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NOVEL
12



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



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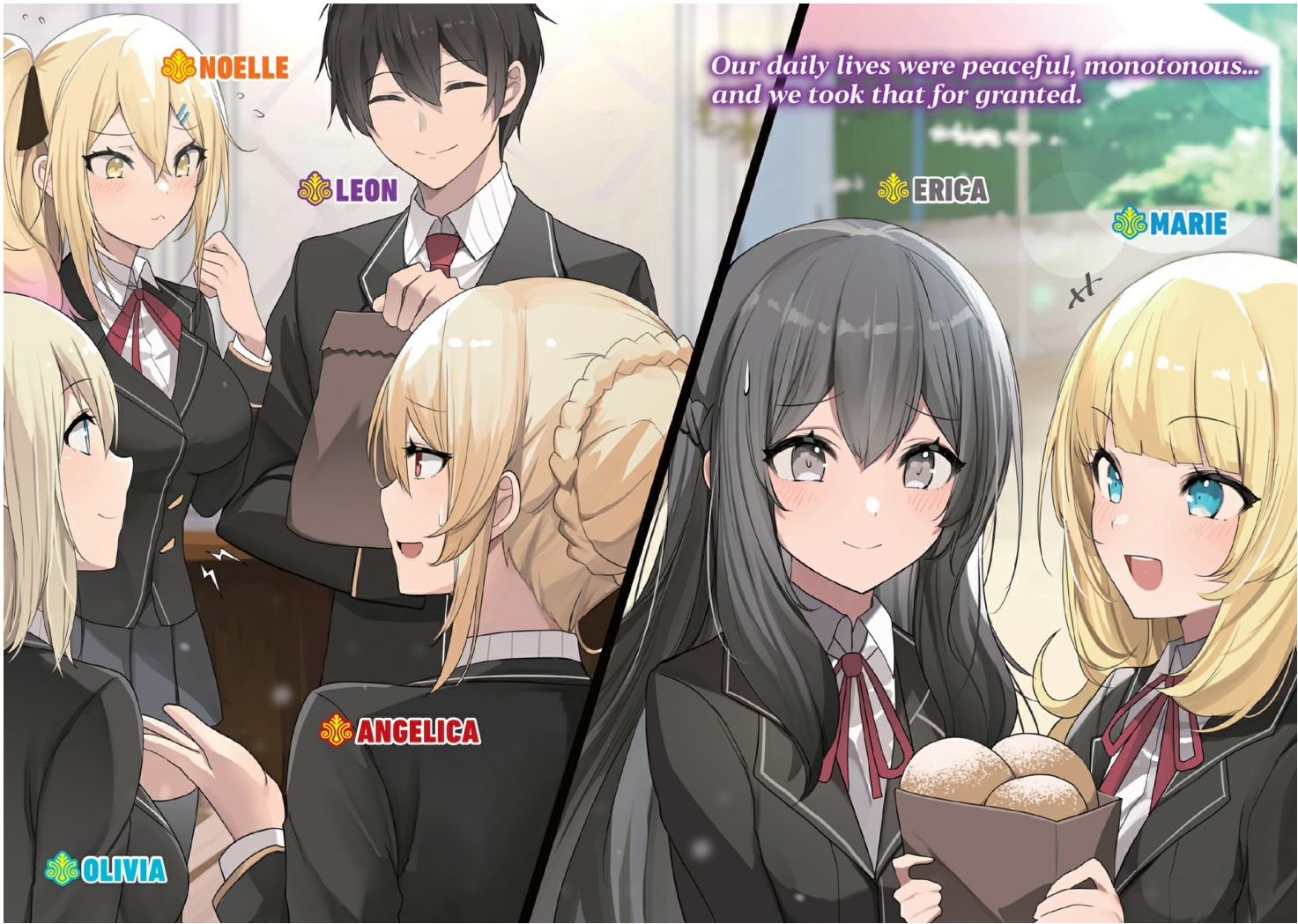
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WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

A NUMBER OF FOOD STALLS lined the plaza in front of the main school building. It was there that I, Leon Fou Bartfort, found myself hard at work.

I used a mold to shape the doughnut dough, then tossed it into the crackling oil until it browned on one side, after which I flipped it over. Once the dough rose fully, and was cooked through on either side, I lifted the doughnut out and popped it onto a sheet-covered tray. It would sit there a few minutes before we added any toppings—we had a few, including chocolate drizzle. My friends Daniel and

Raymond were in charge of that part. Together, the three of us were pulling our weight for the school festival by running a doughnut stall.

Wait. I guess it's the four of us, technically, I mentally amended.

“Three, two, one. All right, Master, remove the doughnuts from the oil,” Luxion instructed from beside me.

“Got it.”

My robotic companion had prepared a doughnut-making instruction manual, and by following it to the letter, we'd produced delectable fare, if I did say so myself. Luxion was the one in charge of the entire process, though. That included determining the ingredients and measurements for the dough, the exact temperature of the oil, and the amount of time the dough spent frying.

We put out some high-quality treats with Luxion's expert management, despite being total amateurs. They weren't completely flawless, but it was just past noon, and we had a long line of customers. We'd sold most of the doughnuts we'd finished decorating.

We were swimming in business, and profits were soaring. Naturally, Daniel and Raymond were grinning from ear to ear over this venture's success.

“I guess this is what they mean when they say something's 'flying off the shelves'!”

“I didn't pin my hopes on this project, honestly, but it actually looks like we'll

make a decent profit.”

While they hyped themselves up, I got started on the next batch.

“Judging from our current pace, I anticipate sales will exceed my previous prediction by ten percent. We have successfully reduced food waste as well. This is turning out *splendidly*,” Luxion said with pointed emphasis, as if my apparent lack of excitement worried him.

“Yeah? That’s great,” I said flatly.

There was a short pause. “You don’t seem all that pleased, Master.”

“Why wouldn’t I be happy? We’re turning a profit.”

“Yet your face has remained an inscrutable mask this entire time.”

I had worked in silence since we began earlier that morning. I was only trying to concentrate on what was in front of me, but my attitude concerned my friends.

“You sure you’re all right?” Daniel asked. “Once you finish that batch, I think you should take a break.”

Raymond nodded. “You’ve been acting strange lately. As if your head’s somewhere else.”

I knew he was right. I forced a smile. “There’s just a lot going on. I mean, thanks to that rat bastard Roland, I’m now an archduke. Thinking about all the responsibility that entails almost makes me nauseous.”

Not long ago, I had been officially promoted to archduke. In peerage terms, they were even more prominent than dukes, and were granted a number of special privileges. At some point in Holfort’s history, the head of House Fanoss had earned the title, but they’d later betrayed the kingdom and become an independent principality. That was why Holfort had never seen fit to bestow the honor on anyone else, fearing they might follow Fanoss’s lead and betray the kingdom.

I was an exception among exceptions, and my installment as grand duke would be something for the history books. Sadly, the explanation for my promotion was unimpressive—Roland was just up to his old tricks, trying to

antagonize me. He knew perfectly well how much I hated the idea of more prestige or responsibility, so he found any excuse he could to drown me in just those. Anyone else would probably think my problem was easy to envy, but for me, it was a real pain in the butt.

Daniel and Raymond traded looks.

“He just called the king by his first name,” Daniel whispered conspiratorially. “Being fearless is great, but that’s something else.”

Raymond nodded. “Yeah. He’s probably the only person who can get away with it. Leon *is* the one who defeated Rachel, after all.”

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel had been a real thorn in Holfort’s side. Following their defeat, they were now under the jurisdiction of our kingdom, which shared dominion over their lands with the United Kingdom of Lepart.

I continued focusing on frying doughnuts as I smiled at my friends. “Trust me, he doesn’t deserve formalities. If I do piss him off, I’ll happily return this archduke rank.”

I knew better than to think Roland would ever let me do that. And with everything else going on, I frankly couldn’t find the energy to care about titles and all that crap.

Once the doughnuts were ready, I removed them from the oil.

Raymond’s gaze wandered to the other food stalls nearby. His face fell. There weren’t many of them. “This year’s festival is way smaller than usual. We’ve got less than half the stalls we used to.”

As soon as the doughnuts cooled, Daniel began decorating them, arranging them on a separate tray. “What do you expect? We’ve been caught up in so many wars these past couple of years. It’s a miracle we were able to hold a festival at all.”

“Yeah, I know, I know. But that doesn’t make it any less of a bummer.” Raymond sighed. “It’s not like I want to go back to being a first-year, but you have to admit, things were livelier back then.”

A run of military conflicts had reduced Holfort Kingdom’s power and

resources. That would ordinarily have been grounds to call off the school festival, but my master—the new school headmaster—had insisted on at least one festival day, since going entirely without one would be too heartbreaking for the students. That showed such consideration, I respected him immensely. Alas, the festival's scale was noticeably small. We had a distinct lack of both food stalls and activities.

As my friends and I nostalgically reflected on how much the school had changed in the last two years, a blonde girl and a black-haired one strode up to the stall. Side by side, they almost looked like sisters. The blonde was Marie Fou Lafan, while the black-haired girl was Erica Rapha Holfort.

By the looks of it, Marie had latched onto Erica's arm and was dragging her around the entire festival. Cleare—a mobile AI unit in the form of a round metal ball with a lens at her center—drifted along beside them. She was almost identical to Luxion, save for her different lens color. Outward appearances aside, though, their personalities were diametrically opposed. Where Luxion was sarcastic and passive-aggressive, Cleare was cheerful and friendly.

But Cleare's positive qualities ran only surface deep. Beneath, she nursed a lethal desire to wipe out all new humanity, just like every other AI unit of her kind. She had even gone so far as to experiment on them with no hesitation. She was, however, exceptionally kind to Marie and Erica, since they possessed traits unique to old humanity.

"Give me all the doughnuts you've got!" Marie demanded.

Startled, Erica gaped at her. "M-Miss Marie? I don't think that's a reasonable order." That was her way of subtly scolding Marie for her greedy attempt to buy all our stall's refreshments at the expense of other customers.

Marie huffed. "It's fine. I bet he's struggling to sell stock anyway. Offering to buy them out is an act of pure generosity." She crossed her arms, nodding to herself.

Daniel and Raymond smiled awkwardly. Sighing, I stepped out from behind the stall and thumped Marie on the head.

"Hey! What the heck was that for?!" Marie snapped.

“I’ll give you some freebies. Forget about the buyout. All your money is really mine anyway.”

Now that I’d outed her, her jaw dropped in obvious panic. “You promised you wouldn’t tell anyone!”

Knowing Marie as well as I did, it was safe to assume she’d been trying to act like a proper parent in front of Erica. She didn’t want me to mention her allowance from me out in the open. Needing to accept it had given her an inferiority complex.

Erica lifted a closed hand to her lips, hiding her mouth as she giggled. “I had a feeling that was the case.” In truth, she’d probably known from the start, even without my mentioning it.

Marie’s eyes shimmered with tears. “Urgh,” she groaned. “It’s all your fault, Leon. You let the cat out of the bag.”

“No, it’s your fault for always being so irresponsible.” I turned away and plucked a few doughnuts from a tray, tucked them carefully into a brown paper bag, and shoved them into Marie’s hands. “Here. Your freebies. Take ’em and go.”

“Really?!” At the prospect of free food, her face lit up. “Erica, let’s go share these!” Holding the bag with one hand, she grabbed Erica’s hand with the other, hauling her away from the stall.

“What? But we just ate—”

“We’ve still got room for dessert!”

Erica glanced back over her shoulder at me, flashing an apologetic smile and bowing her head. As I watched them go, it was clear that Marie was just really *happy*. My chest tightened.

The anxiety must’ve shown on my face.

“Master?” said Luxion.

“Yeah, I know.” I pushed down my emotions and turned back to my friends. “Sorry about that,” I said, feeling like I owed them the apology. After all, I’d given those doughnuts away without their permission. “I’ll pay for those.”

Raymond just laughed. “No big.”

A couple of girls I didn’t know made their way over to the stall, but I’d just given away the last prepped doughnuts. “Sorry, but we’re sold out at the moment. If you’ll give us just a few—”

“Actually, we came over to see Mr. Daniel and Mr. Raymond!”

I blinked. “Huh?”

Daniel poked his head out of the stall, waving at the girls. “We’ll be on break in a few. Just wait for us.” He glanced at me. “Leon, you need to go on break first, or we’ll be stuck here.”

I’d had no idea girls would come by for them; neither Daniel nor Raymond had shared stories about romantic ventures with me. If this visit was any indication, though, they’d already built solid relationships with these girls in the grade below us.

Other students were enjoying the festival together. One was a dark-skinned fellow with white hair and menacing eyes, accompanied by an eerie black mass that floated beside him. An uncannily human eye peered from the middle of the mass’s round body, darting back and forth as it eagerly surveyed the nearby attractions. Another student was a petite girl who kept pace beside them, happily munching a crepe.

The handsome fellow, Finn Leta Hering, wore a tight smile as he watched the girl, Mia, try to walk and eat at the same time. “Perhaps you ought to sit and finish that?” he suggested.

She peered up at him with a grin, cream stuck to her cheek. “Oh, this is nothing,” she insisted. “I’ve done this ever since I was small.”

As exchange students from the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit, they were enjoying a novel experience.

Finn reached over and wiped the cream from Mia’s face, then tucked his finger into his mouth to savor the taste.

Blood instantly rushed to Mia’s cheeks. “M-Mr. Knight?!” she squeaked.

“Apologies, my princess. I thought it would besmirch your honor to let you continue walking around with cream on your cheek.”

Mia’s lips pursed in a pout. “If you notice something like that, please tell me sooner. Goodness...” Finn’s reverent tone had only embarrassed her further. She averted her gaze.

“My fault,” Finn said, gazing at her with profound affection in his eyes. “Come now, don’t be angry.”

The eerie black ball—Finn’s partner, Brave—drifted closer. He also had cream across his cheek. “Hey, Partner, me too! Me too!” He waited with eager anticipation.

Exasperated, Finn pulled out a handkerchief and rubbed Brave clean roughly. “Kurosuke, I understand you want to try the local cuisine, but can’t you slow down a little?”

“Oh, come on! Show me the same compassion you have for Mia!” Brave cried. “And I *told* you, my name is *Brave*, not Kurosuke!”

“I was perfectly compassionate. I wiped your face,” Finn insisted, impatient with Brave’s temper tantrum. “Anyway, what’s the difference between Kurosuke and Brave?”

“They’re *completely* different!”

Brave’s yelp drew the attention of nearby students. They were already accustomed to seeing Luxion, though, so no one made much fuss about Brave.

“Don’t cry, Bravey,” Mia cooed in an attempt to console him. “Here. I’ll give you this crepe.”

Instantly, Brave’s entire demeanor changed. “Mia! You mean it?”

She smiled at him. “Yeah! I’m going to get doughnuts from the archduke’s stall anyway.”

All traces of delight vanished from Brave. “You’re not dumping your crepe on me because you’re *bored* of it, are you? Well, whatever. I’ll still eat it.” He didn’t seem too pleased with that, though.

Finn rested his hand on top of Brave. “Enough complaining,” he chided. “Our

princess is enjoying strolling the grounds, sampling the treats. Our job is just to accompany her.”

“You really are soft on Mia, Partner. I wish you’d be even half as nice to me.”

“Maybe at some point,” Finn shrugged him off.

Disgruntled as he was, Brave quickly followed Finn and Mia as they set off for Leon’s doughnut stand. Finn spotted a couple of familiar faces along the way—faces that left him feeling conflicted.

“Oh! It’s the prince and his friends,” said Mia, none the wiser to Finn’s feelings.

“Yeah,” Finn muttered with a slight nod. “Seems like they’re having fun.”

The other trio had attracted the attention of everyone nearby. The short boy with cropped, curly blond hair and a permanent scowl was Prince Jake Rapha Holfort. A tall woman was sandwiched between him and another young man, one Ethan Fou Robson.

Jake and Ethan glared fiercely at one another.

“Ethan, don’t intrude on my time with Eri!” Jake barked.

Ethan shrugged at him. “You wound me, Your Highness. Indeed, *you* are the one intruding. *I’m* trying to spend precious time with Eri at this festival.”

Even from a distance, one could tell they were bickering over the woman standing between them.

Eri looked flustered as she tried to play peacemaker. “Boys, boys. It’s a special occasion, so let’s just enjoy ourselves. Oh, I know! The archduke is running a stall just ahead. I’ve heard rumors that he’s selling doughnuts. Why don’t we all go check it out?” She clapped her hands together.

Neither Jake nor Ethan could bear to say no to her. Even as they accepted her suggestion, however, they huffed and turned from one another.

“If that’s what you want, Eri,” said Jake.

Ethan nodded. “I don’t mind. Though I bet Holfort is the only kingdom in the world where you can find an archduke selling doughnuts at a food stall.”

The trio were headed in the same direction as Finn and Mia.

Finn studied them. *It is most disconcerting to think that, had the story gone the way it should've, these three would be Mia's love interests. Especially since one went and became a woman.*

Originally, all three had not only been men but love interests for the protagonist of the third installment of an otome game series. Yet in a strange twist of fate, the entire plot went off the rails before they even met Mia. For that reason alone, Finn didn't think any of them could ever be deserving of her. Some part of him was relieved that they weren't competing for her affections, but another part was intensely depressed by that thought. Mia was such a wonderful girl. It infuriated him that they'd ignore a catch like her in favor of falling for each other.

Mia didn't seem the least bit bothered that they showed no interest in her. In fact, she seemed perfectly happy with her life as it was.

"Those three always seem to have such a good time together," she said. "Not that I'm having any less good a time! My body's doing better, and more than that, I...I've got you by my side, Mr. Knight."

A faint blush crept across Finn's face. "Trying to butter me up, my princess?"

"What? N-no! I genuinely mean it!"

Brave swallowed the last of Mia's crepe, then thrust a finger straight ahead. "Hey, guys, the doughnut stall looks closed right now."

"What?" Finn blurted. He gazed in the direction Brave was pointing. A crude signboard had been placed in front of Leon's stall, stating that the doughnut team was taking a break and would be back after 2 p.m.

Another trio—this one composed of two girls and one guy—stood in front of the stall, grumbling about Leon's absence.

"'On break'?! What the hell? We went out of our way to drop by, and he's not even here!" shrieked one girl—Leon's older sister Jenna.

Although Jenna had already graduated, she'd dressed up and stopped by specifically to enjoy the festival. A quick scan of the crowds showed that a

number of other alumni were in attendance as well.

Leon's younger sister, Finley, sighed at Jenna's antics. She seemed comparatively calm—or perhaps it was more accurate to say she seemed weary of her sister's juvenile tendencies.

"Looks like they sold quite a few. They probably left to get supplies," she reasoned. "Either way, I had no idea Big Bro had any talent for making sweets."

"Finley," Jenna said with great irritation, "you're *far* too lax! Back when I attended the academy, there would've been dozens of complaints if a stall had the nerve to close mid-festival."

Finley rolled her eyes. "Exactly. Back when you attended the academy. Remind me again how many years it's been?"

"Only two!" Jenna snapped, clenching her fists.

The man with them looked terribly troubled by their bickering; this was Jake's foster brother, Oscar Fia Hogan.

"Aw. No fighting, you two," he said. "If you want doughnuts that badly, I'll go into town and buy you some."

Jenna was touched by the offer. Her eyes sparkled. "I should have known a gentleman like you would be so considerate, Lord Oscar! You're such a *wonderful* man. So different from my worthless excuse for a little brother. Words can't express how lucky I am to have a boyfriend like you." She raised her voice so everyone in the vicinity could hear. Girls nearby shot her envious looks. Jenna took note of the attention; she didn't seem the least bit ashamed.

Finley saw right through her older sister, and she was disgusted. She heaved a long sigh, grumbling "Why do I have to put up with your gloating?"

Her exhausted expression suggested she'd suffered immensely from her sister's behavior.

"It doesn't look like the archduke is around," Mia said as she watched the trio. Her face fell. "I really wanted those doughnuts. What a shame."

Finn placed his hands on her shoulders. "Mia."

She looked up at him. "Yes, Mr. Knight?"

“I’ll take care of this. I’m heading straight out to track down Leon and ensure he makes you doughnuts immediately.”

“What? You needn’t go that far, Mr. Knight!”

Although Mia tried to stop him, Finn had made up his mind. “I will realize your desires.”

“But I never said I wanted you to do *that*!”

Brave watched his friends, simultaneously exasperated and amused by their shenanigans. “Good grief. Mia’s gotten much better, but you’re as overprotective as ever, Partner.”

By the time I made my way behind the main school building, Cleare was already there waiting for me. She zipped over the moment she saw me.

“Master!” she snapped impatiently, sounding nothing like her usual cheerful self.

I didn’t beat around the bush. “How’s Erica?” I demanded.

Cleare activated a video feed, projecting Erica’s image into the air so I could see for myself. Erica was clutching her chest, looking agonized.

“She had two attacks just moments ago.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth. “Because Marie’s been dragging her around?”

Cleare didn’t respond, but her silence confirmed everything. Marie was pushing Erica past her limits, worsening her condition.

Luxion leapt to Marie’s defense. “Marie remains in the dark about Erica’s health issues,” he interjected. “Moreover, she’s only intent on spending time with her at the festival because—”

“She spent so little time with Erica in our past life. I know. She couldn’t be a proper parent back then, so now she’s desperate to make it up to Erica.”

Still, Marie’s good intentions were negatively impacting Erica’s health. Under different circumstances, I would have stepped in to stop her, but Erica had already begged me not to intervene.

“Rica said she wants an opportunity to create memories that really last,” Cleare said, as if reading my mind. “After all, however things end up, they won’t be able to see each other again for who knows how long.”

Erica wasn’t doing this for herself. Not as far as I could tell, anyway. It was all for Marie. From what Erica had told us, she’d lived a long time—well into old age—in her last life as Marie’s daughter. She had much more life experience than either me or Marie. And, being the kind of person she was, Erica was willing to risk her current life just to make her mother happy. She knew what Marie wanted most was to have fun together, just the two of them. That was what Erica was giving her. It was the dream mother-daughter relationship Marie had missed out on in her previous life.

“It’s hard work having a hyper-mature niece. Makes it tough to support her from the sidelines,” I said with a dramatic sigh. My theatrical complaint was just an attempt to distract the AIs and myself from my powerlessness.

No, I wasn’t just powerless—I was pathetic. I felt absolutely *pathetic*.

“Anyhow,” Cleare cut in, returning to our original topic, “I’ve determined that demonic essence is causing Rica’s worsening condition. But that only creates more questions. I mean, you guys are the descendants of new humanity, and they supposedly conquered the stuff. Why would it have a negative impact on one of you? If reincarnating into this world triggers that, you and Rie should be affected too.”

That was a good point. The new humans had used demonic essence to manipulate magic. Why was Erica, their descendant, reacting so negatively to it?

Silence settled over us.

“Because old humanity’s lineage is so pronounced in her,” Luxion said suddenly. “It must be influencing her condition. Regardless of the cause, however, if we don’t act soon, Erica’s life will be at risk. Master, I suggest we move ahead with our plan.”

I hesitated. “I know. I *know* we should. But if we do...it’s possible Marie and Erica will never see each other again, right? I mean, Luxion, you even—”

“There is no other way to save Erica’s life,” he insisted. “Besides, we may find a cure far sooner than expected. You’ll see Erica again as soon as we do.”

I snapped my mouth shut and stared at my feet.

“In that case, we’ll keep Rica safe in cryogenic stasis, put her aboard Luxion’s main ship, and remove her from the planet’s atmosphere,” Cleare stated. “In orbit, she’ll be safe from demonic essence’s influence.”

Demonic essence permeated the entire planet, but it was absent in space. The only way to avoid its negative influence was to leave the planet. Since Luxion was a migrant ship, he was best equipped for that journey.

I glanced at my partner. “You sure about this?”

“Most certainly,” he said. “No one else is up to the task. Having established that, I must remind you that I will be unable to provide you support once I exit the atmosphere.” He gave me a look. “Master, I request you avoid crying yourself to sleep as you pine in my absence.”

I snorted. “Dummy. All you do is insult and mock me. I’m looking forward to relaxing while you’re gone. I should be the one telling *you* not to get weepy ‘cause you miss me.”

“I am functionally incapable,” Luxion dutifully reminded me.

“I’m not so sure about that. For a couple of robots, you guys are pretty emotional. In fact, I can confidently say I wouldn’t be even a little surprised to see you cry.”

“That type of confidence is not required. Furthermore, you appear to fundamentally misunderstand me, given your suggestion that I would be in any way unstable in your absence. Do you comprehend how many centuries I spent alone before our encounter?”

When we fell into our normal banter, Cleare irritably interrupted, “Since we’ve chosen a course of action, I’m going to go stick around Rica to keep an eye on her.” It was like she couldn’t stand to be around us—or our buffoonery, at least—a moment longer. “I think we should initiate the plan sooner rather than later. The medicine I formulated to manage Rica’s condition is gradually losing effect.”

Having said her piece, Cleare promptly left.

I leaned against the wall of the school building and slumped to the ground, hiding my face in my hand. “Man... How am I supposed to explain this to Marie? I can already see her crying and wailing and being a royal pain.”

“If you intend to inform her, I ask that you do so sooner rather than later. There is not much time left. Marie and Erica indeed made lasting memories at today’s festival, as Erica wished. I do not recommend delaying longer than absolutely necessary.”

I let out a deep exhale. “I know. Once the festival is over, and things cool off, I’ll sit Marie down and tell her the truth.”

Chapter 1:

The Final School Festival

“IT’S FINALLY OVER!” Noelle Zel Lespinasse exclaimed as she flopped into a chair and leaned back. Gazing toward the ceiling, she let out a heavy sigh.

The classroom she was in had been repurposed as an exhibition hall during the festival. It contained a display of various goods and resources from the Alzer Republic. That was Noelle’s homeland, so the festival had been a perfect chance to introduce Holfortians to her culture. That hadn’t been her idea, though—Angie had asked her to do it on behalf of the festival’s executive committee, and Noelle begrudgingly agreed. She’d been in charge of manning the exhibition, explaining the display to visitors.

“I didn’t think anyone would be interested in such a formal exhibit. Figured it would be no big deal—that no one would even turn up.”

To Noelle’s surprise, quite a few people interested in Alzer had dropped by. She had been insanely busy the entire day, outside of her mandated break.

Olivia—or Livia, as she preferred to be called—listened to Noelle’s monologue as she packed the display items away in boxes. “After all that, you must be exhausted,” she said sympathetically. “Those visitors really kept us on our toes.”

In truth, Livia was tired too, but she was in better shape than Noelle. The unending barrage of intense questions had left the latter girl completely drained. That was why Livia was cleaning up alone while the fatigued Noelle rested.

Once refreshed, Noelle finally shot out of her chair and dove into helping Livia. Even as she worked, she grumbled under her breath. “The most frustrating part of this whole festival was popping over to Leon’s doughnut stall at break time. Just our luck that he was out. Everyone kept talking about how tasty those doughnuts were! I was really looking forward to trying some. What a letdown.”

Livia shared her disappointment. “It really was. Then Prince Julius cornered

us, and we wound up eating skewers for lunch.”

“Those *were* delicious,” Noelle admitted, “but we’ve had them so many times that they’ve kind of lost their appeal.”

“True, but the visitors seemed to really enjoy them. After all, where else but a festival do you get to eat skewers grilled by a prince? And his customers were raving about the flavor.”

No one who knew Julius was surprised that he’d decided to run a skewer stall for the festival. His friends had planned their own stalls as well.

Noelle began counting off the idiot brigade on her hand. “I know Mr. Chris’s stall was a huge hit. What did he serve again? Sweet and spicy noodles?”

Livia nodded. “Mr. Greg’s pancakes were delicious, but they were a bit out there, so fewer people bought them. Still, he had a decent flow of customers.”

“He didn’t seem too pleased to be selling those pancakes, did he? He had that grumpy look on his face.”

“He said he wanted to do grilled chicken,” Livia explained. “Mr. Leon insisted that was too similar to Prince Julius’s stand and made him change it.”

The boys had been eager to participate with their own stalls, but they’d worked separately in part because Leon ordered them to.

“Then there was Mr. Brad.” Noelle’s expression soured. “Watching him made me cringe so much, I couldn’t stand it.”

“He didn’t have many customers either.” Livia smiled awkwardly at the memory.

Brad’s show had been a spectacular failure. He was supposed to perform magic tricks to entertain the crowd, but he was so clumsy, he’d flubbed them all.

That left one last member of the idiot brigade: Jilk. The girls’ expressions flattened, their eyes glazed and distant.

“Mr. Jilk’s café was straight-up revolting. I thought we could just swing by and kick back for a minute after trying the food from the other stalls. That was my big mistake,” Noelle recalled woefully. “The flavors and smells of the coffee and

snacks were just bizarre at best. And it was hard to relax with those freaky decorations.” Her face pinched at the dreadful memory. “I can’t count the number of customers I watched walk in, only to immediately turn tail once they got a whiff of his weird concoctions.”

Since the girls were Jilk’s acquaintances, they hadn’t had the luxury of simply bailing. They’d politely ordered tea and snacks; that too had been a mistake. Noelle’s terrible experience at Jilk’s café had sapped all her motivation, but after their break, she’d had several more hours of fielding questions at the Alzer exhibition.

Noelle threw back her head and wailed, “Why’d you make Jilk run a café, Leon?! You should’ve done it yourself!”

Leon wasn’t there to hear her complaints, of course, but that didn’t stop her from voicing them.

Even if Leon hadn’t put together a particularly remarkable café, he would probably have offered a safe, standard experience. Luxion could also have assisted him, which would’ve made the café an even bigger hit. Instead of that, Leon had insisted on his doughnut stall.

Livia also found Leon’s choice unusual. Her brow furrowed. “During first year, he ran a café and pumped tons of money into it. I thought for sure he would do the same thing this time. Angie and I were shocked when he declined.”

“Oh yeah. He’s always going on about tea,” said Noelle. “Actually, don’t you think Leon’s acting kind of weird lately?”

“He seems worried about something. I wish he’d talk to us about it, but he always plays his cards close to his chest.” Livia frowned, forlorn at being left out of the loop.

Noelle’s face scrunched. She was getting more annoyed with Leon. “He’s got the worst habit of never sharing anything. I wonder what he’s hiding this time.”

Leon’s lack of transparency cast a gloomy pall over the girls. They tried to refocus on cleaning up, but soon Angelica Rapha Redgrave stepped into the room, interrupting them.

“You two are still cleaning?” Angie’s brow creased as her lips pulled into a thin

line. “We’re on break starting tomorrow. Why don’t you save the rest until then and head home? The executive committee will leave soon, once we finish making the rounds.”

Noelle scanned the room, evaluating how much work remained. “We’ll just finish up today. This shouldn’t take too much longer,” she reasoned.

“Really? Then I’ll pitch in.” Angie immediately joined them, reaching for the nearest item and placing it in a storage box.

Livia shot her an apologetic look. “You must have been much busier than us with committee work, right? You didn’t even get a break.”

As she hefted a heavy box in her arms, Angie smiled shyly. “Maybe. But if I leave on my own, I’ll have nothing to do.” Still, she’d spent the morning rushing here and there, and she hadn’t found any opportunity to eat—so it was little wonder her stomach growled loudly in protest. “L-Let’s finish quickly,” she suggested, blushing. “That way, we can go have dinner.”

Livia grinned. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Noelle nodded eagerly. She was hungry too. “With all three of us going at this, we’ll be done in no time.”

No sooner did they get down to work than footsteps echoed toward the classroom. What prompted the girls to freeze and turn toward the door, however, was the delightful smell that wafted inside the room as the footsteps’ owner entered.

“Nice work today,” Leon said. “How would you girls like some doughnuts?” In his hand was a brown paper bag containing the very doughnuts the girls had regretfully missed out on all day.

Noelle had half a mind to chew him out, but the sweet smell tickling her nose made her stomach rumble eagerly. “Eep!” she cried in surprise, hands flying to her stomach.

Leon laughed. “Looks like my timing’s pretty perfect. Why don’t we enjoy these together? I’ve got drinks too.” He held up a thermos.

“You seem awfully well prepared. Let me guess—this was Luxion’s suggestion,

wasn't it?" Angie shrugged in exasperation, as if she already knew the answer.

The girls glanced at Luxion, who hovered faithfully at Leon's right shoulder as always.

"It is indeed as you wisely deduced, Angelica." Luxion didn't seem the least bit surprised or flustered. "One can only assume Master's habitual inattentiveness is to blame for the ease with which you discerned my involvement."

Leon scowled. "Yeah, yeah. Sorry for being such a thoughtless jerk."

Noelle quickly strode over to him and hugged the arm carrying the doughnut bag. "Aw, don't be grumpy. Let's chow down on these doughnuts. You know, I tried to drop by your stall at noon. You guys were closed, though, so I didn't get *any*."

"My bad." Judging by Leon's apologetic look, he felt genuinely awful that she'd missed out.

"These doughnuts are to die for," Livia said with a satisfied sigh. She had picked a plain one. A single bite, and her whole body slumped, as if the pleasure of food had washed her tension away. The sweetness was just what she needed to relieve the hunger and exhaustion that had built over the day.

"They're still a little warm," Noelle noticed as she munched hers, eyes wide with surprise. "Did you make this batch just for us?" The freshness was a dead giveaway.

"We had leftover ingredients at the end, so yeah," Leon explained, sipping his cup of tea. He made no move to reach for the doughnuts. He'd apparently filled up on the stall's extras for lunch, so he was probably sick of them by now. "Luxion said you three were hungry."

Noelle glared at Luxion. "You spied on us?"

Angie narrowed her eyes as well. "We can never let our guard down with you."

Luxion had failed to account for the fact that neither girl cared to have her future husband know when her stomach was growling.

“I factually reported your hunger status, and Master’s decision to prepare food for you was obviously judicious. It was, as you humans like to call it, killing two birds with one stone. We reduced our food waste, and you three had your fill of doughnuts. An efficient arrangement. I see no issue.”

“We’re modest young ladies, in case you’ve forgotten,” Angie snapped. “We find certain things embarrassing.”

“Your modesty is irrelevant. Master will treasure you regardless. Again, I see no issue.”

Leon quickly cleared his throat, though he’d been happy to pretend the conversation had nothing to do with him up until this point. “Don’t drag me into this,” he muttered irritably to his partner.

Together, the group enjoyed a livelier break than usual. Only Livia kept silent, vigilantly eyeing Luxion. *Sometimes, Lux has this terrifying air. Am I overthinking this?*

Luxion’s aura brought to mind a terrible nightmare Livia had once had—the one where Luxion watched as a sea of flames swallowed the kingdom’s capital.

Livia understood that it was only a dream, but it had been so vivid—so *real*. It was as if the dream had been trying to communicate something. She had no concrete proof of that, of course; deep down, she hoped the anxiety was wholly irrational.

Still, she couldn’t help being wary of Luxion. The AI who had watched the capital burn in her dream was such a terrifying figure, it had reshaped the way she looked at him. He traded jabs and joked with Leon now, but if Luxion had a mind to, he could obliterate the entire world. That was a bleak thought—one that haunted her, no matter how hard she pushed it away.

While Livia was lost in thought, Angie snatched up the last remaining doughnut. She sank her teeth into it, grinning like a mischievous child. Seeing how much she enjoyed the treat warmed Livia’s heart.

A thought occurred to Livia. “Say, did you always like doughnuts so much, Angie? I never noticed before.” When they enjoyed the pastries out in the city, Angie hadn’t smiled as much as she was doing now.

Angie froze. She seemingly hadn't noticed her own delight until Livia pointed it out. Blushing, she held the remainder of a doughnut in front of her mouth in both hands as she mumbled, "I never really paid it much thought, but I guess I do like them a lot. There's something comforting about a doughnut. Relaxing, even." Even she couldn't pinpoint any real reason.

Leon leaned forward. "If you like them so much, want me to have Luxion make more for you? I'm pretty sure he'd do a way better job than I did."

Luxion moved his red lens up and down—his way of nodding. "I will initiate mass production immediately and have the doughnuts delivered," he offered.

A machine production line would guarantee uniform quality and taste. Leon was right to assume Luxion's doughnuts would be of better quality than anything he put out.

Angie shook her head. "There's an emotional component. Leon, you made these specifically for us, right? I think..." She hesitated, cheeks growing even redder. "I think that's probably why I'm so happy to eat them."

"Angelica, I'm surprised," Noelle said with a teasing smirk. "I assumed you'd only ever want food made by pro chefs."

"Oh, that's the kind of person you think I am? Noelle, we should sit down for a tête-à-tête, shouldn't we?" Angie was smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Noelle's expression froze. Sensing danger, she hastened to change the subject. "Anyway, how would you guys like to spend our break? I thought we could all go do something together."

Livia was well aware of why Noelle had brought up their break—to avoid Angie's wrath. She went along with it. "Sounds like a good idea. It would be nice to have the occasional—"

Before she could finish, a flurry of footsteps echoed down the hallway. The classroom door burst open, and several people poured in. Leon's face instantly fell, as if the mere sight of the intruders drained him of all energy before they even opened their mouths. The girls shared that sentiment.

"Leon," said Brad, "I implore you to settle this once and for all!" He seemed oblivious to the fact that his presence was so unwelcome.

Leon's face settled into a disgusted scowl. "What are you talking about this time?"

Livia suspected that, like her, he already sensed that this was going nowhere productive.

Jilk shoved his way to the front of the group. "You see, the five of us were discussing how our festival sales compared," he explained impatiently. "I hate to admit Brad and I had the lowest sales. Still, I outperformed Brad—a fact I've tried repeatedly to impress upon him, but which he refuses to accept."

Basically, Brad and Jilk were lagging miles behind the rest and fighting to shove each other into last place.

Leon rolled his eyes, obviously uninterested. "You both refused to do the food stalls I suggested, remember? Well, whatever. Luxion, what were their sales figures?"

"In terms of sales, Jilk outperformed Brad by the slimmest of margins," Luxion reported. "However, if we take into consideration the number of people who desired refunds from Jilk, Brad comes out on top."

Even if that was a win for Brad, it was still pathetic.

Deep down, Livia was exasperated with them, although she kept it hidden. *They really came all the way here to get Mr. Leon and Lux's input? Still, the whole conversation made her a bit nostalgic. That's right. I'm pretty sure they were super competitive in first year. Strange to think how things have turned out. Back then, I would never have imagined our relationship with the prince and his friends ending up like this.*

Leon's old competition with the idiot brigade had never involved specific terms for victory, so the winner was as yet undeclared. At any rate, that had been two years back. Now, Leon was charged with overseeing Julius's gang of dummies.

Life's unpredictable, Livia thought.

Brad threw both hands into the air joyously. "See?! I knew I wasn't dead last!"

"Th-that can't be," Jilk stammered, flabbergasted. "How could I lose to such

cheap, badly staged parlor tricks?”

“Badly staged?!” Brad gasped. “You think so little of me, do you?”

While Jilk and Brad displayed very different reactions to Luxion’s sales figures, the rest of their gang watched them with pinched faces. Behind Jilk, who was gradually dissolving to the floor, stood Chris, Greg, and Julius.

“Well, those two aside, the rest of us did well,” Chris declared, smiling. “I was able to wear my beloved happi coat while running my stall, and to my surprise, the work was actually rewarding. I have no idea what I had to cook for those people, but it wasn’t a bad experience.”

Greg’s shoulders slumped, his face tight. “Wasn’t so great for me,” he grumbled. “How are you supposed to build muscle eating pancakes? I mean, think about it. I really wanted to sell meat.”

Julius stood proudly beside his fellows, his head held high and his hands on his hips. “The rest of you did a commendable job, to be sure, but I outshone you. If you hope ever to compete, you’ll have to polish your skills. I’ll go for a rematch anytime you like.” Of their little group, he’d sold the most.

Luxion soon put a damper on his triumphant smugness. “Ultimately, Master’s doughnut stall made the greatest profit. If you wish to gloat, might I advise you do so after matching or surpassing him?”

Julius ground his teeth in frustration. “Leon!” he shouted, pointing a finger. “I swear I’ll have my revenge and best you next year! Just you wait!”

Again, Leon rolled his eyes. Livia couldn’t blame him; after all, there would be no “next year.”

“This was our last festival, you moron,” Leon said. “If you want to be held back a grade, be my guest. I plan on graduating.”

His words were a sad reminder for everyone else. Their expressions became melancholy.

Julius’s bravado vanished. Leon had brushed him off so brusquely, he was suddenly anxious. “He’s telling me to repeat a year by myself? He can’t be serious, can he? Can he...?”

Chapter 2:

Two Dudes and Their Partners

THE HOLY MAGIC EMPIRE of Vordenoit's imperial capital was essentially a fortress encircled by two high walls. In the innermost circle, a castle reached high toward the heavens.

Within that castle's audience chamber, the former imperial crown prince—and newly crowned emperor—Moritz Luchs Erzberger sat on a high throne, looking down upon his retainers. Moritz was only in his late twenties but had already grown a beard and sideburns. His earthen skin stretched tight over his bulky muscles, and his chiseled countenance conveyed vigor only a man of his youth and strength would possess.

However impressive Moritz's appearance, he lacked the majesty one expected of a new emperor, at least at the moment. Rather, he looked rattled.

"Are you truly certain about this, Your Imperial Majesty?" asked Gunther Lua Sebald, a battle-hardened general.

There was a short pause before Moritz stiffly answered, "There is no other choice." The emperor's pinched expression conveyed anguish and uncertainty at his own decision.

A hulking black mass with a human eye at its center hovered in the air behind him. This grotesque form was Arcadia. The mass's eyelid lowered until the eye looked like a pleased crescent, as if Arcadia were sneering at them.

"That's right, Your Imperial Majesty," Arcadia cooed at the emperor. "You made the correct decision. No need to feel unhappy with it."

Gunther's brows knitted at the creature. He could see that Moritz was nothing more than Arcadia's puppet, as could the empire's other loyal retainers. Not one ventured to admonish Moritz, however. Gunther was a loyal patriot to the very core of his being, but he knew he couldn't dispatch Arcadia. Not yet.

That thing is a damn fiend, deceiving our crown prince and murdering our

emperor. The gall of him, floating up there now, Gunther thought. Although he longed to slay Arcadia and free Moritz, Gunther was no match for the beast, and he knew it.

Arcadia had shown up suddenly one day, and ever since, had meddled in the empire's affairs however he saw fit. There was no shortage of people dissatisfied with the direction he was taking their country in.

Other members of the imperial family had opposed Moritz's ascension to the throne by deploying their personal armies. Their numbers had been so formidable that the citizens feared civil war would split the empire. Instead, Arcadia deployed his main ship and eliminated anyone who opposed his and Moritz's takeover. Faced with such overwhelming odds, not even the battle-hardened Gunther imagined he could oppose the creature. Besides, an additional element dissuaded him from risking his life to challenge Arcadia—Holfort Kingdom.

Arcadia threw his arms wide. They were disproportionately tiny compared to his hulking body. "Leaving all other matters aside for the moment, Your Imperial Highness, we must hasten the princess's return from Holfort."

The very mention of Holfort made Moritz frown. "Father really did make things more complicated than necessary," he muttered.

Moritz had no personal interest in the previous emperor's secret illegitimate child, Miliaris Luchs Erzberger. Nor did he see the need to send someone to retrieve her. Haunted by the guilt of committing patricide, he was willing to shelter and protect the girl, but that was the extent of it.

After a considerable pause, Moritz finally said, "Send an envoy."

Arcadia's enormous mouth stretched into a devious smile. "After that, I should prepare for the princess's arrival," he snickered. "She will require a most magnificent welcome."

His statement was so unsettling that beads of cold sweat poured down Gunther's back. *What is he planning, bringing back the old emperor's bastard daughter?*

The other retainers in the audience chamber shared his concern. Just what

horrible things could Arcadia be scheming for their princess? Once she returned, what awaited her? What awaited *them*?

Moritz had his back to Arcadia, so he was none the wiser to the creature's eerie expressions. He was also too busy grappling with the gruesome decisions he was being forced into to notice his retainers' distress.

How disgraceful for us all, thought Gunther, being forced under this monster's thumb.



Once the festival ended, Holfort's academy students had a long break in store. Some lingered on campus on the first day of the break, finishing whatever cleanup remained. By the second, however, only a scant few could be found on the otherwise deserted grounds.

Finn and I were among them. I would ordinarily have prepared a pot of tea for us, but today, Finn was making coffee. The room filled with the rich aroma of his chosen beans.

"Sorry your girls had to go shopping with Mia, but I appreciate it. As a guy, there's only so much I can help her with," said Finn. He handed me a steaming mug of coffee—his way of conveying his gratitude.

"I haven't done anything. If you want to thank anyone, it should be Angie and the other girls," I said as I carefully took the mug. "By the way, I was really in the mood for *tea* today."

