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Duchess
in the **ATTIC**

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Duchess
in the **ATTIC**

Even in a new city,
she finds herself
trapped in an attic once again!

Hello,
little princess.
It's your time
to take the stage.

Dulchess in the ATTIC

Presented by: *Mori*
Illustrations by: *Hayuko Aoi*
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Hey there, Opal.
Long time no see.

The dimly lit room was illuminated only by starlight, but Opal would never mistake the voice of her beloved. Even in the faintest of whispers was he able to convey his usual gentle, low tone. He sounded entirely laid-back, as if he'd bumped into her in the middle of the city and not while Opal was trapped in an attic. Opal wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at that. But before she could think of anything else, she leapt into Claude's arms.



Characters

Claude Roussel

After graduating from university he went to Taisei, which was in the midst of a civil war, and helped Prince Alessandro become king. His efforts were rewarded with the bestowment of the title of marquis. He married Opal after the end of the civil war, but the anti-Alessandro faction is still alive and well, keeping Claude busy.

Opal Roussel

Married Duke Hubert McLeod, but romance didn't blossom between the two. She did her best to reform the McLeod Duchy, which until then had only produced losses. She then divorced Hubert and remarried her childhood friend, Claude. She established a charity organization to support women gaining their independence.

Hubert McLeod

Lost his parents at an early age and was raised completely spoiled by his environment. When he began his marriage with Opal, he was poor at land management and had been saddled with various debts. When Opal took his duchy away from him, he turned over a new leaf and studied hard, making him now an extremely competent noble in Socille.

Alessandro

The current king of Taisei. Relies heavily on Claude, who helped him become king.

Eric Bapot

Also known as Baron Pradeaux. Respects Claude greatly, and is against Claude's marriage to the scandalous Opal.

Nadja

Formerly a maid in the Earldom of Holloway, she became Opal's personal maid when Her Grace moved to Taisei. Very honest and cheery.

Story



Nasty rumors have swirled around **Opal** since her societal debut at the age of sixteen. She'd given up on a proper marriage until one day she was forced into a **political** one with Duke McLeod. Despite being treated poorly at the house she married into, she perseveres and ends up stealing away a dying duchy so that she can reform it from the ground up.

Meanwhile, **Hubert** begins studying land management so that he can buy his duchy back from Opal. He decides to heavily invest in Manthest, an undeveloped land in Socille. His actions are initially seen as a foolish endeavor, but when the powerful **Marquis Roussel of Taisei Kingdom** lends his full support to develop the land, the duke becomes successful in amassing great wealth.

When Opal returns the duchy to Hubert, she decides to divorce him. She later learns that Marquis Roussel, the man who supported Manthest, was actually her childhood friend **Claude**, a man for whom she'd also held romantic feelings. **The two each realize that their love is requited, and they tie the knot to head to the Kingdom of Taisei together.**

But Taisei has just recovered from internal strife, and matters are far from peaceful. Claude, who was in Alessandro's faction and bestowed with the title of Duke Bocceli, is now in danger. The anti-Alessandro faction is on the move to trick him and push him down in rank. **Claude and Opal each act to overcome their difficult situation, but...**



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0. Duchess in the Attic

Opal opened the rickety window of the attic and took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh scent of dirt and greenery. The sky, filled with countless twinkling stars, felt so close that it was as though the dazzling lights would rain upon her head at any moment. Opal whirled around to get another good look at the dark room that was illuminated only by starlight. The space had a low ceiling, a hard bed, creaking floorboards, and a window that groaned with every strong breeze. But Opal just chuckled; she felt nostalgia more than any sense of confinement.

She'd come to Taisei Kingdom, a whole new world, and married Claude, who had been bestowed the title of duke and granted a plot of land. Never in a million years, however, would she have dreamed that she'd be trapped in the Bocceli Duchy. She knew the duchy was home to a few who opposed the rule of the current king Alessandro—her mistake was that she hadn't expected them to act so boldly.