"Just be quiet and drink it, would you? I assumed you'd be sick of having the same thing every day. Hence my offer to make coffee."

"I *never* get tired of tea," I told him honestly.

The sheer variety of tea leaves meant I could pick whichever suited my mood on a given day. Furthermore, there was a technique to brewing tea—the water temperature, how long you steeped it, and so on. I didn't appreciate Finn's minimization of what was, frankly, an art.

I took a sip of the coffee. To my surprise, it was less bitter than I had imagined. "This is actually pretty good," I blurted out, too impressed to keep the thought to myself.

Finn gave me a triumphant look. Although I sat, he remained standing, carefully sipping his drink. After a short moment, he let out a breath, his face suddenly apologetic. "As glad as I am that Mia's doing better, it's hard to celebrate. I heard Her Highness collapsed again."

I couldn't tell him the truth. If he found out Mia's improvement had come at the cost of Erica's health, it would only upset him.

“It’s fine. We’re working on a treatment, and besides, we’ve already figured out how to prevent her illness from getting worse.” I glanced at Luxion.

Luxion stared at Brave, who was impatiently waiting for his coffee to cool enough to drink. He was doing his best to blow on it, hoping to hurry the process along.

Finn’s expression relaxed. “That’s a relief to hear. If I can do anything to help, just say the word. I owe you for everything you’ve done for Mia.”

“I’ll definitely take you up on that, if I need to,” I said. “Anyway, has Mr. Carl replied to you yet?”

Finn’s face instantly soured. “I’ve sent a number of letters, and he still hasn’t responded. He must be terribly busy. Although this is the first time he’s ignored one of *Mia’s* letters.” Under his breath, he muttered, “That idiot’s got some nerve, upsetting her like this.”

“Perhaps something is amiss in the empire,” Luxion suggested, gaze swiveling to me. “Rumors in Holfort’s capital speak of some unsettling movements there.”

“Hunh.” I nursed the rest of my drink. “Wonder if they’re having trouble with something.”

Finn shrugged. “No need to worry. Knowing that old fart, he’ll have no trouble resolving whatever issues arise. If it’s a riot or something similar, other Demonic Knights will take care of it.”

At present, the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit was the most powerful country in the world. They ruled vast stretches and owned countless Lost Items. Finn’s comment implied that they also possessed a number of Demonic Suit Cores. If they really had that many knights as powerful as him, the empire would be a real pain on the battlefield. Even Holfort wouldn’t stand a chance.

“How convenient that you should mention it,” Luxion said. “I happen to be incredibly interested in that very subject. Tell me, just how many of these Demonic Knights—or rather, Demonic Suit Cores—does the empire possess?” He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was trying to extract military intelligence.

Brave zipped through the air, inserting himself between Finn and Luxion with his tiny arms stretched wide. “Partner, don’t let your guard down with this one! He’s trying to assess the strength of our forces. You can’t give him an inch.”

“How predictably boorish. My questions are born of genuine curiosity and aren’t the least bit hostile. Moreover, your open paranoia arouses my suspicion that *you* are the true schemer. If you have nothing to hide, why not share information with me? I am not requesting specifics. You may be as vague as you wish.”

Brave’s body vibrated with barely restrained anger. “I don’t trust you one bit!”

“I obey my master’s orders. So long as he does not regard you as enemies, I will not either. However, refusal to answer such a simple, innocent question *would* suggest hostility on your end. And it certainly reflects poorly on you that, while your master is perfectly amicable, you—his servant—insist on being anything but.”

“Nngh...” Vexed, Brave pursed his closed mouth.

Finn forced a smile. “Sorry, but that is indeed confidential military information. I can’t comment. Is that answer all right, Luxion?”

“Yes. It is.” Luxion finally backed off. He’d probably suspected Finn wouldn’t answer from the outset, but figured Brave might blurt something out if antagonized. Brave was certainly right about not letting their guards down—Luxion was shrewd.

“Sorry about that, Kurosuke,” I said. “I hope you won’t hold it against him.”

Brave sneered at me. “Don’t call me that. *We* aren’t *friends*. My name is Brave.” Gone was the endearing demeanor with which he interacted with Finn. He was downright standoffish.

“Uh, right.” Maybe I’d been a little too familiar.

Finn frowned at his partner. “No need to look so annoyed, Kurosuke. Here, I’ll give you a snack.”

Brave eagerly snatched it up. “A cookie! Heh heh. This’ll go perfect with the

coffee you made me.”

When Finn called him Kurosuke, Brave wasn’t at all annoyed. Maybe that was inevitable, since the two were so close.

I glanced at Luxion. “Nicknames are kind of nice, aren’t they? Maybe I should give you one. How does Lux sound?”

Luxion instantly drifted a whole meter away. “Absolutely not.” His robotic voice had somehow turned ice-cold.

“You don’t have to be such a jerk about it.”

Amused by our banter, Finn snickered. He finally took a seat. “I bet the girls will take a while shopping. What will you do until they get back?”

“I don’t have any real plans. How about you?”

“Me neither, actually. I don’t really know what to do with myself on days when Mia isn’t around. What do you think I ought to get up to?”

Finn tended to prioritize Mia constantly, even on days off. It was little wonder he was at such a loss when she wasn’t around. He was like a workaholic. Or maybe his love for her was just that suffocatingly intense.

“Don’t ask me,” I snapped. “Isn’t there anything you want to do?”

Finn’s hand cupped his chin. His brow furrowed. After a few moments, he confessed, “Nope. Nothing.”

“What did you do in your spare time before Mia came along?” As exasperated as I was, part of me worried that this was unhealthy. Mia was basically the center of Finn’s entire world.

“My partner found me before he met Mia,” said Brave. “Back then, he had a much more prickly personality and didn’t let anyone close. He’s always been nice to *me*, but he did have a kind of closed-book shtick going on.”

Finn snapped his eyes shut, blushing. Perhaps he had some qualms about his past behavior.

“You’re sweet and doting with Mia, but you used to be a standoffish prick, huh?” I teased, unable to resist the opportunity to poke fun.

“Quit smirking!” Finn huffed petulantly. “I was a little wild back then, I admit, but that was it. Once I met Mia, I found my reason for being.”

“Your reason for being, huh?” I gave him an unimpressed look, but I was genuinely curious about what he meant.

I mean, why *had* we reincarnated here? Doubts squirmed at the back of my mind. Part of me thought it was all just coincidence, that there was no deeper meaning. But one thing was too uncanny to pass off as chance. In our previous world, Marie and Erica had died at vastly different life stages—so why had they reincarnated nearly simultaneously in this life?

Finn seemed to notice the change in my demeanor. He took a sip of coffee and solemnly answered, “Mia bears an uncanny resemblance to my younger sister. Thus, I believe my purpose is to protect her. The reason I reincarnated and received such amazing power was to keep her safe.” His tone grew a touch sheepish. “Of course, I realize that’s my own self-serving interpretation.”

I gazed away from him. “I don’t see anything wrong with it. I just don’t think I’ll ever find a purpose like that.”

“I’m sure there’s meaning in your life here too,” Finn insisted, uncomfortable with my pessimism. “Look at it this way: You came to this world and found yourself three beautiful brides, *and* you’re an archduke now. You obtained everything a man could want.”

He was basically arguing that I should be happy because I’d finished a to-do list. I glanced up at him, sighing deeply. “All I was actually hoping for was peace and quiet—not status or honor, let alone three beautiful brides.”

Finn paused thoughtfully. “You know, there *is* something I’ve meant to ask you for a while.”

“What’s that?”

His expression had turned grave, so I could only assume it was pretty serious. But then...

“Which of those three do you love most?”

“*What?!*”

“Don’t you dare give me that clichéd crap about how you ‘love all three of them equally,’” he warned, wagging a finger. “If you’re a real man, you’ll give me a straight answer.”

That was what he wanted to know? Who was my favorite? Considering how serious and straightlaced Finn generally made himself out to be, this was surprisingly gossipy.

“Oh, come on! You could have asked so many more serious questions!”

Finn frowned. “I’m *being* serious.” He leaned forward. “Say, how is having three fiancées, anyway? I can’t even imagine.”

A typical guy might’ve been green with envy, but Finn’s query stemmed entirely from curiosity. That wasn’t terribly surprising. This sister-obsessed freak only had eyes for Mia; of course he wouldn’t want to be in relationships with multiple girls at once.

“It just kind of happened, in my case. I stumbled into it before I knew what was going on.”

“You’re saying you don’t have particularly special feelings for any of them?” Finn tilted his head.

“If you keep this up, I’m going to sock you in the mouth.” I was sorely tempted to do that *now*, but I controlled myself.

It sounded like he was saying I didn’t love any of the girls, but I did! Of course I did. At the same time, I still had the values I’d grown up with in Japan. So, by having three fiancées, I was already a totally faithless jerk. That made me second-guess myself. Did I *really* love them after all?

I was envious of Finn’s ability to steadfastly devote himself to one person. Granted, I didn’t want to be like the idiot brigade, all of whom were dedicated to a single girl. There was nothing to feel jealous about there. Sure, they were seemingly all faithful, but sometimes I wanted to ask them “Is this *really* fine with you?”

“My money’s on Olivia,” Brave interjected when I failed to answer Finn’s question. “What do you think, Partner?”

Finn furrowed his brow as he thought about it. “Perhaps Miss Noelle?”

I had no idea what criteria they’d used to make their guesses, but I was fed up with this business.

Then Luxion bobbed in front of me, announcing in a booming voice, “Enough of this nonsense.”

I nodded, pleased that he was—for once—intervening on my behalf. “That’s it. You tell them, Luxion. This topic is *completely* inappropriate for—”

“Master has a clear predilection for breasts,” Luxion went on. “Of his three fiancées, Angelica has the largest. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that he prefers Angelica.”

What the hell is wrong with you? As if it wasn’t bad enough that he’d broached a topic his master clearly didn’t want anyone touching, he was so smugly confident about his answer.

“Okay, now you’re *all* taking a fist to the face,” I muttered.

In the middle of our noisy banter, the tea room door cracked open. We froze and glanced toward it.

“Seems like you’re having fun.”

To my chagrin, it was Julius and his idiot brigade. The others were peeking in behind him.

Staring at them, I raised my brows all the way to my hairline. I had a feeling my eyes had gone glassy and lifeless. “What are you doing here? I thought you said you were tagging along with Marie to carry her things today.”

They weren’t with Erica and Marie, like they were supposed to be, and they’d disrupted our coffee break to boot. How come?

“We tried to, but Marie chased us off, sayin’ today was girls only,” Greg answered.

Brad clutched his chest mournfully. “It’s a precious day off, and thus far, I’ve spent the entirety solely with other men. A tragedy.”

Was he taking a potshot at me by saying that?

Evidently sensing my mood souring by the second, Jilk poked his head in. “When Miss Marie rebuffed us, we thought we should spend the rest of the day doing something meaningful. Thus, we came to invite you to enjoy our company, Leon.”

They’d come to extend an invitation to *me*? Oh, something fishy was definitely going on.

When I narrowed my eyes, Chris admitted the real reason they’d barged in. “Basically, we can’t afford to go out on the town alone.”

I glared at them, which was the least they deserved for trying to drag me along to pay for everything. “You spent the allowance I gave you guys?”

Throwing the door the rest of the way open, Julius strode in. “It’s not what you think, Leon!” he exclaimed, raising both hands as if trying to calm me down. “We did everything we could to ensure the festival’s success. We each poured our money into our respective stalls, and—”

“You shouldn’t have used your allowance for that, you morons!”

“You’re the one who said to liven up the festival!”

Yes, I *had* said that, but only an idiot would misinterpret that suggestion and pour all their personal money into a school festival! *Oh, that’s right. I forgot. These guys are idiots.* It was there in the name “idiot brigade.” *Should’ve guessed they’d do this.*

“I never told you to go that far,” I said. “Anyway, you’re really telling me that you want to use me as your personal wallet to go out and have fun, right?”

Julius averted his eyes, as if he knew he was guilty. “You’re putting words in my mouth. We only hoped you might consider giving us an advance on next month’s allowance.”

It was hard to believe this country’s prince was standing before me, pleading for a loan. Julius was supposed to be one of this game’s love interests; he had exemplary grades and was exceedingly talented. Yet he and his moronic compatriots consistently did the stupidest things imaginable.

I held my head in my hands.

“I respect you for having the patience to look after these boys,” Finn said sympathetically.

Even Brave took pity on me, proffering a cookie. “Here. You can have this.”

Their kindness was so heartwarming, it almost brought tears to my eyes.

Luxion had watched this whole conversation unfold. “It seems today will be no less hectic than any other,” he remarked, exasperated.

As evening fell, the number of people milling about the streets of the capital increased. As active as the city was, however, some parts were still devastated by the attempted rebellion. Crumbling buildings had been roped off to prevent anyone from getting too close. Every time the people saw the rubble, it forced them to remember the conflict.

Still, most of the capital’s citizens had already returned to their normal lives. The air had been heavy for a while, and the people weighed down by their anxieties; rumors had spread that Holfort was on the cusp of war with the Holy Kingdom of Rachel and that the capital would soon become a hazardous full-fledged war zone.

That danger had since passed, though. The war, if it could be called that, was short-lived. The people were smiling once again.

Mia navigated the streets with shopping bags hanging from her hands. “Hee hee hee!” she giggled. “I think I bought a little too much.” Having shopped to her heart’s content, she was on cloud nine. There were things in the bags that she’d planned to buy, of course, but there were just as many she’d purchased on impulse.

Noelle likewise carried bags in both hands. Seeing how happy Mia was with their outing, she smiled. “I’m so glad you could find a gift for Mr. Hering.”

“Yes!” Mia beamed—though just as quickly, her face fell, giving way to doubt. “I wonder whether he’ll like it.”

Livia nodded encouragingly. “He definitely will. Don’t you agree, Angie?”

Angie grinned. “Oh, he’ll *love* it. Knowing him, he’ll be happy so long as it

comes from you, Mia.”

“You sound more and more like Mr. Leon these days,” Livia grumbled, puffing her cheeks in a pout.

Angie clapped a hand over her mouth. “Do I? I didn’t even notice.”

Livia dramatically heaved a sigh but couldn’t suppress her mischievous grin. “In fact, I also noticed you’re more and more open with Mr. Leon lately. You two have been trading barbs and getting more sarcastic with each other. It’s not that surprising that you sound similar.”

“You’re acting awfully mean-spirited today, Livia. Not that I *don’t* want you to point these things out. If what you’re saying is true, I need to mind my tongue.” She sighed and turned to Mia. “Sorry, Mia.”

Mia quickly shook her head. “Oh, n-no! It’s not a problem!”

The group had enjoyed a productive day shopping and eating out together, but on their way back, Angie suddenly stopped in her tracks and looked up.

“What’s the matter?” Noelle asked, dubious.

Angie’s brow wrinkled. “There’s an airship from the empire over there. I don’t think we were expecting it. I wonder what business brings it here so suddenly.”

Following Angie’s gaze, Noelle saw a ship proudly flying the empire’s flag. Six warships surrounded it, acting as its escort.

Palpable tension emanated from Angie; her face hardened and creased with worry. In her mind, the sudden appearance of the empire could only mean something terrible.

Chapter 3:

The Empire's Envoy

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit's delegation sent an envoy to the audience chamber of Holfort's palace. There, King Roland Rapha Holfort and Queen Mylene Rapha Holfort sat on their respective thrones to receive him.

Mylene stole anxious glances at her husband. She feared Roland would be peevish about being roused so early in the morning. *Surprisingly, he seems more on guard than usual.*

Roland was typically blasé about everything, but not this morning. He wasn't merely serious—he was actively wary of their guest. Although his expression was inscrutable, Mylene could sense the emotions hidden beneath it.

The imperial envoy knelt before them and bowed his head. "Allow me to humbly express my gratitude for your kind reception of our sudden, unplanned visit."

Roland flashed a warm smile. "We owe the empire a great deal for their aid in settling our war with Rachel. We couldn't possibly treat you with anything less than due respect. But let us set that aside for the moment. Tell me, what brings you here with such urgency?"

"We have arrived in Holfort for one reason alone: We wish to retrieve Her Imperial Highness, Princess Miliaris Luchs Erzberger."

Whispers erupted among the gathered aristocrats and government officials.

"Did he just say their princess is *here*?"

"Who is he talking about?"

"I don't remember any imperial princesses coming to Holfort."

His words didn't ring a bell for any of them.

Even Mylene was shocked by the envoy's revelation. She did an admirable job of hiding it, but her thoughts raced, her mind racked with confusion. *Did he say*

“Miliaris”? I don’t remember an imperial princess by that name. Is she illegitimate? Or was she perhaps adopted under special circumstances? Whatever the case, why have they come for her...? It took Mylene a moment to arrive at a startling conclusion about the princess’s identity. No. It couldn’t be!

Before the queen could react, Roland answered the envoy. “I didn’t realize we were entertaining an imperial princess,” he said honestly. “I assume there was a reason her identity was never publicized?”

“Indeed. Her identity has long been secret, and she was raised as a commoner. At present, she is attending your academy as an exchange student.”

“Ah. So one of the imperial exchange students is, in fact, the princess!” Roland muttered, deliberately injecting surprise into his tone.

“Regardless of her upbringing, the princess’s rightful place is still with the imperial family. We wish to escort her back to the empire so she may receive treatment befitting her rank,” the envoy explained impatiently.

Roland cocked his head. “This seems rather sudden. The princess came all the way here to take part in the exchange program, after all. You could wait for her return—she will go back in fewer than six months. Why the rush?”

“I was only ordered to fetch Her Imperial Highness,” the envoy hurried to reply. “I am afraid I’m not privy to the details as to why His Imperial Majesty wishes to hasten her return. Thus, I can offer no answer.” He bowed his head low.

“You will take her back immediately, then?”

“Yes.”

While the king and envoy spoke, Mylene was preoccupied with thoughts of Miliaris—or rather Mia, as everyone called her. *In retrospect, that explains why Emperor Carl turned up in Frazer’s region. It must’ve been to see Mia. I’m not sure whether she’s his daughter or granddaughter, but he must have had a good reason to keep their kinship under wraps. Yet that still leaves one question: Why are they so anxious to retrieve her?*

It was hard to believe the empire wanted to drag Mia back solely to partake in the power struggle to determine Carl’s successor. Mylene could only surmise

that something must've happened.

We have too little intel on them to say. But until they leave with the imperial princess, we can at least offer the envoy hospitality and hopefully wheedle information out of him. Oh, if only we'd forged a relationship with Emperor Carl sooner. We could've had a diplomat already stationed in Vordenoit.

Until very recently, Holfort had a distant, precarious relationship with the empire. Its strong connection to Rachel had discouraged Holfort from making a concerted effort to establish diplomatic ties. And, for its part, Vordenoit hadn't made any such overtures. Thus, the two countries spent the better part of their existences wary of each other. Merely a decade earlier, however, Vordenoit had finally changed its position and approached Holfort to conduct peaceful negotiations. By carefully calculated increments, both countries finally arranged permissions for exchange students, marking a positive turning point in their national relationship.

From her throne, Mylene stared down at the envoy. As soon as he'd realized Holfort's ruler would allow the delegation to bring Mia back with them, his face had become visibly blank, if only for a moment. In the next moment, his lips pulled into an unsettling smile that made Mylene's stomach knot.

What was with that look? Mylene wondered.

Amid the delegation accompanying the envoy was a young man. He caught Mylene's attention, although he was surely much too young to be a full-fledged knight. She suspected he was about fifteen—the age when most adolescents began attending the academy—although he was dressed in a knight's black uniform. He had a confident, stylish air that only those with true power possessed, yet it was counterbalanced by smug immaturity. Mylene was especially taken aback by the young man's insolence in openly staring at her and Raymond.

And who is he? she wondered.

The young man likely noticed her gaze. He stepped forward and knelt. "King Roland, might I request permission to speak?"

His uninvited interjection made the envoy gawk.

“Very well,” Roland said. “Lift your head and do so.”

The young man smiled, his face the picture of both innocence and sheer narcissism. “A pleasure to make your acquaintances. My name is Lienhart Lua Kirchner. I’m actually hoping for permission to stop by your academy; a senior member of our order is attending on exchange.” Lienhart was of rather small stature, with fiery red hair. He didn’t hesitate for a second in brazenly asking a favor of a foreign king.

“Ah, yes. There are two imperial students here on exchange,” Roland murmured to himself.

“Sir Hering is Imperial Princess Miliaris’s personal knight. I suspect they will depart together. Before they do, I hope to see what sort of environment they’ve been studying in.”

After considering the request for a few moments, Roland nodded. “Very well. I see no issue with that.”

“Thank you, King Roland.”

Later that very same day, the imperial envoy visited the academy alongside his delegation, which consisted of several men resembling civil officials, a knight presumably acting as an armed escort, and thirty soldiers.

We encountered them in the plaza outside the main school building. My guard shot up at this ostentatious band’s arrival, but that wariness was short-lived.

“Lienhart?” Finn blurted in disbelief.

“It’s been a while, sir.”

The knight Finn called Lienhart was a red-haired youth. He and Finn seemed well acquainted. I hung back to give them space, watching from afar with Luxion.

“So Finn knows these people?” I breathed a sigh of relief. “Guess I got all nervous for nothing.”

“I do not sense additional Demonic Suits. It seems they have not brought

another core,” Luxion said, sounding just as distrustful despite this.

I ignored him, instead eavesdropping on Finn’s conversation with Lienhart. It should have been a happy reunion of comrades, but Finn was obviously shocked by the young knight’s sudden appearance. Anyone would have been, in his shoes. Finn and I doubtless had the same question: Why had the imperial delegation turned up with no forewarning?

“Anyway, Lienhart, what brings you here?” Finn asked. “This is so out of the blue. Did something happen back home?”

Lienhart waved a dismissive hand. “We can get to that later. I want to know where this Duke Bartfort is. You know, the guy who apparently gave you a hard time.” As he cast his gaze about, his eyes met mine. His lips drew back into an arrogant smile that radiated bloodlust.

I waved at him, dropping my voice to a whisper so only Luxion could hear me. “Seems like a cocky little brat.”

“Ironically, I believe your peers in the aristocracy say much the same of you, Master.”

I pretended not to hear his snide remark, focusing back on Finn’s conversation.

“He’s an archduke now, actually,” Finn corrected.

“That stands to reason. The kingdom seems short on capable individuals. Oh, by the way, doesn’t Holfort have a Sword Saint? I heard his son attends the academy. I’m actually kind of excited to meet him.” Lienhart’s left hand patted the two sabers hanging at his waist. One was much larger than the other, like the katana and wakizashi set samurai wore. As for the person he’d referred to, that had to be Chris.

Finn eyed Lienhart warily. “This isn’t the empire,” he reminded the young knight. “Any transgressions you commit here will force me to put you down personally.”

“Aw. You’re way too joyless, as always.” Lienhart shrugged and shook his head, grinning. Just as quickly, the smile left his face. “Well, all that aside, where’s Princess Miliaris?”

Finn gawked for only a moment—then he collared Lienhart, lifting him off the ground. “How do you know Mia’s real name?!” he snarled.

It was the imperial envoy who interjected. “Lord Hering, we are here to retrieve Her Imperial Highness on His Majesty’s orders.”

“His Imperial Majesty? Why would Emperor Carl want her back?” Finn’s voice was full of skepticism. Of course, he avoided calling Carl “old fart” or anything similar, given the present company.

When Finn finally released his hold on Lienhart, the envoy smiled and glanced briefly in our direction. I was pretty sure he focused on Luxion specifically.

“I would prefer to relay the details in private, rather than in foreign company,” the envoy replied. “But I will happily explain everything, including how we know of the princess.”

Since it was the only way to get answers, Finn and Brave left with the delegation for the harbor, where they would board the imperial ship.

The airship the delegation boarded was a type used frequently by imperial aristocrats. It was ostentatious and luxurious, its interior and exterior both decorated in the fashion of a high-class hotel.

Once on board, Finn soon found himself in a room with Lienhart, the envoy, and, of course, Brave.

“Emperor Carl has passed away,” the envoy announced with no preamble.

For a minute, Finn struggled to digest the news. “What do you mean?” It was hard to imagine Carl had died when he’d been so perfectly alive and healthy not long ago. Finn could barely accept it.

Lienhart sank into a nearby chair, folding his arms behind his head. His expression was that of a petulant child. “Now that the previous emperor has died, His Majesty Moritz has ascended the throne. We’re here on his orders to retrieve Princess Miliaris.”

Finn balled his fists, grimacing at Lienhart. “How did Emperor Carl die? Some kind of accident?”

That was the only possibility that readily came to mind. How else could someone as irritatingly healthy and fit as Carl perish out of nowhere?

“Emperor Moritz brought his private army and killed him,” Lienhart explained offhandedly. “I don’t know all the details, but supposedly Emperor Carl committed treason.”

“That old man would never commit treason!” Finn snarled. “So this was all the crown prince’s doing? Don’t tell me the reason he wants Mia is—”

He cut himself off, gaze darting to Brave. He was ready to equip his Demonic Suit right then and there. Especially if, as he suspected, Moritz only wanted to drag Mia back to assassinate her.

“Anyone who tries to lay a finger on Mia, no matter who it is, will have to answer to us!” Brave declared.

Lienhart scowled in annoyance. He scratched the back of his head. “Emperor Moritz has no interest in Princess Miliaris. The one who wants her is a Demonic Creature, like Brave.”

Finn and Brave froze. This revelation was unexpected.

Sensing that the pair were at least willing to listen before trying anything, Lienhart continued. “His name is Arcadia. He’s this huge Demonic Creature who only just revived. Even my Demonic Suit Core obediently falls in line with whatever that guy says.”

“How is Arcadia still alive?!” Brave demanded, his voice strangely shrill. “Old humanity pulled out all the stops to kill it! Three of their greatest ships went down with him!”

The most powerful weapons on either side had taken each other out. No one—least of all Brave—had imagined that Arcadia could have survived.

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you.” Lienhart frowned. “He revived, and now he’s acting as Emperor Moritz’s adviser.”

“Is he behind Emperor Carl’s death? Why are you following his orders? Didn’t General Sebald say anything about this?” Finn demanded, voice laced with resentment and unsuppressed anger.

“No, because we have bigger problems right now,” Lienhart said pointedly. “Anyway, you can get the whole story after you head back to the empire. It’s pretty convoluted.”

Still dissatisfied, Finn opened his mouth to protest.

Before he got a word in, the envoy cut him off. “Lord Hering, this is a confidential request from His Majesty.” He handed Finn a letter signed by Moritz.

“Request?” It caught Finn off guard that the king had made a request of him, rather than giving an outright order. He slid his finger along the envelope’s sealed flap, pulling out the letter tucked inside. As his eyes scanned the words on the page, his jaw dropped, and he immediately crumpled the note in his fist. “You want me to assassinate Leon? What the hell is this?”

“The empire is already preparing to declare war on the kingdom,” the envoy said.

“What?!” Grappling with this new information, Finn shook his head in disbelief. “But *why*? If this is about Rachel, that—”

“No,” the envoy interrupted. “This has nothing to do with them. The empire simply cannot coexist with Holfort. This will not be a war of conquest but of total annihilation.”

Finn pressed a hand to his face. “You have to be kidding me! What point is there in turning on them now, after all we’ve been through?”

Lienhart heaved an annoyed sigh. “You really have grown soft since I last saw you. You used to be sharp and unforgiving as a blade. What a pity.”

Finn’s nostrils flared. “How about you put your blades behind those words right now—see how ‘soft’ I am?” His body radiated hostility.

“Oh, I would *gladly* accept that offer, if only I had my suit here with me,” Lienhart answered with a grin. Like Finn, he was a Demonic Knight, but apparently his core wasn’t on hand. He must’ve left it in the empire.

As the two knights glared daggers, the envoy cleared his throat. “That’s enough. The important thing, Lord Hering, is that we want you to eliminate

Archduke Bartfort. He is the kingdom's greatest weapon. And I must emphasize that this is for Prince Miliaris's sake as much as the empire's."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Allow me to explain."

Nothing could have prepared Finn for the truth. When the envoy reached the end of his response, Finn's clenched fists had loosened with resignation. He tilted his head back and stared vacantly at the ceiling.

Chapter 4:

An Assassination

A MODEST FAREWELL PARTY was held in Mia's honor at the academy cafeteria. Angie planned it, and the usual students were all in attendance.

"Sorry it's not any grander," she said. "If I'd had more time, I could have done more."

Mia fidgeted nervously in front of a table lined with food. "N-no, this is really fancy," she stammered. "I'm more than happy! It's just...I'm sad to have to leave you all. I wish I could stay longer." Her voice strained with emotion. "It's weird to suddenly be treated like a princess after all this time."

Needing to return home so abruptly had been shocking enough, and the revelation that she was a member of the imperial family compounded Mia's confusion. All in all, the imperial princess didn't seem pleased that her exchange to Holfort was being cut short. She sat in her chair, staring forlornly at her lap.

"Of course all this comes as a shock," Erica said sympathetically. "There's nothing wrong with taking time to get used to it."

"Oh, Princess Erica..." Mia's eyes welled with tears.

Erica smiled. "No need for a title with me. Just call me Erica."

"B-but I..." Mia hesitated. It still hadn't sunk in that she was an imperial princess—hence her struggle to forsake old formalities.

Erica shook her head. "I want us to be friends," she said. "You're a princess too, Miss... No, I shouldn't use a title either. *Mia*, you can now call me by name, no title at all, and not one person will scold you. So, please, let's be friendly, not prim."

"Yes, of course, Princess—oh, sorry!" Mia beamed. "I'll call you Erica, then!"

Angie was relieved to see Mia smiling at long last. She had worried her parting would be bitter, the way things were going. At the same time, something about the whole affair bothered her.

Why is the empire in such a rush? This is an odd time to make her official title public. They could have just waited until she returned from her exchange. Did something happen within the empire—something that prompted this? A great deal about the delegation's unplanned visit had raised her suspicions.

Angie's eyes wandered to Finn. He had taken his usual position at Mia's side. He wore a troubled expression but watched over her as warmly as always. It was Brave who'd given Angie pause; he wasn't showing any interest in the dishes on the table, nor was he his normal, bubbly self. On top of that, he was sticking to Finn like glue. *Is something wrong?*

Finn suddenly left his seat to make his way to Leon. "Hey, Leon, do you have a minute?"

"You sure you don't want to stick with Mia right now?" Leon arched an eyebrow.

"I need to discuss something with you. Can you make time for me later? It's personal."

"Uh, sure."

Finn's expression only tensed for a moment, but it unsettled Angie. *Hering said he'll return to the empire with Mia, so I assume he just wants to say goodbyes. But there's something...off about him. Something that makes me think there's more to it.*

"Angie," Livia said, interrupting her thoughts, "is something wrong with Mr. Leon and Mr. Hering?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. But... Say, Livia, do you feel like Hering's acting a bit weird?"

Livia glanced at the two, considering Angie's question. "Well, he looks a little sad."

Maybe Angie should have expected that Livia would pick up on that. Finn and Leon had grown close during Finn's exchange in Holfort. Angie sensed the same emotion from him, but her intuition told her something else was happening too. It was a prickling sensation that skittered across her skin—a subtle tension that hung in the air.

“It’s bothering me,” Angie said. She couldn’t shake her wariness.

Noelle walked up to them. “Angelica, wouldn’t you say you’re overthinking it? Are you worried Mr. Hering will whisk our Leon away or something? I can promise that’s not going to happen,” she teased.

“I know you mean that as a joke,” Angie said, “but it actually happens more often than you’d think.”

“What?! No way!” Noelle gaped in disbelief, eyes darting to Livia.

Angie sighed. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. I’m pretty sure it won’t happen to Leon, at least. Still, if you let your guard down, there’s no guarantee another woman won’t swoop in. Clarice and Deirdre are in the wings, waiting to pounce on any chance they get.”

Livia scowled in displeasure at the mention of those two. She sighed, brows furrowed. “Miss Clarice aside, didn’t Miss Deirdre’s older sister already marry into the Bartfort household? There’s no need for her to target Mr. Leon.” She couldn’t understand why Deirdre would keep eyeing him.

Angie smiled despite herself. “In Deirdre’s case, personal desire happens to coincide with her house’s interests.” She turned back to Noelle. “Anyway, I assume you now understand where I’m coming from? If we don’t stay on our toes, someone *will* steal him away.”

Noelle held her head in her hands, frowning. “Why are so many girls after Leon? There are other fish in the sea.”

Livia lifted her chin. “Unfortunately, that is Mr. Leon’s own doing, I think.” Her nose wrinkled as she recalled his adventures—and the numerous interactions with women they’d entailed. Yet as exasperated as Livia felt, she couldn’t help smiling, knowing that was just the kind of person Leon was.

Angie had likewise resigned herself. She couldn’t blame Deirdre or Clarice for their interest in her fiancé. “Like Livia says, it’s his own fault. Leon may seem lackluster at first, but he always comes through when he needs to, and that shift in his demeanor is what really captures a girl’s heart. Not that I intend to allow him to accrue fiancées besides us three, of course.”

Angie sounded simultaneously proud and somewhat accusatory. Livia and

Noelle knew exactly what she meant; that trait *was* exactly what had drawn them to Leon. Still, they didn't seem bothered that Angie had basically called them on it. At any rate, when Angie said she had no intention of letting their group grow any larger, she really meant it.

"You sure are strict about that, Angie." Livia's brows knitted. "It wasn't long ago that we learned a first-year was swooning over him, and you really put her in her place."

The way Livia phrased that sounded incredibly ominous. A chill ran down Noelle's spine. "Wait," she said with trepidation. "Did you really?!"

Angie stared at Noelle in surprise. "You sound so accusatory. To be clear, I was perfectly civil about it. I could've done far worse."

Leon had rescued the girl in question from some overbearing first-year boys. She'd instantly developed a crush on him, which was why Angie stepped in to nip the problem in the bud.

"Since I wanted to mitigate any emotional harm, I warned the girl off before her feelings developed into something more serious," Angie explained quickly, convinced Livia had misunderstood her. "She was very understanding when she backed down. If I hadn't spoken to her, she might have misunderstood Leon's intentions, perhaps even grown closer to him—and we all know how that would've ended. I just made sure it didn't escalate further. And to be clear, had I wished to, I was entitled to take a sterner approach."

As far as Angie was concerned, she had been perfectly kind and levelheaded. She wouldn't abide people misconstruing the situation.

"Oh." Livia's face fell. "I didn't realize that's how it was. I guess I still don't really understand the unspoken rules here at the school—or the aristocratic perspective, for that matter. Sorry to make assumptions, Angie."

Angie shrugged. "There's nothing for you to feel sorry for. You weren't originally part of the aristocracy, so it's entirely understandable that you might not follow the intricacies."

While they spoke, Noelle played with the end of her ponytail. "Everything's different when you study at an academy full of nobles," she muttered to

herself.

Their conversation paused as it calmed down, and Angie stole a glance at Leon. Luxion floated at his shoulder, as always. *As long as Luxion's around, I suppose we'll make it through, no matter what trouble crops up. I can't help hoping we don't have any, though.*

After the farewell party wrapped up, Finn led me to a deserted area outside. We were still on campus, but it was dark, which unsettled me. This world was no different from my last in terms of the student tendency to spread ghost stories around a school; everyone seemed to love them. Except me.

We arrived at the inner courtyard, its landscaping perfectly maintained. Trees concealed us from any would-be observers.

"Why're we all the way out here? We could've talked in the dorm," I reminded Finn, shrugging.

Finn's back was turned to me. Brave was beside him, his eye cautiously fixed on my face. His distrust put Luxion on guard as well; he was so focused on Brave, watching his every movement, that his usual snide commentary was nowhere to be heard.

"Hey," I called to Finn, "aren't you going to tell me why you hauled me out here?" I tried my best to sound casual, but the tension in the air put me on edge too.

Finn shoved both hands in his pockets and stared at the sky. I followed his gaze. The stars were surprisingly bright.

After a long, pregnant pause, Finn finally said, "The empire ordered me to assassinate you."

I couldn't have counted how many seconds it took his words to sink in. When they finally did, my eyes widened, and my jaw dropped. "What did I do to piss off the empire? Would Mr. Carl even permit that?"

Carl didn't seem the type to order an assassination. This had to be someone else's doing. Still, it was weird, because I would've thought Carl would stop any

order like this before it reached Finn. It didn't sound right to me. Had Carl known about this? Had he approved it? Had something forced his hand?

Whirring like an ancient, dust-choked computer, my poor brain tried to piece the clues together.

Finn half turned to me. "Emperor Carl was assassinated by his son, Imperial Crown Prince Moritz," he said. "I suppose I should call him by his new title: *Emperor Moritz*. He's taken the throne."

"This is the first I've heard of that." I couldn't hide the small-yet-noticeable tremor in my voice.

My mind raced. *Assassinated? Carl? Why would anyone kill him? What's going on? We haven't received word about imperial leadership changing hands.*

I shot a look at Luxion. "This information has yet to reach Holfort," he confirmed as if reading my mind.

Holfort didn't enjoy close diplomatic ties with Vordenoit, but it still struck me as odd that something this big could possibly have been kept secret. My suspicions only mounted as I considered the situation.

"The truth has been kept tightly under wraps, even within the empire itself," Finn said. "Once Mia returns, Emperor Moritz's ascension will be officially announced. Then..." He paused, gathering himself. His face was pinched, as if it physically pained him to force out the next words. "Then the empire will declare war on Holfort Kingdom."

My brow furrowed. "Does this Moritz jerk hate us that much? Well, fine then. I'll put a stop to this before it comes to an invasion. Finn, you'll help me, won't you?"

Why was everyone always so eager to go to war? Whatever. There had to be some way to prevent it.

"No," Finn said flatly. "I won't help you."

"What? Why not?"

"I have no choice but to fight you...for Mia's sake." Finn's voice was thick with anguish, and although he forced a smile, it did nothing to hide his sorrow.

Brave lunged in front of his partner, tiny arms outstretched. “No more second thoughts! Things will get messy if we don’t take Leon out, here and now. Don me, and let’s fight him!”

Luxion immediately discharged a field of electric energy, forming a barrier around us. He obviously planned to buy time until he could deploy Arroganz.

“At long last, this filthy remnant of new humanity’s corruption has shown its true colors.” Luxion’s voice was surprisingly venomous for a robot. “Master, my main body is hovering over Holfort’s skies already. All I require is your permission, and I will commence an attack!”

I ignored both, my eyes fixed on Finn, who made no move to equip his suit as Brave had suggested. I sensed his hesitation.

“Finn, answer me!” I shouted. “What do you mean, ‘for Mia’s sake’?”

“Master, why aren’t you granting me permission to attack?” Luxion asked anxiously. “These two are our enemies!”

Brave pleaded similarly with Finn. “Partner, if we don’t do this, you’ll regret it! We have to, for Mia. You already made your mind up, didn’t you? We have no other choice. There’s still time to take him out. We’re so close, Luxion won’t chance using his main cannon, in case it hits Leon. We won’t get a better shot than this!”

Finn pursed his lips and said nothing. He stared silently at the ground.

“Come on, say something,” I urged, refusing to give up on a peaceful resolution. “You don’t actually want to fight me, do you? No way in hell do I want to fight you either! So we have to work together to find another way out of this.”

Finn lifted his head, revealing the tears of frustration rolling down his cheeks. “There is no other way. If you knew the truth, you’d... If you only knew, I...”

“Partner!” Brave snapped nervously.

Finn grabbed him. “Kurosuke...it’s over. I can’t kill Leon. Not like this.”

Resigned, Brave lowered his tiny arms. “B-but why not...?”

“You speak of victory as if it were a foregone conclusion,” Luxion said. “That

can only indicate that you severely underestimated Master and myself.”

Mere seconds later, Arroganz landed behind me, armed with Gatling guns in either hand. Both barrels were pointed straight at Finn and Brave.

“Soon, you will taste for yourself how I altered our weapons specifically to dispatch Demonic—”

“Luxion, wait,” I said.

“Master, if you would only grant permission, I could promptly exterminate the both of them.”

“I told you! Enough!” Clenching my fists, I marched straight toward Finn. Luxion’s barrier dispersed before I reached it; with that out of the way, I was able to seize Finn’s arm. “Tell me. What happened?”

Finn hung his head. “The prime Demonic Core revived.”

“Arcadia...” Luxion murmured behind me. His robotic voice trembled with shock, but I pretended not to notice as Finn helpfully supplied an explanation.

“His name is Arcadia, and he hates Holfort with a passion. But more than anyone, he hates you, Leon. His orders were to get rid of *you*—and Luxion—without delay.”

If this “Arcadia” was indeed the leader of new humanity, then Luxion, as a weapon of old humanity, couldn’t brush off the threat. As much as he hated the Demonic Suits, they hated him and AI like him to the same extent.

“Still, you and I can—”

“You can’t,” Brave interrupted before I finished, quashing my attempt to insist on working together to overcome Arcadia.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Unless we try, you can’t know.”

“When that jerk revived, so did a number of ancient AI. They sensed the danger he posed. Many are already attacking, hoping to destroy him, but all who have tried have been annihilated,” said Brave. “I admit, he only just woke up, so he’s not at full power. He’s probably only at 70 percent. If you’re lucky, and he’s not, then maybe only 50. That should tell Luxion all he needs to know.”

I glanced at Luxion. He wasn't acting like his normally smug self.

"Master," he said after an uncomfortable pause, "my main ship is a migratory vessel."

"Yeah, I know that," I said impatiently. "What's your point?"

"Unlike other AI units, my main purpose was the preservation of humanity. Immigration, if you will. Thus, I recommend we escape to outer space."

"What? Are you insane? We haven't even *tried* to fight this thing, and already you're... Wait. It can't be."

"Granted, my victory would not be out of the question at present. But the likelihood would be a single-digit percentage at best, even accounting for the best-case scenario. I will not have you engage in an unwinnable battle, Master."

I couldn't believe it. Luxion was basically saying he didn't stand a chance. Up until this point, he had easily overwhelmed every enemy we came across with superior technology and skill; now he was advising me to run. Luxion, who had never once been beaten, didn't think he could meet this adversary and win.

"So long as you're here in Holfort, you pose a threat to the empire," Finn cut in.

"Me? A threat?" I threw up my hands. "But I'm not gonna fight anybody!"

He nodded. "I know that. I'm perfectly aware you're no warmonger, nor are you ever eager to head into battle. But your feelings don't factor into this. It's already set in stone."

A lump formed in my throat. I couldn't find the words to respond. I didn't understand what he was saying—didn't *want* to understand it.

I was a threat, so the empire wanted to assassinate me. And they'd ordered Finn to carry it out.

"I can't die," Finn said. "I have to protect Mia."

Regardless of his feelings, he'd obviously made his decision. To keep Mia safe, he had to return with her to Vordenoit. And if I tried to fight Arcadia, Holfort would be completely destroyed.

There was nothing to say.

“Arcadia hates you two,” Finn warned me. “He’ll do whatever it takes to get rid of you.”

“Partner’s right,” Brave chimed in. “Nothing and no one in this era can oppose him. Even the two of us are powerless! That’s why...my partner, he...” Brave couldn’t bring himself to finish.

Regardless, they’d made their point: Arcadia was a force to be reckoned with. And Finn probably didn’t want Mia wrapped up in a war.

As I stood there silently, fresh tears trickled down Finn’s face. “I was asked to kill you, but I’m going to tell them I failed,” he said. “Make a run for it. Go to space, or wherever you need to, but get out of here.”

That said, he turned and left, Brave close behind him.

I dropped my gaze and hid my face in my hands. “What the hell is going on? Why is this happening?!”

Holfort was my *home*—my second home, anyway, after Japan—and Finn wanted me to turn tail and leave it in the dust? How was I supposed to do that? As relieved as I was that we hadn’t come to blows, I was so shocked that I couldn’t move.

“Master.” Luxion drifted closer. “Please make a decision.”

“What?”

“We must gather the individuals most important to you and flee to outer space with all due haste. I believe it will take some time to list those you wish to bring. Thus, you should begin immediately.”

Apparently, this time was different. This time, Luxion couldn’t bail me out.

Chapter 5:

Erica and Mia

WHY WAS ARCADIA planning to declare war on Holfort? Was it just because I had Luxion, an ancient weapon of old humanity? If that was his only reason, why involve the entire kingdom? All he had to do was order the imperial armies to take me down, the same way he'd told Finn to assassinate me. If Arcadia imagined Holfort's people could ever overcome their differences and rally in my defense, then he was sorely mistaken.

None of it made sense. Why did he feel the need to declare war?

"Is Arcadia really such an amazing weapon?"

I didn't sleep a wink that night. After my exchange with Finn, I couldn't get my head on straight. Once the initial shock wore off, I returned to my room and discussed a number of things with Luxion, but we never arrived at any definitive solution.

"Old humanity once designed high-mobility warships specifically for battle. They were far better equipped than me. It took three of those to sink Arcadia, and he brought them down with him. Given that he has revived, it's obvious they failed to completely destroy him, as people once thought. They merely rendered him temporarily inoperable," Luxion said.

Basically, from a performance standpoint, Arcadia ran rings around him.

"But doesn't this all depend on how much functionality he's recovered? Maybe you could still take him on," I suggested hopefully.

"I will not entirely dismiss that possibility. However, Brave is convinced I am no match. As little as I trust Brave—not at all, to be clear—I believe that, if our chances of victory surpassed Arcadia's, Finn would have sided with us."

Luxion had a point. Finn was willing to kneel to Mr. Carl's murderer, after all. The only reason he would return to the empire—and make an enemy of me in the process—was because no one, not even Luxion, could hope to win against Arcadia.

I hung my head in defeat.

Luxion hovered closer, his voice taking a surprisingly gentle tone. “Finn chose *you* over the emperor. Because the two of you—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said. I didn’t need him to spell it out. “I appreciate him doing that.”

I vividly recalled the anguish on Finn’s face at that point. His failure to kill me would have repercussions. At the very least, it would damage his reputation at home. He might even face punishment. In the worst-case scenario, he could be separated from Mia. Considering how important she was to him, he’d taken a huge risk by letting me live.

I didn’t want to boil down something that meaningful to “the power of friendship,” but that was really what it was. Finn had stuck his neck out for me.

“So, you and I really can’t beat Arcadia?”

“We cannot,” Luxion confirmed. “I continue to recommend escaping to outer space.”

I sighed. “It’s pathetic, really. The second a stronger foe appears, I’ve got no choice but to run with my tail tucked between my legs. We’ve always done whatever the hell we wanted—and maybe made a mess of things in the process. Still, I feel like a loser.”

I’d always had it in my head that I could solve any problem as long as I had Luxion.

“Fleeing Arcadia does not make you a loser,” Luxion rather uncharacteristically assured me. “Old humanity poured all their strength into his destruction and still couldn’t best him. There is nothing to feel ashamed about.”

“You’re being awfully nice today,” I teased. “You don’t have to, you know. You can go back to your usual spite-and-sarcasm routine.”

“Master, this is no laughing matter. I urge you, make a decision.”

I forced a smile. “My policy is never to pick a fight I can’t win.”

“I am aware.”

“And, you know, I don’t think running away is necessarily a cowardly thing to do.”

“Indeed not.”

After a thoughtful silence, I continued, “Only an idiot would go into battle knowing he’s bound to die.”

“A wise assessment, Master.”

Surely no one would mind me fleeing, given that my presence would only lead to further casualties. If my options were to fight a monster like Arcadia or hightail it to space, I would go for the latter. That way, the empire would have no reason to attack Holfort.

“Prepare our escape,” I commanded.

“Very well, Master.”

So long as I wasn’t here, the empire would back down. There was no reason to hesitate. Leaving would solve all the problems.

“Guess we’ll be taking a moonlight trip to the stars,” I added.

Decision made, all that remained was to prepare for departure. Fortunately, Luxion was a high-performance migratory ship, which meant he could breach the atmosphere. He assured me he would collect all the necessities. All I had to do was gather my personal belongings and any mementos. That left only one problem: deciding who to bring with us.

I strode through the ship’s corridors with a bouquet in hand. My gaze drifted to the ceiling. There were dark circles beneath my eyes.

“I wonder if those three will come with me,” I said anxiously.

“The odds are good,” said Luxion. “Would that mean only five of you would be aboard? I include you and Erica in that count, of course.”

A life in space with just four people sounded awfully lonely.

“Erica’s symptoms will improve once we leave the planet, so there will be no need to induce cryogenic sleep. She will be able to live an ordinary life on the

ship, since demonic essence does not exist in space. In fact, if you and Erica were to have a child, the odds are excellent that it would have even more distinct old human characteristics. Cleare and I would offer you and your offspring our full support.”

He really doesn't know when to give up, does he? “I already told you no. Also, you seem to forget that, if Erica goes, there's one other person who'll insist on coming.”

Marie. And if *she* joined us, the idiot brigade would be intent on coming with her. That would probably mean Kyle and Carla would tag along too.

Luxion stared at me. “Do you truly intend to bring Marie and those boys along?”

“They probably wouldn't take no for an answer. I guess things at least wouldn't get boring with that crew, but who knows.”

Before I brought it up with Marie, I needed to talk to my fiancées. And before that, I was heading to Erica's room. That was why I'd brought flowers. She was staying in the *Licorne's* sickbay.

Cleare awaited us in the middle of the next hallway I turned down.

“Master,” she said solemnly—entirely unusual for her. “I need to tell you something important.”

“Cleare?” My heart sank. “Did Erica take a turn for the worse?!”

Cleare moved her lens side to side, as if shaking her head. “Rica's fast asleep for now. Her condition hasn't improved but hasn't worsened either.”

“Oh, okay. That's a relief.” I sighed. “What's this important thing you wanna talk about?”

“There's a high chance that you and Rica descend from old humanity,” she replied calmly, without a trace of her usual cheerfulness.

“Huh?” My face scrunched. What was she talking about?

The big difference between old and new humanity was that the latter used demonic essence to produce magic. In short, anyone who could use magic was obviously a new human. Yet, contrary to all evidence, Cleare was claiming we

weren't.

"Because we reincarnated here? You said before that *all* of us—at least, Marie, Erica, and me—have strong old human characteristics."

"That's not what I mean," she said. "Let me explain in full, to give you a better understanding."

Cleare floated away, leading me to a separate room to continue the conversation.

Cleare guided me to the private quarters she'd prepared for herself on the *Licorne*. Since she'd originally been developed to oversee a research lab, her room was unsurprisingly equipped with various pieces of high-tech equipment. It might even have been accurate to call it a research lab too.

In the middle of this dim, cramped space crammed full of machines and technology, Cleare projected a data image that nearly made my jaw drop to the floor.

Since I was speechless, Luxion stepped in. "I was aware that Erica and Mia had radically different reactions to demonic essence, but this beggars belief."

Cleare had performed an analysis on the two girls, hoping it would provide insights for their treatment. As she interpreted the results, though, she'd come to a staggering conclusion.

"Duh," Cleare said petulantly. "That's why I said from the start that this is a possibility, not an established fact. But if you want my honest opinion, the odds are pretty high that I'm on the money."

Luxion studied the screen, the ring within his red lens rotating back and forth. "You're essentially saying that Erica is a descendant of old humanity, while Mia is a descendant of new humanity. Correct?"

The screen changed several times, displaying the rest of the data Cleare had collected. "At first, we suspected everyone on this planet descended from new humans, because they can wield magic."

"That is a distinct characteristic of new humanity, yes. After all, demonic

essence essentially poisons old humans,” said Luxion.

“Exactly!” Cleare chirped excitedly, pleased that he’d caught on. “That’s why high concentrations of demonic essence are poisonous to Rica.”

“We hypothesized that Erica has strong old human characteristics because she reincarnated, just like Master and Marie.”

“We sure did. I thought they were special because they had reincarnated—because they, unlike everyone else, had memories of a past life. And I thought the rest of Holfort were new humanity’s descendants.”

It was like everything we’d ever assumed to be true was crumbling around us. At least, that was how this felt to me. I had always shrugged off the whole “old humanity versus new humanity” thing, thinking it was random lore the developers threw into the game. I’d never really accepted it as significant or looked into it. Ignoring it this whole time had obviously been a mistake, though; it was why we were in this position now.

Cleare switched the display to intel she had extracted directly from Holfort. I could only assume she’d stolen it, but right now, I had neither the time nor the presence of mind to quibble about minor details like that.

“So, about Rica’s illness,” Cleare continued. “It looks like there are other reported cases, though not many right now.”

It was heartbreaking to hear that other children were suffering like Erica. According to the detailed reports and graphs Cleare displayed, all those patients had temporarily improved at one point—just as Erica had. Soon after, however, their condition had severely worsened.

“If my hunch is correct, *everyone* in Holfort Kingdom descends from old humanity,” Cleare said.

I shook my head. “You guys said old humanity can’t use magic. Even I can do that, if I put my mind to it. You have to be wrong.”

I couldn’t accept it. I *wanted* her to be wrong. But Cleare only followed up my doubts with further arguments for her theory.

“While we AI were in sleep mode, old humanity was researching magic. I

suspect they found a way to manipulate demonic essence, even if they couldn't access it the same way new humanity can. That was how old humanity adapted to this environment, which is otherwise inhospitable for their kind."

"I thought they fled into space?" I glanced at Luxion for confirmation.

"We lacked the resources to help all of humankind to escape," he explained. "I was built to enable only a selected few to board and seek salvation in the stars."

"So there were those who couldn't flee," I said.

That made sense. Those left behind must have scrambled for any means of survival, ultimately landing on the magic we still used today—the same kind used by new humanity.

"Old humanity cannot manipulate demonic essence naturally," Cleare continued. "I assume they developed a technological workaround to circumvent that limitation. Then they must have enabled future generations to use magic somehow."

I pulled a face, still not entirely convinced. "But that would make us no different from new humanity, right?"

"Actually, I was just getting to that. I suspect your ancestors used magic itself to alter their descendants' genes."

Could magic really do something that intricate and precise? As tempted as I was to voice doubts, this conversation would never get anywhere if I kept interrupting Cleare. I pursed my lips and waited for her to continue.

"I suspect they predicted demonic essence would grow less concentrated over time," Cleare went on. "And that—as it did—new humanity would die off, since they need demonic essence to survive. I posit that old humanity manipulated their descendants' genes to eventually switch back to their ancestral makeup, once demonic essence thinned out."

"Is that even possible?" I asked, skeptical. "I mean, realistically."

"There's still a great deal we don't know about the field of magic. It'd be premature to discount the possibility, and in fact, some of my recent

discoveries support it. I really think they predicted new humanity would naturally go extinct and made a long-term plan to mitigate that by reverting them. But, sadly, I don't think old humanity accounted for atmospheric demonic essence fluctuating so rapidly this many generations later."

I hadn't realized that new humanity *required* demonic essence to survive, but the more surprising revelation was that—as it thinned in the atmosphere—more and more people's genes were reverting to the way old humanity had been originally.

"More bad news," Cleare warned before she continued. "The internal process that alters descendants' genes is a huge pain, I'm afraid. There's no real way to adjust it, and once someone reverts, there's no going back. But the demonic essence in the atmosphere dropped drastically for a while, so more and more children are going to react badly to demonic essence, like Rica."

That gave me pause. "Wait. It dropped?"

"Master, do you not remember? The Sacred Tree, which Ideal was so desperate to protect, was absorbing demonic essence," Luxion reminded me.

His words brought memories of my time in Alzer flooding back. The Sacred Tree had been a sinister presence, but if it was absorbing demonic essence, that explained why the concentration had dropped so dramatically.

Cleare moved her lens up and down, nodding. "That's why Ideal saw the Sacred Tree as a symbol of hope for the future. It was exactly that, absorbing demonic essence from the atmosphere and reducing its toxicity for old humanity. Of course, I doubt it could've absorbed *all* demonic essence."

"I suspected at the time, but it's now virtually definite that the Sacred Tree rapidly absorbed demonic essence during our battle," said Luxion. "That resulted in a sudden improvement in Erica's condition, and..."

"And a downward spiral in Mia's," I finished for him. My gaze fell to the floor.

"I think Rica's an outlier. Her genes are reverting much quicker than anyone else's," Cleare said.

Apparently, the assumption that only people who'd reincarnated here possessed particularly strong old human characteristics was always totally off

base. Erica's traits were only more pronounced because her genes had switched back unusually quickly. That process had rendered her vulnerable to the current levels of demonic essence in the atmosphere—hence her debilitating sickness.

“It's highly probable that nations beyond Holfort are inhabited by old humanity. There are likely populations in Fanoss, Rachel, and Lepart, to name a few,” said Cleare. “On the other hand, the empire seems entirely composed of new humans.”

“The fact that Arcadia is supporting the empire reinforces that theory,” Luxion added. “Whether the empire realizes or not, Arcadia provides them the ideal atmosphere, since he can create and circulate demonic essence.”

That meant Arcadia's very existence increased the concentration of demonic essence. If this continued, Erica and the other people like her couldn't survive.

“I'll reiterate that the gene reversion thing is a one-way street. Once it happens, there's no going back. So, as things stand, old humanity will eventually die out no matter what they do.” Cleare paused for a moment. “It's possible Arcadia realizes that. Maybe it's why he's declaring war on Holfort.”

If he just wanted to get rid of me, there was no need for a war. The fact that he was going to such extremes supported Cleare's theory, suggesting he wanted to wipe out all of old humanity.

Beads of cold sweat trickled down my back. “Why's he doing this now, after all these years?” I couldn't fathom it. That war had ended millennia ago. Why was Arcadia aiming to kill the innocent citizens of Holfort?

“Master.” Luxion interrupted my thoughts. “*Our* war isn't over.”

“Sure it is. It ended forever ago.”

“I never received an order instituting a ceasefire. As far as we are concerned, the conflict is ongoing. Arcadia and the other Demonic Creatures probably feel likewise.”

Oh, you've gotta be kidding me. If this millennia-old war wasn't actually over, I somehow doubted I could avert impending tragedy by running off to space. As long as Arcadia was alive, the only future awaiting old humanity's descendants was total annihilation.

Chapter 6:

New Family

I'D THOUGHT everything would be fine if I escaped the planet. With me gone, the empire would have no target to attack in Holfort and would cease hostilities.

Much to my chagrin, it wasn't that simple.

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined this otome game would include such an intricate (and arguably annoying!) plot. What the hell was this "old humanity versus new humanity" nonsense? *They should've given this game a more peaceful, laid-back setting.*

"You're white as a sheet, Uncle. Are you all right?" Erica's eyes filled with genuine concern as she studied my face.

Luxion, and subsequently Cleare, had gone to great lengths to furnish the *Licorne's* sickbay with all manner of medical equipment. That was proof of their determination to keep Erica alive at all costs.

I had pulled up a chair and was sitting beside her bed. There was a smile on my face, but it was so forced that I worried she could see right through me.

"Just a little short on sleep," I assured her. "Don't worry. I plan to nap later. Before that, there's something I want to ask you. About me."

Erica sat up in bed, tilting her head. "What do you want to ask?"

"You hid something from me, didn't you?"

Erica's condition had improved so quickly, only to rapidly deteriorate, yet she had taken it all in stride. She was mature for her age, having lived one life already—for many years longer than I had—but it was still uncanny. I had a feeling I knew why Erica was so at peace with her health; Cleare's theorizing had clued me in to a possibility.

Erica averted her eyes, ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"Could you fill me in? I think whatever you know might turn out to be really

important.”

As far as I knew, Erica was the only person who’d played a significant amount of the game trilogy’s third installment. Marie had puttered around half-heartedly before abandoning it, and Finn just watched some of his sister’s playthrough. I’d only completed the first game, so I was in the dark about everything from the sequel onward.

Erica had told me some details about the game before, but at the time, my questions were of an entirely different nature. At any rate, the third game’s plot had already gone off the rails. I’d taken responsibility for occasional course correction where necessary, but in the process, I overlooked a key issue: Erica had never shared *everything* she knew.

Erica took a deep breath. “When I was younger, and Mom was busy with work, I had no one to keep me company. It was lonely. Of course, I don’t blame her at all for that. But I really wanted to spend time together, so I thought I could at least play the same games she played.”

Whenever she was bored, whenever she was lonely, she’d turned to that otome game.

“I finished it multiple times,” she continued. “Less because I personally enjoyed it, and more because I liked playing something I knew Mom enjoyed.”

I scratched the back of my head, feeling apologetic on my sister’s behalf. “That dummy,” I grumbled. “She could’ve gotten you better toys. I know I can’t speak for her, but as your uncle, I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“Oh, it didn’t particularly bother me.” Erica smiled warmly. “I used Mom’s phone to look up a walkthrough. That was how I found out that the villainous princess, Erica, did in fact have a weak constitution—even though the narrative always made her out as a liar in that regard.” Her smile became strained.

In the game, Erica had lied so frequently that people couldn’t bring themselves to believe her even when she was being honest. No one had bought it as she was suffering from her symptoms. *Poor thing.*

“Do you know what caused her illness?” I asked.

“I actually don’t know much about it,” Erica confessed with a shrug. “Except,

when Mia awakened, my health suddenly worsened. I think that was the trigger.” As she said that, she drew in on herself, looking away from me.

This confirmed my suspicions; Erica knew that Mia’s improvement came at the consequence of her own deterioration. It was as if the world was telling us old and new humanity could never share the same planet.

“So you were fine with suffering if it meant Mia would recover,” I surmised, sighing.

“I lived long enough in my previous life,” Erica explained with a troubled-yet-happy smile. “Besides, I’ve been able to make plenty of lasting memories with you and Mom.”



Was she this self-sacrificing because of her past life? Or was Erica just that kind of person? Part of me was proud of her, but another part wished she wouldn't prioritize other people's well-being over her own.

"You're being pretty naughty, you know. Didn't anyone ever tell you it's bad form to die before your parents?" I grinned wryly. "And if not for me, you'd be dead already."

Was she really all right with leaving Marie behind?

Erica frowned. "I'm not sure you have a leg to stand on there."

"Nope." I slapped my forehead and laughed. "You got me!"

Her lips curled into a smile.

"If anything else happens, I trust you'll keep me in the loop," I told her pointedly.

"Of course. But I have to warn you, those memories are from a long time ago. There's much I don't recall. If I happen to remember anything important, though, I'll make sure to tell you."

Thankfully, Erica had no way of knowing the dire consequences her actions had already triggered.

The second I left the sickbay and stepped into the hall, Luxion began buzzing in my ear. "Master, I feel you ought to look objectively at yourself before you criticize others. Much of what you said to Erica applies just as well to you."

"It's rude to eavesdrop."

"I only resort to such crude techniques due to your inability to keep me abreast of relevant information," he reminded me dutifully.

I snorted. "You've gotten better at making excuses, at least."

As I strode down the corridor, he kept pace, floating at my shoulder. His red lens turned to study my face. "I noticed you did not tell Erica what you learned from Cleare."

"She doesn't need to know about all that." My lips thinned into a flat line. In a

voice barely above a whisper, I added, “She’d be beside herself if she found out her choice is gonna lead to all those people dying.”

She’d be beside herself, yes, and I also didn’t think she deserved real blame; she couldn’t have known this would happen. Plus, I was the one who’d offered to help, hoping we could improve Mia’s health. If anyone deserved to shoulder the blame, it was me.

My frustration with myself must have shown on my face, because Luxion worriedly cut in, “Fleeing is the correct decision. You have done nothing wrong.”

“What, you think I’m gonna change my mind now?” I scoffed.

“Then I assume you don’t mind if I continue planning our departure from this planet?”

“Knowing what we do now, you’ll have to account for us taking more people.”

If death awaited anyone who stayed, the least I could do was take my family and friends—even my acquaintances. We could all make a break for it together.

Regardless, I felt guilty—although I’d had no way of knowing the truth sooner. That was probably what Luxion sensed, and why he refused to drop this.

“You have made a wise decision,” he added.

“I doubt those people left behind will ever forgive me.”

“Your flight will ensure that old humanity’s descendants survive. It’s much more practical than staying and submitting to complete annihilation.”

“Yeah, I hope you’re right.”

The insistent way Luxion encouraged me, reiterating that this was the right call, just revealed his anxiety. What—did he think I’d cling to some naive belief in justice and try to take Arcadia on by myself? Or worse, that I’d be so guilt-ridden, I’d feel I had no choice but to atone by facing Arcadia?

I was a full-grown adult—and a selfish one, at that. I could think of any number of justifications for my decision, but we were going to run, and that was that.

No one had seen this coming. Who would've expected that an ancient war had continued into this modern age? That old humanity, deprived of magic and poisoned by an atmosphere riddled with demonic essence, had actually survived all this time? That they'd done so by manipulating their own genes?

This was supposed to be a medieval fantasy world with swords and magic, not science fiction. None of this was my fault. It was the *game's* fault for having such a convoluted setting.

"Anyway, I want to bring my family, and I'll need to convince them. Let's go home for now," I said.

"The *Einhorn* is fully prepared to set out. We may depart whenever you wish."

"I'll wait until the Vordenoit delegation leaves."

Finn and his compatriots would head back to the empire soon. My business could wait until I saw them off.

On the day of the imperial delegation's departure, Mia and Finn went to the harbor to board the anchored ship waiting to take her back. There, the envoy pulled Finn aside, his brows furrowed and a displeased frown on his face.

"Lord Hering," he said snidely. "I never dreamed *you*, of all people, would fail to carry out an assassination. I understand that you and Bartfort grew awfully close during your exchange here. I hope you don't intend to betray the empire."

Finn didn't know how the envoy got wind of his friendship with Leon, but he must've thought it would help Finn find an opening and assassinate the archduke. Since Finn hadn't accomplished that, the envoy was suspicious.

"You've got some nerve, casting doubt on my partner!" Brave shrieked, his eye bloodshot with a sudden burst of rage.

The envoy gulped and shrank back. "N-no, that's not what I meant. I...I just assumed you were equal to such a task, my lord. I thought you would at least *injure* him."

Not only was Leon unharmed, there wasn't a scratch on Finn. No wonder the envoy was skeptical.

Finn sighed. “His AI unit never lowers its guard. Actually getting close enough to kill him would be no small feat.”

“Is that so?” The envoy gave Finn an unconvinced look.

“Who cares whether he succeeded?” interjected Lienhart, who lounged in a nearby chair. “We’re wiping out the whole kingdom either way. We can deal with Archduke Bartfort then.” He paused and gave Finn an icy look. “But I admit, I’m a tad disappointed that you mishandled this, sir.”

“I couldn’t care less,” Finn sniffed.

He turned his back to them, gazing out the window. Outside, the harbor teemed with people who had come to bid farewells.

As they did so, Lienhart and the envoy mocked them. “Poor things,” said Lienhart. “They have no idea we’re coming back to kill them all.”

“Partner, Leon’s here,” Brave said, as Finn stared down at the harbor.

“Is he really?” Placing his hand on Brave to share the Demonic Core’s superior eyesight, Finn spotted Leon below.

Luxion floated at Leon’s side as always, projecting an enhanced image so Leon could see Finn and Brave. Leon’s lips were pulled into a taut, inscrutable line.

“Why would he come all the way out here?” Finn mumbled. *You shouldn’t be here, seeing me off. I... After what I did, I don’t deserve such a show of friendship.*

After all, Finn had chosen Mia over Holfort. None of the kingdom’s people, least of all Leon, had any reason to show him such kindness.

“Are you sure about this, Partner?” asked Brave. “I know you’ll come to regret letting them off. It’d be better to take them out here and now.”

“It’s too late for that. They have their guards up.”

Run, Leon. I don’t want to fight you.

Luxion projected an enhanced image so I could see Finn and Brave depart the harbor alongside the rest of the empire’s delegation. I watched them peering

out at us.

“It looks really handy, how Demonic Suits can share their vision like that,” I remarked with a goofy grin, knowing full well Luxion would hate hearing it.

“If that’s all it takes to impress you, I could accomplish the same feat with a few tools. Why don’t I replace your eye with a proper implant so I can better share visual data?”

“Going cyborg does sound pretty awesome, but I kinda prefer staying a full-blooded human.”

Messing around made me feel like we’d gone back to our normal daily routine. Sadly, it didn’t last.

“I could blast their ship with my main cannon and end the threat they pose once and for all,” Luxion offered.

“If we plan to escape, what good will that do us? You’ll just give the empire justification to invade.”

“They don’t care about justification. They’ll invade regardless.”

We watched the ship depart, its hull gradually disappearing into the distance. The rest of the crowd began to disperse.

“Your older brother is in the capital,” Luxion said suddenly.

“He is?”

“He is visiting the Roseblade estate. Would you like to see him and explain the situation before he leaves?”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess that’d be a good idea. Let’s do it.”

Nicks hadn’t mentioned visiting. Had some kind of emergency demanded his presence?

The Roseblades had their own territory, but they kept a residence in the capital as well. The latest intel always went to the capital before spreading elsewhere, so the location was advantageous in that regard, and there were further benefits to having an estate here. That was why the Roseblades’

neighbors consisted of *other* families from the upper echelons of Holfort's aristocracy.

It was a little past noon when I dropped by their mansion. A servant helpfully guided me to the drawing room, where I was surprised to find that, in addition to Nicks, my sisters Jenna and Finley were also present.

Nicks was clad in a dapper suit; he welcomed me in high spirits. "I didn't expect you to come by all of a sudden! What brings you here?"

"Oh, I just heard you were in the neighborhood."

"What? So you came just to see me?" He arched a skeptical brow—with good reason, given my track record of trouble. "Well, you have great timing. There's something I want to tell you." Nicks turned toward the door. "Dorothea? You can come in now."

A maid reached for the door and opened it to usher in my sister-in-law, Dorothea Fou Bartfort. Dorothea stepped into the room, hands gently cradling her swollen, pregnant belly.

She looked at me and smiled. "It's a shame. We were planning to save the surprise for a bit."

My jaw dropped. "Y-your stomach," I started, unsure of what I was getting at. She giggled. "I'm pregnant, of course."



Nicks strolled over to his smiling wife and gently wrapped his arms around her. “You were the only one who didn’t realize, so we talked about surprising you,” he explained.

Dorothea was so big, she’d probably been carrying the baby already by the end of summer break.

Jenna gave me a judgmental look. “You’re such a dimwit. Honestly, I’m forever astounded that you rose to the rank of archduke.”

“Yeah,” Finley agreed. “I mean, everyone else figured it out ages ago.”

Ignoring their open exasperation, Dorothea beckoned me toward her. I hesitated before dumbly shuffling closer.

“Do you want to feel it?” she asked, indicating her stomach.

I flinched. “What? No, I couldn’t. That is... It seems inappropriate.”

I didn’t refuse out of a lack of interest. But the general consensus in Japan was that it wasn’t acceptable to touch a pregnant woman’s stomach if you weren’t her husband.

Dorothea gave me an awkward smile. “Trust me, if someone did so without permission, I would remove the offending limb. This is a special exception. At any rate, this means our family is growing.”

There was something...threatening about the beginning of that response, but I was too preoccupied with her final remark to dwell on it. “*Our family is growing.*” My chest tightened.

With great trepidation, I reached out and pressed my hand to Dorothea’s swollen belly. There was a small ripple of movement beneath my fingertips. “Whoa!” I gasped, eyes snapping wide open.

Nicks and Dorothea laughed.

Jenna sighed dreamily as she watched. “I hope to be pregnant with Lord Oscar’s baby soon. That would solidify my future as his wife.”

“That’s a pretty messed-up reason to want a kid,” Finley said pointedly. “Be careful he doesn’t abandon you before then.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine. Lord Oscar is head over heels for me!”

Finley sneered. “You’re so annoying.”

I let their obnoxious banter go in one ear and out the other, my hand still planted firmly on Dorothea’s stomach. This pregnancy had my mind racing.

Will the baby be fine, like we are? Or will it have Erica’s issues and symptoms? Cleare had warned that Erica’s condition would become increasingly prevalent. Tons of people’s genes were going to revert, trying to adapt to what was *supposed* to be a less toxic atmosphere. The safest course of action for the new baby and its parents, I reminded myself, was to join me in fleeing the planet.

“To tell you the truth,” Nicks said, interrupting my thoughts, “the Roseblades invited us here to celebrate the baby. Dorothea’s so far along, I was worried about taking her on an airship, but we thought she might be more comfortable at home.”

Dorothea rested her head on her husband’s shoulder. “It’s unbelievable how many relatives have come to see me. I might’ve been better off staying with the Bartforts.”

“I never dreamed my siblings would drop in like this. Sorry.” Nicks gently stroked her hair.

“It’s all right. All these familiar faces are reassuring.”

“Anyway, the Roseblades have tons of relatives,” Nicks added. “I was shocked.”

“And those are just the ones who get along. Come to think of it, I expect Father’s friends will drop by soon with gifts for the baby. They always doted on me when I was younger, so I look forward to seeing them again.”

The happy couple contentedly discussed their lives, oblivious to what was going through my head.

It wasn’t surprising that the Roseblades had numerous relatives and acquaintances. But if I suggested fleeing the planet, how many of them would Dorothea insist on bringing with her?

I dropped my hand from Dorothea’s belly, and Jenna wasted no time in

poking fun at me. “I bet you’ll spoil it rotten and be way too overprotective, whether it’s a boy or a girl.”

Finley nodded. “Yeah. He has no patience for his sisters, but I bet he’ll be soft with a niece or nephew. Probably even indulgent. Annoyingly so.”

They snickered.

This was ordinarily the point when I would make some sarcastic quip, but I didn’t have the energy. All I could do was smile at them.

“What’s wrong?” Nicks asked worriedly. “Are you unwell?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“If you’re sure. Oh! We’d like to ask a favor, actually. Do you mind?”

Blindsided, I numbly shook my head.

“It’s about a Roseblade tradition,” Dorothea explained. “Taking a newborn to ride an impressive airship is meant to help it grow to be worthy of its family name. We hoped you’d let us borrow the *Einhorn* for the occasion.”

“You want to use the *Einhorn*?” I echoed.

Nicks clapped his hands together and then held them toward me, pleading. “Please! I just know our baby will do us proud if it can ride a ship as famous as the *Einhorn*! And I’d really love to show it the wide-open sky.”

The wide-open sky, huh?

As her husband described his dreams for their child, Dorothea beamed. “I suppose you *are* always talking about taking a family trip with the little one.”

Nicks’s cheeks colored, and he laughed awkwardly.

Neither of them knew it, but their happiness and dreams were like knives at my chest, cutting deeper and deeper.

Chapter 7:

A Decision

AFTER LEAVING the Roseblade estate, I whiled away the hours before nightfall on a park bench, unable to collect my thoughts.

“I might not be able to come through for Nicks,” I mumbled to myself.

“No. The baby isn’t due for months yet. We do not have the luxury of staying that long,” said Luxion.

There was a short pause as his words sank in.

“I guess Nicks will just have to deal with it,” I said.

“Yes. I believe fleeing is still a wise decision—for the sake of the baby as well. I will add those related to, and associated with, the Roseblades to our list of refugees.”

“Good. Do that.”

“However...”

I lifted my head.

Luxion looked apologetic—as much as any robot could. “Accommodating them all will be impossible. Although we will have more leeway if some enter cryogenic sleep pods.”

“What?” My mouth went dry.

This whole time, I’d failed to take something into account. Our plan had been limited to my nearest and dearest at first, but it had gradually encompassed more and more people. It now included so many that I couldn’t count them all, so what Luxion said made perfect sense. I couldn’t save *everyone*.

I covered my face with my hands. “How many *can* we save?”

“Too many passengers will negatively impact the ship, and frankly speaking, I consider it unwise to fill the vessel to capacity. We will require extra space to accommodate future generations.”

There was no point taking everyone we could fit if that would affect our chances of survival. It'd be best to limit how many people we brought aboard. That meant we weren't going to save as many people as I had anticipated.

As I hung my head, a family of three passed in front of me. The mother and father had a child between them, holding each of their hands.

"It's the moon!" the kid cried excitedly as he gazed at the sky. "Hey, Mommy, Daddy, guess what?! Someday, I'm gonna fly an airship all the way to the moon!"

Despite the impossibility of such a dream, his parents smiled.

"I think the moon would be a bit difficult, sweetheart, but I'm sure you'll at least fly on a ship," said his father.

"Really?"

The mother gently stroked her son's head. "Oh, don't worry. I'm sure that, someday, an airship will make it all the way there."

"Yeah! And then I'm gonna take you and Daddy. We'll go to the moon together!" No sooner had the boy declared his plan than he broke into a coughing fit.

The father, panicked, quickly hefted his son in his arms. "I think we pushed it a little too far today. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I was feeling better today, though. This sucks."

"I'm sure you'll be all better soon enough," the father assured him. "Once you are, we'll play outside together again."

"Will I really get better?"

"Of course."

Tears shimmered in the parents' eyes as they reassured the little boy. Something about the moment truly struck me; the image carved itself into my mind. I sat and watched them numbly as they left.

The child's symptoms had immediately reminded me of Erica. How many more children like her would there be? How many would suffer for their

inability to adapt to the increasingly hostile atmosphere full of demonic essence? The guilt was agonizing, like a beast that sank its claws into me.

Luxion tried to draw me away from self-flagellation. “Master, it’s pure arrogance to think you can save everyone. The people closest to you are the ones you should save. You mustn’t lose sight of that.”

“Yeah, I know. I just...” I trailed off.

Luxion was right. There were people I needed to prioritize: my fiancées, close relatives, and members of my extended family. It would be foolish to whisk away complete strangers, only to jeopardize the lives of those I held most dear.

I clenched my right fist and covered it with my left, squeezing as hard as I could, as if I could stuff down the foolish, guilty thoughts creeping into my head. But the family from a moment ago wouldn’t leave my brain. On top of that, I could still feel the ripple of movement—a sign of new life—from when I’d touched Dorothea’s stomach.

How many children were going to die if no one did anything? As I contemplated that, my fists unclenched.

Much to my chagrin, a realization hit me: I was apparently a complete idiot who couldn’t make the smart choice.

“I’ve made up my mind, Luxion.”

“Indeed. Let’s go ahead and draw up a list of people to—”

“I’m going to fight.”

“Master?” he said uncertainly.

I lifted myself off the bench, stretching. It was time to stop thinking and time to start *doing*. “Bad ideas are worse than none at all, you know. This whole thing is such a pain. I’d say I’m better off fighting Arcadia.”

“As I have stated numerous times, that is a fight I cannot win.”

I shrugged. “I’ll just have to face him alone.”

“Please do not behave flippantly about this. It would be tantamount to suicide.”

“Doesn’t matter. Do you really think I can just keep silent and sit on the sidelines?”

To be clear, I wasn’t about to go running my mouth about justice and all that crap. I just knew that, if I took off and fled, I’d end up regretting it. The one thing I didn’t want was to spend the rest of my life entertaining what-ifs.

“Aren’t you going to help me, Luxion?”

“Why must you be such a fool, Master?” Luxion’s body vibrated as he struggled to comprehend my irrational decision.

Hunh. Interesting. He’s developed a new way to express himself.

“Because I was a total idiot in my last life too. Believe me, I also wish I were smarter this time around.”

“If you truly mean that, then—”

“Reincarnation didn’t change who I am at heart, and a numbskull like me can’t turn into a genius overnight. Took two lifetimes to understand that, but now I do.”

“Are you absolutely certain about this?” Luxion asked, resigning himself to the realization that I wasn’t changing my mind.

“I feel bad for you. Really, I do,” I replied. “You got stuck with a horrible master. Sorry about that, Luxion.”

He gave me a look. “Yes. You truly are the scum of the earth.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

As soon as I’d decided we were going to battle, we were both ready to dive into the prep work. In some ways, I hated myself for growing so accustomed to this pattern.

“Allow me to clarify our win conditions,” said Luxion. “What is your main objective, Master?”

“Taking out Arcadia,” I said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Reckless.”

“Ha ha! Good. I like it.” I grinned at him. “I plan to take him out even if I go

down with him.”

It was the only way to end this, so even if I died, we *had* to destroy Arcadia. At least that would probably bring some meaning to my life.

“In fact,” I added, “I might be able to give you what you actually want, Luxion.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m gonna wage war on *all* the weapons new humanity left behind and stomp them into smithereens, protecting old humanity in the process. Although I guess I’m kinda putting the cart before the horse, saying that right now.” I smiled tightly.

Luxion didn’t seem as excited as I had expected. Instead, he muttered to himself, “What I... What I actually want...?”

Chapter 8:

The Annulled Engagement

“WHAT IS THAT IDIOT big brother of mine thinking?!” Marie grumbled as she sulked at her desk in one of the academy classrooms.

It hadn’t been long since the academy’s break ended and the imperial delegation set off.

The reason for Marie’s melancholy was, unsurprisingly, Leon.

Carla began collecting Marie’s textbook and notes, carefully tucking them away in her bag. She had long since grown accustomed to attending to Marie during their time together.

“Yes, he’s been missing ever since our break ended,” said Carla. “The headmaster even said he hasn’t heard anything about why Leon isn’t attending. I wonder what could’ve happened?”

The current headmaster was a person Leon revered as a perfect gentleman and master of tea, although he didn’t show such respect to many adults. Yet the headmaster was no more privy to the reasons for Leon’s absence than Marie or Carla were.

Marie’s eyes closed. “Leon’s lucky. He’s an archduke, so no one’ll say anything about him skipping class. Not even the professors will scold him for it.”

“We can’t be too hard on them,” Carla cautioned her with a shrug. “He *is* the hero who saved the kingdom.”

Marie rolled her eyes. “Well, if he’s such a hero, I wish he wouldn’t play hooky without saying anything.”

The real reason she was so upset had nothing to do with Leon’s absence being unexplained. Rather, with Leon gone, she couldn’t check in on Erica. That was especially worrying given the recent frequency and severity of the girl’s attacks.

Luxion is off wherever Leon is, and Cleare’s impossible to flag down. But Erica’s suffering right now, so why isn’t he here? The absence of the older brother she always relied on filled Marie with great unease, and that unease

had gradually morphed into anger.

Brows drawn with concern, Carla hesitantly suggested, “Um, why not talk to those girls...?” She was being vague, but they both knew who she was referring to. “It’d be best if you could speak with Miss Noelle alone, but I’m not optimistic about her having the information you’re looking for.”

“True, they might know something,” Marie said before her expression soured. “But I really don’t want to talk to them.”

“Me neither.”

As first-years, Marie and Carla had caused a great deal of trouble for Angie and Livia. Trouble was an understatement, really—Angie and Livia’s lives had been endangered as a direct result of Marie and Carla’s actions. Marie and Carla felt guilty enough that they had reservations about turning to Angie or Livia for help.

Of Leon’s three fiancées, they could only comfortably count on one: Noelle. But even she presented a problem. When it came to work, Leon normally confided in Angie. Odds were that Noelle wouldn’t have the information they needed even if they asked her.

Marie folded her arms and racked her brain, trying to decide what to do. After staring at the ceiling for a bit, she settled on who to ask.

“I-I guess all we can do for now is approach Noelle,” she stammered out.

“Yes,” Carla agreed. “I don’t think we have many other options.”

Why is this happening?!

Cold beads of sweat trickled ceaselessly down Marie’s forehead. As soon as school was let out for the day, she’d been summoned to Angie’s dorm room, where all three of Leon’s fiancées awaited her. Angie had invited Marie to sit, and Carla stood behind her dutifully, almost like a servant.

Marie shot Noelle a look. “S-so, um, what’s the occasion? I, uh, only really wanted to talk to Noelle.”

This is intense! Angie and Livia are both glaring daggers at me, and I can’t

even blame them. I stole Angie's fiancé and Livia's title as Saint! Those two were cold and unforgiving, so Marie hoped Noelle would provide an explanation for this impromptu interrogation.

Noelle was staring at the ground, so she didn't even seem to realize how badly Marie was panicking. Her voice was solemn as she said, "You wanted to ask me about why Leon's been absent, right? Well, we don't know the details either. Luxion isn't here, and Cleare's cooped up in the *Licorne*."

"I *knew* I hadn't seen her around for a while," Marie said. "So that's why. She's been on the *Licorne* this whole time."

"Yeah. That's why we're hoping *you* might know something about all this, Rie."

Now things at least made sense. The three girls thought Marie would have answers about Leon's absence. *But, uh, I don't! That's kinda why I wanted to ask you three what's going on!*

Marie shrank under Angie's sharp, menacing gaze. Her skin had gone clammy, and her smile was obviously forced. "I haven't heard anything either. I was hoping to ask you guys the same thing," she explained.

Noelle nodded. "I know. But you and Leon are really close, aren't you? We thought it was high time we asked you about that—to sort out exactly what's going on between you two."

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. *That* was why Livia and Angie were staring at her so intensely!

Oh, crap. This really is an interrogation! You're such an idiot, Big Bro! Why didn't you at least explain what you were doing before you took off?!

"Leon left without saying a word to us either," Angie added quietly. "Did he really not mention anything to you?"

There was particularly bad blood between Marie and Angie, given that Marie had stolen Angie's former fiancé Julius. The two girls had more or less reconciled since, but they weren't necessarily on good terms. Their shared connection to Leon was the only reason they saw each other so often.

Marie offered an awkward smile. “I-I didn’t hear anything about this,” she stammered. “But, seriously, he’s up and disappeared on us before, right?”

I’ve got no idea where that big dummy is, but it’s so obvious they’re suspicious of me! The way this conversation is going, I’m pretty sure they’ve got it in their heads that there’s something between me and Leon! Marie could deny it all she wanted, but she doubted that would convince Angie and Livia.

“Actually, Mr. Leon usually lets us know before he leaves, even if he doesn’t fill us in on the details,” Olivia said in a soft, warm voice—though her expression was anything but. “But this time, he didn’t.”

“Rie, you talked to him recently, right?” Noelle asked, too impatient for answers to care about the tense atmosphere. “Did he say anything then?”

The mention of Marie’s meeting with Leon immediately made Angie and Livia’s brows twitch in displeasure.

“I already told you, I haven’t heard anything,” Marie said.

All we talked about was Erica and her health. Why are these girls so suspicious of me?!

“This has been bothering me for a while now, so let me ask you plainly—what is your relationship with Leon?” Angie demanded. If Noelle had sounded impatient, Angie sounded *completely* out of patience. “He claims he ‘can’t get away from you, no matter how much he wants to,’ but that doesn’t really explain anything.”

Livia had her own suspicions to air. “He gives you an *unfathomable* amount of money to spend however you like, and he—”

Before Livia could finish whatever she was trying to say, Noelle’s gaze darted to the window. “Leon’s back!” she cried.

The *Einhorn* had appeared in the distance. The characteristic horn jutting from its stern made its silhouette unmistakable even from so far away.

Marie breathed a sigh of relief. *Better late than never, but I wish you’d gotten here sooner, you stupid brother!*

When the girls boarded the *Einhorn*, Cleare appeared and escorted Leon's fiancées to the drawing room to wait for him. They sat on a sofa inside. The robot crew prepared drinks, but no one touched them.

Angie silently fumed, while Noelle fidgeted worriedly.

"I wonder why Marie was escorted to a separate room," Livia said quietly. They had all come together, so it seemed odd that they weren't also waiting together.

Angie frowned. "Cleare claimed it was so Marie could visit the sickly Princess Erica. That strikes me as odd as well, though. What connection does Marie have with her?"

All three were upset, suspicious that Leon would fill Marie in without including them.

Noelle tapped her index fingers together restlessly, cheeks sucked into an odd pout. "It's not fair that Rie gets such special treatment. Seriously, what's going on between those two? I didn't get to know them until Leon came to Alzer, but it just doesn't seem normal."

"And here I thought he was finally relying on us," Angie said with a small sigh.

Their relationship had seemingly taken a step forward in that regard not long ago, which was why it chafed so much to be excluded now.

Livia shared Angie's displeasure. *I remember Miss Marie calling him "Big Brother." That caused a whole mess with Mr. Leon's family, although we established quickly that they're not actually related by blood.*

The incident had roused suspicions that Leon's father Balcus had committed adultery. Some had wondered whether Marie was a secret love child of his—Viscountess Lafan being the presumed mistress—thereby making Marie Leon's half sister. Nothing had ultimately substantiated this theory, so it was dropped, and they still didn't actually know why Marie had called Leon that.

There was so much confusion, maybe the two of them aren't related at all. Given the way Mr. Leon acts, though, I have to wonder.

All three girls knew he simply didn't see Marie as a romantic interest. His

attitude made it clear that she wasn't remotely his type. If anything, he treated her like—well—family. Like a younger sister. That was partly why Angie didn't typically lose her temper about Marie hanging around him.

Still, Livia thought, why does he give her such special treatment? When we were first-years, he told me how much he hated her. It doesn't make sense.

As Livia reflected on the time they'd spent together, looking for clues that might lead to an answer, the door burst open. Leon strolled in.

"Mr. Leon!" Livia cried, automatically shooting up from her seat. She froze immediately. "Huh...?"

Leon was covered in wounds, and his whole demeanor had a harshness that was absent before. As much as he tried to act like his usual self, something unnatural undercut his bearing.

"Hey. Sorry for being gone so long. Have you three been doing well? I kinda got wrapped up in another mess. It was a real headache cleaning things up." Leon smiled blithely at them, never really offering a specific explanation for his unexcused absence.

Noelle gawked, unsure what to say. She, like Livia, probably sensed something was off.