Her heartfelt chuckles soon turned awkward when her previous time in an attic came to mind. Opal expelled a deep sigh. Eight years ago, she'd married Duke Hubert McLeod and had been villainized by him and his servants. The young duchess had forsaken all attempts of negotiation and had holed herself up in the attic. *I was arrogant then, wasn't I?* Opal thought.

Back then, she'd believed that she wasn't in the wrong—that she'd made the correct choice. And perhaps that was true. Duke McLeod's land had developed considerably since, making his duchy one of the most, if not the most, most successful lands in Socille, bountiful with riches. However, one could never forget that the duchy was home to fertile soil and that the duke himself had received plenty of support from those around him. Opal couldn't have turned his entire duchy around if she'd been completely on her own.

Opal had created many businesses after she'd married Claude, but this was due in no small part to the fact that she too had been helped by people around

her. She'd only been able to help women become independent in her home kingdom of Socille and improve the working environment in Manthest because Claude and others had lent their assistance. *I hope Claude's all right...*

It'd been seven years since Alessandro claimed the throne in Taisei, but opposing forces were still alive and well. No doubt the incident that had occurred in the royal villa, on the outskirts of the royal capital, had been organized by someone as part of their nefarious scheme against the crown. It had all come about because Opal, already worried about her husband—away on Alessandro's bidding—had suddenly received a letter summoning her to the royal villa. The letter had contained the king's signature, and though Opal had her doubts, she couldn't ignore the summons entirely.

And so, with heightened vigilance, she had gone to visit the royal villa, only to spot her beloved Claude in bed with a mysterious woman. The truth had quickly come to light. Someone had tried to ruin Claude and Opal's marriage. She had known at once that the summons from the king had been forged, and was entirely exasperated. But still, she couldn't have stopped her stubborn side from leaking out.

"I suppose we'll be living separately for a while," Opal had said. *"I'm furious about what just happened, so I'll hole myself up in the duchy."*

"Then I'll repent for my actions as we live apart before I come to pick you up," Claude had replied.

Opal had been planning on visiting the Bocceli Duchy anyway. Claude had been surprised to hear her words and though he had hesitated, he had ultimately allowed Opal to do as she pleased. In truth, Opal had actually been a bit anxious to go alone, but she had once again put on a strong front before she quickly parted ways with her husband. *That wasn't cute of me at all.*

It was unusual for Opal to have such lingering regrets; clearly, she was in quite poor spirits. She'd been nervous during her entire ride to the royal villa, and now she was exhausted. She returned to her bed and took some slow, deep breaths in hopes that she'd fall asleep. As she closed her eyes, nostalgic memories flooded her mind.

Unlike how things had been eight years ago, she now had plenty of allies and

friends. This wasn't contained to just the Taisei Kingdom either—beyond the sea, there were plenty of workers doing their best for her sake. *And above all...* Opal's thoughts trailed off as her breathing grew deeper still. She'd fallen into a deep slumber.

1. The Duchy

It had been a few days since Opal and Claude parted ways on the outskirts of the capital, where they had met at the royal villa. Opal waved her hand at the people who were lined up on the roads for her arrival as she let out a small sigh. Everyone bowed their heads, so they couldn't see her face. She hadn't given prior notice of her visit to the Bocceli Duchy, but somehow the residents had already been informed. Opal didn't expect it and thus hadn't prepared herself for a warm welcome—but all the villagers had stopped their work and gathered to greet their new mistress.

When I arrive at the duchy, I must tell everyone that such a grand welcome is unnecessary, Opal thought. She wasn't sure if these warm greetings were due to meeting their new duchess for the first time, or if they were always this welcoming, but neither she nor Claude wished for such gestures of grandeur.