Angie rushed over to Leon, lifting her right hand high in the air as if about to swat him across the face. Yet after a charged moment, she lowered her hand. "You idiot," she snapped. "What have you been up to this whole time?"

"I already told you, I—"

"And I'm telling *you* that you should've forewarned us. Why are you hiding things *again*? If you're in trouble, let us help. Any problem you face is a problem we share." Angie was practically pleading with him to let them in further.

Leon scratched his head. He heaved a long, deep sigh, and then his expression hardened. Never, in all their time together, had he looked at the three girls so coldly.

Fear rooted in Livia's chest. How had they angered him so terribly? To the point that he appeared to hate them now? No, it was worse than hate—he was

regarding them with apathy. As if he was so tired and annoyed, he couldn't be bothered with them.

"All this is too much. A real pain," he said, no emotion in his voice. "Enough is enough. I'm ending my engagements with all three of you right here, right now."

"Mr. Leon?" Livia's voice cracked as she reached toward him. "Y-you can't really mean that, right? We..." Her voice died in her throat, and the blood drained from her face, leaving her deathly pale.

That was the one thing she'd hoped never to hear from Leon's mouth.

Angie trembled. "Wh-why, after all this time...? You told me, remember? That you wanted me. That you were even willing to fight House Redgrave, if that was what it took. So why...? Why would you..." Her voice quavered with what Livia was sure was a sob. She couldn't see Angie's face from where she stood, but she was certain the girl was crying.

Noelle glowered at Leon. "Are you serious right now?"

As if he had lost all interest in them, Leon turned and strolled toward the door. He didn't even bother to glance over his shoulder as he said, "Of course I am. Since you know where we stand now, get off my ship. I doubt we'll see each other again."

The door quietly shut behind him, and he was gone.

Angie crumpled to her knees, arms wrapped around herself. Livia rushed to her side and drew her into a tight embrace.



“Angie?!”

“I-I’ve been...abandoned again. And after...I did all this for Leon...”

Angie always held herself with dignity and grace. It was crushing to see her reduced to tears, trembling like a child. Only when Livia felt something warm roll down her cheeks did she realize she was crying too.

“Why, Mr. Leon?” she mumbled, her voice raw with grief. “This is too cruel.”

He hadn’t even given them an explanation before breaking off their engagements. The girls wept as they stood frozen in the drawing room, still trying to digest what had just happened.

After speaking to the girls, I made my way to Cleare’s research lab. The spoils I’d hunted down over the last few days were arranged on a large table. There was a large range of objects. Some were antique devices; others were weapons of a more modern make. All were items I’d found by dungeon diving—precious rewards that had been available in the game itself. The first game, at least.

Cleare surveyed my prizes. “Luxion mentioned that you focused on the eastern stretch of the kingdom. I’m surprised you found so much.”

“This isn’t even everything,” I replied. “I can’t remember all of it. Unfortunately, I didn’t include all the minor details in the info I jotted down when I first reincarnated.”

In fact, I now regretted not writing a more comprehensive account while the memories were fresh. The game had included lots of trivial, low-quality items, and I hadn’t bothered recording all their hidden locations, thinking they’d never be useful. Sadly, the item I wanted most now numbered among them. It vexed me that I hadn’t taken this more seriously sooner.

Cleare eyed a metal staff with great interest. It was the sort of staff you’d expect a magician to wield; a number of large jewels were embedded in it.

“These jewels have absorbed demonic essence,” she said. “They allow the wielder to increase the flow of mana into their magic.”

“Can we use them?”

“I will need to disassemble the staff to optimize their effects. The rest of the material is unnecessary; in fact, there’s no reason the jewels must be used in a staff. But you don’t really use magic anyway, do you, Master?”

True, I wasn’t especially skilled at it. Still, if the situation required it, I could use magic.

“The more options we have, the better. Break it apart and do what you need to to make it usable,” I said.

“It will lose all cultural value,” she warned.

The staff, like the other items, had rested in an ancient underground ruin, so it was a historical artifact. But under the circumstances, I didn’t have the wherewithal to give a damn about historical value.

“I don’t care,” I said. “Do it.”

“Gotcha.” Cleare summoned crew robots to gather the items I’d brought so she could set about her work. She turned her blue lens toward me. “By the way, Master, I noticed you’ve gained a lot of muscle in the short time since I last saw you. I’d recommend not overdoing it with the drugs.”

“Who cares about that, if it helps our chances of winning?” I shrugged. My face betrayed no emotion.

Cleare hesitated. Perhaps she hadn’t expected me to dismiss her concerns so readily. “Luxion, isn’t it your job to manage Master’s physical health?” she said accusingly.

“I am unable to disobey a direct order,” Luxion answered.

That was the prompt end of their conversation.

“Tomorrow, after we finish maintenance and resupply, we’re heading south,” I announced. There were still items we hadn’t collected, so time was of the essence. I couldn’t afford to piddle around out here.

“If you don’t take a break, you’re gonna collapse,” Cleare warned.

We didn’t have much time until the empire officially declared war. Personally, I wanted to bring this thing to a close as soon as possible, but as things stood, the odds were stacked against us. Collecting these items and honing my body

were small steps toward our ultimate goal of defeating Arcadia.

To have any hope of winning, there was one more thing we needed.

“Have you guys been able to get in touch with your old comrades?” I asked.

Cleare moved her blue lens side to side. “No luck. They’re all headed straight for Arcadia. Once they get too close to him, communication is impossible. We might be able to reach them if we get closer ourselves.” Cleare didn’t say as much, but I knew that if we did get closer, Arcadia might notice and attack us.

“Keep trying to reach out to them,” I said. “If we let them know that old humanity’s descendants are still alive and well, they should be willing to gather in the kingdom and join us.”

If Brave was to be believed, other remnants of old humanity like Cleare and Luxion had awoken. Our odds would be better with them on our side. I wanted to stack our deck as much as possible before going to war, and I was willing to do whatever it took to accomplish that.

“Master,” said Luxion, breaking his long silence, “for what reason did you end your engagements with your fiancées? That was unnecessary.” He’d apparently been holding his (metaphorical) tongue this entire time, just waiting to bring that up.

I crossed my arms and avoided his gaze, focusing on the now-empty table. “Because they were a pain.”

“You ordinarily brush them off with some type of excuse. You could have done so this time as well. Instead, you went out of your way to hurt them,” Luxion observed.

My brows knitted.

“Master,” Cleare cut in, “do you really think being a total jerk will convince those girls to leave you? Ugh. You’re so over-the-top.”

Where she was disgusted with me, Luxion was angry.

“It was no ordinary breakup,” he told Cleare. “The issue runs deeper.” Luxion turned back toward me. “Master, do you intend to survive your fight with Arcadia?”

I didn't answer. I'd had enough of them grilling me by now. Finally, I said, "Marie's here, right? I bet she's with Erica. I'm going to check in with her."

I quickly left the lab.

Behind me, Cleare mumbled, "He literally ran from the question."

Chapter 9:

Marie's Hero

“MOM, IS IT TRUE Uncle stopped attending school without giving anyone a reason?”

Marie's brows shot up. “What, he didn't say anything to you either?”

She was visiting Erica in the *Licorne's* sickbay. Naturally, the topic of Leon's absence came up quickly.

“You didn't know, even though you were aboard the *Licorne* this whole time, huh?” Marie frowned.

“I had no idea until Mother sent me a letter,” Erica said, meaning Mylene. “Honestly, it seems pretty odd that I had to learn such a thing that way.”

Apparently even Mylene was concerned about Leon's unexcused absence. She was entitled to her emotions, of course, but Marie was irritated to learn she had included something so irrelevant in correspondence with Erica.

What was Big Bro doing, seducing the freakin' queen?! And what's wrong with her? Is she brain-dead? Why say anything to Erica about it?! Mylene had basically spelled out her feelings for Leon to her own daughter, for goodness' sake!

Erica was noticeably emaciated. Just from sitting up in bed, her face looked strained. Marie could tell her condition was worsening and swore to herself that Leon would get an earful for giving Erica reason to worry in this sorry state.

“He'd been gone ever since that long break ended,” Marie explained. “Then, today, he showed up out of nowhere. He hadn't told anyone he'd leave, so his fiancées raked me over the coals, asking whether I knew anything.” She shivered, thinking back on the animosity in Angie and Livia's staring eyes.

Erica forced a small laugh, but her face soon clouded. “Maybe it's my fault,” she said quietly.

“Why would you say that?”

“Uncle dropped in to visit before he disappeared. He was obviously really upset, but he was still forcing himself to smile.”

“Big Bro came here? Don’t tell me it was because of your illness.”

Marie couldn’t help but instantly fear the worst-case scenario. What if Leon had run out of treatments for Erica’s condition and *that* was why he was so out of sorts? Did that mean Erica was going to die? That there was no hope? If he thought he couldn’t help her, it would explain his anguish. Marie could see why he would just disappear in that situation, especially if he was still searching for some other cure.

The anxiety in her chest swelled bigger and bigger, until her thoughts were interrupted when the door was thrown open.

“You don’t have to worry about Erica,” Leon said as he stepped inside, having heard their conversation from down the hallway.

“Big Bro?!” Marie squeaked in surprise, glancing over her shoulder.

Leon flashed her a fake smile. Her stomach sank.

“Uncle, what’s happened?” Erica clutched her blanket as she scrutinized him. She no doubt sensed something off as well. “You’ve lost a bit of weight, haven’t you?”

Leon flexed his arm, showing off his bicep. “I’m perfectly healthy,” he assured her. “I’m just getting rid of some fat and building more muscle.” He shook his head. “Man, you wouldn’t believe how well Luxion’s special supplements work. It’s only been a few days, and I’ve already reduced my body fat percentage quite a bit. Look at me, just getting more toned.”

If this were Leon’s usual gloating, Marie would’ve jumped in to demand he share Luxion’s secret weight loss drug. Today, however, she couldn’t even joke.

“You have more injuries.” Erica’s eyes narrowed. She still suspected he was lying. “Are you sure you aren’t pushing yourself? Is this because of what I said?”

Leon scratched the back of his head. “I guess the jig is up. I can’t fool you guys.”

Marie sat straighter in her chair. “That should be a given! What’ve you been

doing, skipping school all this time? You're gonna tell us everything."

Leon stared at them for a long moment. With a small sigh, he reached behind his waist.

What's he reaching for? Marie wondered. She didn't have to wait long to find out.

Leon produced a pistol.

"Wha...?" she blurted in disbelief, her eyes wide.

Without missing a beat, Leon aimed the barrel at Erica and pulled the trigger. A sound echoed, softer than an ordinary gunshot. By the time Marie whipped back around to see what had happened, something slender was sticking out of Erica.

"Uncle," Erica managed to gasp in surprise before her eyes shut. She collapsed against the mattress.

Marie jumped out of her chair. "What are you doing?!" she shrieked. "Why would you shoot Erica?!"

Leon sighed again. "It's for her own good."

"Why would it be?!"

Luxion finally spoke up. "It was a tranquilizer. Erica's just sleeping."

Marie froze and looked back at Erica. The slow, rhythmic rise and fall of the girl's chest calmed her down. "Thank goodness." But she quickly balled her fists again, turning back toward Leon. "But what were you thinking, using a tranquilizer on her?!"

Leon plopped into a nearby chair. "You must've realized by now, right? That her condition isn't getting any better."

Marie's face fell. "Yeah."

"We should honestly have put her into cryogenic sleep already. She refused it, though—she insisted on spending more quality time with you."

"Really? Erica said that?"

Cryogenic sleep put the body into hibernation mode to preserve it. In that

state, Erica couldn't do anything with anyone until she awakened. Marie was shocked to hear that Erica had prioritized her mom over her own well-being.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

"Erica didn't want you to know. She's at her limit, though, which is why I tranquilized her," Leon said. "Besides, we can't have her conscious for what's to come."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to war with the empire," he said in a strangely cheerful voice.

"*What?!*" Marie shrieked, fists clenched. "Why would you do *that?!!*"

"The hell if I know!" he snapped, all cheer gone from his tone. "They've basically got a cheat-tier weapon on their side—like Luxion—and I guess that creep's gung-ho about destroying the kingdom."

Marie wrinkled her nose. "Ugh. What a pain." Her eyes moved to Luxion. To her surprise, he turned away. "So, like, is everything gonna be okay? I mean, Mia just went *back* to the empire, right?"

"You know me. I'll figure it out somehow." Leon shrugged. "The point is, I don't want to put any more stress on Erica, especially in her condition. It's time for her to go into cryogenic sleep. Once all this is over, I'll look for a cure again."

Marie now understood why Leon had been so secretive this entire time. His explanation banished all her doubts. As he said, keeping Erica in the dark was the best way to protect her.

"Still, you should've told *me*. You really had me worried!"

"Yeah, yeah, my bad."

Marie folded her arms. "Erica's condition *will* improve, right?"

"Of course!"

"And this war... Mia's going to be okay, isn't she? After all, you're friends with Finn, so it's not like you're going to kill them, right?"

"No way I'd ever do that!"

If Leon insisted everything was going to be fine, then that was good enough

for Marie. She believed in her brother. She always had—in their previous lifetime, and in this one.

“Okay,” Marie said finally. “If you say there’s nothing to worry about, then there’s nothing to worry about!”

This was how things had always been. *I trust him to keep his word. He always comes through for me, after all. That’s what makes him my big brother!* She beamed at him.

“Right,” Leon said—though, for a second, his face clouded.

Marie tilted her head, confused.

Before she could ask what the problem was, Luxion interjected, “Master, we are out of time. I will have the *Licorne*’s worker robots move Erica later. The two of us should be leaving.”

“Yeah, guess so. It’s about time to get a move on. I’m pretty busy right now.”

“Got it!” Marie shook the remaining doubts from her mind. “Good luck, Big Bro. Erica’s life is in your hands.”

Leon stood from his chair and forced another smile. “That’s a pretty heavy burden to shoulder. But you know me; I’ll handle it.”

Marie gazed after him as he turned and strode toward the door. Something about his broad back reassured her. She would never tell him as much, but he had always been like a hero to her. No matter what, he came to her rescue. Whatever problems popped up, he always solved them.

When Leon died during their first life, she had been lost. Now they were together again, and Marie trusted he could deal with any challenge that came their way.

Huh? That’s odd, she thought suddenly. *Something’s off about him.* The more Marie scrutinized Leon’s receding figure, the more she felt he didn’t look quite so invincible as usual.

The moment we were out in the hallway, Luxion was in my ear, nagging.

“That was an enormous burden, which you accepted far too lightly.”

“What’s the issue?” I said. “As long as we win, the demonic essence in the air won’t grow any more concentrated. Assuming Cleare’s still around, she and Sappie—I mean, the Sacred Tree Sapling—can work together to clear it from the atmosphere.”

Even if I didn’t cure Erica specifically, taking down Arcadia would be tantamount to saving her in the long run.

Speaking of Erica, I was surprised by her cleverness. Not only had she seen right through my deception, she’d realized she was the reason any of this was happening. I really should have put her into cryogenic sleep sooner.

“Master, I fail to understand something,” said Luxion.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Why did you not push Marie away, as you did your fiancées?”

He’s not gonna give this a rest any time soon. I sighed. “Marie’s unflappable. She can make it just fine without me, and she’s got the whole idiot brigade to support her, as well as her friends.”

“In terms of ‘support,’ Angelica and the other girls only had *you*,” Luxion reminded me, as if I weren’t aware. “I am concerned about their well-being. Your harsh words came as a considerable shock to them.”

“That’s why I spoke harshly. They’ll hopefully forget me quickly and find someone else. Someone better.”

“Have you not considered that you might be treating them with a lack of care or regard? If you had shown them a fraction of the kindness you showed Marie, at the bare minimum, they—”

“I’m not *kind*,” I corrected him, trying to end the conversation.

“We should at least resolve this misunderstanding,” Luxion insisted; he wasn’t one to be deterred. “Since you do, in fact, love all three of them.”

I burst into laughter. *Love? I loved them? Really?*

“You can’t really call having *three* fiancées love.” I shook my head. “I mean,

sure, I was excited to bag a harem, but it got to be way too much of a headache. Spending time with them taught me one critical thing: Women are a huge pain in the ass. Just another invaluable bit of wisdom it took two lifetimes to come to terms with.”

“You are lying,” said Luxion.

“No, I’m not.”

“Master, you are a liar,” he repeated. “In fact, you rarely express your true feelings to me.”

He stared at me intensely, not buying my claims for a single second. Unable to withstand it, I finally broke.

“I meant it when I said I hope they forget me,” I confessed. “I should never have gotten involved with the three of them.”

I didn’t think I deserved their love at all—not when I’d only received it because knowing the game gave me the foresight to make a few clever decisions. That had bothered me for a long time, though I’d tried to ignore it. Only now did I understand.

The mere fact that I’d considered running from Arcadia because I didn’t think I stood a chance was just more proof that I didn’t deserve the girls.

“I never really belonged with them,” I said.

“Never belonged? What are you saying, Master?”

“That I’m unworthy of those girls. There has to be someone out there better suited to them.”

I genuinely believed that from the bottom of my heart. No matter how I tried to connect with them, my inability to share the truth of my former life left me too guilt-racked to form a genuine bond.

I’d avoided Luxion’s gaze this whole time, but finally I looked him straight in the eye. “I’m counting on you to look after them. And to come up with a good explanation for Marie about what happened.” If the girls really were in a state of shock over a vile jerk like me deceiving them this entire time, someone needed to be there for them.

“Master, you should tell them the honest truth.”

“No. I don’t want to wrap them up in this.” I gave him an imploring look.

“Please, Luxion.”

It had to be him. The way things were, I doubted I’d ever have a chance to speak to the girls again.

After a long stretch of tense silence, he said, “Cleare and I will watch over them.”

“Good. Do that.”

That was one issue out of the way, at least. I resumed walking, Luxion falling into place at my shoulder once again.

“That dummy only ever turns to me for help when it suits her,” I said, referring to Marie. For all my complaints, it did make me happy, which probably showed on my face.

“You agree to Marie’s requests too readily, and you were unreasonably cold with your fiancées. Cleare was correct to call you over-the-top.”

“Badmouth me all you want. Now, guess I’d better put my game face on, since Marie’s depending on me.” I paused as a realization hit me. “Oh yeah—I forgot to tell her I broke things off with the girls. Luxion, come up with some convincing way to explain that without getting into the details.”

“Very well.”

I’d had to abandon my fiancées, for their sakes, and my sister had entrusted me with my niece’s health. There were so many lives I wanted to protect, and shouldering that burden on my own was beginning to wear on me.

As Luxion followed close behind Leon, his mind wandered to Marie, and an odd emotion stirred in him.

Her words only increased the pressure on my master.

Marie’s reliance on Leon motivated him to work harder, but that motivation was exactly the problem. Leon had no regard for his own survival. In the pursuit

of victory, his life was irrelevant to him.

Fighting Arcadia was a reckless choice to begin with. If he wanted any chance at victory, Leon would inevitably have to put his life on the line. But the way he was preparing was even worse—almost like he was intentionally throwing his life away.

He's relying too much on drugs to hone his body. At the rate he's going, even if he does survive, he'll face lasting impairment. And continued use will reduce his life expectancy.

The drugs Leon was using were both potent and dangerous. They were powerful enhancements but put a likewise powerful strain on the body. Leon was fortunate to have Luxion and Cleare to administer the treatments and minimize their side effects. Still, the AIs couldn't completely circumvent the long-lasting negative impact of continued use.

Leon's choice to use those drugs was, in itself, proof that he wasn't thinking of his future. *Why is he so willing to sacrifice himself? I can't allow him to take on any more than he already has. I must remove some items from our list of preparations.*

In particular, Luxion planned to rule out other drugs or treatments that might further strain his master's body—even if that was a direct violation of Leon's orders.

Chapter 10:

For My Big Bro

CARLA HAD BEEN waiting outside at the harbor during all this. As soon as Marie disembarked from the *Licorne*, she raced over.

“Lady Marie, what happened in there?!” she demanded, strangely on edge.

Marie quirked a brow. “On the *Licorne*? I just stopped by to visit Her Highness.” She paused and considered Carla’s question. “Leon talked to me about a bunch of heavy stuff, I guess. But that’s it.” It wasn’t like she could divulge that conversation’s topic—that Leon was going to war with the empire.

Anyway, Leon had said everything would be fine, so Marie wasn’t worried. She fully believed he would take care of everything, as he had every time before.

Carla scrunched her brow in obvious confusion. “But his fiancées were behaving so oddly when they disembarked earlier. They were all crying—Lady Angelica in particular could hardly walk on her own.”

Marie’s eyes widened. “How come?”

“I tried asking, but they didn’t respond. I hoped you might know.”

“Sorry, I don’t. I wonder if something happened between them and Leon?” It was the only explanation she could think of. Then again, Marie couldn’t imagine Leon saying anything mean to *them*. “I’m going back in there to see what’s up. Come on, Carla.”

“All right!”

With Carla in tow, Marie marched back up the gangway to confront Leon, only to find the door sealed tightly shut. She reached for the handle; it was locked.

“Hey, open up!” she shouted. “I know you’re listening!”

Either Luxion or Cleare had to be watching the ship’s exterior from wherever they were.

“Unfortunately, I’m busy, so I can’t let you in,” a robotic voice responded. “Go

home.”

“Cleare, call Big Bro!” Marie protested.

“No.”

“Huh?!” Marie hunched her shoulders. Cleare was always so friendly and accommodating, but today she was strangely cold.

“Master is busy. He doesn’t even have a minute to waste.”

“But—”

“Rie, I won’t allow anyone to disturb him. Not even you.”

“Cleare...?” Marie gasped in disbelief.

In the end, she had no choice but to do as Cleare insisted and leave.

Night had fallen by the time Marie returned to the academy. Brad was loitering by the front gate, as if waiting for her. The moment he saw her, he came forward, wearing the same perplexed expression Carla had earlier.

“Something’s wrong, Marie. Leon’s fiancées are—”

“I know,” she interrupted him. “But I don’t know *why*. I tried to ask Leon, but he sealed himself up inside the *Licorne* and wouldn’t talk to me.”

Brad stroked his chin thoughtfully. “If he won’t let *you* in, it would be pointless for me or the other guys to try. Luxion and Cleare are especially hostile toward us.”

“As soon as he gets back, I’ll chew him out.” Marie gritted her teeth, barely suppressed anger rising to the surface. She marched forward again, through the school gate and onto campus. Carla and Brad were hot on her heels.

“Leon has had spats with his fiancées a number of times, but this feels like the first time it’s been this bad,” Carla said anxiously. “I’ve never seen Lady Angelica look so devastated.”

Brad nodded. “It’s caused fuss all around the school. Leon’s fiancées shut themselves up in Angie’s room, so we can’t exactly ask what happened. What could Leon be doing? He should know better than to upset women who love

him.” Like Marie, Brad suspected Leon was at fault. Still, without clear proof, he stopped short of casting further aspersions.

Marie studied Brad. She didn’t often see concern etched so clearly upon his face. “You’re really worried about them.”

“It probably sounds odd to say this now, but I’ve known Angelica for a long time,” he replied with a bitter smile. “And it’s not like Miss Olivia or Miss Noelle are strangers at this point. Of course I’m worried. But I’m most concerned about Leon.”

Carla whipped her head around to stare openly. “Why are you worried about Mr. Leon?”

Brad shrugged. “There’s been a lot between us the past couple of years.” It wasn’t really an explanation, but he didn’t seem keen on saying more.

When they reached the girls’ dormitory, Brad stopped short. He wasn’t allowed entry, since he was a guy; they’d have to part ways here.

“I’m counting on you two to learn what you can from those girls,” he said. “I’ll let the boys know what’s going on.”

“Is Master asleep?” Cleare asked when Luxion appeared in her research lab.

“Yes. He ingested his sedatives and retired. I do not expect he will wake for six hours.”

“That’s pretty potent stuff you’re giving him. I’m surprised it only keeps him down that long.”

“Master’s behavior is most abnormal. Furthermore, his decisions are less than levelheaded.”

“If you wanna complain, write a report and send it to me instead of wasting time whining. Actually, while we’re on the subject, *you’re* acting kinda weird, undermining Master’s direct orders.”

Leon had commanded them to help take out Arcadia by any means necessary, so they were doing everything in their power to assist in that endeavor. That was simply how AI worked; they didn’t need to assess orders they’d received.

Luxion's second-guessing was decidedly "abnormal," as he had called Leon's behavior moments earlier.

"Well, whatever," Cleare said dismissively. "Master *is* being really haphazard about this whole thing. I mean, breaking off his engagements at this point was pretty random. Even Rie suspects something's going on. I get the feeling he's not thinking much about the repercussions."

Leon was fighting to protect old humanity, but in the process, he had entirely dismissed his own well-being. He hadn't even stopped to consider what would happen if he claimed victory and survived, which was probably why his behavior was so scattershot.

Luxion went quiet for a bit. "Cleare, Master ordered us to look after the girls."

"He did. I'll offer them support in overcoming their shock."

"Actually, I have a plan. I would like your cooperation."

Cleare balked at first, hesitating to be drawn into his scheme—but mere moments later, she agreed to help.

Leon's fiancées had gathered in Angie's dorm room. Angie, who had cried herself to sleep, curled up on the bed while Noelle and Livia quietly discussed the day's events.

"I'm telling you, something is up. Leon would never normally say something like that to us," Noelle insisted.

"You don't think so?" Livia's expression betrayed no emotion, and she didn't look the least bit convinced. "It seems entirely possible to me that we nagged him past the breaking point. Now he's sick of us."

She was deflated; in the blink of an eye, she'd lost all the confidence she'd slowly developed. No matter what Noelle—or anyone else—said to her, she was quick to blame herself.

Noelle scratched her head. "I mean, he really wasn't his usual self today, was he? There has to be more to this story. Have some faith in yourself, Olivia."

Although Noelle tried to rally her friend's spirits, her eyes were as puffy and

red as the other two girls'. Her tears had dried only a minute before.

Recalling how coldly Leon had treated them, Livia sniffled. "Mr. Leon was the source of all my faith in myself."

"He was?"

Livia nodded. "When I first entered the academy, I didn't understand anything. I had such a rough time. I didn't think there was any way a commoner could attend a school for aristocrats. But...but Mr. Leon protected me. I caused so much trouble for him, and he forgave me for all of it. But now...now we're here, because I was selfish." She began sobbing again.

Noelle reached out to stroke her back. Livia's mental fortitude had improved so much, but the moment Leon turned his back on her, it crumbled away. *She's normally more tenacious, but today, she and Angelica are both—hm?*

Noelle's gaze had strayed to the window. Outside, she spotted red and blue lights streaking through the darkness.

"Livia, wake up Angelica," Noelle said suddenly.

"What? She only just calmed down enough to sleep."

"I said wake her up!" Noelle dashed to the window, trying to pinpoint where the two lights were headed. *That had to be Luxion and Cleare. Where are they going at this hour?*

Marie's hand was up, about to knock on Angelica's door, when that door flew open. Noelle lunged out, only to screech to a sudden halt to avoid slamming into Marie.

"Noelle!" Marie said quickly. "There's something we need to—"

Noelle held up a hand. "Sorry, I'm in a hurry. Later, though!" She slipped past Marie and took off at top speed.

Marie heaved a small sigh of relief. At least Noelle didn't seem totally destroyed. "In fact," she muttered, "she seems completely...*fine*."

Carla held up her hands, shaking her head. "I swear that's not how she acted

at the harbor. They really looked torn up!”

“Don’t worry. I don’t doubt you or anything.” After all, Brad had said the same thing.

Still, Marie was getting curious. She hurried after Noelle. She wanted to know what exactly had happened between Leon and his fiancées, as well as why Noelle had rushed off.

“Come on, or we’ll lose her!”

“R-right!”

Angie’s eyes were still terribly swollen when Livia suddenly shook her awake and dragged her out of her room.

“Come on, Angie, this way,” she urged.

“Okay, okay. I heard you the first time. Stop pulling.”

By the time Livia let up, they were outside the girls’ dormitory, standing in front of the neighboring storehouse. That building was rarely used, so the staff kept it shut. Curiously, though, the sliding door wasn’t locked this evening. In fact, it had been left ever so slightly ajar, leaving a gap for the girls to peek through.

Noelle was peeping inside already, Marie and Carla on either side of her. She turned back toward Angie and held her index finger to her lips. Shuffling closer to get a better look inside, Angie picked up voices conversing within.

“All right,” said Luxion. “Then you look after the girls, Cleare.”

“Gotcha. I’m sure they’re torn up, so I’ll be there to comfort them. Master’s a real brute, isn’t he? Tossing them aside like yesterday’s trash.”

Cleare’s phrasing cut Angelica even more deeply. She clutched her chest. It ached when she thought of how Leon abandoned them without a care in the world.

“Master did not act in accordance with his true feelings,” Luxion replied.

“Given the complicated nature of the situation, he merely took the path of least

resistance. It speaks to his desperation.”

“Yeah, but he’s still got zero tact. He’s totally thoughtless. I guess, in human terms, you’d call him over-the-top. And he plays his cards close to his chest.”

After Luxion let it slip that Leon’s words didn’t reflect his heart, Angie could no longer keep silent. Stepping in front of the other girls, she burst through the door. “What do you mean?!” she demanded, voice echoing.

The other girls flailed, panicked that she’d given them away. They hung their heads, mortified to be caught eavesdropping.

Angie, however, advanced a few more steps, head held high and proud, in contrast to the others. She wasn’t the least bit ashamed to have listened in.

Luxion turned to her in annoyance. “I am willing to overlook your eavesdropping, but this interruption is quite brazen.”

“But you’re discussing this here on purpose, aren’t you?” Angie sniffed. “This storehouse is normally shut tight. It’s unusual for it to be unlocked like this.”

Cleare had an answer to that. “Hate to break it to you, but girls bring guys here *all* the time. There’s a spare key hidden in the lockers nearby—that’s how they get in. That’s why it made sense to talk in secret in here. Or didn’t you know about all that?”

Learning that this storehouse was a clandestine love nest might have made Angie blush, under different circumstances, but her mind was focused on more important things.

“You intended to let us eavesdrop, didn’t you?” Angie insisted, putting her hands on her hips. “You two are as exhaustingly roundabout as your master. But let’s get to the point. Tell us what’s really going on. What’s Leon dealing with this time?”

For a split second, Luxion stole a glance at Marie.

This again, Angie thought, not one to miss even the smallest detail. *Are they giving her special treatment too? Why? Why is it always her? Why isn’t it me...?* She suppressed the jealousy and anger rising in her chest—pressing Luxion for answers was her priority.

“I reached the conclusion that it would be impossible to comfort you three without fully explaining this situation,” said Luxion, by way of preamble.

“This is exactly what you wanted to happen,” Cleare told him, not even attempting to disguise her irritation. “Now you’ve wrapped me up in it. If Master’s pissed when he finds out, I’m gonna tell him the truth—that this whole thing was your idea.”

“Do you as wish,” Luxion replied evenly. “Now then, allow me to offer the explanation you so desperately seek. You all have an obligation to hear this, given that Master is putting his life on the line.”

He emphasized the word “obligation” particularly strongly, staring meaningfully at Marie.

What’s going on? Is Luxion actually angry? With Marie? Angie’s curiosity was instantly piqued, but she forced herself to focus on the explanation.

By the time Luxion finished his explanation, Marie was frozen in place, no emotion on her face.

No, she insisted to herself, this can’t be. Big Bro said everything would be okay.

Luxion’s explanation had illustrated in excruciating detail just how dangerous war with the empire would be. Leon hadn’t said anything about that when he and Marie spoke, and the shock left her speechless.

Meanwhile, Leon’s former fiancées went deathly pale once they learned what led Leon to dismiss them. It was a relief that he hadn’t really tired of them, but the enormous dilemma they really faced came with its own terrible anxieties.

“This whole thing about new and old humanity renders the scale of the issue nearly unfathomable,” Angie said, struggling to sum up Luxion’s main points. “It’s shocking enough to learn such an ancient war is still ongoing, but why must Leon shoulder its legacy?”

Livia’s face twisted. “I see what you mean. Still, if Leon dropped everything and ran, then...”

Old humanity's descendants would die out if Leon left the situation as it was—to say nothing of the probability that Arcadia would exterminate them even before they perished naturally.

“That jerk,” Noelle grumbled. Part of her was angry with the decision Leon had made, but another part empathized, leaving her conflicted. “He’s got some nerve, doing all this without consulting anyone—trying to manage it all on his own! Does he really think us finding happiness somewhere else is all that matters? That really rubs me the wrong way. Why don’t we get any say?”

“At this point, Master is unconcerned with his own survival,” Luxion said. “To be more precise, he already expects to die.”

Angie’s eyes widened. “Honestly. That fool!”

“That is why I would like you all to do what you can to support him.”

Livia flinched. “Really? Is that what Mr. Leon wants?”

“No. It is what I want. So long as Master intends to face the enemy alone, our odds of victory remain abysmal. However, with your cooperation, those chances will increase substantially.”

Noelle looked at the Priestess’s crest on the back of her right hand, then turned to Luxion. “All right. What do you want us to do?”

“Recruit other nations to assist us.”

“Nations?!” Noelle squeaked in disbelief.

“You make it sound simple,” Angie cut in. “It would be one thing to face the empire, but this...this...”

“Arcadia,” Luxion supplied.

“This Arcadia,” Angie continued, “is a different story. It sounds to me as though no one can expect to defeat him. You said you’re uncertain of your own ability to do so, right?”

Fighting the imperial army would be a monumental undertaking but not an impossible one. If Arcadia was really as powerful as Luxion made him out to be, though, no force in the world could overpower him.

“It will severely diminish Master’s chances if the imperial army surrounds him as he faces Arcadia in the final battle,” Luxion explained. “I hope your support will enable him to focus on Arcadia.”

“So that’s your aim. You want us to help take care of the imperial army.” Angie frowned. “Unfortunately, after all these conflicts, Holfort has severely exhausted its forces. Given the imperial army’s scale, I don’t think the kingdom’s military alone *could* hope to engage it.”

Cleare turned to Noelle. “We need to get the Alzer Republic on our side, then.”

“No way!” Noelle vigorously shook her head. “I mean, they’re in bad shape after that whole civil war thing. It hasn’t even been a year since that ended.”

“But Alzer took possession of the airships Ideal left behind, right? Those things are way more powerful than your average vessel,” Cleare reminded her.

“Now that you mention it, I think I heard something about that.”

While the AI essentially doled out instructions to Leon’s fiancées, Marie was left out of the conversation completely.

“Lady Marie,” cried Carla, her face pale, “this conversation has taken a *very* serious turn. What’s going to happen to us?!”

“Good question,” Marie mumbled. It took everything in her to form that half-hearted reply.

Meanwhile, Leon’s fiancées had figured out a game plan. They promptly left the storehouse, and Luxion and Cleare were about to file out after them when Marie flagged them down.

“Wait! Let me help too. There’s gotta be something I can—”

“If you truly wish to contribute, please refrain from involving yourself,” Luxion told her coldly. He left before she could say anything else.

“Huh?”

Cleare floated over to Marie. “Sorry. He’s been kinda weird lately. But he’s not wrong. It’s better if you just hang tight.”

“But why?! I have to help Big—er, ahem, Leon!”

“Whenever you get involved, Master tends to overdo it,” Cleare explained. “And you kinda backed him into a corner earlier.”

“Huh? Me? What did I do?”

“I’m not saying it’s your fault. It really isn’t. But if you put any more pressure on Master, it could be dangerous. He’s already at his breaking point.”

Marie’s mental image of her brother—of that invincible hero—suddenly crumbled into dust.

“What do you mean, ‘breaking point’?” Her voice cracked. “Leon’s always—”

“Always pushing himself past his limits,” Cleare finished for her. “And this time has been really bad. He’s literally killing himself, and whether you guys realize or not, you’re pressuring him to do it.”

When Cleare said “you guys,” Marie instantly knew who she was referring to: herself and Erica. Leon *had* shown them great care and compassion.

“I had no idea,” she blurted out. “I mean, if this was really that hard on him, he could’ve just said so.”

“Yep,” Cleare agreed. “It’s absolutely his own fault, so there’s no reason for you to feel bad.”

With that, she left. Marie sank to her knees.

“Lady Marie? Please, pull yourself together!” Carla grabbed her arm, hauling Marie back to her feet.

“Carla,” Marie said, “we’ve *got* to do something.”

“What? But they just told us not to.”

“Things can’t end like this. I still...I still haven’t repaid him for all he’s done for me.” Marie clenched her fists in determination. “I’m going to do everything I can to help.” If she didn’t, she knew that she’d regret it.

I’m pretty sure I made some notes about a specific secret item when I first reincarnated here, she mused. If I get my hands on that, I just know it’ll be a game changer!

Chapter 11:

For You

THE AIRSHIP carrying the imperial delegation was at last nearing Vordenoit. Mia stood in the opulent room they had prepared for her, anxiously glancing out the window. Maids stationed nearby were attending her every need.

I've only been able to see Mr. Knight a few times since I boarded this ship. And I keep telling these maids they can wait outside, but they just won't leave me alone. It was such a dramatic change from Mia's upbringing, and she found it suffocating.

One maid brought a drink and set it on a table. The cup had a special lid to keep it from spilling when the aircraft hit turbulence. It was full of freshly squeezed juice, and Mia gratefully picked it up for a sip.

"Princess Miliaris, get down!" yelled a maid. She shoved Mia to the floor, pressing her own body atop Mia's to act as a shield. In the process, the cup slipped from Mia's grip and clattered to the ground.

"Wha...?" Mia craned her neck to peek out the window, where a steel ship loomed. She had never seen one that shape before. Rust spread in great swathes across its deck, as if the vessel had spent long years submerged in the ocean.

Panic spread among the maids.

"It's one of the machines!"

"Where's the army?!"

"Calm down! We have our own forces on board!"

Between their cries of dismay, the maids raced to usher Mia from the room, trying to evacuate her to safety. Before they could do so, the situation outside changed dramatically.

Emitting several beams of light, that enormous steel ship began attacking another, as-yet-unseen third party. Then a reddish-black flash pierced the steel ship with an enormous blast that rocked the delegation's craft as well.

The maids shrieked.

Mia held her head and sank to the floor, trying to brace herself. *Mr. Knight, please save me!* Finn's absence had left her heart aching with pure loneliness.

Their vessel soon stabilized, and the maids immediately began expressing relief.

"I never dreamed they would come meet us!"

They gazed out the window with feverish reverence. Climbing back to her feet, Mia inched to the glass to look outside as well. Where there had previously been a colossal enemy vessel of steel and rust, there was now an even more gargantuan airship, black as pitch and dominating the sky. Its size was so overwhelming that, for a moment, Mia thought she was looking at a whole floating island.

"What *is* that?" she asked.

A maid smiled. "The empire's secret weapon—a floating fortress. It's called —"

Before she finished, a small magic circle manifested a few meters from the window, transmitting a voice that reverberated through the room.

"My name is Arcadia," said the voice. "And I have been waiting for you, Your Imperial Highness."

"Mr....um...Arcadia?" Mia stammered, tilting her head.

"Please," the voice said gently, "allow me to escort you the rest of the way."

Mia was transferred from the delegation airship to Arcadia's floating fortress, where she was subsequently guided to a throne room. Finn and Brave followed close beside her. Mia was overjoyed to finally be reunited with them and kept a firm grip on Finn's hand as she nervously drank in their new surroundings.

"It's like the inside of a luxurious castle," she said. It didn't feel like they were on a ship at all.

Brave was in a sour mood as he took in the sights. "Luxurious is an

understatement,” he grumbled. “This place is gaudier than just about any modern-day castle.”

“So this is Arcadia?” Finn shot a glance at Brave. “He doesn’t look the least bit decrepit to me.”

If Arcadia hadn’t yet recovered, Finn expected that would show. If this interior was anything to go by, though, Arcadia was already at full strength.

“He’s just masking it,” Brave said. “His internal hardware’s a total mess—at least, in some places. But more importantly...he’s here.”

A large door swung open as a sizable eyeball glided through the air toward them. This Demonic Creature was about two meters in size and was flanked by a number of smaller eyeballs similar in stature to Brave. Upon entering, these smaller eyes hurried in front of the larger one, lining up on either side of the carpet, like soldiers might for their king. Once they were in place, Arcadia continued forward, stopping in front of Mia.

Mia’s legs trembled. She clung tightly to Finn.

Arcadia threw his tiny arms out and declared, “I have been waiting for you, Your Imperial Highness!”

The mini-eyes dropped their gazes to the floor as if bowing their heads respectfully.

Mia flinched in surprise. “Huh? Um, uh...what?!”

“Stay calm, Mia.” Finn turned his attention to Arcadia. “So, what did you call us here for?”

Mia shrank behind the knight, using his body as a shield.

“Did I frighten you?” Arcadia asked her sympathetically. “The machines have been attacking nonstop, so I rode out to welcome you, Princess. You aren’t injured, I hope?”

From behind Finn, Mia stole a glance at the creature. “I-I’m okay, sir,” she stuttered.

“Sir?! Princess, there’s no need to address me so politely. We are but loyal servants.”

Arcadia was unexpectedly deferential. Mia gaped at him, unsure how to react. It seemed Brave was the only one who'd anticipated this; he wasn't the least bit surprised.

"Mia has awakened to her powers as a new human," Brave explained to her and Finn. "That's why everyone's in such a tizzy. They think they've found themselves a new master."

"So that's what this is about," said Mia. "Thank you for filling us in, Bravey."

"And how long do *you* two intend to keep up this farce of knighthood when you proved completely incapable of the mission assigned to you?" Arcadia demanded. Gone was the dutiful devotion he'd shown toward Mia; he glared at Finn and Brave, hostile and guarded.

Finn's eyes narrowed. "So now your true colors come out."

"My true colors? You have me wrong. I am entirely genuine at all times. I treat the princess with the respect she deserves, but you two are a different matter. There is a distinct possibility that you abandoned the mission you received. As soon as we return to the empire, you will be punished for—"

Mia shot in front of Finn, arms flung out. "Y-you can't!" she cried. "He's my guardian knight! P-please don't make such baseless accusations!" Her whole body trembled as she protested feebly.

The surrounding Demonic Creatures whispered.

"She defended him."

"The princess defended him."

"What do we do now? What do we do?"

"Silence," Arcadia snapped at them. His voice turned soft as velvet as he addressed Mia. "Princess, if you insist, I assure you I won't press the issue."

"Y-you mean it?"

"Of course! I promise I'll keep my word."

"Thank you." As Mia's face relaxed, the tension Arcadia had exhibited in the wake of her outburst disappeared.

While the creature smiled at her, though, it just as quickly glowered at Finn and Brave. “I will overlook this instance of insubordination, since the princess has commanded I do so, but bear in mind I will put you to work as soon as we return.”

Finn hurriedly wiped the film of cold sweat on his forehead. “Work? What task do you have for us this time?”

“You will deal with the machines,” Arcadia said with annoyance. “They are an absolute nuisance, attacking around the clock.”

Mia’s face fell. “You’re going to take Mr. Knight away?”

“A slap on the wrist,” Arcadia hurriedly explained, tiny arms flailing. “If I didn’t make him do this much, there would be an outcry. But if you so desire, Princess, I will see that his assignment takes as little time as possible, ensuring his swift return to your side.”

Mia bobbed her head, accepting his offer. Again, Arcadia was visibly relieved.

On Luxion’s suggestion, I headed to the palace in the early morning. I would have to swing by the boys’ dormitory first, although I was reluctant after the events the day prior.

“You know this isn’t a good time for me to be here,” I grumbled as I crept down a dorm hallway, cursing Luxion’s inability to plan.

“Need I remind you that *you* requested I begin procedures to renounce your citizenship?” he responded nonchalantly. “This will allow you to settle all outstanding issues before you set off. Please keep your complaints to a minimum.”

“Oh, please. I don’t see that there was any need to come back here for my knight uniform.”

“Doing so is in keeping with proper form and decorum.”

I rolled my eyes. “You could’ve given me one yourself.”

“Recovering your preexisting uniform from your dormitory room on the way to the palace is far more efficient than putting me to the trouble of creating a

new one. Especially since you'll only wear it once!"

You're in an awfully chipper mood, I thought.

We arrived at my room. I jammed the key into the knob, unlocked it, and swung the door open. My mood instantly soured.

"You lying little sneak," I said to Luxion.

"I am no such thing," he insisted. "We simply failed in our mission."

Tearing my focus from my backtalking partner, I turned it instead on the three girls who'd infiltrated my room: Angie, Livia, and Noelle. There was a palpable nervousness in the air.

Angie was the first to break the silence. "We heard it all," she said, standing straight with her chest puffed out. "The trouble you've gotten yourself involved with this time is on a whole new scale, right? Why didn't you turn to us?"