But despite such a formal welcome the residents couldn't entirely hide the state of their land, and in the grand scheme of things, Opal felt that her sudden visit was a success. It wasn't as if she thought the land manager was neglecting their duties, but generally, people in that position tended to try to obscure things if the land they were responsible for wasn't in the best shape. Prior reports had shown that the land's poverty wasn't due to the mismanagement of the person in charge. Hence, Opal had arrived to rectify the situation. She didn't expect to solve every little issue with her visit, but if she didn't start somewhere, the situation would never change. *I have to say, the state of these people is quite alarming...*

The residents that came to greet her weren't exhausted or weary from their daily labor—no, they were clearly trembling in fear at the sight of their new duchess. Some were even trying to hide their repulsion, a clear sign that her next challenge would be no easy feat.

Do they despise the fact that Claude wasn't born in Taisei and is somewhat lowborn, as the son of a baron? Is it me they dislike, since I am from Socille? This

territory has somewhat oppositional leanings—are they wary of Claude since he’s close with His Majesty Alessandro? To be fair, while Claude might be related to Earl Roussel, he’s a young man who came from the Socille Kingdom and almost overnight became a marquis. Now, he’s been bestowed the title of Duke Bocceli and has been given a plot of land. From an outsider’s perspective, I can see how this all might seem a bit too convenient.

As various thoughts swirled around in her mind, the carriage clattered into the Bocceli Duchy. The ladies-in-waiting all let out gasps of awe and Opal looked up, shocked by the manor that stood solemnly in the distance.

One of her attendants, Nadja, couldn’t stop her jaw from hitting the floor. “I’ve never seen such a magnificent castle in my life!”

“Quite right,” Opal agreed. “It’s no wonder it’s called the ‘Palace of the North.’”

She’d heard rumors, of course, but she hadn’t expected the manor to be so impressive, majestic, and beautiful. Also known as the Pearl Palace, the Palace of the North was owned by the house of Duke Bocceli, a household that in generations past had held great power. They had been so powerful that they had practically split the nation in two with their influence and had been hugely threatening to the royal family. During that split, this manor had been built, a proud display of Bocceli’s power. The building was constructed from white marble, a material that could only be harvested outside the duchy, and was another display of their wealth and power.

The nickname ‘Pearl Palace’ was due not only to the milky-white color of the manor but also the ocean route required to transport the material.

Transporting all this marble by land would be a trial. Opal began to envision where the marble would come from. The northern region where the Bocceli Duchy was based was highly mountainous. Time, funds, and manpower were essential to carry all this rock, and thus, any ores and minerals that had been excavated from the duchy were most likely sold abroad, carried across the ocean to be sold to foreign nations, including Socille. The duchy would also import any heavy materials. *I’m pretty sure that the stone was imported from Socille, then.*

North of Manthest, the city Opal co-owned, there was a huge mine boasting a large nearby port. Trade was seemingly booming; nearly all the silver mined from the duchy was making its way to that port. The sales from this trade were most likely what was funding the king's opposition—and had probably also funded the opposition to the king's younger brother eight years ago.

The Bocceli Duchy and the royal capital were a fair distance from each other and were additionally separated by quite a few mountainous areas. Once the duchy claimed its own trade route, their threat to the royal family's power had been firmly solidified.

Eight years ago, that threat had turned into reality. Yet even after the civil war, King Alessandro hadn't tried to place the duchy under the royal family's direct control because the royal family was unable to comfortably manage such a large plot of land. The area itself was much too tricky for someone like a young prince to manage. And here Opal sighed, reminded of the king's cunning once again.

His Majesty always had a smile on his face and was prone to humor, so it was quite easy to be friendly with him. But underneath that sunny veneer was an astute man, highly observant of his surroundings, with a clever mind that quickly solved any manner of issues that arose. He was, quite simply, a brilliant monarch. He played up his favoritism toward Claude so he could draw out those who opposed him. *And if Claude's enjoying himself, there's nothing I can do.*

Opal had spent the past eight years apart from her beloved, and there were many things she didn't know about her husband yet. Still, there were quite a few things about him that hadn't changed. He could find joy in the most tedious of tasks and was endlessly kind to those less fortunate than him.

The citizens of the duchy had suffered from the negative effects of a tyrannical ruler for a long time and were battered by poverty. Though the management of the land had fallen to someone else for quite a few years now, any decisive push for reform had yet to come to fruition. The previous manager had reported that outsiders were treated with much suspicion and that the residents generally looked upon newcomers unfavorably. And so, Claude had been forced to shoulder all the trouble.

The timing was eerily perfect. Clearly, this decision had been made because Opal's skills and funds had helped rebuild the McLeod duchy. *Claude was asked to return, even if that meant kidnapping me, wasn't he?* It was apparently what King Alessandro had said when Claude left Taisei to ask for Opal's hand in marriage. His Majesty's casual remark most likely had quite a few different meanings. It occurred to Opal that her visit here on her own had been spurred by *His Majesty* calling away Claude on business.

The two men had apparently become close from the civil war that had occurred nearly a decade ago, in which Claude had served as a replacement for his grandfather, Earl Roussel. But even after Alessandro had claimed the throne, he continued to joke with and prank Claude every chance he had. *His Majesty's cruel. How could he work a newly married man to the bone?! I'll restore this land and return it to him at once!*

Gradually, her anger toward the king had begun to grow. But above all, the scene that she'd witnessed in the royal villa had caused her anger to reach a near breaking point. Though she had been able to appear calm, on the inside what she had seen had shocked her to her core. The only reason she'd let Claude off easy was because she believed in him. He even seemed to have in mind a clear suspect who was behind sneaking a woman into his bedroom, and he was hard at work to take care of the issue. All Opal could do was fulfill her role as well.

The Bocceli Duchy was an important plot of land. Opal was aware that once issues here were resolved, it would likely be exchanged for some other plot of land from the royal family. She had no complaints on that end; she expected it to happen. Even so, she wasn't going to sit back and take it easy. Filled with renewed resolve, she clenched her fists and braced herself.

"Madam, your face is terrifying," Nadja remarked. "You'll make everyone tremble in fear even more than they already are."

"Oh dear. I'm sorry," Opal apologized.

It seemed she'd furrowed her brow and stiffened her face quite a bit. Her jokingly snooty response earned a few chuckles from her lady-in-waiting and maid. The two had been brought along from the manor of Marquis Roussel,

formerly owned by the earl, Claude's grandfather.

Before Opal knew it, the impressive manor was right in front of her eyes. The doors of the entrance were wide open, and servants lined up to greet the new duchess.

"Will things be all right for me here?" a maid murmured anxiously.

"Of course they will!" Nadja assured. "You've got madam with you!"

She spoke with confidence, and Opal smiled and nodded in agreement. Both the maid and lady-in-waiting breathed a sigh of relief. Eight years ago, Opal had been all alone. But it was precisely because she had been alone that she could act so freely. *Will I be able to protect everyone?* Opal wondered. But soon after she shook herself free from any worried thoughts.

Nadja had worked hard to learn etiquette precisely so that she could assist Opal. The other two attendants had also volunteered to tag along and had taken excellent care of Opal—all three of them were her allies. *We don't know if the servants at the manor are hostile just yet, but it's better to remain vigilant.* She might have been the duchess, but here she was stepping into enemy territory. The influence of the previous Duke Bocceli still lingered here, and opposition to the crown was surely still present. And it was because the citizens were so old-fashioned that they lagged so far behind on developing their land, not to mention how the relative isolation of the region played no small part in fashioning their views.

On her trip to the manor, Opal could see that the streets were poorly maintained and the agricultural tools in use were old, practically ancient—they resembled the ones in McLeod's duchy eight years ago. Her goal was the same here as it had been then. She'd develop the Bocceli Duchy and make it prosperous while prioritizing the residents' wishes. Opal took a deep breath and smiled.