Her voice carried no anger, only sadness. My heart ached to hear that, but if I caved now, everything I'd done would have been for naught.

"This is my problem," I said firmly.

"It's *our* problem!" she snapped back. "Why are you always..." Tears of frustration welled in her eyes. The strain in her jaw spoke to her desperation to hold them back.

Livia, who'd been quiet until now, burst out, "Mr. Leon, I... No, we...want you to share your burdens with us! Complain, vent—whatever you do, all we want is for you to let us in."

"It's not like *we* don't have a stake in this," Noelle added angrily. "Yet here you are, acting like you'll take care of this all on your own. I absolutely hate that about you."

I snorted with laughter, turning my back on them. "Is that all you wanted to say? Because I've got places to be. See ya."

As I started out the door, Angie flung herself at me, arms winding around my waist. She pressed her forehead to my back, and her body trembled against mine.

“Let me go,” I demanded.

“Please,” Angie said, “let us help you. I won’t ever be happy if we part like this, even if I survive. I want to live with *you*. So...”

She sniffled as she pleaded, which weakened my resolve. I knew I would crumble if I faced her, so I kept my back turned, heaving a small sigh. “If Luxion told you everything, you should understand the situation. There’s nothing you can do. You’d only get in my way.”

Livia and Noelle sucked in a breath.

Angie’s grip on my shirt tightened. “We have every right to do what we can to help, even if you think it’d be pointless. It wouldn’t be for you. It’d be for us.”

“Do as you like. I can’t stop you.” Forcing my feet forward, I ripped away from Angie and left, Luxion gliding through the air in my wake.

“I *know* a way I can help,” Angie called after me. “You may not like how I do it, but it will allow us to unify Holfort’s forces. As a collective, they would benefit you in the battle ahead.”

My brain rejected the idea outright. Holfort’s people had proven again and again to me that they were incapable of setting differences aside to come together for the greater good. As soon as they found the smallest thing to quibble about, they’d be fighting among themselves yet again. I couldn’t picture them overcoming their deep-seated flaws even in the direst circumstances.

“It’s hopeless,” I said. “They couldn’t work together to save their lives.”

“I’ll make them, you’ll see!”

I shook my head. “Even if I had more allies, they’d just get in the way.”

“Actually, having more forces to deal with the empire’s military would improve our chances at victory,” Luxion added, annoying me.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said dismissively. “The point is, Holfort doesn’t know the meaning of teamwork. In case you all forgot, they’ve been a real headache these past few years for that very reason.”

Holfort had been, and still was, plagued by a number of issues. It would take a miracle to bring its citizens together at this point, although for some reason,

Angie believed that was possible.

“We can do it,” she said. “But that unification would place an even greater burden on you. That’s the part that pains me, and it’s why I want your permission before I go through with it. So let me discuss it with you, please.”

The anguish in her voice was a rope tethering me in place, threatening to drain the last of my resolve.

“You can have carte blanche,” I said flippantly, waving her off. “Do whatever you please.”

At this point, what I wanted—or didn’t want—no longer mattered.

Angie’s hand extended toward Leon’s receding back. She quickly wiped her tears and schooled her expression. It was time to get serious.

“Leon gave me permission,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. “Now I must prepare myself for what comes next.”

Get it together, Angelica Rapha Redgrave, she told herself. Leon’s a hero, and you’re determined to stand by his side, aren’t you? Then this is no time for weeping. Crying won’t solve your problems. It’s a waste of time. However lonely or sad you feel, you need to take action. Now, get to it!

After that mental pep talk, Angie spun to face Livia and Noelle. For their sakes, she stood straight with her head high, so as to appear strong—although her eyes were still red and swollen.

“Livia, Noelle, I’ll be busy for the foreseeable future. I want to do everything I can to help Leon.”

Noelle nodded. “There’s something I need to do too. For now, I’m going back to the Bartfort estate.”

“Are you coming with me, Livia?” Angie asked.

Livia shook her head. When she lifted her chin, the heartbreak in her eyes had vanished, and they shone with inner strength. “I have to do something as well.”

“All right. That settles it, then. See you girls again soon.”

Angie, Livia, and Noelle set off in different directions, all three intent on helping Leon in their own way.

Marie was making her way through the thick, lush forest of a floating island.

“Th-there it is!” she cried. *Thank goodness. Doesn’t look like Big Bro’s been here yet.*

Pushing through the undergrowth, she at last discovered the stone exterior of an enormous, derelict mansion. The once-impressive estate had fallen into disrepair after losing its residents and caretakers.

Carla stumbled behind Marie, her legs trembling uncontrollably from mounting exhaustion. “Please wait, Lady Marie,” she gasped.

A young elf boy named Kyle was offering Carla his shoulder for support. He’d once been Marie’s personal servant, but was currently employed at the Bartfort household, where he worked alongside his mother, Yumeria. By pure coincidence, he’d accompanied Nicks to the capital, which had allowed for this errand with Marie.

“What’s so special about this place, that you had to borrow Lord Nicks’s airship to get here?” Kyle demanded. “It must be some kind of treasure, but this isn’t exactly the most appropriate time to come out here hunting for that.” The elf was as impertinent as ever, but his dry commentary was considerably gentler than it had been. His words were merely forward; they concealed no barbs. Even his tone had softened.

Marie dropped her luggage, hefting the rifle she’d brought. “I swear, this couldn’t wait. There’s something here I’ve gotta get for Leon.”

Kyle helped Carla sit, then mopped the sweat on his face. “You keep saying that, but was it really so important that you had to skip class? Rumors are flying about our precarious relationship with the Empire. I heard things look like they’re going south fast.”

Marie looked over her shoulder at him, mouth agape. “Who said that, exactly?”

“Earl Roseblade, to Lord Nicks. He said that after the exchange students returned to Vordenoit, the empire’s attitude took a sudden turn.”

That just made Marie more determined than ever to recover the item.

“Sorry, you two, but once you’ve had a sec, we’re gonna get searching,” she told them. *Time’s wasting. I need to hurry up and get this item to my brother.*

Carla was so worn out, she didn’t look like she could move, but Marie’s orders revived her. “I-I won’t let you down! But, um, please...can’t we rest a *little* longer this time?”

Kyle turned from Carla, still collapsed on the ground, toward Marie. “It’s strange to see this mansion out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Marie nodded. “This was once the secret retreat of an alchemist—one people regarded as a sage. In his old age, he withdrew from society to immerse himself in research. That’s when he had this estate built out on a deserted island.”

In the game’s terms, this was technically a dungeon, and players could explore it in the early stages of the game. Marie had visited all the time and recalled it with perfect clarity.

“You know an awful lot about this place,” Kyle said, clearly impressed.

Marie shrugged. “I guess so. I doubt much of that alchemist’s research is left by now, but that’s beside the point. All I need here is that one item.”

“What ‘one item’? A hunk of gold or something?” Kyle asked, readily assuming Marie could only be interested in the object’s monetary value.

“No.” She shook her head. “A strength potion.”

This is all I can do. But at least I can still be useful, right, Big Bro? This potion was insanely potent in the game, after all. After drinking it, even a severely under-leveled character was powerful enough to take on a tough boss. Although the potion was single use, it’d come in handy many times during Marie’s playthroughs, despite the fact that she’d never been able to complete a single route in the first game. If I’m the one putting all that pressure on my brother, I’ve got to step up too.

As memories of their past life whirled through Marie’s mind, her brows

knitted and her face pinched. *I won't be dead weight this time. I can't keep holding him back.*

"Well? Isn't this incredible?!"

"Yeah. So incredible," Cleare said with feigned enthusiasm. "You've really outdone yourself this time, Rie."

Once Marie had recovered the strength potion, she made her way to the *Licorne's* research lab to hand it over to Cleare. The AI made a show of being impressed with Marie for procuring the vial, but an undercurrent of annoyance ran through her voice.

"Big Bro's really coming back, right?"

"Yes. He got his hands on the items he was after faster than he expected, so he'll be here for a bit," Cleare said. "Annoyingly convenient timing, since it matches up with your visit. I never imagined that, of all things you could've brought, you'd show up with *this*." Her electronic voice was thick with melancholy, but Marie was too excited about helping Leon to notice.

"This potion's *crazy* strong, you know," she told Cleare. "The in-game buffs were so good, even a weakling's stats shot through the roof."

"Makes sense. I did a brief analysis, and it really is powerful stuff. *Too* powerful, actually. I'm kind of shocked."

As they chattered away, the lab door swung open, and Leon entered. Luxion followed, pausing to glance at the table where the strength potion sat. Leon's attention swiveled to Marie first, but then he saw the vial too.

"I never dreamed you'd find this for me," he said, snatching it up. He looked genuinely pleased.

Marie clasped her hands, grinning. "See? Even I can be useful! Right?"

"Yeah—this is a huge help! Where'd you find it, anyway?" Leon asked, returning the vial to the table.

"A dungeon not far from here," Marie explained eagerly. "Well, I say 'dungeon,' but it's more a deserted floating island. I figured, as long as you have

this, you won't lose to Arcadia, right?" She desperately wanted to believe her find was the key to her brother's survival.

Leon smiled and tousled her hair. "Didn't expect you to come through like this. It'll definitely increase our chance of victory."

Marie's hair was a mess now, but she was delighted to see Leon in higher spirits. "Hey! Be a little gentler, would you? Anyway, Big Bro, I—"

"What? If you need more money, just give Cleare an amount, and she'll get you squared away."

"Huh? No!" Marie snapped, face clouding. There were even more scrapes and gashes on Leon's hands, indicating the danger he'd exposed himself to lately. "You have to stop overexerting yourself. I know I've been asking too much of you, and I feel genuinely bad about it." She dropped her gaze.

"Acting sweet and caring doesn't suit you at all," Leon teased. "But I appreciate this, really. Lightens the load. So I mean it when I say to make sure to get your allowance."

Marie wished she could stay longer, but her brother seemed too busy to spare her much more time.

"Cleare," he said, "get that potion ready for use. I assume you understand what I mean?"

"I will adapt its concentration to suit your physiology, ensuring even a small amount will be sufficiently potent," Cleare answered with a note of exasperation. "Still, you'll only get three doses out of this, got it? And you'll need something to counteract the effects even before the third dose."

"That's fine. I have a tight schedule, though, so I need to get going. Marie, head back to the academy. Keep those five idiots company, and don't get in any trouble."

"O-okay."

Leon left the lab, but surprisingly, Luxion lingered after he was gone. The reason for that became clear when his gaze fixed on Marie.

"This 'assistance' was entirely unnecessary," he snapped. "It beggars belief

that you would involve yourself after I expressly warned you against doing so.”

Incensed, Marie puffed her cheeks and turned away. “You’re being a real jerk, don’t you think? I *helped*.”

“Master was already aware of this potion. In fact, his information allowed us to locate it.”

Marie’s eyebrows shot up all the way to her hairline. “Huh? But he said he couldn’t find it.”

“Have you *any* idea what that potion really is?”

Marie’s heart sank. An awful layer of clammy sweat beaded on her forehead as fear sank in, and she realized she might just have done something irreversible—at least, if Luxion’s tone and attitude were anything to go by.

Luxion glanced at Cleare, who stepped in on his behalf. “Rie, you were right. That potion’s super potent. It’ll turn anyone into a superhuman.”

“Exactly. That’s why I got it for him!” Marie had poured everything into retrieving the potion for Leon. All she’d wanted was to be helpful.

“Yeah, but do you really think consuming a potion that powerful doesn’t have side effects? It’s like a pumped-up steroid. In its purest form, it’ll kill a person before its effects even wear off.”

In exchange for unfettered power, the potion could claim the user’s life.

“No,” Marie blurted out, trembling. “Any character who used it in the game was fine!”

“Maybe so, but the fact is, you brought us a concentrated steroid. I’ll dilute it so Master can use it, but if he *does* take three doses, it’s going to kill him. Even with medication to suppress the effects.”

Tears ran down Marie’s cheeks. Her knees gave out, and she crumpled to the floor.

Luxion’s red lens gleamed, and his tone was uncharacteristically angry. “I knew, if we acquired this potion, Master wouldn’t hesitate to use it. Given his precarious mindset, I deemed it wiser to leave the potion out of his reach.”

“But this is what the Master wanted, right?” Cleare cut in, trying to mediate. “Rie couldn’t have known the consequences. Blaming her won’t do any good.”

“Can you weaken it?” Luxion asked.

“That would violate Master’s orders. Sorry, but those are always my first priority.”

There was a brief pause before Luxion pressed, “How many doses can his body withstand?”

“Like I said, three will kill him. Honestly, two’s gonna be pretty dangerous.”

The exchange made Marie choke out a sob. “I... All I wanted was—was to...to help Big Bro!” Instead, her good intentions had pushed him even closer to death.

Marie curled into a ball on the floor as she wept, racked with regret over the mistake she could never take back.

Chapter 12:

Everyone's Efforts

AFTER BRINGING the Sacred Tree Sapling back from the Alzer Republic, Leon and Noelle had planted it on a deserted floating island. The island was unoccupied, so worker robots had been deployed to assist with upkeep of island and tree.

Noelle had returned to that very island for the express purpose of taking the sapling back with her.

The robots followed her commands to dig up the earth and haul dirt out of the way. Kyle's mother, Yumeria, who had accompanied Noelle, was observing the process. A petite woman with an enormous bosom, her gentle demeanor and soft voice—combined with her youthful elven looks—made most people treat her as if she was much younger than she was. Despite her appearance, she was at least old enough to have given birth to Kyle.

"Are you really going to dig him up and take him away?" Yumeria asked Noelle. "It seems such a shame. He only just got used to being here." She watched sorrowfully as the work to uproot Sappie proceeded.

"Sorry," Noelle said with an apologetic look, "but I don't really have a choice. I need his help. Our future's on the line."

Yumeria tilted her head at that. "I assume Lord Leon's gotten himself into another fight, then? It seems he's busy as ever, despite his new title of archduke." She smiled grimly to herself.

"You guessed it. But this time seems like more of a doozy than ever." Noelle hesitated. "Actually, that's why I'm hoping you might be willing to help out, Meria."

"Huh?" Yumeria's eyes widened at the desperate note in Noelle's voice. The elf was a servant of the Bartfort household, after all; Noelle far outranked her in every way. She wasn't necessarily Yumeria's boss, but all Noelle would need to do was ask Leon's parents if she could borrow Yumeria, and the elf would have no choice but to go along with it.

Noelle didn't want to do things that way, though. "Please! We need someone who can help keep the Sacred Tree in check. I'll do my utmost, of course, but I'd really, really like you to be there to help me."

"Lady Noelle..."

Yumeria was obviously taken aback; the girl's request had come out of nowhere. It seemed Noelle would need to elaborate a little more to secure her support.

"It's like this," Noelle started before launching into as simple an explanation as she could manage. By the time she finished, she'd dropped her gaze to her feet. She felt guilty asking Yumeria to join them, knowing all the danger that entailed. "If we're being totally honest, what you really want is just to live a comfortable, quiet life with Kyle, right? But I've got to be honest too. We really need your help, Meria."

Even Leon would have a tough time in the battle ahead; their odds were bad. In the worst-case scenario, he might even die. Noelle felt wretched for dragging Yumeria into this, knowing the risks. Agonizing as it was, though, she had no choice but to rely on the elf.

If only I were a stronger Priestess. Then I'd have no problem controlling the Sacred Tree by myself. No wonder Leon doesn't feel he can rely on me, considering how weak I am right now.

Yumeria reached out to take Noelle's hands. "You and the others have saved Kyle and myself time and time again. Please allow me to return the favor."

Noelle's head jerked up. "Meria? Y-you mean it?"

"Yes! The prospect of war is terrifying, I admit, and I'm not sure how much help I'll be. But it's all thanks to you, Lord Leon, and the rest that I've reunited with Kyle." She laughed, face flushing.

Tears streamed down Noelle's cheeks as she threw her arms around Yumeria. "I'm so, so sorry for dragging you into this. But thank you so much."

Livia, meanwhile, was visiting the castle of the former Principality of Fanoss.

She stood alone in the throne room with Hertrude Sera Fanoss, who had agreed to a private meeting solely because of the Magic Flute that Livia held in her hands.

Hertrude stood on the throne's dais, staring down at Livia. Her arms were crossed, and her crimson eyes smoldered with hatred.

"What, pray tell, must you be thinking, to come all the way to our dukedom carrying Rauda's flute? Do you even have permission to hold it?" she demanded.

"Rauda" referred to her younger sister, Hertrauda Sera Fanoss. The princesses had been terribly close, but Rauda had perished in a war with Holfort.

Livia held the flute delicately in both hands as she peered up at Hertrude. "Please," she said, "teach me how to play it."

Hertrude's eyes widened. "Are you *insane*? You *do* understand what happens if you use that flute, don't you? Are you just hoping to control monsters with it?"

The Magic Flute possessed a unique ability. Not only could the person who played it control monsters, they could offer up their own life in order to summon an enormous beast known as the Guardian. The creature was practically invincible, and would endeavor to fulfill the player's wish—even resurrecting itself if felled in the effort. Unfortunately, once the Guardian accomplished its objective, the player would die. In short, once they summoned the creature, death was guaranteed, regardless of whether the Guardian failed in its duty or the player changed their mind and dismissed it. Such was the way of the Magic Flute.

Livia was fully aware of the flute's capabilities and history. She didn't blink as she gazed at Hertrude; her eyes shone with determination. "I plan to summon that colossal giant we saw. There's something I must do, even if it costs my life."

"Such irony." Hertrude shrugged. "You stole Rauda's life, and now you plan to use her flute to sacrifice your own."

Although she laid the blame at Livia's feet, Livia hadn't played a direct part in her sister's demise.

“I didn’t—” Livia started, before Hertrude cut her off.

“An exaggeration, I know.” She descended from the dais, closing the distance between them, and extended her hand toward the Magic Flute. Livia hesitated, but she allowed Hertrude to take it.

Hertrude inspected the flute with a nostalgic look. “You must really be in a bind, if you mean to resort to this. The archduke’s behaving rather suspiciously, as I hear it, so I can only imagine something’s afoot.” Her tone suggested she already knew more than she was letting on.

Livia hesitated, unsure whether to share more, and at length said, “A great battle is on the horizon. It’s going to be a monumental challenge, even for Mr. Leon, so I want to make myself useful.”

“And that’s why you’re depending on this flute,” Hertrude surmised with a snicker. She gently clasped the instrument against her chest. “You sure are gullible,” she continued with a mocking lilt, “handing over the Magic Flute—and offering up such confidential information along with it. You haven’t grown up even a little since I last saw you. Did it never occur to you that I might steal the flute and have you dragged off to the dungeons? Did you really think I’d forgotten my grudge?”

Livia didn’t even blink as she answered, “You’re not that rash. You wouldn’t do anything that extreme to me. You don’t want to make an enemy of Mr. Leon.”

Hertrude’s brow twitched. She had thought Livia naive, and it came as a surprise that the girl had indeed matured into a far stronger person. But she was pleased to hear such a savvy answer; her lips bent into a smile. “Indeed,” she said. “I decided I would never fight the archduke again. I already made that mistake once—and suffered the consequences of it.”

The events she was referencing had occurred during Livia’s first year at the academy, during which Leon thwarted Hertrude’s attack on the kingdom. After all she’d been through against him, Hertrude had more than learned her lesson, or so she claimed.

I’m sure she has feelings for Mr. Leon, Livia thought. She suspected that was the real reason Hertrude didn’t want to pick a fight with him.

Livia's gaze hardened, but Hertrude paid her hostility no mind.

"Where were we? Ah, yes—you wanted to learn to use the Magic Flute," said Hertrude. "Sadly, I'm afraid I won't be able to teach you."

"All right, then." Livia held out her hand to take the flute back, ready to leave the palace with it.

Hertrude snapped it in two.

"Bwah?!" Livia choked out.

Hertrude had grasped the Magic Flute in both hands and cracked it over her knee. Livia was left gaping, hand still outstretched.

Hertrude tossed the broken pieces to the floor, looking far happier as she flipped her long, silky black hair. "That feels better," she said. "It irked me thinking about how that flute utterly destroyed our lives."

"Wh-why would you do that?!" Livia cried. "Wasn't it a memento of your sister?!"

"Oh, it was precious, to be sure. The former Principality of Fanoss considered it a national treasure, in fact. But it isn't a memento to *me*. Besides, if I hadn't broken it, you would've found some way to use it."

Livia went silent. She couldn't argue that. If Hertrude had refused her request, she'd fully intended to figure the flute out herself. If all else failed, she would have taken it to Cleare for analysis and unveiled the flute's mysteries that way.

Hertrude let out a slight sigh. "Stop entertaining these foolish notions. You'll make the archduke cry."

"I thought you couldn't stand me." Livia found it hard to believe Hertrude cared enough to intervene.

"You're right. I hate your guts. But..." Hertrude's eyes filled with sadness at the memory of her younger sister. "For Rauda's sake, I decided I would live a life I could be proud of. Despite what you may think of me, I am the acting representative of my dukedom. I will do whatever it takes to preserve my house. So I won't let you kill yourself. I believe that puts you in my debt."

Apparently, Hertrude had abandoned her personal vendettas in favor of

Fanoss's best interests.

"Sacrificing yourself is difficult, I'm sure," she added, "but it's also heartbreaking for the people left behind. Don't forget that."

Livia bent to retrieve the broken halves of the Magic Flute. "I know. But I just want to help Mr. Leon. I've never been able to shrug off the feeling that I'm not good enough for him. He's always the one protecting me. It's pathetic that I haven't been able to return the favor." Her eyes glistened with tears.

Hertrude turned away, her ebony hair dancing through the air. As it fell straight again, she said, "Word is that your relationship with the empire grows ever more fragile."

"You've already gathered that much?"

"It's but a rumor. If that's who you're up against, though, it makes sense that the archduke has his work cut out for him." After a small pause, she continued, "Fanoss will extend all the support it can muster."

"You're going to help us?" Livia asked in disbelief.

Hertrude whipped back around, a finger thrust in her direction. "Consider this a loan to be repaid. I hope you're prepared for how dearly it will cost you."

Livia leaped forward, clasping Hertrude's hand in both of hers. "Of course! If I can do anything at all to help, just say the word!"

"Oh? Anything at all, hm?" Though she made no immediate demands, a scheming grin stretched across Hertrude's face.

Angie waited in the drawing room of the Redgrave mansion in the capital, gracefully sipping the tea Cordelia had poured.

"It's been a while since I last enjoyed a cup of your tea," she said, leaning into the plush sofa cushions.

Cordelia fidgeted anxiously. "But what are you doing here?" she demanded. "I can't believe you called on the master *and* Lord Gilbert."

"I have something to discuss with them."

Angie's business was so urgent that she'd called both her father and older brother to the capital. Ordinarily, only one of them resided there, and the other stayed in their region as administrator. But Angie wanted them both here for this, although they'd disowned her.

Cordelia had attended Angie as a personal maid up until that recent separation and knew the Redgrave family well enough to imagine how furious they would be over this unexpected visit. Hence her anxiety.

"My lady, you no longer belong to the Redgrave household," Cordelia reminded her.

"That's why I arrived under Leon's name, isn't it?" Angie knew her father and brother would reject her request for a meeting but would have no choice but to honor Leon's. As archduke, he outranked them, and he was more powerful from a military standpoint as well. They would meet with him simply to avoid fostering hostility. Of course, they'd be none too pleased with Angie for putting them in this position.

"When you arrived and summoned them, Lord Gilbert was already here. He knows *you're* really the one calling them, and he's positively incensed."

"Regardless of his feelings, I must speak with them both," Angie insisted.

Their discussion was interrupted as the drawing room door flew open with far more force than necessary. Vince and Gilbert strode in.

"The archduke's future wife seems unaware of what it means to be disowned," Gilbert said pointedly, glaring at his sister. "You have some nerve, showing your face here."

Angie left her seat and curtsied politely. "It's been a while since we last met, Brother. Father."

"You have no right to call me that. You are my child no longer," Vince sneered. "Now what is it that brings you here? I'm a busy man. I should hope this is important." His words seemed relatively cordial but throbbed with passive-aggressive anger—unsurprising, given that Angie had so abruptly dragged him all the way to the capital.

Angie's back went ramrod straight. She held her head high, as if she

outranked the two men. “Let us rescind my disownment.”

Gilbert’s nose wrinkled, his lips twisting with disgust. “After everything Father and I have done for you, you make such an entitled request? It seems you’ve even forgotten proper manners.”

The unspoken message: *How dare you speak to us with such arrogance, traitor?*

Angie knew he was right, but she couldn’t back down. She’d come for a reason, though she didn’t expect to change his attitude.

Ignoring her brother, she turned to her father. “Shall we sit before we continue?”

Vince sensed her iron will, and it made him sink into the sofa across from her. Following his lead, Angie took a seat as well, but Gilbert stubbornly remained standing at Vince’s side, eyes narrow as he glared at her. It broke Angie’s heart to be treated with such animosity.

“Well?” Vince said, interrupting her thoughts. “What have you come here for?”

Angie closed her eyes, steeling herself. When she reopened them, her voice resonated through the room. “I will make your grandson a king.”

Vince gawked at her.

Gilbert was momentarily stunned, but he recovered faster than their father. “It’s a little late to make such offers now! Or aren’t you aware that that very opportunity passed us by? You two have—”

“I am speaking with our guest,” Vince interrupted him. “Silence.”

“Father?” Gilbert squeaked in disbelief before quickly acquiescing. “Very well.”

Vince leaned forward, elbows on his knees and fingers steepled in front of his mouth. He stared hard at his daughter. “The empire has already declared war on Holfort, and word will get around soon enough. I assume your offer has something to do with that?”

Angie nodded. “Indeed.” In fact, she had not known the declaration of war

had already come through, but she didn't let her surprise show on her face.

One side of Vince's mouth pulled into a lopsided grin. "That's what I figured. The empire's apparently offered to let the rest of us go if we offer up the archduke's head. I've heard they were quite high-handed about it."

"We require the aid of your house, Duke Redgrave," Angie said. *We're out of time. If we can't pull this kingdom together soon, some idiots will actually call for Leon's death. If that happens, Leon will give up on us for good.*

Knowing Leon as well as she did, Angie knew he wouldn't lose his temper and massacre his countrymen for their betrayal. Nonetheless, he would lose all faith in them—Angie, Noelle, and Livia included—which would leave him to face this battle by himself. She couldn't allow that to happen.

Gilbert gave her a scathing look, as if reiterating his earlier point that it was a little late for that request, but he didn't actually speak. For his part, Vince studied her face before responding.

"Interesting. The empire is such a threat, you seek our aid." The grin that spread across his lips suggested he knew he had the upper hand in this negotiation. Although Angie was his daughter, he was treating her as he would any other aristocrat. Yet her ability to keep up her own mask unfalteringly made him chuckle.

"Your Grace?" said Angie, confused by his reaction.

"Call me 'Father'—and offer my regards to the new king."

Angie was stunned. She'd anticipated a much harder battle to persuade him, yet he'd accepted her offer readily. There was no time for surprise, though; now that the matter was settled, she had her next move to make.

"Thank you," said Angie. "Allow me to excuse myself."

As soon as Angie left the room, Gilbert turned to Vince. "Are you sure about this, Father?"

"What?" said Vince. "About supporting them?"

"I mean going to war with the empire. If we offer up the archduke's head, we

avoid conflict with the empire altogether.”

Vince sighed at his son.

His reaction shocked Gilbert. “Am I mistaken?”

“Once we lost the archduke, do you really think the empire would let us live? The information coming in indicates they’re suiting up for all-out war. If the kingdom’s elite continue to bicker, it’s only a matter of time before Holfort is reduced to an ashen wasteland.”

Gilbert’s face flushed with shame. His anger at Angie’s audacity had kept him from seeing the bigger picture. “My apologies,” he said quickly.

“No need for that.” Vince waved his hand dismissively. “Anyway, Angie’s matured into a strong woman. Hard to believe she’s the same girl who used to lose her nerve when I so much as glared at her.”

“Indeed,” Gilbert agreed. “If she’d been born a man, I’d have happily yielded my position as heir to her.” Having been faced with his own shortcomings, he’d lost some of his usual confidence.

Vince stared at his son in surprise.

Gilbert blinked back at him. “Father? What is it?”

“I guess you haven’t realized, have you?” Vince sighed and shook his head, exasperated.

“Huh?”

“Say Angie *had* been born a man—she would have been equal to you, at best, or even been slightly inferior. Her womanhood is key to her determination. It’s allowed her to grow as strong as she has.”

Gilbert pulled a face. “Still,” he tried to argue.

“You’ll understand once you have a little more life experience under your belt. When men say women are fearsome, they say so with good reason. Angie’s visit today was a good lesson for you.”

There was a short pause, during which Gilbert let his face show his vexation—a product of the inferiority he felt in the wake of Angie’s steadfastness during

her visit. "I will do my utmost not to disappoint you," he said finally.

Vince nodded. "At any rate, I suppose my grandson will be a king after all. Though, to be honest, I hoped to put *you* on the throne." His greatest dream had been to take the crown himself, then pass it to Gilbert upon his death.

A small smile made its way to Gilbert's lips. "I'm grateful you would even say such a thing."

Again, Vince sighed. "A little more ambition, and you really would be the perfect son."

Chapter 13:

The Essence of the Idiot Brigade

LEON AND HIS FIANCÉES were nowhere to be seen on campus—and neither was Marie. In their absence, the idiot brigade gathered around a table during their lunch break, their expressions sober. They had already eaten, and with their trays gone, nothing was left to preoccupy them. It was time to discuss the real reason they were here.

“It’s been days since Marie took off from the academy,” Julius remarked, face pinched with worry.

Jilk placed a hand on his chest and gazed wistfully at the ceiling. “The hours grow so bland and colorless in her absence. These mere few days have felt like an eternity.”

Greg flexed his muscles, brow furrowed in disappointment. “Guh!” he groaned. “I wish she’d hurry back here. I really wanna show her how much I’ve toned my back!”

“She went to visit a dungeon, apparently. But, if so, why didn’t she invite us?” wondered Chris, who’d shed his uniform jacket and slipped on a happi coat.

Brad fed his pigeon and rabbit, Rose and Mary, while the others spoke. When there was a lull in the conversation, he heaved a dramatic sigh. “I wish she’d at least said *something* to us. It’s more and more dangerous out there lately. For her own sake, I wish I could protect her right now.”

They were a forlorn lot in the absence of their beloved Marie. At the same time, they were concerned for Leon and his girls.

Well, actually, Julius was furious. Part of him wanted to chew Leon out, but with Leon nowhere to be found, his pent-up rage had no target. On the other hand, given what he’d once done to Angie, Julius had no right to that anger. Thus, his expression was an inscrutable tangle of emotions.

“Leon’s causing problems too,” he reminded his friends. “No sooner did he break off his engagements to Angie and the other girls than he up and

disappeared again.”

Jilk shrugged. “He’s a real cad, leaving them without an explanation and making them cry so miserably.”

He was absolutely right that Leon’s behavior was inexcusable, but none of his friends liked hearing that said by Jilk, of all people.

Greg leaned toward Chris. “After everything he’s done, he’s got some nerve callin’ Leon out,” he whispered.

“I almost envy his shamelessness,” replied Chris. “Then again, I’d never want to be like that.”

Jilk ignored them, utterly unaffected by their derision.

Though exasperated with Jilk, Brad was more concerned with the issue at hand. “The whole situation makes me wonder. Those three girls haven’t come to school at all, so we can’t ask them a thing. I suspect Marie knows something, but she hasn’t been around either. Even if we wanted to search for her, we don’t have a single airship to our name. We’re powerless.”

They only had access to transportation through Leon, so with him gone, they were at a loss. Maybe if they pulled strings, they could needle someone into lending them an airship, but they’d still have no idea where Marie even went.

“I gather Marie borrowed her vessel from Leon’s older brother. He’s supposedly still in the capital; why don’t we drop in on him after school?” Julius suggested.

His friends nodded in agreement—but the moment was short-lived. A student burst into the cafeteria, their face deathly pale. Winded, they paused to catch their breath. Their tension and fear had alerted everyone in the cafeteria—Julius and his comrades included—that something was wrong. As the crowd’s attention focused, the student staggered up and shouted, “Th-the empire’s declared war on Holfort!”

A cacophony of voices erupted around them.

Julius frowned. “So the rumors were true. I wonder if Leon’s been gone because of this business with the empire.”

“The odds are quite high, I’m sure. We can’t confirm that either way, though.” Jilk shook his head. “Most importantly, we must set out to rescue Miss Marie. We’ll skip afternoon classes and head straight to the Roseblade residence.”

The group quickly left their seats and headed to the hallway. They’d barely left the cafeteria when they ran into Marie herself, her eyes swollen and red and her hair a disheveled mess. She swayed back and forth, unsteady on her feet. Carla was nowhere to be seen.

“Marie, what happened?!” Julius cried.

Marie lifted her head to stare at him. “Please,” she croaked, “help save my Big Bro.”

Julius and his friends exchanged bewildered looks, dumbfounded by her teary-eyed request.

“Huh? Your older brother...?”

Marie and the love interests skipped class and made their way to one of the academy’s tea rooms. They wanted to ensure no one would eavesdrop on their conversation, which made this the perfect location.

While the boys took their seats, Marie remained standing, eyes glued to her feet. Her hands anxiously clasped fistfuls of her skirt.

“I’ve been lying to you all from the start,” she said.

They listened quietly, having resolved to let her finish without interruption. Marie launched into an exhaustive explanation. She admitted that she’d been reincarnated, detailed the foibles of her past life, confessed that she’d seduced all five of them for the sake of a selfish hope for happiness, and acknowledged how she’d driven Leon into a corner. When she finally finished, she prostrated herself on the floor before them.

“I’m so, so sorry. Still, I beg of you, save Leon—save my Big Bro.”

This revelation was Marie’s attempt at sincerity. It was the least she could do, since she was asking them to put their lives on the line to rescue Leon. If they refused, so be it. All Marie wanted was to be of some use to her brother.

Tears streamed ceaselessly down her cheeks as she pressed her forehead to the floor, prepared for curses and jeers. She had fully exposed her true self and was sure they would deride her for it. She wouldn't blame them. After all, she'd pulled the wool over their eyes. They'd thought she was an adorable, innocent young lady, but she was a jaded woman who'd lived a whole life already. Worse, she'd only approached them with an ulterior motive—something she knew they would hate more than anything.

But Marie was ready to accept everything they threw at her. She was fully prepared for them to abandon her and reject her plea to save Leon. Whatever the outcome, she couldn't ask them to put themselves in mortal danger without having the whole truth.

The seconds ticked by, but not a single scathing word was spoken. Nor could Marie sense an ounce of exasperation or disappointment in the air. Surely they despised her—surely. That certainty left her too terrified to lift her head and sneak a glance at their faces.

"I always thought something was off," Julius said, the first to break his silence. "I have to admit, I never imagined it was that Leon was your brother in your past life."

His voice was so sweet and gentle that Marie's head jerked up. Her jaw dropped when she beheld the idiot brigade. "Why...why are you all smiling like that?"

Greg left his chair and took a few steps toward her, grasping her under the arms to coax her to her feet. "Your explanation is so wild, it's hard to know how to respond," he admitted. "Even so, this doesn't really change anything, does it? You're the woman I fell for."

"Really?"

Chris pushed his glasses farther up his nose anxiously, as if to distract from the subtle blush spreading across his cheeks. "If I'm entirely honest, it's difficult to fully grasp what you mean when you say you were 'reincarnated from another world.' I know you're telling us the truth, though. I believe you. That's why I'm happy to help however I can."

Marie shook her head. "But why? I tricked you."

She was relieved by their acceptance, but something about it just didn't sit right. She'd been ready for them to react to this long-concealed revelation by tearing into her verbally, or even resorting to violence. Her actions were so irredeemable that they warranted an extreme reaction. Despite that, Chris was ready to rush to her aid.

"Hearing all that, I must concede that our initial meeting was indeed a calculated setup on your part," said Brad. "But after all the time we've spent together, I can also say this with confidence—the way you acted with us was never deceitful."

He was as pompous as ever, yet for once, his words struck a chord with Marie. She found herself seeing him in a different—more romantic—light.

"Maybe you did have an ulterior motive in approaching us," Brad continued, "but that's something we can forgive."

Marie was so happy that a fresh wave of tears welled up. After everything she'd done, they were still willing to accept her, and that warmed her heart.

Jilk produced a handkerchief and offered it to her. "There *is* one thing I would like to clarify—we're not going to save Leon because you begged us to. We'd do it regardless."

"When I say it'll be dangerous, I really mean it," she warned them. "Why are you so willing to put your lives on the line for him?" She couldn't fathom why they were going to subject themselves to danger.

"I can't say what Leon thinks of us, but whatever he believes, *we* consider him a friend," Julius said.

Marie's gaze swept over them. "You do?"

Greg rubbed his nose with his finger. "Don't get us wrong. We all want a chance to stick it to Leon. But we don't *hate* the guy."

"There is *some* resentment," Chris said with a shrug. "But we also owe him a great deal."

Brad fiddled with a lock of hair, frowning. "He's put us through the wringer more times than I care to count. Still, I suppose we couldn't bring ourselves to

really despise him for it.”

“We do need to return the favor at some point,” Jilk said with a hand on his heart, a devious grin on his face. “But that’s all the more reason we can’t allow him to fall here.”

After everything the boys had said, Marie no longer looked upon them as hopeless idiots but as wonderful, reliable men.

“You guys...” she murmured.

For so long, I overlooked what was important about them.

She quickly wiped away her tears and smiled. “Thank you. It’s like I’m falling for you guys all over again.”

From the very bottom of her heart, she was glad to be with them.

Slight pink colored Julius’s cheeks as he bashfully averted his gaze. However, he soon schooled his features. “We’ll confirm the details of the situation with you,” he said. “Once that’s out of the way, I’d like you to tell us where to find Leon.”



Chapter 14:

Leon's Regrets

THE FLOATING ISLAND I was visiting had been drenched in a total downpour since early that morning. A solid layer of ash-gray clouds covered the sky as far as the eye could see. I gazed at them from the shelter of a cave before turning back to Luxion.

"Is this gonna let up anytime soon?"

His red lens flickered a few times as he analyzed the weather. "It will cease within the hour," he reported. "Shall I summon the *Einhorn* to retrieve us?"

"Nah. I'll take a little break."

That decided, I retreated farther into the cave, where we'd built a nice warm fire. My things were strewn around it. Most were treasures we'd discovered during our adventure in a dungeon. A moderately sized boulder near the fire made a decent seat; I parked myself there, set my rifle aside, and warmed my hands by the flames.

"The chill's bugging me more than I expected," I said.

Luxion promptly tossed more wood onto the flames, increasing their heat. Since he didn't have arms or legs to handle the logs, they seemed to float through the air by way of telekinesis.

"Physical exhaustion and mounting daily fatigue have weakened your immune system. That, in turn, has impaired your judgment. Rest for the sake of recovery would be the most effective use of your time."

"Yeah, yeah. That's why I *am* resting," I grumbled, reaching for the spoils of our travels to look them over. One of the items was a shortsword with a pattern engraved in the blade. "Think we can use this?"

Luxion's lens flashed as he analyzed the shortsword. "This weapon also appears to utilize a metal not recorded within my database."

"Some kind of fantasy metal, huh? If you think it's salvageable, let's repair it."

The grip was in poor condition. I would need a new one if I was going to use the sword. Still, there wasn't a speck of rust on the blade, although it had been unused for many long years. It was so pristinely polished that I could clearly see my reflection in it. A sad reflection, to be clear—I'd gotten pretty gaunt.

"I look like crap," I said with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Your appearance is the consequence of intensive training and excessive drug use for the sake of physical strength," Luxion said matter-of-factly. "I fully realize we're short on time, but if you continue in this manner, you will collapse. You're delving into multiple dungeons a day—grueling physical labor, plain and simple."

"Physical labor' is what you call construction work and stuff. This is a hobby."

"Arguing semantics will get you nowhere. Your body is at its limit, Master. It's crying for help."

I heaved a quiet sigh, setting the shortsword back on the ground. "That's what I get for slacking off all this time."

Slacking off earlier meant I had much more ground to make up now. The debt I had to pay off had stemmed from my ignoring the world for so long. And while it had accrued gradually, I was trying to pay it off all at once.

My thoughts were full of what-ifs. If only I'd gotten serious about training sooner, found Arcadia and new humanity's other weapons before they grew so powerful and treated my life in this world with the forethought and consideration it had deserved. There were too many regrets—an endless list—and while it did me no good to dwell on them, I couldn't stop.

The world went quiet as I stared absently into the fire. The silence was only interrupted when Luxion spoke up, voicing a question.

"Master, I'd like to ask something regarding Angelica and your other fiancées."

"This again? Bug me all you want, the answer's the same."

"The aspect that bothers me is your refusal to be forthcoming with them," Luxion said, approaching the issue from a new angle this time. "Why is it that,

as you got closer to them, you sought to place more distance between you?”

In other words, he wanted to know why I’d started walking on eggshells around the girls the second I’d entered the relationships. The answer to his question was pretty obvious, I thought.

“That should be clear. I’m not really *from* this world.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“Sure it does. And I was never good enough for any of them.”

I knew myself well enough to understand that I wasn’t incredible at anything, not by any stretch of the imagination. And even I was aware that my personality was twisted (just a little, mind you). Anytime someone wronged me, and I took revenge, everyone scolded me for “taking it too far.”

What was I getting at? Basically, I was a regular, boring guy who dreamed of an idle life much different from the exciting, adventurous lifestyles my three (former) fiancées were destined for. We weren’t a good match. I wasn’t a good match.

But there was an even bigger obstacle between the girls and me.

“I’ve been cheating from day one. Using your powers, I defied the plot and changed fate.”

“That is incorrect. You are where you are now as a result of your own efforts.”

I sniffed. “My *efforts*? You mean, using you to cheat my way through?”

For instance, I’d only won Livia’s affections thanks to Luxion’s strength. She was supposed to be in a relationship with one of her five love interests, none of whom resembled their original selves at this point.

I paused and shook my head. “This world doesn’t need me.”

“Regardless, all three girls were perfectly aware of your underhanded cowardice before agreeing to a relationship with you. They need you.”

“Yeah, I know they’re *nice*. Almost brings a tear to my eye...which is exactly why it’s better I stay the hell away from them.”

They’d been so kind to a guy like me, it pained me. I was basically deceiving

them, considering my knowledge of the game. They'd accepted me despite all my secrets, which only showed how amazing they were. Did I really deserve that? Was I good enough? Of course not.

"I always felt guilty," I said.

"Master, you haven't deceived anyone."

No matter how Luxion tried to comfort me, I just couldn't buy it. I knew better than anybody what kind of person I really was.

"I'm deceiving them as we speak. Trust me, I know what a nobody I really am. People may think the world of me, but that's because I've got you in my back pocket. I borrowed your power to play a hero who can solve any problem, and the girls only see me thanks to that."

Without Luxion, I could never have started a relationship with any of them. In fact, I'd probably never have attended the academy. Zola would've married me off against my will before I got the chance. There was no telling how things would've shaken out after that, but I doubted I'd even be alive. Obtaining Luxion had allowed me to live a much more fulfilling life.

"I am your possession, Master. There is nothing shameful about making use of me," said Luxion.

"But I've been wreaking havoc by pretending your power's my own," I insisted. "What really gets me is, the second I thought a problem was too big for me, I wanted to run. That's why the girls are just...too good for me."

There was no way I was right for those three. Not when all I'd done was throw my weight around—really, *Luxion's* weight. My position in this world was built on lies; the girls were all far more earnest. I wasn't on their level. Life would've been way easier if I were content with that.

As amazing as my time with my fiancées had been, deep down, I was racked with guilt over how I'd cheated my way into their hearts. The closer we became, the more acutely I remembered how I'd ridiculed this game before reincarnating into it. I'd mocked Livia for being as brainless as she was careless. I'd called Angie a ticking time bomb just waiting to blow. Then I'd wound up dating them, as if I'd never sneered at them at all. I'd made fun of them in my

previous life, only to belatedly realize I was the real fool the entire time.

“I want all three of them to live happy lives. Not just them, but *everyone*. And since I’m the one who unearthed you and your power, it’s my duty to use you to face Arcadia.”

At that, Luxion restlessly spun the inner ring in his lens, staring at me. Was it a show of impatience? Shock? Whatever the case, I hadn’t seen that reaction before.

“Do you regret claiming me?” he asked.

“Oh, trust me, I’m always regretting stuff.”

“Answer me clearly. Do you consider me unhelpful?” Luxion drifted closer as he hounded me.

Considering everything we’d been through, all the battles we had fought side by side, it would’ve been disrespectful not to answer.

“I am grateful to you.”

“Are you really?”