"Now then, shall we go?" she said quietly.

"Yes, madam!" the three energetic ladies responded.

The carriage stopped. Opal had steeled herself, but she still trembled slightly at the sight of the majestic manor. Not so long ago, this veritable palace had

served as the home base for a prominent member of the opposition. She braced herself as she climbed up the stairs with Nadja and her other attendant. A middle-aged man standing in front of the door stepped forward and gave a deep bow.

“Thank you for coming all this way, Duchess Bocceli. My name is Connelly, and I serve as the butler of this manor,” he said.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Connelly,” Opal replied. “I hadn’t given prior notice of my visit, but I’m elated to receive such a warm welcome.”

She flashed a friendly smile as she analyzed Connelly; she could feel the gazes from the other servants as well.

“It’s been a while since we could welcome a mistress to this palace, Your Grace,” he said. “We’re simply ecstatic.”

“Why, thank you,” Opal replied. “You seem to be very attentive. I’m relieved to see a butler like you in this manor.”

“Your words are far too kind.”

Connelly referring to this manor as a “palace” spoke to his prideful nature. And since all the other servants remained in line after their brief exchange, it was clear that Connelly had a decent relationship with the rest of the servants in the manor. Opal decided to act a bit more arrogant than usual as Connelly introduced her to the other servants, and she, in turn, introduced Nadja and her two attendants. Once formalities were over, she was guided to her room.

The interior of the manor was as splendid and gorgeous as its exterior. There were unfortunately some new purchases that stuck out like a sore thumb here and there, creating a sense of lavishness to the space that was so jarring it was almost tacky. Every now and then, Opal would pose Connelly a question, delaying their trip to her room. But even without delays Opal could tell the trip would take quite a while, due to the sheer size of the place.

When she finally reached her room, her belongings were swiftly brought inside, giving her no time for rest. Perhaps she could’ve just relaxed at this, but Opal was not the type to rest while others were working hard on her behalf. Her rank didn’t permit her to help them out much, however, and so she sipped

on her tea as she feigned relaxation. It seemed that here, she was still seen as the scandalous Opal Holloway.

That was the common belief when she had first arrived in Taisei, but recent ordeals upon her return from Socille had changed her reputation considerably. Newspapers praised her to an almost obscene degree, with headlines claiming that she was an elegant, valiant noblewoman who kindly gave weak women a helping hand as she uncovered the sinful deeds of young, debaucherous nobles. She had become rather popular among the public, pushing the nobility of Taisei to decide it would be most advantageous if they accepted Opal into their society.

But, as she'd been told, the Bocceli Duchy was a different story. Once she had entered the mountainous terrain of the north she had entered a place where both the lifestyle of the residents and their access to information operated completely differently than the rest of Taisei. Opal cared nothing for her reputation, but it would be a problem if that hindered her reformation plans. She knew that traditions were important and should be maintained, but if the people refused to adapt, their duchy would only become even more isolated from the rest of the kingdom. *This train of thought might be born from my hubris, but this all seems a little...intentional.*

It might have been difficult to transport stone across land, but rumors had no such barrier. Information could easily be passed through the grapevine, and the duchy was fortunate enough to have several ports, making it a hub for trade. Surely, new ideas and information would be in abundance here.

The same logic applied for agricultural tools. Opal had first assumed that the Bocceli Duchy simply lacked the funds to upgrade, but it was odd to see that the farmers here didn't even have access to scythes. *I've been told that there's been no signs of any pestilence plaguing this land.*

The Bocceli Duchy had served as a base for the anti-Alessandro faction. Perhaps the political struggle had caused a delay in modernizing agricultural tools.

But the civil war ended quite a few years ago. Why has nothing still been done about this place? It may be isolated, but surely there's more than enough room

for reform. Opal realized at once that her thoughts were an insult to the territory. The clever Alessandro had personally selected a replacement to manage the land—they were certainly no slouch. There must've been a reason behind the outdated duchy, but Opal was simply too exhausted from her trip to divine what it was.