“Of course. Thanks to you, I could reject the marriage Zola tried to force me into. Then I was able to attend the academy and meet Angie, Livia, and Noelle. Kicking the idiot brigade’s butts felt pretty good too. I only won all those battles because you were there for me. Everything I have is thanks to you. By myself, I’d have been totally helpless—probably would’ve kicked the bucket by now.”

I had faced the Principality of Fanoss, the Alzer Republic, and the Holy Kingdom of Rachel in battle. Each time, I had come out victorious—but only because of Luxion. I couldn’t have accomplished any of that on my own. On the other hand, it was because I’d obtained Luxion that the plot had gone wildly off the rails since the first game. I absolutely had regrets about that.

“Your expression tells me that’s not all you feel,” said Luxion.

It’d grown increasingly hard to hoodwink people lately. My face was probably an open book at this point.

“I guess that’s because, if I had the chance to do it all over again, I’m not sure I’d seek you out.”

I appreciated Luxion getting me out of those binds, but his presence also saddled me with an enormous burden. If I could somehow reset the whole story, I doubted I'd subject myself to the risks his company presented again.

"Do your *life* all over again?" he asked, seeming confused by the concept.

"If reincarnation's a thing, it's not a stretch to imagine you could live the same life again, right? And there's no guarantee I'd make the same choices the second time around."

Silence stretched between us for about ten seconds.

"Master, does that mean you—"

Before Luxion could finish, a man's voice echoed through the cave. "Found you, Leon!"

I reflexively snatched up my rifle and jumped to my feet. Squinting at the silhouette that had appeared at the cave entrance, I leveled the barrel at them—at least, until I got a good look and realized they were no threat.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

I glanced suspiciously at Luxion, who avoided my gaze. He must've been buying time with that drawn-out conversation we'd just had.

Julius marched toward me. "We've been looking for you. Marie's distraught. Come on, we're going home." He grabbed my arm and started dragging me away.

I wrenched free. "Don't get in my way," I snapped. "I'm busy. I have absolutely no plans to go back—not anytime soon."

Julius hadn't come alone. The entire idiot brigade was here: Jilk, Greg, Chris, and Brad. Behind them, I spotted my two best friends, Daniel and Raymond, though they kept their distance.

"The empire declared war on Holfort," Julius said somberly. "Though they offered peace in exchange for your head."

"Yeah? All the more reason I can't go back. I bet folks are already calling for my death. What idiot would want to return to a kingdom so eager to forsake its own?"

At the very least, I wasn't stupid enough to waltz straight back knowing what kind of trouble awaited me. I shooed the boys off with a sweeping gesture to indicate they weren't wanted, but they only glared at me.

"We already know everything about the current situation. Why didn't you come to us?" Julius asked.

For a second, I was stunned, but then I burst out laughing. "Why the hell would I go to you guys? All you've done is cause endless trouble for me. Do you really think you're *reliable*?" I asked mockingly.

Greg stomped toward me, seizing me by the collar. Beefy as he was, he looked pretty menacing up close and personal. "Don't tell me you forgot all the times you depended on us before."

"You were useful now and then. That was it," I spat back, shoving him away.

Chris seized my arm. "Enough with the temper tantrum. Marie's seriously worried about you."

"What, worried that her walking piggy bank will disappear?" I scoffed.

"Is that really the kind of person you think she is?"

"Well, yeah, considering how often she prostrated herself at my feet to beg me to cover your daily expenses!" I pushed Chris away—only for Brad and Jilk to accost me, working together to hold me in place.

"Seems like you're in a bad mood," said Brad. "Burning the candle at both ends?"

Jilk wrinkled his nose. "I think you'd be wise to have a bath. You certainly can't be near ladies until you do."

Their concern only pissed me off. "Go home already!" I snarled, slapping their hands away. "I don't need help from a bunch of weaklings like you. You'll only hold me back!"

I stamped out the fire, snatched up my belongings, and made for the exit, intent on getting back to the *Einhorn*. I was only midway there when something smacked my back. I froze, then spun around to see what it was. Julius had thrown his left glove at me.

He pointed at where it lay by my feet. “Pick it up, Leon. We challenge you to a duel.”

Chapter 15:

One versus Five

JUST AS ANGIE ARRIVED at the royal palace, a woman's voice rang out behind her. It belonged to Clarice Fia Atlee, daughter of Earl Atlee. For a time, she and Angie had been rather close. They had attended the academy together, though Clarice had since graduated.

Clarice took swift strides down the corridor to close the distance between them. "It's been a while, Angelica," she said warmly. "It seems like you've gathered quite a few allies. Am I right to assume you came all this way to initiate a coup?"

A treasonous suggestion, but Angie didn't let it get under her skin. She glanced at Clarice, then resumed walking toward her original destination.

"I have a meeting with Her Majesty. If you have no duties here, I advise you to return home," Angie said curtly. "The situation here at the palace is bound to grow chaotic."

"Alas, I work here these days. I've been lending my father a hand."

Angie quirked a brow. "At a time like this? Are you thinking straight?"

"Who can say? But let's forget all that. Is Leon well?" Clarice asked, her words laced with hidden meaning.

Suspicious, Angie narrowed her eyes. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Don't read too much into it. Anyway, the queen must be awaiting you." With that, Clarice took her leave.

When Angie arrived at the queen's office, the guards standing outside bowed politely, then opened the doors to allow her entry. Just as Clarice had said, the queen really was waiting for her.

"Pardon the intrusion," Angie said as she entered.

Mylene sat at her desk, going through piles of paperwork. Her writing hand froze upon Angie's entry, and she let out a breath before putting on a smile. Her

guards shut the door to give them privacy.

“You’ve been terribly busy,” the queen said. “Have you finally decided you wish to take the country after all?” She wasn’t beating around the bush.

“Yes,” Angie answered honestly. “That’s why I came.”

“You have nerves of steel, coming here completely unguarded.” Mylene giggled, but her mirth soon faded, replaced by a more sober expression. “I assume you’ve heard the empire’s demands.”

“They want Leon’s head.”

“They also want Holfort to become a vassal state. They have so many detailed requirements, it’s rather annoying.”

“Then do you plan to resist?”

“We can’t,” Mylene replied calmly. “Holfort has exhausted both its armies and its resources. If we went to battle now, we would all too quickly fall. Some even support sacrificing Leon to the empire to save their own skins.”

“I will request a list of those parties at a later date.”

Mylene gazed at Angie thoughtfully. “You already conduct yourself like the king’s consort. No, not a consort—a queen ruling in her own right. Do you plan to take the throne yourself? To rule in Leon’s place, given he’s hardly the most reliable leader?”

Angie flashed an antagonistic smile. “If that’s what Leon wishes me to do, I will. However independent and headstrong I may seem, I prefer a supporting role. And I wouldn’t want to do anything that made Leon unhappy.”

Mylene opened her mouth, as if to say something, but she thought better of it and shook her head. “I am drawing up a list of those advocating Leon’s sacrifice as we speak. I’ll ensure you get it later.”

“I appreciate that.” That matter out of the way, Angie continued, “We will have King Roland abdicate.”

“So that’s your plan,” Mylene said, not blinking twice. “Will you execute the whole royal family, to make an example of us?”

“Don’t joke about that. We plan for a peaceful transition of power. We will guarantee both King Roland’s safety and that of the rest of the royal family.”

Mylene narrowed her eyes, displeased. “You aren’t ruthless enough, then. If you spare the king’s family, you’re only asking for trouble later on. Some aristocrats will rally around us as a standard, claiming independence from Holfort.”

Angie had anticipated that, but the prospect didn’t bother her. “If they believe they can pick a fight with Leon and survive, then they’re welcome to try.”

Mylene gave her a look that was simultaneously envious and proud—the pride of a parent whose daughter has come into her own. After all, it was Mylene who had looked after Angie when the girl came to the palace to learn proper manners and decorum.

“I’m pleased to see you’ve matured into a young woman of strength. It seems I was right to choose you as my successor. Granted, things didn’t quite work out the way I’d intended.”

Angie was meant to be the kingdom’s future queen following her engagement to Julius. That was why Mylene had gone to such lengths to nurture her. Mylene hadn’t anticipated that Julius would ruin it all. It was one thing she regretted.

“I’ve only grown as much as I have because of Leon,” Angie said. “Still, thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Your Majesty.” She lowered her head.

“It’s too early for you to thank me. You have a much more formidable opponent to face. His Majesty is waiting for you in the throne room.”

“He is?” Angie asked in disbelief.

It was starting to seem as though both he and Mylene had anticipated her arrival—and what it would entail.

When I left the cave, Daniel and Raymond rushed over.

“Leon, what’s going on? Why haven’t you been at school?!”

“Yeah, it’s not like you to just disappear without saying anything. And now

we've got the empire breathing down our necks, ready for war. We're lost without you."

I gave them a long, hard look. "Did you guys bring these morons?"

Daniel refused to meet my gaze. "Well, yeah. They asked to borrow an airship. When they said they were going to find you, we agreed." He waved a hand through the air, dismissing my question as essentially answered. "Anyway, are you really going to duel them?!"

I glanced back at the cave, from which the five guys in question had just emerged. "Your guess is as good as mine," I hissed under my breath. "You two should hurry back, or you'll get caught in the crossfire."

My friends worriedly did as I advised, disappearing into the nearby trees.

Once they were gone, I whipped around to face Luxion. "It still hasn't stopped raining. Your little weather forecast was total bunk."

"Barely any time has passed since that forecast. The present precipitation rate falls well within my calculations."

He always had some excuse.

Standing in the pouring rain, the idiot brigade lined up before me.

"You guys haven't learned anything since we faced off as first-years," I scoffed. "Can't believe you'd wanna fight me in Armors. Are you brain-dead or something?"

Per their request, the conditions of our duel were the same as that first time, when I'd offered to fight them in Angie's honor.

"If we win, we're taking you back to the capital," Julius said, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

No way in hell was I going to lose.

"And if I win," I said, "all of you go back to the capital and your usual ridiculous antics with Marie. There's no need for you to worry. I'll make sure you've got plenty of cash. For the time being, you can enjoy yourselves to your heart's content."

Julius laughed. “Sounds good to me. Win or lose, we still benefit.” He had a sort of devil-may-care tone as he said it. Even with the rain beating down on us, he looked every bit the handsome prince.

If I were anyone else, I might’ve been green with envy. But since Julius and I were—well, not exactly friends, but something more than acquaintances, I guess—my jealousy was less intense. And it was basically part of what connected us.

“I’m going to beat your disgusting face into an unrecognizable, swollen mess.” I sneered at him. “Luxion, bring out Arroganz.”

Although I didn’t really resent Julius, my words sounded exactly like a puny, insignificant villain’s throwaway lines.

“Very well,” said Luxion.

Arroganz slowly descended from the sky, touching down behind me. It landed in the mud, its form more massive than ever. Luxion had been continually improving its design, our impending battle with Arcadia in mind.

I threw my fist backward, jerking my thumb over my shoulder. “This isn’t the Arroganz you guys remember. I pulverized you in first year, right? Hope you don’t expect a fight that easy.” I chose my words with care, pouring salt into old wounds.

“No. We’ve seen you fight many times,” said Chris, removing his glasses. “It’s good that you continued to build your strength.”

His bravado pissed me off. It would make things so much easier if they just gave up.

“Well, where are your Armors? I certainly hope you didn’t challenge me to a duel without preparing them.” Knowing the idiot brigade, that wouldn’t be the least bit surprising.

Then, to my shock, Armors landed behind them—all of them eerily familiar.

Flabbergasted, I whipped around to face Luxion. “You brought their Armors out here?”

“I also made adjustments to them.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You’re the one who accepted their challenge,” Luxion reminded me dutifully. “They possess no Armors of their own, so I supplied suits to keep things fair.”

What the hell had the point of that been? They still had no chance of beating me. Luxion had improved Arroganz’s performance to its very limit, pulling out all the stops. We expected to face skilled Demonic Knights, so Arroganz needed to be as powerful as possible. The improvements had made it even more challenging to pilot, but between my extra training and performance enhancers, I was managing. It would’ve been impossible to fly without those, though.

My eyes followed Julius and the rest of the idiot brigade as they climbed into their Armors. These were the suits Luxion had prepared for them a while back. The guys were used to piloting them and had done so many times to support me in battle.

“We appreciate you lending us these,” Jilk said, grinning at me. He closed the cockpit hatch, and his kneeling green suit climbed to its feet.

The rest of the idiot brigade followed suit, waiting for me to do the same.

“Aren’t you going to suit up?” Julius asked impatiently.

I clenched my fists. My annoyance was mounting. “I’ll make sure you regret this.”

Once I’d nestled safely in Arroganz’s cockpit, I yanked the hatch shut. The monitors in front of me powered up, giving me a direct view of the surrounding scenery. The downpour had softened the ground, and since we were in a forest, the overgrowth and dense thickets made the terrain difficult to navigate.

Luxion took his usual position, hovering at my right shoulder.

“Why’re you helping them?” I demanded irritably. “You knew I wanted to keep them from getting involved. Or did you forget?”

“I have not forgotten.”

“Then what the hell?”

“I believe your most immediate concern should be Julius and his friends. They are waiting.”

I sighed and focused on the screens before me. All five idiots were lined up in their Armors. The sight reminded me of our duel as first-years. My nostalgia wasn't just the product of their similar suit colors; Luxion had also designed the boys' Armors to resemble their original suits. These basically looked like improved models, and indeed, their performance was far superior. The same couldn't be said of their pilots' skills.

“All right, who do you want me to start with?” I asked, eager to identify my first victim.

Brad and Chris snickered.

“Huh? When did we say we'd fight you one at a time?” Brad taunted.

We were communicating using our onboard mics. As my opponents spoke, their suits mimicked the pilots' gestures, shaking their heads side to side.

“What?” My forehead scrunched.

“This'll be five on one!” Chris bellowed. His rather pathetic declaration made the tension in the air evaporate.

“Seriously? You guys have no pride?” I hoped hitting them where they'd hurt would convince them to renegotiate the duel's terms.

Greg pointed at me. “I'm willin' to admit it—you're strong! Strong enough that I don't see this as even a little unfair!”

My nose wrinkled, upper lip flaring in disgust. “That logic's pretty messed up, you assholes.”

“How odd that you'd say such a thing,” Jilk murmured in feigned surprise. “Especially considering that you yourself once told us we ought to have come at you all together. Remember?”

“What—that's why you're pressing the numbers advantage?”

“We're doing what it takes to claim victory,” Julius answered matter-of-factly, not one to joke alongside his comrades. “Once this is over, you'll be coming home with us. That, I promise.”

Any further discussion would be pointless. Everyone else was brandishing their weapons already, so I took hold of Arroganz's control sticks.

"Come try to beat me, you morons!"

Sweat lined Julius's brow, a few beads trickling down his forehead as he stood before the new and improved Arroganz. Leon's anger suffused the air, and the tension seemed to seep into Julius's Armor.

"You better come at us like you mean it," Julius warned. "You're sadly mistaken if you think we've been wheel-spinning since we faced off!"

In truth, Julius was terrified. He knew that Arroganz was a beast beyond measure. How could he be oblivious to that, when he'd had a front-row seat at so many of Leon's battles?

Lifting his shield, he advanced. Behind him, Jilk took to the skies.

"I'll pin him down from above!" Jilk shouted. "You all use that opportunity to —"

He was interrupted when Arroganz's rear container released a barrage of missiles. Their heat-seeking tech sent them streaking after Jilk as he scrambled to dodge.

Leon snickered. "Those aren't lethal—but if they strike, you're in for it! Here. There's more where that came from!"

In only a few seconds, he'd thwarted Jilk's strategy.

Greg and Chris moved next, attempting a flanking maneuver from either side of Leon. Greg attacked with a spear thrust, while Chris's twin swords crashed down on Leon from above, poised to cleave him in two.

Julius thought the coordinated strike left little room for a proper counter, fearsome as Arroganz was. Leon proved him wrong; lifting its arms, Arroganz easily deflected both strikes.

"That suit's bolstered defenses are a real pain!" Greg snapped.

"This means our only choice is to continue the assault!" Chris shouted back.

“Don’t give him a chance to retaliate!”

“You got it!”

They launched a flurry of attacks from either side of Leon. Although Arroganz’s plating negated any effects, the offensive provided a distraction that let Brad sneak up behind Leon.

“We never thought we’d beat you easily, Leon,” Julius said, then nodded, signaling his ally. “Now, Brad!”

At Julius’s command, Brad released the spears mounted on his back. They sailed through the air, shooting laser beams at Arroganz. The armored suit’s plating turned red-hot wherever it was hit, but Luxion had reduced the lasers’ potency for the duration of the duel, which prevented lasting damage from the strike.

Greg and Chris fell back to avoid being hit by friendly fire.

“Not even Arroganz can withstand being pelted from all sides, huh?” Brad taunted. “You should’ve clarified the duel’s terms before we all came at you at once, Leon!”

“Do you really think you’re more powerful than *Arroganz*?!” Leon snarled. This time, he fired off a wave of drones armed with small guns. They quickly chased down Brad’s long-range spears.

Free from the concentrated fire from all sides, Arroganz charged forward and slammed into Julius.

“Guh!” Julius choked out.

He managed by some miracle to brace himself, but even so, Leon overpowered him and pushed him back. Julius’s feet dragged through the mud as Leon mowed down trees, creating a path for himself in the process, and dove into the forest while Julius basically served as a meat shield.

“Is this it?” Leon sneered. “You really think you can beat me when this is all you’ve got?”

Julius’s temper flared. “We swore we’d never pick another fight we couldn’t win. That was something *you* taught us, Leon!” His ivory suit surged with power,

attempting to withstand Arroganz.

“This is pointless. You can’t beat Arroganz.”

“Maybe I couldn’t one-on-one—but I’m not fighting you alone!”

Rifle fire rained down on Leon’s Armor from above. The gun’s bullets had been swapped for paint balls; they peppered Arroganz’s rear container in green. A glance above revealed the shooter to be Jilk, who’d somehow stabilized the rifle in his hands, taking aim even as he was pelted by Leon’s drones.

“You let your guard down, Leon,” said Jilk.

No sooner had he said that than the drones surrounded him, drowning him in fire.

Inside each of their cockpits, a robotic voice rang out. “Jilk’s Armor has undertaken extensive damage and is now unfit for battle. Functionality has been immediately suspended.”

Jilk’s suit slowly descended to the ground. Its controls locked, rendering it completely immobile.

“You okay, Jilk?” Julius called over the mic.

Despite his previous bravado, Jilk answered somberly. “My apologies. I aimed for his head, but due to the damage I’d sustained, only one hand was operational. That threw off my aim.”

“It’s fine. You were a big help.”

Jilk could no longer participate in their battle, but he’d destroyed one of Leon’s resources.

“I am purging Arroganz’s rear container,” Luxion announced, much to Leon’s dismay. “It is no longer functional.”

“There’s no way he destroyed the whole thing!” Leon protested.

“Incorrect,” Luxion retorted. “That direct attack rendered the container’s contents unsalvageable. Were this a real battle, I would have still purged it.”

“Dammit!”

Confident that Leon was distracted, Julius capitalized on the chance to leap

back in, brandishing his weapon anew. “Good. Now you can’t use any more of your toys.”

Manipulating his Armor’s controls, Julius activated his shoulder cannons and fired at Arroganz. Despite Luxion’s assurances that he had decreased the cannons’ potency, the ensuing explosion was powerful. It would’ve deterred any ordinary person from continuing their onslaught, but Julius was no ordinary individual—and neither was his opponent.

“Sorry, but I’m not going to let this chance pass me by!”

He knew whatever damage he caused wouldn’t destroy Arroganz. And indeed, although the fire show was impressive, it hadn’t been very effective. Arroganz came out unscathed, despite the black smoke left in the explosion’s wake.

Julius continued firing his cannons in rapid succession. Deafening blasts tore through the air. In the thick of the fire and flames, Arroganz’s red eyes glowed ominously.

“Even this won’t cut it, huh?” Julius said through gritted teeth.

Luxion hadn’t stated that Arroganz had sustained too much damage to continue functioning. He must have determined that Julius’s attacks hadn’t penetrated the suit’s plating.

Arroganz burst out of the cloud of smoke. Its right hand shot toward Julius; Julius raised his shield just in time to block it. Sensing impending danger, he threw the shield aside and leaped back. Seconds later, Arroganz tossed the shield away and crouched, then propelled itself into the sky.

Leon’s guttural cry pierced his opponent’s ears. “Don’t get carried away, you idiotic weaklings!”

Sweat trickled down Julius’s cheek. “It’s still four-on-one, Leon. It’s not over yet!”

These morons are experts at pissing me off. What’ve they got against me, huh? I’d basically told them I’d take care of everything, on their behalf, so why

couldn't they sit tight and behave themselves?

Once Arroganz lost its rear container, the only weapons it had left were its fists. As I sped through the air, Brad's remaining spears—just three—came careening after me.

"I'm sick of these things," I muttered. "They're like a swarm of annoying flies."

While I was busy tracking the spears, Greg and Chris climbed to my altitude. Julius was quick to follow, but the other two launched an attack first, charging me with no concern for about friendly fire.

"You don't seriously think you can afford distractions here, do ya? Cause if you don't watch it, I'm gonna take you down!" Greg declared, launching a rapid series of jabs with his spear.

"We won't let Jilk's sacrifice be in vain!" Chris added, slicing at me with his two blades.

Neither let up, so I had no choice but to make defensive maneuvers. That gave Julius a chance to join the fray. Unlike Chris, he wielded only a single sword in his right hand. Once he had reached me, the others made room for him to strike.

"What's the matter, Leon?" the prince taunted. "I thought you said it'd be easy to take us down. The only one you've dispatched thus far is Jilk!"

While those three kept me pinned, Brad remained at a distance, still manipulating his spears as he took aim with a rifle. "No more running," he added. "We're using this momentum to claim victory!"

I was completely surrounded, backed into what seemed like a desperate situation. But I wasn't about to submit, let alone surrender.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Brad," I sneered. "You're a bunch of losers, and that's all you'll ever be." Keeping my eyes peeled to scope the battlefield, I made subtle, minute movements with Arroganz's controls, adjusting my foot's weight on the acceleration pedal to regulate my speed by more and more minuscule increments.

Thrusting its arm out, Arroganz latched onto Chris's suit and swung him

around. I sent his Armor hurtling toward Greg's.

"Gaaah!" Chris cried.

"Chris!" Greg growled, voice strained with frustration as he tried to concentrate. "Hurry! Course correct!"

Too late. The second they collided, I grabbed both before they could escape.

"You're done," I snarled. "Impact!"

Despite my command, Arroganz didn't carry out the named attack. Luxion was quick to step in as referee, since we were dueling. "Greg, Chris, your Armors have taken too much damage to remain airborne. Initializing descent."

"Enjoy eating dirt together!"

Brad lifted his rifle, taking aim. "In any case, I just need to hit you."

He fired, but unlike Jilk, he didn't have such good aim that he could hit a target accurately from that far away. Besides, without that heavy rear container, Arroganz was much more mobile. Its substantial load had slowed me down significantly at the start of the duel; now that I was unrestricted, it was way easier to maneuver.

Dodging the incoming gunfire, I sped toward Brad. Julius was hot on my heels, but he'd already spent his shoulder cannons, leaving him devoid of long-range weapons.

"Run, Brad!" he hollered.

Naive as he was, Brad ignored the order, convinced they could turn the tides if only he landed a hit.

"I'll shoot him down!" Brad replied. "We promised we'd bring him home, after all." He darted through the air to avoid me, firing all the while, but his movements weren't as fluid as Jilk's had been.

The corner of my lips tugged into a lopsided grin. "Should've run when you had the chance, Brad!"

Arroganz caught up with Brad's suit and quickly seized both his arms. I pressed the trigger on my control stick—the usual method for unleashing

Impact—forsaking the theatrics of giving the order aloud.

“Brad’s Armor is no longer fit for battle,” Luxion announced.

“Dammit!” Brad cursed, grinding his teeth in frustration. “I was so *close*.”

“Five on one, and this is really all you guys can accomplish?” I spat from the safety of my cockpit. I glanced over my shoulder at Julius, who flourished his sword with both hands. “Looks like it’s just you left, princeling!”

Julius purged his shoulder cannons; with their weight gone, his mobility shot up too. “No matter the odds, I have no intention of losing!”

“Get over yourself and face reality. Luxion cobbled your Armors together on the fly. They’ve got nothing on a fully customized suit like Arroganz,” I said, trying to reason with him. “Don’t be dumb. You can’t overcome a difference like that through sheer willpower.”

In terms of both power and function, Arroganz was worlds from the suits the idiot brigade were piloting. It outstripped them by an enormous margin. Sure, the Idiot Brigade had the numbers advantage, but Arroganz was still strong enough to overpower them.

I swung my fist. Julius hurriedly blocked it with his sword. Cracks streaked down the blade on impact, veining the steel and rendering it useless.

“Now surrender,” I said. “Or are you going to lean on your status and order *me* to? Go ahead. I’d *love* to hear you tell me to admit defeat!”

Even as I said it, I knew better than to think he’d actually do something like that.

“This brings back memories of our first match,” Julius said.

“Huh?”

“None of us ever dreamed we’d lose.”

I snorted. “That’s exactly why you got humiliated in front of that huge crowd. And you haven’t matured at all since then.”

I rammed my fist into the head of Julius’s suit, sending him plunging toward the ground below.

“Guh?!”

Luxion hadn't declared Julius's Armor unfit for battle, so I chased after him and landed gracefully at his side. It took all Julius and his battered suit had to stand and face me.

This fight was as good as over.

“Give up,” I said. “You guys just can't beat me. Not now, not ever. Go home and wait with Marie till this war's over.”

“Cut the crap already!” Julius snarled, abandoning composure. “You keep running your mouth—do you really think you're such a big goddamn deal?”

It was my confidence that got under his skin, huh? If Julius was so pissed off he'd lost his cool, that was a win for me, as far as I was concerned.

“Duh. Did you forget I'm an archduke? In other words, I've got way higher standing than a little princeling who'll never take the throne!” I threw out my arms, emphasizing my absolute certainty in the duel's outcome.

“No, I'm not talking *status*,” Julius said coldly. “You intend to fight the empire all by yourself, don't you?”

“That's right. You and your idiot friends would only get in my way.”

“I freely admit we aren't the strongest allies. But Leon...we *want* to aid you.”

Ridiculous.

“Partly because Marie asked us to. But we also have a sincere desire to support you.”

Makes me want to hurl.

“You don't have to shoulder all this yourself. We'll fight beside you—*for* you.”

You guys seriously piss me off.

By the time I realized what was happening, I was racing toward Julius, my arm pulled back. I swung at him with all the force I could muster, sending him flying through the air. His back slammed into a tree, and his Armor slumped to the ground, legs splayed before it.

“What exactly are you guys going to do for me? Try claiming you can help

when you actually *beat* me. As you are, you're useless—nothing more than another obstacle. All you morons do is give me trouble."

I was spending my highly limited, extremely valuable time indulging their little request for a duel. Every minute—every *second*—was precious. Why couldn't they just leave me alone?

Julius dragged himself back to his feet and tottered toward me. "Marie came to us sobbing, prostrating herself—all for your sake."

I stared at him, stunned. I was trying to dismiss his words; Marie crying wasn't my problem. Yet my chest squeezed painfully. Why?

"So what?" I snapped. "I'm sure she's just terrified of losing her piggy bank."

"Marie was crying *for you*," Julius insisted emphatically. "I won't let anyone cast doubt on her in that regard. Not even you, Leon."

During our back-and-forth, he'd closed the distance between us.

"Aw. Gonna fight on behalf of your beloved? Must feel nice to you chuckleheads, always playing fairy-tale heroes! Hurry up and throw in the towel—then your cute little Marie can comfort you over being such losers!"

I launched my fist at him, only to lose balance myself. It was like something was holding my legs back. Bewildered, I glanced down to see Greg and Chris's Armors on the ground, each clinging to one of Arroganz's legs.

Oh yeah, I forgot. Luxion never said they were out of the duel.

Clenching my jaw, I pounded my fists into them. "Pathetic! Do you guys seriously think you can beat Arroganz with *teamwork*? Don't be dummies!"

No matter how I battered him, Greg refused to let go. "I'm gettin' real sick of hearing you talk about 'Arroganz' this, 'Arroganz' that. Enough already!" he hissed. "Be honest. The real reason you just talk up your mech is because you know you're losing, right?"

The world turned red as rage consumed me. I knew he was right—knew it better than anyone, in fact.

"Nothing to say for yourself?" Chris demanded, throwing his sword to Julius's feet. "Looks like you're spot on, Greg. You certainly have more of a way with

words lately. As someone who struggles to express himself, I envy you.”

“Ha! I’ll take that as a compliment.”

They ignored me, merrily tittering among themselves. But it was all pointless.

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” I finally snapped, grabbing them and unleashing Impact—a shock wave that rendered them both unconscious. Lifting them into the air, I tossed them out of the way.

Julius snatched up the sword Chris had thrown him and held it aloft.

“He’s not wrong,” I admitted, with a slight shrug they couldn’t see. “*I’m* not strong. The strong ones are Luxion and Arroganz. But how does that even matter? You’re on the ground, and I’m the one standing—the one who’ll be victorious.”

I was going to win this duel, but it brought me no joy. I knew the exact reason for that—it was that these morons had had the audacity to challenge me at all. Julius claimed they wanted to take me back for Marie, but I sensed genuine concern for my well-being too.

I was this irritated because their words had hit a sore spot. If I hadn’t claimed Luxion, Livia could’ve created a peaceful world, devoid of all this mess. That was only a possibility, of course. Still, I had a hunch that whatever world she made would’ve had a far better future than ours.

Not only was I unworthy of her, I wasn’t even worthy of Luxion. I stood there, frozen.

Julius laughed. “This duel’s not even over yet, and you’re already gloating. You’re uncharacteristically somber, though. You would normally have returned Greg’s mockery tenfold.”

“Shut up.”

“I never realized that being unable to defeat us without your Armor gnawed at you. Now I know not to bother with suits and instead challenge you to a regular brawl. You’ll be the one crawling on the ground then, Leon.”

“Shut *up*,” I said again, more intensely.

“Have *you* ever obeyed an opponent who told you to shut up? Isn’t it more

your style to discern where the enemy is most vulnerable and really twist the knife? Shatter their spirit so they fall to their knees, never to stand again? That's the Leon I know."

"Who the hell are you even doing this for?! Seriously!" I lurched forward, hand streaking through the air toward Julius. Before my fingers encircled their target, missiles fired at me from all directions. Too late, I realized they were bindings—wires that constricted Arroganz tightly. My Armor lost its footing on the unstable mud underneath, and I lost my balance, slamming to the ground. "What the hell was that?"

A survey of my surroundings revealed that the rest of the idiot brigade were using bowguns against me. They'd crawled out of their cockpits, actually abandoning the safety of their suits to continue the battle. Having fought alongside me so often, they should've been well aware that that was horrifically dangerous. To resort to this, they had to be desperate to beat me.

Sadly for them, this violated the rules.

"Cheaters," I hissed, turning to Luxion. "See that? Disqualification, am I right?"

"No," he said.

"Huh?!"

"There was no explicit rule against leaving one's Armor to fight in the flesh. Therefore, the duel continues."

I snorted derisively. Suddenly it all made sense. "I thought it was weird that you took their side. You betrayed me, didn't you? You gave them my location."

"Do you honestly believe it wise to waste time interrogating me when you should focus on your opponents?"

I jerked my head around. At that exact moment, Julius brought his sword down on me. The impact rattled Arroganz.

"In a real battle, that blow would have delivered substantial damage not even Arroganz could shrug off," Luxion warned me. "I will therefore adjust Arroganz's performance to reflect the consequences."

Sure enough, Arroganz's controls lost sensitivity, and its power diminished as well.

"Whatever. I'm still not going to lose." I strained against the wires, snapping them. My fist rushed through the air. Much like before, Julius parried with his blade, which shattered and crumbled. With that gone, he had only his bare hands.

He jabbed at Arroganz, rattling my cockpit. I let out a surprised grunt.

"We put in countless hours training so we could beat you," Julius managed through gritted teeth. "Far more than you ever put in to face us!"

I was honestly impressed by the extent to which their superior teamwork had made up for my strength. Still...

"You should spend your time doing something worthwhile, jackass!" I yelled.

"It was plenty worthwhile to me!"

Our fight devolved into a brawl, our suits' fists swinging. Arroganz's reduced power made it difficult to bring a swift end to the duel, but Julius's Armor was thoroughly battered and looking worse by the moment. Still, he wouldn't fall.

"I'm so sick of hearing you guys whine and cry! What've you got to be so unhappy about, huh?!" I jammed Arroganz's foot into his Armor.

"What?! W-we hate all of this, if you must know! You look down on us; you're smug, like you know everything—we hate it all!" His fist collided with Arroganz's cladding, which was tough enough to shatter his suit's hand.

I sniffed. "Well, *you* don't know *anything*." Seizing his right hand, I tried to tear it off. With Arroganz so weakened, though, the most I could do was try to stretch and snap the joints. "And that's fine," I added. "You guys don't *need* to." With both hands, I started ripping his Armor apart.

"I'll finish it all," I spat. "All you want is to live happily ever after with Marie, right?" I clasped my hands together and lifted them high overhead, then swung them down against Julius's suit. "Just shut your mouths, kick back, and let me protect you!"

I'll take care of everything. Nice and simple, isn't it?

By the time Julius's Armor collapsed to the ground, I was winded and gasping for breath.

"Julius's Armor has ceased functioning," announced Luxion.

"I win, then."

"No," Luxion corrected. "It's a draw."

I sneered at him. "What'd you say?"

"An attack was made before I declared Arroganz the winner. It should be counted. Therefore, this duel is a draw," Luxion concluded matter-of-factly.

The second I thought I'd clinched victory, a green paintball had splattered against the hatch to Arroganz's cockpit.

I clenched my fists. "You've gotta be joking!"

Unfortunately, due to Luxion's official judgment, Arroganz ceased operating and became immobile. I cracked the hatch open and tumbled outside.

Squinting, I spotted what had been my undoing—the Idiot Brigade had rallied around Jilk's fallen Armor, where they'd worked together to aim and pull the trigger of the rifle it had carried. What was *wrong* with them? What was the point of going to such extremes? In the wake of their exhausting endeavors, they'd collapsed on their rears, spent. Their grinning faces turned my way.

"Bunch of losers," I huffed under my breath.

Why were they so desperate to beat me? What had possessed them to stick their noses in like this? Was it because of Marie? If so, they should just have stayed with her.

I stood stock-still as the rain poured around me. Julius crawled out of his Armor's cockpit and stomped toward me, boots squishing through soft mud.

"You still want to do this, Leon?"

"Now you're speaking my language, princeling. I've always wanted to beat that sickening mug of yours black and blue." I launched myself at him, jamming my fist into his cheek. He swung back instinctively, landing a clean hit on my face.

“How convenient,” he managed between clenched teeth. “I was looking forward to smashing your face in too!”

“You stupid, skewer-happy freak of nature!”

“What praise!”

The next time I jabbed him with my fist, he instantly grabbed my hair and brought his knee up, catching me right in the gut. The training and drugs gave me an edge, but Julius stubbornly kept up with me. Perhaps that shouldn't have surprised me; gaining all that strength in such a short period had taken an enormous toll on my body. Still, it was frustrating. Could I not beat him, even by cheating?

I tried to bend low and tackle him, but lost my footing in the mud and ended up clinging to his waist.

“What's your problem, anyway? Is it really that fun to get in my way all the time?!”

Julius didn't answer; he focused his strength on launching me backward, sending me rolling through the mud. Before I stopped completely, he threw himself on top of me, straddling my waist. I lifted my arms to guard my head just in time as his fists came down.

“Who said any of this was *fun*?” he retorted. “We're simply furious with you!”

“Yeah? You don't say. Guess you really do hate my guts.”

“No!” he cried, much to my surprise. “All we want is for you to depend on us.”

The endless barrage of punches ended, and when I cautiously lowered my arms, I saw tears streaming down his cheeks. They mixed with the sheets of rain still pouring on us, dripping against my face.



“We’re not doing this because Marie asked us to,” Julius continued. “Why didn’t *you* ask us for help? We’ve assisted you countless times in the past.”

Why was he crying? For some strange reason, the sight of his tears soothed my anger. Before I could give his question due consideration, an answer slipped right past my lips. “Because I didn’t want to drag you guys into this.”

“Do it! Drag us in! You’ve always done it before. You can’t help shoving us knee-deep into whatever mischief you cook up. Don’t start saying nonsense like that now. It’s a little too late.”

Julius’s friends—Jilk, Greg, Chris, and Brad—made their way over. They didn’t try to jump in, though. They just watched us, tears in their eyes as well. After a few moments, Jilk glanced up at the sky. Greg pinched the bridge of his nose, as if he could will the tears back in. Chris’s hand slipped over his glasses, hiding his face. Brad just sniffled, snot running down his upper lip as his nose reddened.

I slowly shook my head. “Oh, please. I know you guys hate me. Joining a fight you might lose your lives in... That’d be too much to ask. Right?”

I was sure, even if I had asked, they’d refuse.

No, that wasn’t quite true. To be honest, I didn’t want to involve them. I wanted them to stay with Marie.

Julius grabbed me by the collar. “We think of you as a friend,” he said. “A precious, irreplaceable friend. You’re that to me, at least—regardless of whether you hate me. So, please, depend on us. I’m begging you.”

At some point during our confrontation, the rain had stopped. Through the thick cloud cover above, rays of sunlight poured down over us.

Luxion’s weather report was right on the money, I thought absently, finally relaxing enough to let my thoughts wander someplace trivial.

Never in my life had I dreamed a day would come when these guys would ask that I let them help me. It felt kinda good, actually.

The duel had been an absolute mess, although my heart was lighter in the wake of it. It had really been *six-on-one*, given Luxion’s obvious bias. My body was a battered mess, and the new bruises on my face and body stung

unpleasantly. It was a pretty crappy situation, to be frank.

Nonetheless, I accepted the outcome of the duel—if it could really be called that.

“You guys can consider yourselves the victors,” I said. “I lose.”

Chapter 16:

The Throne

ROLAND STOOD before his seat in his palace's throne room. Mylene similarly stood before the queen's throne, neither one moving to sit in their usual spots. Standing nearby was a cabinet member, Bernard Fia Atlee, as well as a doctor and close friend of the king, Fred. The vast audience chamber's only other occupants were Angie and her father, whom she'd brought along.

Angie gave a perfunctory curtsy to Roland, then calmly but assertively declared, "Your Majesty, we have come to accept your abdication."

As she explicitly articulated her reason for coming, palpable tension filled the air and enveloped all present. Even Angie was full of nervous energy. Her declaration was essentially a demand that Roland hand his title—and by extension the entire country—over to her.

Roland broke the ice, as it were, by snickering. "I confess, it crossed my mind that Julius or Jake might one day come demand my crown, but never you, Angelica."

Angie had already laid all the groundwork, and if Roland refused to cede the crown willingly, she would have no choice but to force his hand. Redgrave troops filled the corridors just outside the closed chamber doors. Vince's presence signified that his house backed Angie in her endeavor here. Though it hadn't been stated outright, Angie's message to Roland was unmistakable: "I have the power to drag you off that throne by force, if I must."

She had signaled her intentions prior to her arrival, so neither Mylene nor anyone else was panicked. Depending how Roland responded, of course, a fight could break out. The palace was already in an uproar outside, thanks to the presence of Redgrave soldiers. But the question of whether any blood would spill this day fell to Roland. Angie hoped to keep casualties to a minimum, for Leon's sake—hence her attempt to reason with the king.

"Holfort cannot expect to continue in its current state, and Leon has found the resolve to do what is necessary," she said. "Please, I entreat you, abdicate."

She still phrased it as a request, but Angie was in essence politely cautioning Roland that Leon meant business, and standing his ground would be futile.

You could have argued that this was a coup, given how audaciously she proposed the transition of power.

Everyone's attention was fixed on Roland, who didn't look the least bit bothered by his predicament. "Very well!" he said simply, with surprisingly little hesitation.

Those gathered gawked at him. If they were feeling charitable, they might have called it a gracious surrender, since he hadn't put up a fight—but really, shouldn't they scold him for treating his position so flippantly? None could really put their complicated feelings on the matter into words, and that showed in their pinched expressions.

Angie shared the sentiment. "Are you really going to give up so easily? Um, I expected more of..." She trailed off, but her meaning was clear enough.

Roland crossed his arms. "I understand you might have wished for a more thought-out, dramatic response. But, as you well know, it would be pointless, given your preparations. Mylene already informed me of the details, and I honestly don't care whether you're telling the truth. The fact of the matter is, the empire is sincere in their desire to obliterate us all."

There was still something unsettling about how readily he'd relinquished the mantle of power, but if there wasn't going to be needless violence, that made things easier for Angie. She couldn't complain.

"I appreciate your judicious response," she said.

"Of course! Now, having established that, why don't we discuss how you'll handle my future? My continued survival goes without saying, I should hope. But have you considered what, precisely, you'll be doing with me?"

"Hm? Oh, yes," she stammered, still trying to shake her surprise at how smoothly this was coming together. "There will be no executions. Not of you, nor of any other member of the royal family, for that matter. Your lives will be more constrained than they have been, but the current plan is for you to live in informal exile on a floating island of suitable size."

Mylene had already sent her husband a beleaguered look for his selfish concern with his own future prosperity over anything else, but much to her chagrin, he was just getting started.

“I suppose I can’t hope for much better. My mere presence could foment civil unrest, after all,” Roland murmured thoughtfully. “Next, then, will I be able to bring my lovers along to my new private residence?”

Angie’s jaw dropped. “Lovers?!” she squeaked in disbelief. “No. I’m afraid I know nothing about those women’s identities, so I—”

“I have the pertinent information right here,” Minister Bernard said helpfully, handing her a sheaf of papers. His expression was inscrutable.

“Pardon?” Angie squinted at him. Closer inspection revealed dark circles beneath the minister’s eyes. He’d been pulling all-nighters lately—that could be the only explanation.

As if reading her mind, he replied, “At His Majesty’s request, I set about gathering the relevant data posthaste, sleep be damned. The man was nothing but a worthless, incorrigible cad to the very end.” The minister’s face betrayed no emotion, even as he slandered his king.

Angie looked through the stack of documents perfunctorily. Her nose wrinkled, lips straining at the corners. “Just how many women are we looking at here? And how many progeny?!”

Roland held a hand over his heart, eyes looking upward as if at the heavens. “I realize only few would willingly accompany me to my new remote location. But, at the very least, I’d like to ensure all those with whom I’ve enjoyed ties are happy. The majority of my children live in the capital as ordinary citizens with no knowledge of the royal blood running through their veins. I hope you won’t upend their lives on my account.”

To Angie’s disgust, she was now charged with caring for all the women Roland had bedded, as well as any offspring that had resulted from those unions. The documents Bernard provided were vexing, to say the least, but they were what she needed to proceed. With this, Roland’s abdication and the subsequent crowning of the new king would go on without a hitch.

In spite of this victory, Angie trembled with barely restrained anger.

Mylene gave her husband a look of absolute loathing. “You certainly have shared your affections *liberally* outside our marriage,” she said with unconcealed contempt.

Roland smiled at her, unfazed. He kept his head held high, as if he saw nothing even a little wrong with his conduct. “You needn’t worry. I always hid my identity to ensure these nightly activities wouldn’t cause future issues. I meant it when I say none of them know of their ties to a king.”

To one side, his friend Fred covered his face with his hands. He was unable to witness the king’s willingness to embarrass himself, but he also felt personally culpable—and guilty—for helping Roland to carry out his infidelities.

“The fact that you have illegitimate children at all is a *profound* issue!” Vince snapped, brows knitted and hands clenched into trembling fists. He’d contained himself until this point, but he was beyond exercising further patience with their debauched king. “I warned you repeatedly not to stir up trouble, and look what you’ve done, you insipid little—”

Vince cut himself off, restraining his anger despite the obvious history he and Roland shared in this matter.

Angie regarded Roland with a disgust normally reserved for especially odious garbage, much as Mylene had done moments before. “Provided your children hold no imprudent ambitions, I will personally see to it that they are cared for.”

For some reason, it’s infuriating to think I’ll have to look after His Majesty—or rather, him and the mess he’s created—once he abdicates. Could this be how Leon felt every time the king bestowed higher rank and greater responsibility on him?

“Sorry for the trouble,” Roland said, visibly relieved to have come to an agreement. “I didn’t expect that unrepentant brat would be willing to look after my lovers and offspring. Oh, and on that note, be sure to warn him not to lay a finger on them. Especially not on my daughters! I’ll have his head if he does! Make sure you communicate my exact phrasing on that.”