Oh no... My thoughts are in a whirl. I haven't even seen the duchy properly, so it's too early to jump to conclusions anyway. Her cup of tea had long been empty, and soon enough Nadja informed her that the bath was ready. The duchess stood, then noticed how the maids and ladies-in-waiting of the manor were still stiff with nerves. *They'll loosen up in time,* she thought. Opal decided to clear her mind and entered the bath. She ate a light meal afterward and decided to head to bed earlier than usual.

2. The Land Manager

The next morning Opal woke up bright and early as she usually did, surprising the servants. Clearly, early-rising nobles were unusual throughout the kingdom. She informed the servants that she'd have breakfast in her room, but starting tomorrow, she'd like to eat in the breakfast room. After she ate, she summoned Connelly to her room to discuss future plans.

"The land manager, you say?" he asked.

"That's right." Opal nodded. "Someone is in charge, no? This place is far too large for you to manage alone."

"May I ask why in the world you'd like to meet him?"

"To discuss this entire duchy, of course."

"*You*, madam?"

"Yes, me. My schedule is free, so I am willing to accommodate whatever time constraints he has. I'd also like to greet our neighbors. Could you provide me with a list of their names later?"

"Very well."

Connelly clearly looked displeased, but he had no choice but to reluctantly follow his mistress's orders. His reaction worried Opal. Had she sprung it upon him too suddenly? But she was justified in her requests, she thought to herself—the harvest season was quickly approaching, and she had no time to spare. Just as she'd done eight years ago in the McLeod duchy, she wanted to provide the farmers here with scythes and a thresher. She'd already discussed it with Omar and purchased from him the same threshers they had first bought eight years ago. Preparations had been made to send them over via the port. Perhaps it would have been better to buy the latest farming equipment, but Opal feared that such an abrupt change would unpleasantly surprise the farmers, and because she needed quite a few, the used machines would do just fine for now. She'd already requested that the smiths of the McLeod duchy forge new

scythes, and the rest of them would be made by the smiths here in the Bocceli Duchy.

Opal arrived at the study just before lunch, and Connelly introduced her to Duncan, the manager of the Bocceli Duchy. The duchess smiled and outstretched her hand for a shake, but Duncan clearly looked upset by his situation and scowled without returning the gesture. She had reached out for a handshake, but it seemed Duncan assumed she wanted him to kiss the back of her hand. It was clear a rocky road was ahead of her, and soon, she would learn the road was much rockier than she had ever expected.

“I’d like for everyone to use a scythe for this harvest,” Opal said. “I already know that the farmers will quickly get used to them, and you don’t need to worry about the number of tools either. I’ve already ordered them from the smiths of the Socille Kingdom.”

“We have no need for scythes,” Duncan grumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Such tools are unnecessary.”

“How so?”

Opal had wanted to provide scythes and a thresher to increase efficiency and decrease workload; she hadn’t expected Duncan to be so vehemently against it. She’d already told him that they would have enough tools to go around, and it wouldn’t take much time for farmers to get used to them. *Is there any other reason for refusal?* Before she could pose her question, Duncan gave a shocking answer.

“Because they’re the tools of the devil.”

“Tools of the devil?” Opal parroted. “The scythes?”

“And this *thresher* as well.”

Opal was speechless in her astonishment. She looked intently at Duncan’s face and realized he was entirely serious. The duchess managed to gather herself and tried to explain further.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” she started. “The shapes of

scythes might look similar to the tools that devils use. One might call a scythe the trusted companion of the grim reaper. But if you look closely, the scythes that I'm offering are quite different in shape. And above all, they're very convenient. I planned on installing a harvester in the near future, but shall I implement that first instead, if that helps?"

"No, there's no need," Duncan replied firmly. "I won't be swayed by your promises of convenience."