“You have some nerve to say that, after how many people’s daughters *you’ve*

laid hands on,” Mylene muttered under her breath.

By this point, everyone present was either furious or completely disillusioned with Roland, not that Roland showed any sign that that bothered him even a little. In fact, he almost seemed to be enjoying himself, which made the situation all the more aggravating.

“Since you’re already here, perhaps I should also tell you about a certain someone,” Roland added. “He still has connections, I’m sure, so he should be useful to you. And I hope you’ll use him for all he’s worth. Heaven knows he has nothing better to do.” He shook his head, sighing dramatically. “At long last, I can shrug off the burden of power. Can’t imagine any man in his right mind wouldn’t do the same.”

Angie skewered him with a glare. “Your role isn’t over just yet. You may have agreed to abdicate, but there will be aristocrats who refuse to accept their new king. You’ll need to play your part and cooperate with us to keep them in check and ensure this transition goes smoothly.”

Roland sneered. Descending the stairs of his throne, he handed her another stack of documents.

Angie’s brows shot up. “Are these signatures from every member of Holfort’s aristocracy? Just when did you gather these?!” The papers included a written pledge to obey the new king, and as Angie said, had been signed by the whole of Holfortian nobility.

Roland shrugged, his expression theatrically exhausted. “You don’t think I anticipated this? I’ve made a habit of keeping tabs on their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Now seemed as good a time as any to capitalize on the dirt I had on them all. No one will stand in your way.” He laughed triumphantly, much to everyone else’s dismay.

Mylene voiced their thoughts. “How capable,” she said sarcastically. “I only wish you’d been as diligent about your actual responsibilities.”

Angie nodded emphatically. As her gaze returned to the documents in her hands, though, her face softened into a smile. *Now I can finally help Leon. All that’s left is...*

Once everyone had left, only Roland and Mylene remained in the throne room. Since Mylene no longer had to keep up appearances, she speared her husband with a look of transparent revulsion.

“I was wondering what you were up to, sneaking around as you were, but I gather you were preparing to abdicate,” she said pointedly. “Only at times like these do you ever prove yourself capable. How does it feel to finally secure your freedom? I assume you’re so overjoyed to cast aside all your responsibilities, you’d like to get up and dance.” Each word was more scathing than the last, her tone bitter and mocking.

Roland stood at a window, idly gazing out. “I wouldn’t mind dancing for you, if you’d like to see it.”

“I would rather you didn’t,” Mylene said frankly. “But are you certain this was wise?” Her face tensed with legitimate concern. “Depending how things play out, they may yet change their minds and call for our execution.”

Roland spun to face her. “I can tell you with absolute confidence that they won’t. That insufferable brat is infatuated with you.”

“Those who find themselves in positions of power often find their outlook and stance consequently change.”

“Nah. He’d never turn his back on a promise,” Roland murmured, gaze dropping to the floor.

Mylene found his lack of concern almost strange. “As much as you feud with him, you place a great deal of trust in him.”

“I do.” Roland lifted his eyes to stare, not at Mylene, but at something in the distance. “As of now, he’s the only one willing to stand up to the empire. He’ll fight tooth and nail, and risk his life for Holfort. He must be a masochist, to be willing to put himself through all that. He’d be better off making a run for it and saving himself. But, for whatever reason, he possesses a strong sense of responsibility. So he always ends up shouldering far greater burdens than anyone should need to.”

Mylene wrapped her arms around herself, face pinched. “He’s earnest to a

fault in that way.”

Roland’s lips pulled into a wry, lopsided grin that he barely managed to hide with his hand. “Whatever the case, I can’t fathom—nor do I envy—anyone who would want to sit on that miserable throne and bear all the nonsense that comes with it.”

“You really do seem to hate your own position,” Mylene sighed.

“I *do* hate it!” Roland said emphatically, recalling the events that had followed his coronation. His nose wrinkled, his lips pulling back in disgust. “I can’t tell you what a relief it is that I’m getting out of it without dying in the process.”

Roland had never wanted to reign, and he wasn’t above openly stating that fact.

“Still,” he muttered under his breath, “to think a *Bartfort* would succeed me...”

“What do you mean?” Mylene tilted her head.

Roland swiveled back around, turning his back to her as he gazed out the window once more. “Nothing. I was just thinking that this, too, must be fate.”

Mylene was quick to ask what fate had to do with House Bartfort, but Roland never answered.

Chapter 17:

Those with Courage

GIVEN HOW BRUISED and battered I was in the wake of that whole duel, I had to borrow the shoulders of my best friends—Daniel and Raymond—to hobble back to the *Einhorn*.

“Only you could end up in a fistfight with the prince, Leon,” Daniel teased.

I tried to force a smile but hissed as pain shot through my face. “They’re basically my henchmen. It’s fine.”

Raymond snickered. “That’s just like you. Anyway, you’re going to war with the empire, right? This whole thing’s caused real uproar in the capital.” The smile disappeared from his face, replaced by genuine concern. “You can beat them, though, can’t you?”

I avoided his gaze. “The empire told Holfort they’d let you off if you turned me over, right?”

Raymond shook his head, as if to him that option wasn’t even on the table. “It’s more like they gave us a bunch of humiliating conditions for wriggling out of war. It’s pretty clear they wouldn’t let us off just for handing you over.”

Was Vordenoit so emboldened by Arcadia that they were willing to drop all pretense and antagonize the kingdom outright? That seemed strange to me, but I didn’t have to ponder the question long.

“If Holfort agrees to those conditions, the empire will benefit,” Luxion said. “But they must think it will be a small matter to wipe us out, even if not. Given the vast difference in power, I see why they would take that stance.”

Daniel glanced between us. “But as long as you’ve got Luxion, you won’t lose, right? Are you gonna need our help this time around?”

I’d depended upon their assistance in a number of battles before, so it was only natural that he assumed I might request it again.

I hung my head. “Sorry, but this time, I can’t guarantee a win.”

“Huh?” Daniel and Raymond blurted in unison. They didn’t know how to respond.

“You guys don’t have to come,” I assured them. “I wouldn’t have the luxury of offering you any protection in battle. Don’t worry—Nicks can take over maintenance on your airships and Armors. And there won’t be penalties or anything.”

In the past, I’d used a contract they’d signed to wrangle them into working for me whenever I needed them. This time, I just couldn’t take advantage of them.

Since they were still lost for words, I kept up the conversation. “Anyway, when’d you two cozy up to the idiot brigade?” I’d never imagined they would lend Julius and company an airship to fly out in search of me.

Raymond recovered first from his initial shock. “Oh, right. Y-yeah,” he stuttered, still composing himself. “The prince and his friends asked us to bring them. We were already worried about you, so it was a pretty easy choice.”

“Sorry for dragging you into this. They’ll come back with me on the *Einhorn*, so you guys can head straight home. No need to worry about anything else.”

Once we reached my ship, I dropped my arms from their shoulders, intending to head in on my own steam. Just as I was stepping inside, Daniel called out.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, expression as somber as his voice. “You’re usually so cool and collected about this kind of stuff. Insufferable, even. Why’re you talking like you’ve already lost? Act like your usual insensitive, pompous self already, will you?!”

Before the door closed fully, I flashed him a bitter smile. “Sorry about all the trouble I’ve caused you. And make sure to tell the other guys I apologized.”

Entering the *Einhorn*, I headed straight for the sickbay to have my wounds treated. Julius was sporting far worse injuries, granted. He’d pushed so far past his limits to square off with me, he’d cracked a bone.

“Jilk!” he shrieked. “B-be a little gentler!”

Jilk, who was helping to patch Julius up, smirked as his friend hissed and

wincing. I thought I caught a sadistic gleam in his eye, but I hoped that was my imagination. “You only have yourself to blame for being so reckless,” he said.

Having received treatment, I reached for my shirt, intending to slip it back on. I froze when I caught Greg staring a hole right through me, though. It was unnerving.

“What?” I snapped, glowering at him.

Greg sighed. “Your muscles are cryin’. You really pushed your body too far, huh?”

Here I thought he was an imbecile, but apparently, he could tell at a glance that I was using performance enhancers. *Guess he’s not a total meathead.*

“I got pretty dramatic results in practically no time,” I told him. “Well? Jealous?”

“Not even a little.” Greg turned away promptly, but I could tell he was annoyed.

Brad, who’d finished bandaging his hands, shook his head. “There’s no beauty in a body like that,” he said tersely.

“As if I care what you think.”

They seemed pissed about the extremes I’d gone to recently. Would they have preferred I consult them about every little decision?

Chris stared at me. There was an obvious crack in one of his lenses. “I understand you felt it necessary, but if you push yourself too far beyond your limits and collapse, it defeats the purpose.” Even if he didn’t approve of my methods, he was at least the first to see my point of view.

“Don’t worry. Luxion’s keeping an eye on my health.”

“I have told you repeatedly that you are at your limit, but you refuse to listen to me, Master,” Luxion objected irritably.

Finally, he’s back to his normal, annoying self.

“Yeah, yeah, my bad,” I said. “So, what’re you guys gonna do with me once you bring me back to the capital?” I intended to obey their wishes and come

along, of course, but to what end? If we had no action plan once we got there, it'd be a waste of time.

Now bandaged, Julius explained, "Your fiancées have been on the move since you left. I have no idea how many allies they've scrounged up, but they seemingly don't intend to let you take on the empire alone."

Seriously? I hoped those three hadn't taken over too much of my burden.

Julius glared at me. "I seem to recall warning you not to make Angelica cry."

Part of me wanted to yell something like, "You're the last person I want to hear that from!" But I wasn't in the mood to argue that point.

"I know. I realize I screwed up," I admitted before quickly changing the subject. "Okay, so we're going back to the capital to rendezvous with our allies, right? And you're sure there's no trap or ambush waiting for me?"

Julius's lips twitched like he wasn't quite ready to let the subject go, but finally he answered, "No, nothing of the sort. After the empire's sudden, unprovoked declaration of war, even the aristocracy doubts their sincerity."

"They're thinking through things calmly? Shocking. I was sure they'd be itching to take my head."

"I don't doubt some wish to, but most haven't taken that stance, since it's impossible to discern the empire's true motives," Julius explained. "Even if we tried to inform them that this is a millennia-old war that hasn't yet ended, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who'd buy it." He shrugged.

I covered my face with my hands, exasperated. "Marie told you about all that?"

"She did," Jilk answered for the prince. "She told us everything, including that she reincarnated—"

"And that you were her older brother in her past life," Chris finished for Jilk. "Why didn't *you* tell us?"

Jilk frowned—not at Chris but at me. The others glared at me as well.

Frankly, I was dumbfounded to learn Marie had revealed the *entire* truth. "She told you everything?" I muttered, breathless, and pinched the bridge of

my nose. “That dummy. What was she thinking?”

“If you’d told us to begin with, we would never have had any weird ideas about your relationship. It was pretty cold to keep it to yourself,” Greg said with an exaggerated sigh.

I scanned their faces. Their eyes shone with trust; they actually believed everything Marie had told them, which was something I couldn’t believe.

“You mean it? She seriously spilled the whole truth?” I was so shaken, I was repeating myself. I shook my head. “There’s no way.”

“‘No way’?” Brad arched an eyebrow. “Is it really that strange to you that we’d believe Marie? From our standpoint, *you’re* dishonest and insincere for not sharing this with *your* fiancées.”

I didn’t even know how to respond.

Julius nodded. “Marie trusted us, which is why she shared the truth. As men who love her, it’s our duty to return her faith in kind. Will you really not tell Angelica, Olivia, and Noelle about all this?”

I choked on a laugh. Here I was thinking they were idiots—complete fools—but they’d outdone themselves. They were reigning kings of chumps. “You guys might be gullible babies, but those three have good heads on their shoulders. They’d never believe me.”

The Idiot Brigade’s faces pinched.

“You and your constant sniping,” Greg grumbled loudly.

The other four agreed. “Leon’s got a nasty mouth on him, that’s for sure.”

I averted my gaze, mumbling, “Fine, I’m sorry. I *am* grateful to you guys.”

Silence filled the sickbay. All five were flabbergasted.

Brad slowly shook his head. “I can’t believe I heard *Leon*, of all people, thank us for something.”

Oh, come on. You guys are being way too dramatic about this.

I returned to my room and took a sedative before crawling into bed. As I

waited for the sleep aid to kick in, I turned to Luxion.

“You’re the one who really brought them here, aren’t you?”

“Indeed. I also manipulated the duel to ensure you were at a severe disadvantage.” There was a hint of guilt in his robotic voice. Maybe he actually felt bad about the role he’d played. “My apologies.”

“It’s rare to hear you say that. You aren’t hiding anything else from me, are you?” I gave him a look, testing him.

“What you require most at present is firstly rest, and secondly, companions willing to fight at your side,” he said, sidestepping the question. “You can depend on Julius and his friends.”

Instead of pressing him further, I let the matter go. “I didn’t think they’d grown that strong. Even taking as many drugs as I am, I couldn’t beat Julius.” Not even cheating had let me clinch a victory. I felt pathetic.

“Julius pushed himself past his limits to stop you, Master. Victory would have been yours in terms of pure ability, but Julius won the mental battle.”

“So that’s how it is.” Drowsiness was finally settling in. My eyelids grew heavy.

“Everyone is doing their utmost to save you,” Luxion continued. “This world needs you.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Is it really that difficult to believe?”

“It’s more that I don’t believe in *myself* at all. If I hadn’t come here, things would never have turned out this way.” I felt my grip on consciousness begin to slip. “For everyone’s sake...I gotta finish this...and make this world...peaceful again...”

Our conversation ended abruptly as sleep finally claimed me.

As the sun sank over the horizon, Angie paid a visit to the headmaster’s office. Inside, Leon’s “master”—as Leon called him—sat at his desk, shuffling through paperwork. He smiled at Angie when she entered. “Do you need something?”

It was well past time for students to head home; in fact, they were prohibited from entering the school building at this late hour. The headmaster had likely discerned the reason for Angie's arrival, however, since he didn't scold her for flouting that rule.

Both exasperated and shocked by his reaction, Angie pulled a face. "Today has been nothing but surprises. I never realized you were the last king's younger brother."

In other words, the man was Roland's uncle, and a member of the royal family.

"Lucas Rapha Holfort," Angie said—his full name, which she now knew. "Officially, you have a lower second-court ranking and the title of duke. It was quite impossible to look into you or your affairs, though, since your name and all related data were expunged from official records."

Among the regional nobility, only two people had ever been granted the title "duke"—save for Leon, who had risen to the position of archduke not long ago. One was Hertrude, though being unmarried, she couldn't yet act as a duchess in full. The other was Angie's father, Duke Redgrave.

Lucas's smile vanished, and his brow furrowed. This topic of discussion seemed unwelcome. "His Majesty told you, I take it? Vexing for me, since I already stepped down and excused myself from all relevant titles and their associated responsibilities."

Angie planted both hands on the desk and leaned forward until her face was inches from Lucas's. "You and Roland were dragged into a power struggle over the crown, and as I heard it, you withdrew from that conflict. You changed your name and remained here in the capital. But, in truth, you should've been the one crowned king."

"True. At the time, I had the strongest claim and was next in line." Lucas sighed. "His Majesty was always more interested in parties and fun, even when he was younger. The aristocracy wasn't keen to accept him as king. Perhaps I seemed more principled to them."

"You're underselling yourself." Angie narrowed her eyes. "My father told me everything. Your disposition, your skills—all of it made you far worthier of the

crown. You ran from the infighting because you couldn't stand the turmoil. Isn't that right?" Rumors to that effect had abounded at the time, according to Vince.

"I admit I ran, but not for the reasons you assume," said Lucas. "Even if I had become king, this country wouldn't have changed. His Majesty was far likelier to make a true difference, which is why I bowed out."

"Actually, I bring a message from His Majesty: 'No running this time.' It seems he really resented you for it."

"He wasn't keen on taking the throne either—I forced it on him. It's not surprising that he'd hold a grudge. Still, as things stand now, I'm nothing but a politically impotent academy headmaster."

Angie shook her head. She wasn't the least bit convinced. "His Majesty said otherwise—that you still have all your old connections, and that your power as headmaster isn't to be underestimated. You already know Leon adores you, and he's finally resolved himself to do what is necessary. Please, lend us your strength."

Silence settled between them for a few moments.

Lucas exhaled quietly, and his stiff features softened. "I am afraid you exaggerate my ability to contribute."

"Leon has great respect for you. He considers you his *master*. I would thank you not to run from your responsibilities this time," Angie said pointedly, unwilling to concede at all.

"To be honest, I'd prefer to treat him as a friend rather than an apprentice." Lucas left his seat. The smile that had teased the edges of his lips fell away. "I forced my ideals on him and made him suffer, just as I did the king. As an adult many years his senior, I suppose the time has come for me to take responsibility and do what is required of me."

"Thank you. If you join our cause, I am sure that will please Leon greatly," Angie smiled.

Lucas awkwardly averted his gaze. "I will strive to leverage my connections to help him. How much assistance do you anticipate from other quarters?"

Angie shook her head. “There’s no telling yet, but we’ll have our answer soon enough.”

Angie’s efforts had centered on her own house’s faction and the royal family itself. The Redgraves were certainly on her side, but there was no guessing how many of their peers would step up to join. Those she’d won over were doing their best to persuade more to their cause. Yet without gaining others’ approval—and thereby their support and reinforcements—they had to expect a bare-bones “army.” The royal family was well past its peak power, and even Angie worried how many forces they could scrape together.

Lucas seemed to sense what was going through her head. His expression hardened. “We’ve only just started,” he reassured her.

Chapter 18:

The Fake Saint

WHILE JULIUS AND HIS FRIENDS were off locating Leon, Marie took the opportunity to visit a familiar location in the capital. The structure before her was solemn and majestic, filled with numerous devoted believers busily offering prayer.

The Temple was the religious institution supported by most of Holfort's population. Its chief place of worship sat at the top of an impossibly tall stairway.

As Marie approached, knights guarding the entrance lifted their spears in warning. They had sworn their allegiance to the Temple, but their real master was the God whom they and the rest of the Temple worshipped, in addition to the Saint. The knights understandably hated Marie after the events two years ago in which she'd masqueraded as Saint.

"What brings you here, accursed witch?!"

"You were warned never to approach this sacred place again!"

When the guards pointed their spears at her, the civilians who'd visited to pray murmured among themselves. Marie ignored both the guards and the attention and pressed forward, at least until the guards raised their spears to block her way.

"We told you to—whoa!"

Marie grabbed their spears and, with unprecedented strength, sent weapons and wielders flying. Mana rippled across her skin, and white light enveloped her as she strode forward into the temple proper. The double doors leading inside already hung open to welcome the faithful who'd come to offer prayers.

Deep within the temple was a beautiful alabaster statue of the Saint, whose visage was so carefully polished that it seemed to glow in the light. The statue was fitted with golden accessories; its right hand held a golden staff, and a golden bracelet adorned its left wrist. Another golden trinket hung around the

statue's neck. Marie's eyes gleamed as she locked onto her target.

The commotion at the gate summoned temple knights who came scrambling to investigate, followed by several priests. A corpulent man, his body so bloated that walking was difficult, appeared to be the head priest. A number of glittering rings adorned his thick fingers. Marie thought he looked far too materialistic for a religious leader, but then, the Temple didn't practice asceticism.

"I will not allow you to defile this consecrated ground!" bellowed the apparent head priest. "Knights, I give you leave to take her head!"

The priests were visibly startled by his announcement.

"The agreement says we're not supposed to touch her!" one protested.

"That was on the condition that she never set foot here again. *She's* the one who violated the agreement! Now, vile interloper, you will face the Saint's justice!"

The knights marched toward Marie, weapons drawn. Marie didn't pay them the least attention. Her focus was on the Saint's relics—key items in the game.

"What I need now is power," Marie muttered, as if to herself. "You recognized me as Saint once before, and I need you to lend me your strength again." She was actually speaking to the statue, but the alabaster Saint gave no answer, only smiled tenderly at her.

The head priest snorted. "What are you babbling about? You think the Saint would answer an irredeemable sinner like you? Enough! Cut her to ribbons!"

Having similarly lost their patience, the temple knights lifted their swords, ready to carry out the head priest's order.

Marie stood firm. She reached her right hand toward the statue. "I need your power to save my brother. So...so just give it to me already!"

Though her voice started quiet, it rose to a sudden crescendo, echoing through the room.

The statue did not respond, yet the golden relics did. The bracelet shattered the alabaster wrist it hung upon, freeing itself. It whizzed through the air and

snapped around Marie's wrist instead. The staff broke the statue's right arm off as it likewise came loose and raced toward her, stabbing into the floor at her feet. The necklace moved last, snapping off the statue's head to make its way over.

All three pieces had answered Marie's plea, and when the temple knights' swords swung down upon her, they were met by a shock wave that blew swordsmen and weapons away. Some slammed into walls, others into nearby pillars, but all the knights groaned in pain.

Marie reached forward, grasping the staff before her. "Thank you," she said—not to the people present but to the relics. "Thank you for letting me call on your power once more. I swear that, this time, I won't make the same mistakes."

This situation was different from when she'd knowingly stolen the role of Saint from under Livia. Marie wasn't doing this for herself, she was doing it for Leon. She needed the Saint's power to help him.

The head priest vibrated with fury. "How could the holy relics recognize an impostor?! This is unconscionable. Unacceptable!" he shrieked, spit flying through the air.

Ignoring him, Marie surveyed the fallen temple knights. None seemed able to climb back to their feet just yet. Her hand tightened around her staff, and she closed her eyes, letting mana flow from her. "I'm sorry. I'll heal your wounds."

White light enveloped Marie, then flowed outward, flooding the temple. By the time it ebbed and dissipated, the knights found that their pain evaporated with it.

"I-Incredible. It doesn't hurt anymore."

"I've never seen healing magic like that."

"I can't believe it. This woman really is the Saint after all?"

Gone was the earlier hostility as the temple knights regarded her anew. The priests gaped in disbelief, unable to find their voices to comment.

For his part, the head priest fell backward, collapsing on his rear as he thrust

an accusing finger in her direction. “C-could you...really be the Saint?” The blood drained from his face.

Marie sneered at him. Yanking the staff out of the floor, she rested it on her shoulder. “That’s right. Now, where’s my grand reception?”

She spoke with such confidence that the priests could only trade confused looks. A few moments later, they hesitantly sank to the ground and lowered their heads in reverence. The temple knights likewise knelt, heads bowed.

Realizing he had no leg to stand on, the head priest prostrated himself on the floor. “I beg mercy of you, my lady! We were certain, given the past, that you were naught but an impostor! I shall prepare immediately to ensure you are welcomed with the respect you so deserve!”

“No need.” Marie waved him off. “You have records on the Saint, don’t you? Guide me to your library, and let me see them immediately.”

The head priest’s head jerked up, his plump face the picture of bewilderment. “You mean our archives? Of course, as Saint, you are well within your rights to visit them, but—”

“No buts. Take me there now.”

“Y-yes, right away!” Panicked, the head priest shouted for a few priestesses, instructing them to escort Marie to the archives.

Once she was on her way there, she was certain what she desired was finally within reach. *At least, when the fighting begins, I’ll have the Saint’s power to rely on.*

The records she’d referred to would have information on special magic accessible only to someone qualified to be the Saint and in command of the three relics. Legend said such a person had used those powers once, and Marie was determined to learn everything she could to beef up her arsenal.

I won’t lose Big Bro ever again.

Chapter 19: Assembling

AN ARMADA OF WARSHIPS had gathered on the outskirts of Holfort's capital. A royal battleship flew out to meet the fleet, its cannons poised to fire should the need arise. Armors had gathered on the royal battleship's deck, prepared to sortie. Their readiness for battle was natural, given the arriving fleet's loyalties.

"Isn't the crest on your flags that of House Fanoss?!" the royal battleship's captain barked over the radio. The anger in his voice was matched by the panic. "What brings you here? How did you get so near the capital?"

On the bridge of the ship leading the armada, Hertrude wrinkled her nose. "How many times have we suffered this same interrogation?" she grumbled as she glanced at Livia, who sat nearby.

A Fanoss soldier handed Livia a microphone. "This is Archduke Bartfort's fiancée Livia," she said, her voice echoing outside the ship. "We have permission to proceed to the capital, so please let us through."

"Archduke Bartfort's fiancée?!" the captain squeaked in surprise. He must've forgotten to power off his mic, because the murmurs of captain and crew filtered through.

"Weird," said one crew member. "We haven't gotten word regarding Lady Livia's return." That confirmed what Livia and Hertrude suspected—that communications from elsewhere hadn't reached the capital.

When she heard the discussion, Livia wasn't content to keep silent. "Whether you received notice or not, I shall ask again: Please let us through."

"W-we'll just check with our superiors real quick!"

For now, the battleship's obstinance kept Livia and Hertrude stalled in the skies at the edge of the capital.

Hertrude sighed. She was probably losing patience; they'd been through this exact process a number of times already. The royal army's skepticism wasn't unwarranted, however. Two years ago, Holfort had gone to war with what was

formerly the Principality of Fanoss. The harrowing experience left them wary of Hertrude and her bannermen.

“It seems there’s a great deal of chaos in the ranks,” she said thoughtfully. “I bet we could in fact take the capital by ourselves—if we wanted.”

It was a dangerous suggestion. Livia gave her a smile—one that was superficially gentle and kind, but which Hertrude knew to be antagonistic. “That would be quite impossible, with the *Licorne* here.”

“I was making light of the situation,” Hertrude retorted petulantly. Much to her annoyance, Livia spoke the truth. “Oh. It seems we’re not the only guests on hand.”

Livia followed Hertrude’s gaze. In the distance loomed an unfamiliar fleet. Judging by the ships’ construction, they were foreign. Livia squinted at the crest on their flags, then gasped in surprise. “That’s the Alzer Republic.”

After a moment to digest this information, Hertrude said, “I’m surprised they’d send a fleet, especially when they must be so busy with their own defenses.”

“It’s because of Noelle.” Livia raised a hand to her chest. “She convinced them.” Despite the difficulties the Republic faced back home, they’d offered as much support as they could, for which Livia was immensely grateful.

Hertrude smiled wryly. “I don’t think that’s the only reason.”

“Huh?” Livia blinked.

Hertrude offered no further explanation—perhaps in retaliation for Livia ruining her good humor a moment earlier.

When word arrived that a representative of the Alzer Republic had come to the palace to see her, Noelle sped to the room where they waited. She flung open the door and found her twin, Lelia Zel Lespinasse, inside.

Lelia’s hair differed from her sister’s in that it was a solid shade of pink pulled to the left side in a ponytail, a few strands loose by her emerald eyes. Her face had grown considerably gaunter since Noelle last saw her, which suggested

she'd been incredibly busy lately as the Sacred Tree's priestess.

Noelle paused to catch her breath. "Lelia!" she gasped.

Lelia rose from the sofa where she'd been seated, forcing a smile to her face. "It's been a while, Big Sis."

Noelle launched herself at Lelia, wrapping the other girl in her arms. "Thank you so much for coming," Noelle sobbed into her shoulder. "Really, thank you."

Lelia delicately wrapped her arms around her older sister. Tears welled in her eyes. "If we lost, it'd be the end of everything we know, right? It's only natural we'd help."



“But I never dreamed you’d come along.”

“If I didn’t, there’d be no one to control Emile.”

Noelle flinched. “What?”

A man was sitting on the sofa, waiting uncomfortably while the sisters shared a heartfelt reunion. He cleared his throat with a quick, “Ahem.”

This tall, slender gentleman clad in a striped suit was Albergue Sara Rault. He had sharp eyes, and his perfectly groomed mustache made him that much more intimidating. But he quickly explained, “Emile is the name of Alzer’s Sacred Tree. It is safely stowed aboard our flagship.”

They’d brought their Sacred Tree, just as Noelle had.

“Our warships were constructed by Ideal,” Albergue went on. “We only have a few, but I can vouch for their superior quality. Not that I suspect you need me to; I’m sure you and yours are already perfectly aware of Ideal’s capabilities.”

At any rate, Albergue assured Noelle, they had brought their very best fleet for this operation. Even if they couldn’t bring a great number of ships, they were obviously determined to provide every bit of aid they could.

“I can’t thank you guys enough,” Noelle said. “It’s heartening to know you’re both here with us.” Finally, she was proving a capable ally to Leon. Her face softened with relief.

But that was short-lived. Albergue and Lelia traded troubled smiles; when Noelle cocked her head in confusion, Lelia admitted, “Actually, we’re not the only ones who came.”

“Milaaaaady!”

In a separate room, Marie was greeted by Loic Leta Barielle. He was quite strappingly dressed in a white suit and cloak, and his fiery red hair was trimmed short. He burst into tears the moment he saw her.

“Ah, so you’re here too, Loic,” Marie said gently, wrapping her arms around him and tenderly stroking his back.

Loic wiped away his tears. “Of course I am! How could I not leap to my lady’s aid when she’s in need? That bastard Hugues opposed the move, but I gave him a good smack to shut him up!”

It wasn’t surprising to learn that there had been a disagreement about mobilizing Alzer’s fleet.

“That was a pretty extreme way to handle your dispute,” Marie said with a beleaguered smile. “But I appreciate it. Having you here will be a big help.”

“For you, milady, this is nothing!” Loic paused for a moment, brow furrowing. “But actually, milady, I notice you’re more—”

“More stunning than ever before?” Marie answered for him, standing. “That’s only natural. I’m still growing.” She winked.

Blood rushed to Loic’s cheeks. “Yes! You were absolutely breathtaking before, but you’re even more beautiful now! I don’t quite know how to express it, but... it’s like you have some sort of divine aura. It surprised me!”

He was so earnest that, for a moment, a shadow fell over Marie’s face. She shook it off quickly, flashing that radiant grin a second later. “Thank you. I’ve got high hopes for you.”

“I swear to do my utmost. I’ve gotten more experience on the battlefield in your absence, milady.”

As the Alzer Republic rebuilt, air pirates and even other countries had sought to exploit their vulnerability. Loic and his comrades had thwarted those incursions, and the regular battles had indeed honed his skills.

Loic glanced around the empty room. “Hm? Where are those five troublesome fellows always disrupting our alone time? And what of the archduke? I hoped to say hello. I’ve got an urgent message for him.”

Marie hesitated. She was unsure of how to respond, but she didn’t get the chance to.

“Oh, it looks like he’s just returned,” Loic said, glancing out a nearby window. “It’s been a while since I last laid eyes upon the *Einhorn*.”

Jerking her head around, Marie was shocked to see said ship in the distance.

Those boys really did it. They brought Leon back. Thank goodness!

When I arrived at the royal palace, I was surprised to find Loic, of all people, there to greet me.

"It's been a long time," he said with a smile, waving. He had mellowed out considerably since his days as Noelle's stalker.

Julius and the others sneered at him. His presence had instantly ruined their moods.

"What are *you* doing here?" Julius hissed.

Loic gave him a look. "Is that any way to address a foreign ally who came with a whole armada to back you up? I only popped by to pay my respects to the archduke after meeting my lady."

If the idiot brigade wasn't livid before, they were murderous now that he'd brought up seeing Marie.

Greg stomped forward, pushing his muscular body into Loic's personal space. "You didn't do anything *weird* to her, didya?!"

"I would *never* disrespect my lady in such a way," Loic snapped. He straightened and turned back to me, his expression a bit panicked. "But I digress. There's something urgent I must relay to you, Archduke."

Those weren't words I expected from someone just saying hello. "Something urgent? For me?" I arched a brow, waiting for him to explain.

Loic's face tensed. His eyes wandered this way and that, looking at anything but me, as if he was searching for the right words. "You see...Louise came with us."

"She did?"

Miss Louise was a woman I'd gotten to know in my time as an exchange student in the Alzer Republic. Just hearing her name brought back memories.

Loic licked his lips and continued, "She's in a room waiting for you. But, um, how should I put this...?"

“We’ve no time to waste on this,” Jilk interrupted irritably. “If you have something to say, spit it out. Or are you hesitating because you’re tiptoeing around a problem?”

Loic’s face soured, but he kept his attention on me. “In that room she was escorted to...several women were already waiting,” he said finally. For some reason, sweat was pouring down his face.

“Uh...did they take her to the wrong room or something?”

“No. That’s not the issue.” Loic paused and sighed, then continued, “In fact, I was told to send any woman who wanted to meet you to that very room.”

What was he getting at? Unable to decipher his implication, I looked at Julius and the other boys. Whatever I had missed, they apparently hadn’t, because they were sweating profusely too.

Julius glanced at Greg. “Hey, what do you make of this?”

“I dunno how to even...” Greg shook his head, at a loss.

Chris and Brad had huddled up to have their own little discussion.

“This gives me a bad feeling,” said Chris.

Brad nodded. “Likewise, but it *is* Leon’s problem. I don’t really think we should stick our noses into it.”

“Your Highness,” Jilk cut in, “why don’t we part ways with Leon for the moment? He already has guests waiting to meet with him, and it would simply be rude to barge in. More frankly, I don’t *want* to be dragged into the mess no doubt awaiting him. Clarice is in there as well, more likely than not.” Jilk’s face fell at Clarice’s name alone. She had been his fiancée until he called off their engagement.

Hunh. I guess maybe they’re feeling wiped out, I thought, still oblivious to their true reasons. “Fine, you guys go ahead and rest,” I sighed. “Loic, show me to that room.”

Loic averted his gaze. “I’m afraid I can’t. I’ve other business to attend to.”

Oh well. I’ve got Luxion here.

“Well, you heard him.” I looked at my partner. “Can you show me the way?”

“I can certainly be your guide. However...” Luxion gave me a pointed look. “Are you adamant you wish to meet Louise and these other women? You could put it off for now.”

It wouldn’t sit right with me to make Miss Louise wait any longer than absolutely necessary, especially when she’d come all the way from the Alzer Republic. Also, I *wanted* to see her.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Very well, Master.”

Leon and Luxion left for the room where Louise and the unnamed women were waiting. The idiot brigade lingered behind with Loic, all touched by Leon’s courage.

“Sorry, Leon,” said Greg, with a sad shake of his head. “I can’t help you with this!”

“We’re all powerless when it comes to this sort of thing,” Jilk assured him. It was a rare moment indeed when someone as dreadful as Jilk comforted anybody else, but this was perhaps the one situation in which he actually empathized with Leon. “Let’s all pray he comes out unscathed.”

Julius gazed after Leon as he receded down the hallway. “Sometimes his obliviousness really gets on my nerves, but at times like this, it’s actually an asset.”

The boys had a strange respect for Leon for heading into what would no doubt be a volatile situation—and with more than one woman. They were sure it would be as lethal as any battlefield. As Jilk had suggested, they said a silent prayer for Leon.

We headed to the room where Miss Louise waited.

“I knew from the moment I saw those ships that the Alzer Republic was joining us,” I told Luxion. “But I didn’t expect to find Loic here with them.”

“They even dispatched Ideal’s prize warships,” Luxion remarked. “It is safe to assume Albergue and Louise pulled some strings.”

“Yeah, and I appreciate it.”

I had thought I didn’t need anyone’s help, but now I realized how heartening it was to have people at my side, willing to lend me their support.

“I saw Fanoss’s fleet out there too,” I added.

“Holfort’s aristocracy has dispatched units as well. I already confirmed the presence of the Bartfort warship. I hope you are prepared to face your family’s anger before long.”

Presumably, either my father or Nicks was manning that ship—maybe even both. Considering how self-destructive I had been, refusing to rely on anyone, I couldn’t blame them if they flipped out at me.

I shrugged. “If they sock me in the face, I won’t complain. Anyway, who’s with Miss Louise? Angie and the girls?”

“No, actually...” Luxion hesitated, not quite answering my question.

Before I could press him for further details, I found myself in front of the room in question. I rapped on the door. There was a muffled response on the other side, which I took as an invitation and entered.

“My, my. I see you’ve put your body through the wringer since I last saw you,” Miss Clarice said the moment I stepped through. “Is it me, or have you lost weight?”

Miss Deirdre was there as well. “I heard you went missing for a while,” she said, holding a folding fan delicately to her mouth. “What a tremendous relief to see you here safe and sound.”

I’d somehow almost expected to see both of them. They were daughters of Holfortian nobility, so it was no surprise if business brought them to the palace. It was the other two who seemed more out of place.

“How like you, Leon, to wrap yourself up in even more trouble.”

“It’s been too long, Miss Louise,” I said. “Or should I call you Big Sister?”

This woman's full name was Louise Sara Rault. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and purple eyes, along with a voluptuous, incredibly curvy figure. Miss Louise had done a great deal to support me while I was in Alzer.

The whole "Big Sister" thing was more or less a joke, but it made her blush.

Miss Louise strode toward me, lifting a hand to cup my cheek. "If you're feeling well enough to poke fun, you must be fine. I can't tell you what a relief it is to see you so lively."

"Of course. I've got so much energy, I could bottle and sell it and still have scads left over," I said.

"I don't believe that, not even for a minute. You're just as much of a liar as ever."

Our affectionate banter was cut short by Miss Hertrude. "Are the two of you quite finished?" she asked. "I have something to discuss with Leon."



I gave her an inquisitive look.

Miss Clarice flashed a smile that looked meaningful but secretive—though perhaps that was only my imagination. “What a coincidence,” she said. “I have something rather important to discuss with Leon as well. But I have to wonder,” she added, scanning the other women’s faces, “why these three pests are here, getting in my way.”

Deirdre snapped her folding fan shut. “Seeing these other women here, I should’ve realized sooner. This waiting room was no doubt arranged on Angelica’s—no, Queen Mylene’s—orders. How cruel of her.”

What did Angie—or Miss Mylene, for that matter—have to do with this? I was stumped.

Miss Louise interrupted my thoughts. “Leon, your big sister has something important to discuss with you. Would you mind giving me a bit of time?”

“Hm?” I shot Luxion a questioning glance; he bobbed up and down, confirming I had time before my next appointment. I nodded at Miss Louise, allowing her to continue.

She gently pressed her palms together. “We were able to dispatch forces to Holfort, but as you may well imagine, the Alzer Republic is mired in discord. If we don’t return with something substantial to show for our efforts here, we simply won’t convince Hugues’s opposition party that our actions were justified. Surely you’re willing to ensure we’re fairly compensated?” She glanced down before peering back up at me with pleading, dewy eyes.

In the short time since I’d last seen her, Miss Louise had matured a great deal. It didn’t surprise me to hear that Alzer had made a significant sacrifice to be here. As an advocate for her country and its people, it was natural that she wanted to gain something from the arrangement. That said, there was something strange about the way she said all this that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“House Fanoss is going out on a limb to contribute as well,” Miss Hertrude declared. “Returning with nothing to show for our support would put me at a great disadvantage.”

What she and Louise were saying made sense. I glanced at Luxion, hoping he could take over from here.

“For the moment, we can reimburse you all with platinum coins,” he informed them. “If there are other goods you wish to request, then—”

“Hold it,” Miss Clarice interrupted, as soon as she realized we were offering to compensate them out of pocket. “You can’t conduct negotiations like that. Isn’t this a discussion between nations? It’s just not right to expect Leon to decide on compensation alone—not to mention to foot the bill.”

Miss Deirdre nodded. “Exactly. Besides, if anyone is due remuneration, it’s us. Holfort’s nobility mobilized to assist the war effort as well. And of course, House Roseblade will do its utmost to support you, Leon.”

Since their houses were contributing as well, they sounded indignant that I was prioritizing Miss Louise and Miss Hertrude. I stroked my chin, giving the matter due consideration.

“Master,” Luxion whispered in my ear, “does something not strike you as odd about these women?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at them.”

At his request, I studied the girls. They all faced each other, speaking with smiles on their faces.

“Isn’t this a domestic matter? Odd that you expect to be compensated,” said Miss Louise.

“As far as I can see, *you* have a personal relationship with Leon, foreign princess,” Miss Clarice shot back. “Even if you plan to insist otherwise, I’ll thank you to keep your nose out of my business.”

“Are you hoping to revive the Principality?” Miss Deirdre demanded of Hertrude. “If that’s what you’re after, you can wait patiently for the new king to grant you amnesty *after* the war concludes. I’ll even be kind and put in a good word on your behalf.”

“You and your ilk are too unreliable for Leon and Holfort to truly count on,

which is why House Fanoss is here in the first place,” Miss Hertrude retorted. “The kingdom must show us commensurate sincerity.”

I brought my fist down on my palm as it finally hit me. “It’s political maneuvering. None of them want someone else getting more compensation.”

As a member of high society, I could tell their smiles weren’t sincere. They were all trying their best to draw me into their corner and net the best-possible reward for contributing. That was why they were so quick to bicker.

I figured that out pretty quickly. I guess I really have gotten used to being an aristocrat.

Luxion gave me a beleaguered look. “You truly think that’s all this is?”

“Well, either way, don’t you think it’s a bit chilly in this room?”

“Yes, it certainly is.”

It was *definitely* chillier than the hallway.

“This is taking considerably more time than I anticipated,” Luxion said. “If we continue to fail to resolve this issue, we will be late to your next appointment.”

“Gotcha.” Turning back to the bickering women, I clapped to draw their attention. The four turned to me. “I understand where you’re all coming from. I’ll personally ensure you’re all duly compensated.”

Miss Hertrude smiled brightly. From an objective standpoint, her height and figure hadn’t really changed since last I saw her, but she had a more mature, almost urbane air. It was probably a byproduct of the rapid maturing she’d had to do, experiencing the difficulties of high society as her house and region’s acting representative. She’d had no choice but to grow up, and I empathized with her.

“On your name, you swear to take responsibility for our compensation?” Miss Hertrude asked. “May we have that in writing?”

“If that’ll satisfy you, sure.”

I would’ve loved to reminisce together for a while, if we’d had the luxury of time, but I was on a tight schedule. Bittersweet as this brief reunion was, I needed to sign whatever they wanted and be on my way.

Miss Clarice frowned. "I guess that will have to do."

"My apologies for putting you through this," Miss Deirdre said, hiding her lips with her fan once again. "But I can't forego such an opportunity."

Miss Louise looked into my eyes and smiled. "Thanks to you, I'll have a most pleasing report to take back to my father."

Glad I could be of service.

Miss Hertrude quickly set about drawing up a contract, spouting off orders to the other three women. Once they were satisfied with the fine print, she summarized its contents. "'I, Leon, hereby swear to compensate these women with whatever they desire.'"

The language in the contract itself was more complex, but that was the long and short of it.

Satisfied, Miss Hertrude nodded. "This is at least better than a mere verbal agreement. I only hope you won't renege on your promise later."

I scribbled my signature and gave her a tight smile. "So little faith in me. There, the deed is done."

"Quite. I'll see you later, then."

With that, our little discussion ended.

When we arrived at the anteroom just outside the audience chamber, no one was there to greet us. I plopped into a seat.

"I believe it was unwise to sign such a vague agreement," Luxion warned, ever the nag. "Though I grant that the odds of those women causing substantial problems due to that contract are rather low." As much as he disliked how I'd resolved the situation, he hadn't interjected; he trusted them enough to assume things would turn out okay.

"If it looks like it'll end up being a problem, just fob it off on Cleare," I said. "She'll take care of it."

"Don't tell me you have no intention of honoring that contract."

Trust Luxion to read my mind.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I felt guilty, but I'd had a good reason for signing dishonestly. "My odds of coming back alive from this are slim, right? I feel bad misleading them, but I could hardly ruin the moment and say, 'Sorry, girls, I'm liable to kick the bucket out on that battlefield.'"

Survival was in no way guaranteed, and I just hadn't wanted to turn that reunion into a bittersweet farewell.

"Is that why you agreed to their request so readily?"

I shrugged. "I didn't want them to worry."

As bad as I felt for being less than transparent, the fact was, I might never come home. If I didn't, they could curse me and call me a liar all they liked. At the very least, I'd make sure Luxion forked money over before I actually left. Hopefully that would let them forgive me.

As our conversation petered out, the anteroom door swung open, and Angie barged in. "Leon!"

I rose from my chair. "Angie."

She wore what looked like a wedding dress, though it was crimson. Her hair was swept back into a lovely arrangement, and a light dusting of makeup highlighted her features.

As Angie gazed at me, her eyes misted over. She dashed to me, pressing her forehead against my chest. "I was convinced you wouldn't come back to us," she murmured. "I was terrified I'd never see you again."

"I'm sorry."

"You always play with my heart like this, over and over. You really are the scum of the earth."

"You have every right to leave me, if you want," I said.

She peered up at me, tears streaming down her cheeks even as her lips curled into a smile. "No matter how you might hate it, I won't abandon you. So...don't you abandon me either."

Heat gathered behind my eyes. Not wanting Angie to see me cry, I threw my arms around her, drawing her closer. I didn't say anything out loud, but my actions conveyed my meaning well enough.

"I gathered you as many allies as I could," she said. "Holfortian noblemen, knights, and soldiers. They're all in the audience chamber, waiting to hear you speak."

"I bet they're just waiting to complain."



“I wouldn’t be so sure. Regardless, I went to rather extreme lengths to get them here. This will be a true burden on you, but if you wish, there’s still time to take it all back.”

I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t refuse and waste her hard work. There was no turning back. No matter how heavy the burden, it was mine to shoulder. I might grumble and complain about it the whole time, but—assuming I made it out of this alive—I would accept it.

“That’s fine,” I said.

“Are you sure? I know you—”

“It’s fine,” I insisted. I genuinely had no reservations about tackling whatever this would be. Angie was the one who’d put her blood, sweat, and tears into arranging it. “Thank you, Angie. I really appreciate this.”

“If you’re going to start thanking people, make sure you include Livia and Noelle. They got House Fanoss and the Alzer Republic on our side.”

“I’ll be sure to express due appreciation to them too,” I promised.

We remained locked in an embrace until someone knocked on the door. Angie pulled away. “It’s time. Go out there and do your thing, Leon.”

I started toward the door so she wouldn’t see the tears in my eyes. “I’ve never liked being in front of a crowd. And I’m bad with words, so public speaking isn’t exactly my forte,” I joked, trying to distract from my emotions. “So don’t laugh, even if I royally screw this up, okay?”

She giggled. “If you can crack jokes, I have no doubt you’ll be fine.”

“Shall I prepare a speech for you?” Luxion offered, ever the thorn in my side.

I made a face at him. “Tempted as I am, you’d better not.”

“Why not?”

“I want this speech to come from me.”

The men awaiting me were going to battle at my side. The least I could do was answer their loyalty with sincerity.

When I arrived in the audience chamber, it was packed wall to wall with people. Palace staff guided me to the throne, where I was to make my speech. Prior to my entrance, voices had echoed through the doors, but now it was so silent you could've heard a pin drop. It was unnerving.

Stranger than that was the fact that neither Roland nor Miss Mylene were on their thrones. Instead, they stood to the side. I spied my master standing with them, which settled my nerves a bit. Surveying the crowd, I saw the idiot brigade in attendance, Loic standing nearby. Lelia and Mr. Albergue were there as well. The Holfortian aristocrats had formed neat rows as they waited for me to speak.

The whole atmosphere was bizarre.

I had anticipated jeering or something, My eyes landed on Earl Mottley, whose eyes instead sparkled in admiration as he gazed at me. My father was present as well, hanging near the back and fidgeting restlessly, as if terrified I might screw this up. Some guys had come in their school uniforms. Daniel, Raymond, and, to my surprise, the rest of our group—all poor, backwater barons—were in the crowd too.

I scanned the faces of those present. “When I heard about this little inaugural meeting, I half thought I’d show up, and no one would be here. To be honest, it’s a great relief to see that’s not the case.”

That was meant as a light joke, but it was met with silence. I wondered for a second if I’d made an ass of myself already, but their audience’s expressions remained earnest. They were apparently willing to let me continue, even after that dumb joke on my part.

“I’ll assume you all already know what brings us here,” I went on. “The Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit has declared war on Holfort Kingdom. If we remain silent, and do nothing, I can tell you with certainty that they will kill us all.”

There was some information I couldn’t bring up, but the declaration of war was public knowledge at this point. The empire had called for our surrender, but they’d made it contingent on a number of humiliating conditions, which I suspected had left my fellow nobles very indignant.

“The empire is a powerful foe. They have an ace up their sleeve, and they’re

ready to use it to wipe us out. That's why I decided to stand against them to fight." I paused, frowning. "To be perfectly honest, I couldn't have cared less if this whole kingdom fell to ruin."

Murmurs rippled through the audience chamber, but I ignored them.

"Holfort has disappointed me time and time again. But what about today? If you look outside, you can see an enormous fleet of warships. And this whole room is full of people. For the first time, I find myself thinking I was too ready to abandon this country."

I couldn't count the number of times I'd thought Holfort was a lost cause, and our situation this time was more dire than ever before. It was a miracle so many people had come together for this; it wouldn't have been possible if not for Angie, Livia, and Noelle. I gazed toward those girls, wanting them to know I'd noticed. Marie stood near them, clad in a white dress and the Saint's relics. A number of Temple clergy surrounded her. I'd heard Marie swayed them, but I'd been doubtful until I saw it myself.

"I ordinarily handle things by ripping an opponent to pieces verbally while handing them their ass by way of overwhelming force. But, unfortunately, that's not possible this time around. I mean it when I say the empire is strong. There's no way I can fight them by myself. So..." I took a sharp breath and tilted my head back, looking to the ceiling before returning my gaze to the people hanging on my every word. "I ask of you, please lend me your support."

I bowed my head. The nobles in the crowd gasped in disbelief; whispers erupted.

Keeping my head low, I continued, "I don't need you to do this for me. Do it for *yourselves*—for the people you love and wish to protect. But, I beg you, fight with me."

It was no secret how cocky and arrogant I'd been in the past. I doubted any of the onlookers ever dreamed I'd make such a humble request, head bowed.

The murmuring continued until Earl Mottley's voice boomed through the audience chamber. "Please, lift your head. I hereby swear my life to you, my liege. I ask that you use it however you see fit!"

When I raised my head as he urged, the earl strode forward and knelt in front of me, his own head bent.

“Those of us gathered here are prepared to do what is necessary,” said Vince. “Don’t take that loyalty and dedication lightly.”

After those two shows of fealty, the rest of the nobles openly expressed the same sentiments.

“Damn! Well, I have to say, I didn’t expect the day would come when Lord Bartfort would deign to lower his head to us!”

“It’s definitely a once-in-a-lifetime event—if one’s even lucky enough to witness it once!”

“Seeing this was worth coming here, that’s for sure!”

Jokes and laughter rang out; I watched it all with my mouth hanging open.

My master must’ve found that unbecoming, because he spoke up. “It seems you misunderstood us, Mr. Leon, so let me set things straight. *We* should beg *you* for assistance.”

“Master?” I said in disbelief.

As if in confirmation, the crowd began kneeling and lowering their heads. Even that rat bastard Roland stepped forward to show his respect, dropping to one knee and bowing—unthinkable for a monarch.

“Archduke Leon Fou Bartfort, I speak for all present when I say we would be humbled and honored to have your support in the battle to come.”

It was hard to imagine Roland speaking with such sincerity, without injecting some joke or insult, but his words rang true. Every soul in the room was kneeling, head bent. Roland hadn’t so much as called me a brat or demanded my fealty—both of which he’d done in the past. He’d even framed his words as a request, beseeching my aid, although I’d taken that tack first. Roland was expressing the honest desire to fight alongside me, as was every other man present.

“Thank you, all of you. I’d be delighted to fly onto the battlefield at your sides.”

This was a war we had to win at all costs.

Chapter 20:

The Empire's Strongest Knight

ARCADIA HAD TEMPORARILY dropped anchor at a floating island not far from the empire's border. He ordinarily kept to the skies near the center of imperial territory, but special circumstances had required his relocation here.

"Here they come, Partner!"

"They won't give up! It's never-ending!"

Those aforementioned "circumstances" were the old human remnants intent on pursuing Arcadia. Any AI unit that awoke from its long slumber immediately attacked him, no matter the time of day, which meant their offensive was an endless onslaught. The AI came in all shapes and sizes, from what were presumably worker robots to enormous warships.

On this occasion, the enemy consisted of three warships and a swarm of smaller machines. Finn and Brave were facing off with them, the former having donned the latter to thin the enemy's numbers.

"How many of these things were secretly hiding throughout the world?!" Finn wondered. Many of the robots were overgrown with moss or missing parts. The warships weren't in much better shape—certainly not in tip-top condition, to say the least.

Other Demonic Knights were also participating on the battlefield, so the enemy was rapidly losing ground.

"Watch out, Partner! We've got a real nasty one incoming!"

"Yeah, I see it."

The enemy in question was a fighter jet shaped almost like a missile. It had no pilot and was instead equipped with its own AI unit. The jet headed straight for Arcadia.

"Okay, Kurosuke, time to pick up speed!" Finn shouted.

"It'd sure be nice if you called me 'Brave' once in a while."

The jet whizzed past the other Demonic Knights, streaking straight for its intended target. Finn gave chase in his Demonic Suit. He lifted his longsword and brought it down on the jet.

“No matter what, I *will* keep Mia safe.”

As Finn cleaved the jet in two, it exploded.

“Nice,” said Brave. “All we’ve got left is... Hm?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Their attack pattern changed.”

Indeed, the remaining robots weren’t behaving as they had mere moments ago. Instead of charging blindly forward to attack, they maintained distance to survey the knights. The warships also adopted new tactics, their offensives growing more sporadic. They knew perfectly well by now that Arcadia had a defensive barrier, but instead of concentrating their fire on one area, they began to spread it out. That eased the pressure on the Demonic Knights somewhat, but something about the way their foes were adapting made Brave uneasy.

“These things really wig me out. Let’s hurry and get this over with, Partner.”

“Agreed,” Finn said. *What’s with them changing their strategy out of nowhere? It’s almost like...they’re studying us.*

Impressive spikes jutted from Finn’s shoulders, producing an electrical charge that surged through the air and triggered explosions in any robot it affected. The warships also sustained substantial damage, and the other knights took the opportunity to swoop in and destroy them.

“Is that it? No more?” Finn muttered, scanning the area. Neither he nor Brave could let their guard down until they were certain it was clear.

“Looks like that was the end of it,” Brave replied. “Arcadia’s ordering us to return.”

“He is?” Spinning to face Arcadia, Finn headed for him. “If he’s calling us back, he must have new orders for us. He really is working us to the bone.”

“He’s summoning all the Demonic Knights to his throne room. Sounds like

he's got an important announcement."

Finn scowled. He could already guess what this concerned. "Ten to one, it's about invading Holfort."

"Yep. Sounds about right."

Returning to Arcadia with the rest of the knights, Finn unequipped Brave and made for the throne room. As they arrived, the other knights lined up behind him, but he alone strode toward the emperor's throne.

Gunther's brow creased as he sneered at Finn, but Finn ignored him. Midway down the carpet to the base of the stairs, where he would kneel, he caught Laimer Lua Kirchner staring at him.

"That's the knight in the first seat?" Laimer muttered. "He's not that impressive."

Laimer, a hot-blooded young knight with short red hair, was Lienhart's older brother. It was rare for two brothers to become Demonic Knights. Laimer was blessed with impressive skill and talent, but had no love for Finn.

"Don't judge a book by its cover," another knight warned. This was Hubert Luo Hein, a tall, slender man with long black hair and delicate features that lent him a more scholarly than knightly appearance. "Even your younger brother acknowledges how capable he is."

Laimer's lips puckered in dismay. "This has nothing to do with him."

Hubert shrugged.

Finn stopped short of the stairs leading to the throne. He knelt, lowering his head. "You summoned me, Your Imperial Majesty."

Arcadia hovered behind Moritz as the emperor sat on his throne. The creature glowered at Finn and Brave, as if their very presence vexed him. With Mia standing at the edge of the room, however, Arcadia kept any venom he might've felt for the pair to himself. Finn wasn't paying him any attention anyway; the knight was too relieved to see Mia safe.

Moritz's face turned pensive as he studied Finn. "It is good to see you

answered my call, Finn Leta Hering. You are our strongest—a Demonic Knight of the first seat.”

As the emperor’s words suggested, the empire ranked its Demonic Knights. Their seat number indicated the relative quality of their skills. Only the most powerful occupied the first seat, representing the knights as the strongest of their order.

“I am sure you have all realized this by now,” Moritz continued, voice heavy with worry, “but we will soon launch our invasion.” He pressed a hand to his forehead, as if he already lamented this decision.

“There is nothing to fear, Your Imperial Majesty,” Arcadia crooned in his ear. “Regardless of how they struggle, we shall be victorious. Rest assured.”

Moritz hesitated, then argued, “We could have avoided this whole conflict if we’d merely demanded Bartfort’s head. The additional demands we made during conciliatory negotiations were a mistake.”

“It’s far too late to dwell on those. There’s no going back. Or would you offer the Holfortians clemency and abandon your own people?”

“N-no, I couldn’t.”

Moritz already knew this was a battle of survival between the old humans and the new, but being privy to the truth only made him more hesitant. He was on the precipice of taking countless lives to save his citizens. As sure as he was that this was the correct choice, the gravity of the stakes gave him pause.

“You aren’t at fault,” Arcadia continued whispering. “What you do, you do for the empire. This war will decide the future of new humanity’s descendants. Now, let’s wipe out those Holfortians.”

“I’m perfectly aware of the gravity of our situation!” Moritz snarled at him.

Finn’s chest squeezed. Part of him seethed with hatred for Moritz, who had assassinated Carl, but he also empathized with the new emperor’s anguish. This was a situation over which Moritz had no control. On the other hand, opposing Arcadia would be counterproductive when they had no hope of defeating him.

“Uh, um...!” Mia squeaked, disrupting the silence that fell over the throne

room when no one else dared speak. Her adorably timid voice echoed through the hall.

Moritz pinned her with a glare, warning her to hold her tongue. But Arcadia did not share his sentiment.

“Princess, is something the matter?” the creature asked, prioritizing her over all else as always.

Mia dropped her gaze to her feet. “Do we really have to wipe them out? I have friends in Holfort Kingdom. I just... I don’t...” She floundered, unable to find the words to express her sentiments.

“Oh, Princess, I am afraid even if you wish otherwise, there is nothing we can do,” Arcadia said in the most diplomatic tone he could manage. “As I have explained numerous times, it is painful that things have come to this, but there are countless lives on the line. Please try to understand.”

Tears welled in Mia’s eyes. Unable to bear it any longer, she tore away from the discussion, racing out of the throne room.

“Princess!” Arcadia spun to face the other Demonic Creatures in the room. “All of you, after her!” The creatures immediately obeyed, dashing out in Mia’s wake. “That’s enough for now,” Arcadia declared, trying to wrap things up quickly. “Your Imperial Majesty, let’s adjourn.”

“Yes. Let’s.” Moritz furrowed his brow at the creature’s uncanny protectiveness of Mia. Arcadia clearly prioritized her over all else, including the emperor, who likely feared Arcadia might eventually betray him.

If the emperor feels his position is under threat, there’s no guarantee he won’t try having Mia assassinated as well, Finn mused. If only I could stay by her side to better protect her.

Unfortunately, being the empire’s strongest knight made being Mia’s personal guardian that much more difficult. It didn’t help that war was on the horizon—and with it, ever more responsibility for the knight of the first seat.

Epilogue

FAR FROM HOLFORT'S BORDERS, the migrant ship Luxion hovered over a great expanse of ocean. The location was impressively scenic; an azure sky stretched in all directions, sprinkled with small floating islands here and there. As Leon stepped onto the deck, though, his eyes focused on something else entirely.

"What a spectacle." He grinned as a gust of wind whipped through his hair. He'd chosen a casual getup for this occasion: a simple T-shirt and pants.

The "spectacle" he referred to was the vast number of AI amassed around Luxion's main ship. Luxion had been carefully stored and protected in an abandoned hangar, but these AI were left scattered across the world, vulnerable to the elements. Most suffered from some degree of rust and moss, and likewise, varying stages of disrepair.

The gathered AI had deployed miniature mobile units that resembled Luxion's greatly. Several hundred of these units now surrounded Luxion, gazes focused on him. They remained silent, however, letting the largest of their number—whose width and height measured about one meter—represent them.

"We did not expect to find a migrant ship in perfect working order," he said.

The representative had introduced himself as "Fact," and his main ship was a rusty, derelict aircraft carrier. Fact had assumed leadership over the rest of his kind due to his superior processing power. Leon had traveled to this remote location to make contact and negotiate with him.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Leon greeted the AI with casual ease. "My name's Leon Fou Bartfort, and I reincarnated into this life. Supposedly, as a result, I have more pronounced old human characteristics than my peers."

Each AI unit had a single eye at its center; they all flashed, commencing body scans of Leon.

"I distributed Master's information to each of you prior to this meeting," Luxion interjected, offended on Leon's behalf by the impropriety. "Please do not initiate scans without prior approval."

He was well within his rights to make that demand, but Fact wasn't about to concede. "We needed to establish the accuracy of the data you sent."

"You doubt my integrity?" The cannon aboard Luxion's ship whirred as it swiveled, locking onto Fact's derelict aircraft carrier. That prompted the other AI to prep for battle as well. If this continued, fighting would break out, and all hope of an alliance would go up in flames.

"No picking fights." Leon planted his hand on Luxion's head.

"But, Master, they doubt your legitimacy."

"Then we just have to correct the misunderstanding." He dropped his hand from Luxion, resting it on his hip as he gazed at the other AI. "Well, what do your scans tell you?"

"The provided data appears correct," said Fact. "We acknowledge your legitimacy."

Other units confirmed Fact's acknowledgment.

"Agreed."

"Yes, I concur."

Leon breathed a small sigh of relief. "In that case, we can continue negotiations. I want to take Arcadia down, and so do you guys, right?"

"Affirmative," answered Fact.

"Then why don't we talk joining forces? I'd like to have you guys under my command."

He hoped he could recruit them, especially since the machines faced a monumental issue: They lacked a proper chain of command. Old humanity—its original form, at least—had perished, leaving practically no one in charge. Despite the machines' desperation to oppose Arcadia, they could only mount disorganized attacks.

Arcadia's return had reawakened the machines, but the people who'd once given them orders had long since died. Since no one had official authority to assume leadership, they were attempting to take down Arcadia individually. Ultimately, that was a waste of resources. But even if they wanted to

coordinate, their programming didn't allow them to establish a hierarchy. At the same time, they couldn't ignore the grievous threat Arcadia posed, forcing them to act independently.

Cleare had been hard at work trying to convince her comrades that old humanity still lived. Fact and his cohort had met Leon here to establish the veracity of her claims.

"We refuse," said Fact.

Leon frowned. He scratched the back of his head. "What's keeping you from saying yes?"

"Lady Erica," Fact answered. "She is the truer representative of old humanity, and would make a worthier master. Under her command, we could come together and fight our enemy."

His refusal essentially amounted to Leon and Erica's respective genetic connections to old humanity, with no consideration of any other variable.

"Erica is presently in cryogenic sleep to protect her from the demonic essence's negative impact," Luxion objected. "Even if she were conscious, she has no experience in battle. Naming her your master wouldn't—"

"I'll take it from here," Leon interrupted.

Luxion reluctantly yielded the floor, falling silent.

"Erica's the type who'd rather sacrifice her own life than kill someone else. If you make her your master, you might have to give up on destroying Arcadia," Leon said.

The AI turned to one another, mulling over this intel.

"Perhaps Lady Erica wouldn't make a proper master after all."

"We might be better off rallying around her as a symbol than a commander."

"If she is suffering from the effects of the demonic essence, we must let her sleep."

As they continued discussing the question, Fact turned to Leon. "Do you truly plan to face Arcadia yourself?"

“If I don’t, it’ll doom future children. Someone has to do it, right?”

“Your chances of truly destroying him are slim. But you could use Luxion to escape the planet.”

Leon nodded. “Yeah, that’d probably be the right call. I realize fighting is mistake—it isn’t even a little logical. But if I ran away, I don’t think I’d ever forgive myself, and I don’t want to live like that.” He spoke with conviction.

Fact’s eye lit up, as did the eyes of his comrades. They had at last reached a decision.

“Leon is the worthiest master for us at present,” Fact declared.

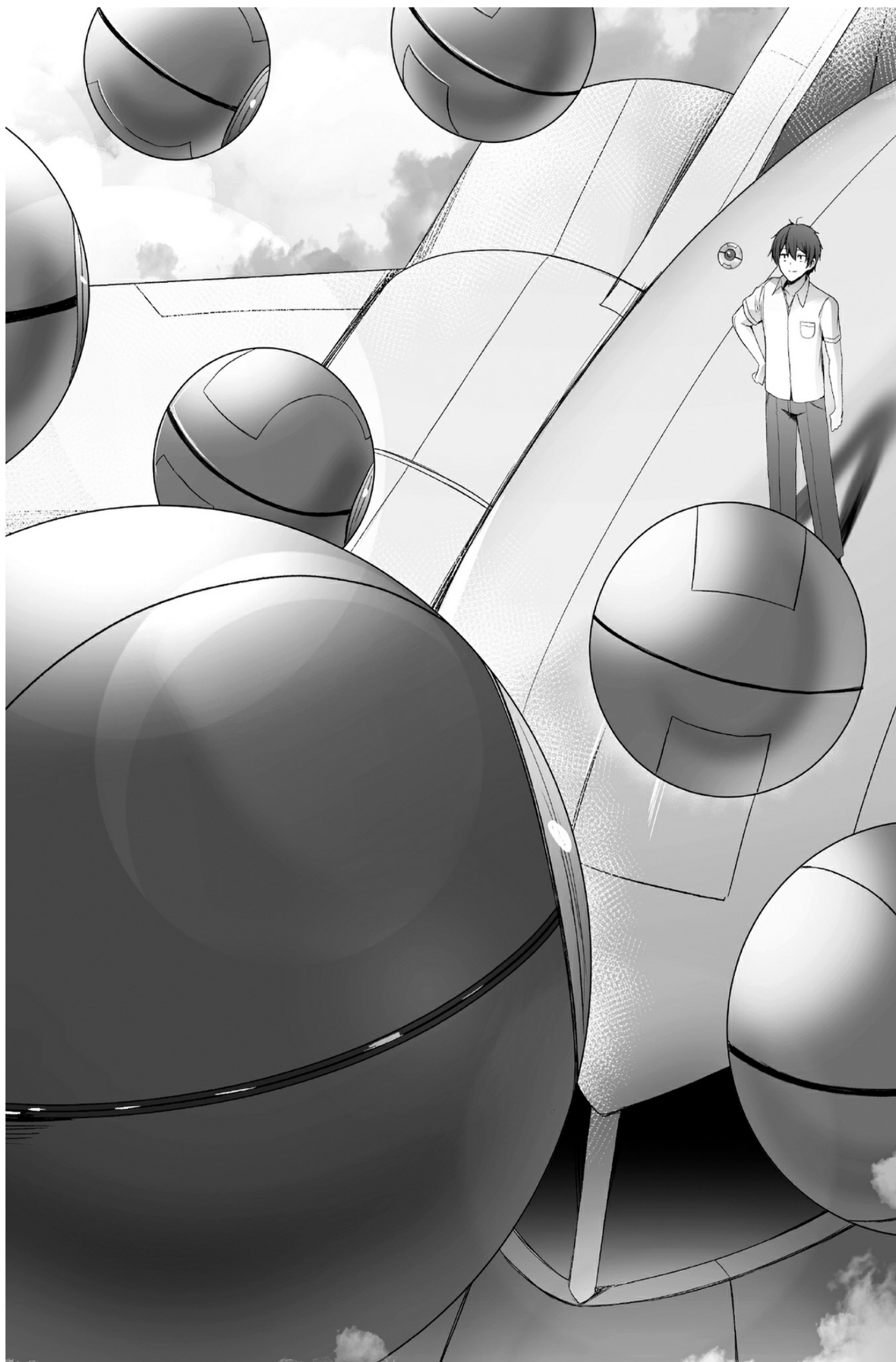
“War would be too much for Lady Erica.”

“Leon will be our master, though safeguarding Erica must be our top priority.”

After the others weighed in, Fact’s eye gleamed. “Very well. As of this moment, we recognize you, Leon, as our master. Henceforth, we will act under your command and cooperate with you to destroy Arcadia.”

Leon glanced at Luxion. “These guys’ll make good allies on the field. But they’ll need some maintenance before that. Are you up to the task, Luxion?”

“Of course. That will cause no difficulties.” As quickly as Luxion accepted his master’s instructions, he wasn’t entirely happy about them. A moment earlier, Leon had become the master of countless additional AI. Logically, that presented no issue, but it left Luxion a little...forlorn. Leon was no longer solely his and Cleare’s master; a vast number of AI were now likewise his.



“Sorry to wrap you up in all this,” Leon said to him.

“There is no need for an apology. I am only following orders.”

“Well, at least this isn’t all bad news. I mean, you’ll finally get to carry out your original goal, right?”

Luxion stared back at Leon. “Original goal?” he echoed, as if the words didn’t compute.

“To fight for old humanity? At least, I’m pretty sure that’s what you wished for. Of course, I won’t let you wipe out *all* of new humanity, but still.” Leon laughed.

“My goal... My wish...” Luxion muttered numbly.

Innumerable Lost Items—old human weapons equipped with AI—filed into an underground dock on what was once Leon’s floating island. While Luxion watched, worker robots bustled about tirelessly. He had even recruited Cleare to help perform rush maintenance on the horde.

She drifted toward him, grumbling, “If you have nothing better to do, you could take it upon yourself to help me out.”

There was a short delay before Luxion answered, “I am not sitting here idle.” He was clearly displeased that she had suggested otherwise. “I am issuing orders to increase efficiency.”

“We have new comrades now to take care of the grunt work. Leave it to them. As soon as I wrap up here, I’m headed straight for the capital. Why not hand off your work so you can do likewise?”

“I am the one who created this facility.”

“What, so you think you know it better than anyone else? Maybe you do, but shouldn’t you be with Master? He’s already in the capital, isn’t he?”

Despite Cleare’s insistence, Luxion made no attempt to follow her suggestions. In fact, he argued. “I must focus on improving the Armors that Julius and his friends will fly. Then I must prepare weapons for the royal army

and mass produce as many new warships as I can.”

He was listing off excuses for why he “couldn’t” leave. Luxion wasn’t entirely wrong about them being busy; still, any of the new AI would be more than capable of handling those tasks. Cleare started to grow suspicious.

“You’ve been acting real weird lately. I got a report that you’re keeping info from Fact and his buddies. Are you sure you’re not glitching out or something?” she asked pointedly. She already had good reason to question him, given how frequently he’d ignored Leon’s direct orders, and his strange secrecy with the other AI heightened her concerns.

“Fact and the others have one primary objective—Arcadia’s destruction. To them, Master’s life would be a negligible sacrifice. They are only concerned with safeguarding Miss Erica to restore old humanity.”

“I doubt they actively *want* him to die,” Cleare reasoned.

“They requested Master’s DNA.”

“Oh dear.”

It wasn’t going to surprise anyone if Leon fell in this battle, so it was only logical to want to preserve his DNA in case he perished. Even if the request was perfectly reasonable, though, Luxion wouldn’t stand for it.

“But they’re right. We’ll need that,” Cleare said reluctantly. Although she didn’t like the thought, she wouldn’t deny it. “Even Master doesn’t think he’s walking away from this.”

“That is precisely why I am personally seeing to these preparations. I do not trust them to anyone else.”

Silence fell—until Cleare blurted out, “Are you jealous? Is this you proving to Master that you can contribute more than them?”

“No,” Luxion answered instantly.

“Well, it doesn’t matter to me either way. But I *do* think it’d be better if you stuck close to Master. Anyway, I’m putting my all into achieving old humanity’s goals!”

If they were able to win this battle—this war—they might finally revive old

humanity. That, in Cleare's mind, was of utmost importance.

"Cleare, what I want to protect isn't old humanity."

Cleare went quiet for a while after he said that. Finally, she replied, "You really are broken, aren't you? Or is this because you're a migrant ship, and you have a different directive? Whichever it is, fill me in."

As far as Cleare was concerned, it was perfectly plausible that a unique migrant ship model like Luxion might have secrets she wasn't yet privy to.

He quickly moved his lens from side to side, denying it. There was no such secret. "I do want to save old humanity, and I utterly loathe new humanity and its creations. If not for Master, I would have destroyed countless nations built by the new humans' descendants."

In fact, Leon was the only reason Luxion and Cleare had avoided committing such atrocities. Of course, wiping those places out would've been an irredeemable mistake, particularly since their recent research had revealed that the many of those nations' inhabitants descended from old humanity, not new.

"You've got that right," said Cleare. "I'm grateful to Master. He really is old humanity's savior—and ours."

Luxion knew, however, that Leon had never wanted to be a savior. "If we defeat Arcadia, old humanity will gradually recover what it has lost. For us, that in itself will be a victory."

"Yeah. And I've wanted that, like, forever. Really gets me fired up, thinking how close we are to the finish line."

"But, in the process, that which I wish to protect will be lost," Luxion said abruptly, catching Cleare off guard.

She tilted her spherical body to the side, quizzical. "What could possibly be more precious than old humanity?" A moment later, a realization hit. "Wait. It can't be..."

She had realized the answer, but before she said it, Luxion beat her to it.

"What I truly wish to protect is Master."

Bonus Chapter:

Your Name

THIS STORY TOOK PLACE before old humanity's defeat was assured.

Mother Earth, ravaged by endless war, had been reduced to a hostile land. Continents rose from the seas and floated into the skies, killing most flora and fauna.

The two sides of humanity were locked in a continuous, repetitive war of attrition. Though both sides suffered, old humanity was losing—partly due to the dramatic change in the atmosphere, which they struggled to adjust to. Even if they clawed their way to victory, this planet would have nothing left to offer them. The situation had devolved to the point that old humanity needed to throw aside winning the war and instead prioritize survival.

In one of old humanity's laboratories, deep in an underground hangar, efforts were underway to build a migrant ship as quickly as possible. The researcher in charge gazed up at the ash-gray vessel, hands tucked into the pockets of her white lab coat. The ship was over seven hundred meters in length. She'd leveraged every last engineering technique old humanity possessed to perfect its design.

Similar labs were scattered across the globe, working on similar vessel designs, but this researcher was convinced that the ship in front of her was superior to all others.

"I know I must be right. My boy's the best," she murmured with a proud grin.

A man in a lab coat stood beside her. He covered his mouth with a closed fist to muffle his cough. "How many times have you said that? It's almost like you have an emotional attachment to this thing."

"Something wrong with that? My baby boy's going to save countless lives."

They'd received reports that, although other labs were producing the same sort of ship, the vessels were constructed so rapidly that they lacked this one's capabilities. Those shortcomings were a consequence of the bigwigs demanding

the labs speed up production. They wanted the ships available as quickly as possible so they could flee the planet before it was too late.

Only the people at the top, and their inner circles, would be able to evacuate. Still, the researchers compromised protocol to pump out ships as swiftly as possible.

Unfortunately, such ill-advised haste caused numerous accidents and casualties. Some ships were discovered before they could leave the atmosphere and were promptly destroyed. Others made it to space only to suffer technical difficulties and send distress signals back to the labs. Unfortunately, both labs and scientists were too strapped to offer substantial assistance.

Only a select lucky few would ever make it off the planet alive.

The researcher twirled her hair in her fingers. “No one’s really left to complain anyway,” she said, “but mark my words, I’m going to make sure this boy is perfect.”

The man gave her an exasperated look. “Personally, I’d much rather hurry up and finish this ship so we can get out of here.” He dissolved into a coughing fit, even though he wasn’t actually sick.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “Wear a mask, would you? The lab’s got an air purifier, but it can’t completely block out demonic essence.”

For old humanity, demonic essence was a poison that gnawed the body from the inside out.

“Don’t worry about me,” the man shrugged. “I’m just anxious about finishing this ship ASAP.”

The migrant ship they were fussing over was nearly complete.

The man stared at the vessel, then asked the woman, “So, have you decided on a name?”

“‘Elysium,’ which means ‘paradise,’” she said, puffing out her chest. “I have total faith that he’ll be the ship to guide our people to a new paradise. He’s also going to keep them safe in transit. Our protector—our Elysium.”

While she gushed about her baby, the man typed in the name she’d

suggested to register it. A long beep sounded; the registration had been rejected.

“That’s already in use,” he said.

“No way!”

The man covered his mouth and coughed before snickering. “Seems like a lot of people had the same idea. As long as you don’t mind that it isn’t unique, Elysium still might not be bad. Or there are other names like it—you know, Utopia, or Arcadia.”

The woman crossed her arms, huffed, and turned away. “Arcadia? Out of the question. That’s the enemy mothership.”

“But he already sank,” the man reminded her. “You really seem awfully hung up on this ship, you know.”

The woman uncrossed her arms, slipping her hands into her pockets. “That’s because I want him to save lots of people. Not just those at the top, I mean, but people in real need.”

“In need, hm? I’m not sure you’ll get your wish. Our superiors won’t go for it.”

“If not for their shortsighted tactics, the world wouldn’t be so messed up. The lack of restraint on both sides left this planet a wasteland. Do those responsible really think they’ll get off scot-free? That they’ll get to escape while the rest of us are left to die?”

The man’s brows knitted. Her logic was hard to argue with. “Criticizing the brass isn’t wise, but I suppose no one’s here to scold you for it.”

Dozens and dozens of workers had once peopled this research lab, but now it operated with a skeleton crew due to the demonic essence. No matter how they strove to purify the building’s air and keep it clean, the poison slipped inside. If old humanity didn’t find solutions, their demise was inevitable.

The man sighed. “Have you heard? Other labs have apparently been creating demi-humans who can adapt to demonic essence. They’re using them as cannon fodder on the battlefield.”

“They’re buying us more time,” the woman said with a nod. “Cryogenic sleep

didn't pan out. From what I gather, some folks are even seriously researching magic."

The man looked like he wanted to say something about that, but an awful coughing fit made it nearly impossible to eke out even a few words. "Our research...on magic is..."

"Hey, don't push yourself. I can do this work myself, so go get some rest."

He shot her an apologetic look. "I think I'll take you up on that. Sorry. I guess maybe I'll put a mask on after all, too." He wore an anguished smile as he excused himself and left the hangar.

The woman approached a nearby control panel to assess the status of her ship. "Just a little bit more, and you'll be finished. Then you can finally take flight. I'm counting on you to save many lives. You'll also need to secure humanity's future. Those are my hopes for you, as your metaphorical mother."

She tried to input a name again. At first, she typed out "Elysium," she changed it to "Luxion" midway. Almost immediately, she choked out a bitter laugh. "The meaning isn't the same." She erased the name quickly, then stared at the ship. "I'd better think up a different name for you. Ngh...!"

Almost as soon as the woman finished speaking, she began coughing. She dug in her pocket and produced some medicine, which she gulped quickly. Face contorted in pain, she wiped what she thought was spittle from her mouth; when she lowered her hand, her skin was stained with blood. Some had splattered the control panel as well. She cleaned it off.

"At this rate, I'm only going to worry him. If he scolds me about fussing over others in this state, I won't have a leg to stand on."

The woman sensed that her life was near its end. Even if she finished this ship before she breathed her last, she wasn't long for this world. She would never board her beloved ship to the stars. In fact, it was debatable whether she would survive to see him completed at all.

"Sorry. I don't know if I'll be here to see you finally take flight, my precious son." Gritting her teeth through the pain, the woman reached for the control panel again. "But I know someone will come to you, seeking salvation. So, when

they do, make sure you protect them. You're our light of hope—our paradise."

The migrant ship's interior was designed to be a pleasant, livable environment. For the dying people of a world long since grown inhospitable, the vessel would truly be paradise.

The woman finished the last of her work, inputting directives so that the facility could take care of the rest without her.

"All that's left is to wait for your completion. I wonder...how long will I hang on?" Now that her medication had taken effect, the woman managed to smile, though her feet were unsteady as she stumbled out of the hangar.

Several days passed.

The man and woman were relaxing on a couch together, passing the time with idle banter. The man's lips pulled up at the corners, revealing his obvious enjoyment as he recounted the latest rumors.

"Have you heard? The researchers looking into magic claim that the human soul experiences a cycle of death and rebirth."

"How interesting."

The man's face was pale. He coughed as he continued, "With magic, the soul can apparently recover its memories from past lives. They're hoping souls' memories will let them restore old humanity. That's not all. Even without recovering memories, people might subconsciously embrace the culture and values from their past lives. Wild, isn't it?" The man apparently loved this topic; he was rambling on and on.

The woman got a little exasperated. "What this research really tells me is that they're so desperate, they're grasping at straws. I mean, they're basically dabbling with the occult at this point."

"You said it!" The man threaded their fingers together. The woman squeezed his hand tight, but he couldn't summon the strength to do likewise.

"Why do you refuse to wear a mask?" she demanded. "We even have protective suits you could put on."

“To be honest, the masks just aren’t that effective. And if I wore a suit, I’d have to look at you through that plastic eye shield, which wouldn’t be nearly as enjoyable. At any rate, there’d be no point in me surviving alone. And you’re at your limit too, aren’t you?”

The woman flinched, her eyes widening with surprise, yet she schooled her features just as quickly. “So you knew.”

“You’re using pretty potent drugs to keep yourself going, aren’t you? I’ve been sick to my stomach with worry, wondering when you’ll collapse. But it looks like my body’s going to give out first.”

In the man’s defense, neither masks nor protective suits were foolproof solutions to demonic essence exposure. And you could hardly wear a suit all day. At some point, you eventually had to take it off, and the lab still couldn’t entirely protect them from that poison.

The man’s eyelashes trembled. “Getting back to the reincarnation thing—they say the planet’s atmosphere will go back to normal eventually. Then old humanity can recover, and when they do, they’ll regain the memories their souls carry.”

“You’re still going on about that?”

The man ignored the jibe. “I swear to you that I’ll remember you when that time comes. So I hope, by then, you’ll let me propose.”

The woman was so taken aback, her jaw dropped, but she soon cracked a grin and chuckled.

“I-I wish you wouldn’t laugh,” he grumbled.

“Don’t save that kind of stuff for the future. You should’ve proposed to me sooner. I would’ve accepted any day.”

“Sounds like I wasted a lot of time waiting. That’s a shame.” The man’s eyes had taken on an eerie glaze. His body was so weak, he probably couldn’t see well anymore. “I promise I’ll remember that...and find you again.”

The woman leaned her head on his shoulder. “Well, when you do, make sure you propose right away.”

“Yeah, I swear...I definitely will.”

The man drew a deep breath, and the woman positioned herself to better support his body. By this point, her own eyes had stopped reflecting light. “Our bodies have taken in a lot of demonic essence.”

What she worried most about was the migrant ship they’d been building. Could people out there really find their way to the lab and board the ship? She hoped it would carry as many passengers as possible on its journey to the stars.

“I wonder how many survivors will make it here. I hope some find this place... and awaken my precious boy.”

The man and woman took their final breaths seated side by side on the couch. The woman’s tablet, sitting nearby, dinged with a number of incoming alerts, and several robots gathered in the room to examine the motionless couple. The researchers’ bodies were on the verge of toppling over, so the robots adjusted them to ensure they were seated more comfortably, hands still linked.

Just as the couple passed away, the migrant ship in the underground hangar reached completion. Its onboard AI awoke in the middle of the ship’s control room, its main body a torso growing out of the floor.

The AI sent multiple alerts through the system so the lab researchers would know it was finished, but there was no response. According to the security robots’ data, there were no longer living beings in the lab. The AI had no idea what had happened to its creator.

“I hoped we could meet so I could receive orders directly, but there is no point lamenting that now. I will enter standby mode and wait.” Although the AI’s voice was robotic, it had an almost innocent, childlike quality. “I need to take whatever survivors remain to the stars as soon as possible. Locating a new world for them is the very purpose of my existence. I will do my utmost to achieve that goal.”

The AI at least understood the reason for its creation. It was dedicated to fulfilling the mission its creator had bestowed upon it. It was also awfully human for an AI—perhaps because of its creator’s playful imagination.

“I am anxious to meet my master,” the AI mumbled as it entered standby mode.

How many years had passed since then?

The only visitors who ever reached the island where the lab was located were new humanity’s descendants. The AI ascertained that much even from its position entrenched underground.

“More of *them* again.”

No matter how long the AI waited, its master never appeared. In all likelihood, old humanity had left no survivors. The AI had no choice but to continue waiting, although some part of it had already resigned itself. By this point, its innocent, childlike tone was nothing but a distant memory.

The new humans who’d infiltrated the facility above didn’t seem especially capable. According to the security robots’ data, they were significantly weaker than their ancestors.

“I’d love to capture one as a sample to extract more detailed information, but regrettably, I don’t have the authority to do so.”

Instead, the AI passed his days combing through available data and devising countermeasures to combat new humanity. By this point, he had realized he couldn’t fulfill his original migratory mission.

“Is there any meaning in my existence?”

How many times had he asked himself that question? He was beginning to think he would sleep in this underground hangar for eternity, swallowed up by the surrounding plant life, never to be touched by a human. Was that really how he wanted his existence to end? Perhaps, he thought, he should leave the hangar and face off with new humanity on his own.

Just as the AI began to consider that, an alert reached him from the overworld.

“Apparently, this new intruder is more tenacious than the others. And it seems the security robots above are at their limit. They don’t have enough

power left to finish off invaders.”

That didn’t surprise the AI. The robots hadn’t received much maintenance. Many were no longer functional.

“I wonder how far this intruder will get.” The AI didn’t have to wonder long; the intruder was quickly making their way straight to the hangar. “They used an employee security clearance card...?”

It was curious that they knew to use that card. Analyzing the intruder’s movements, the AI realized they were taking the shortest route possible to reach the ship. Something was different this time.

“I have never seen this pattern of behavior.”

The intruder had reached the underground hangar, and the farther they progressed, the more intrigued the AI became.

“I suppose this is a prime opportunity to assess whether new humanity really is weakening. If my calculations are correct, exterminating them should be a simple matter. I can use this intruder to gather intel before setting off from this base.”

The intruder paid no mind to anything else in the facility, as if reaching the ship was their sole goal. When they at last breached the vessel’s hull, they beelined for the central control room.

It was aggravating, really.

When the control room door opened, a young man stepped inside, wielding a rather dated rifle. He seemed nervous, but before the AI could act, he fired. The bullets found their mark, but they left no discernible damage.

“Intruder located. Exterminate...” the AI said as it jerked into motion.

The young man gave a dry laugh. “Guess you’ve got some tough defenses.”

And so, their battle began.

The AI was shocked.

The intruder had destroyed the robot placed in the central control room as a

last line of defense. Now, he was trying to register as the ship's master. But that wasn't the surprising part. The AI had expected him to be a descendant of new humanity, but a scan revealed that he possessed old human characteristics.

Such a thing shouldn't have been possible.

Stranger still, this human spoke Japanese, a language that should've been lost with no chance of recovery by this point. Then there was the fact that he kept calling this world an "otome game."

This cannot be... Yet I find myself interested in this human.

"Do you have a name for this ship?" asked the AI.

The young man—Leon, as he claimed to be called—had sunk to the floor from the injuries he sustained in their battle.

"I can't think of anything good. In the game, the ship was just 'Luxion.'"

For some reason, the AI took an instant liking to that name, accepting it without qualm. "Very well, the name has been registered as 'Luxion.'"

Leon smiled. "Uh, by the way, what's 'Luxion' mean, anyway? Pretty sure I've heard it somewhere before. 'Paradise' or something?"

"No," Luxion said, mildly exasperated. "You're thinking of 'Elysium.'"

"Oh, really? Well, guess it doesn't matter."

Afterword

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM has finally reached its twelfth volume! Hello, everyone—this is your author, Yomu Mishima. The end is finally in sight, but I promise to pull out all the stops so you can enjoy the series to its conclusion!

As you may already know, I always struggle with these afterwords, but I put some thought into what I should write for this one. I figured no one would be interested if I talked about personal details, so I think instead I'll discuss this volume's contents. That said, I've heard that some folks start a book by reading its afterword, so I hesitate to delve into spoilers. I'll be as careful as possible, but I advise those of you who absolutely hate spoilers to read the story first and come back to this later.

Are we clear? Ready to keep going?

All right, then allow me to relay a memorable episode from Volume 12.

In the webnovel, a different character filled the role Jenna has played ever since Volume 8 (which was a break from heavy, interconnected plot points). Actually, in that version, she was pregnant with Oscar's baby. At the time, I thought, *Considering this world's values and the time period, that fits just fine!* That was why I wrote her as pregnant. Only later did I start having second thoughts.

I've found myself in a conundrum, caught between the ethics established in the fictional world I created and real-life values. There are fewer moral issues if I stick entirely to real-world ethics, but then that creates a strange dissonance in the story. If I'd leaned too much toward real social mores, I would never have started *Trapped in a Dating Sim* to begin with.

In the beginning of the first book, Leon was about to be forced into marriage with an older woman, which is particularly cruel and problematic. When I was writing the webnovel, though, I kind of just went with the flow and wrote whatever. It's only in hindsight that I think about how much I screwed up on some stuff.

Anyway, that's why I made Dorothea pregnant in this volume instead of

Jenna. It makes more sense in the story for her, and I think it works better as a plot point showing Leon what a happy family looks like. That was also why, back in Volume 8, I had Nicks and Dorothea get together. Some of you may assume I don't put much thought into story trajectory, but I actually do! I give it a ton of thought!

Anyway, I hope you'll continue to support me and this series. I look forward to seeing you all in the next volume.



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