"But as things are here, the farmers would be burdened with hard work for the rest of their lives. In the south and in other areas where this technology is used, work efficiency has increased drastically. In addition, workers who use these tools have been found to have increased free time which they can enjoy as they see fit."

"And that's why eight years ago there was a pestilence in the south."

"Technology has nothing to do with that!"

Opal had tried to remain cool, but at the blithe mention of the plague that had claimed so many lives she couldn't help but raise her voice in a shout. She quickly fell silent. Being emotional would never persuade the opposition. As she glanced at Duncan's face once more, she could easily see that his decision was set in stone, and so, instead of pushing the matter, she chose to back off for now.

"Let's revisit this topic another time," Opal said. "If it's all right with you, I'd like for you to guide me to the nearby farmland. Do you mind?"

"Are *you* going to visit the land, madam?" Duncan asked.

"That's right."

"There are other more suitable places to have a picnic."

"There will be no picnicking; I'm going to *inspect* the place. Now then, I shall be ready to go after lunch. Please call for me then."

She quietly held herself back; she knew that her words would make little difference here. Internally, she grumbled not only at Duncan but at King Alessandro as well. His Majesty must've been aware of this situation, and yet

Opal had been kept in the dark about it this entire time. She was furious, but upon returning to her room, she realized knowing ahead of time wouldn't have changed her situation. Sure, she might have been able to prepare herself mentally, but it's not like she could have devised an entire plan. Only when she saw this land for herself had the gravity of her situation sunk in.

Even so, I would've very much preferred to know about this! It makes a huge difference! She was furious at Alessandro. Had Claude known about it, he would've undoubtedly given Opal a word of advice—clearly the king had decided this on his own. *But dwelling on it will get me nowhere.* Opal took deep breaths to calm herself and relayed her afternoon plans to Nadja.

"Nadja, I know it's only been a day, but how are the people here?" Opal asked. "Do you think that you can get along with them?"

"Well, they're a bit distant with me still, but they're all kind," Nadja replied. "It seems they sympathize."

"Sympathize?"

"You're a selfish and carefree woman who wildly acts as she pleases, apparently. I suppose it must be tough for me to serve you, or so I'm told."

"Oh, is that all? I'm no longer a harlot or anything?"

"The servants have no comments of that kind. But there are also rumors that your husband, Marquis Roussel—now Duke Bocceli—has already abandoned us. That earns us some pity."

"So my husband has apparently abandoned everyone, then?"

"Apparently so."

"I see..."

Opal was a bit surprised to hear about her reputation from Nadja. The incident that had occurred in the royal villa, before Opal had left the royal capital, had already spread. And if even a faraway land like the Bocceli Duchy was in the know about such a recent event, it was evident that information was being manipulated. Someone in this manor had been able to find out about happenings in the capital before she was even able to arrive here.

“If it gets too much for you, would you come to me for advice?” Opal inquired. “Until then let them speak as they please. Could you also tell the others that they can do as they like as well?”

“Your wish is my command!” Nadja replied.

The ladies-in-waiting, maids, and menservants that Opal had brought with her from the royal capital all favored her quite a bit. It was imperative for her to look out for them so that they wouldn’t feel harassed in any way, but she also wanted to observe their behavior for a while. *Duncan’s beliefs are an issue here.*

There was a famous myth about the indolence of man. It said that long ago the devil had used sweet words to persuade humans to live a slovenly, idle life. When a plague swept through the population, wars broke out to no end. From the desperation of man emerged a god who saved humanity.

None of the information Opal had received about this region indicated that the people here deeply believed in this legend. If Duncan was the only one with these beliefs, it wouldn’t be too difficult to convince him, but if many of the residents were equally opposed to technological innovations, she knew that she was in for a rough time. *I must think of a plan once I return from this afternoon’s inspection.* Opal had certainly solved many issues in the past, but that was because the people involved were *cooperative*.

She’d only been able to reform the McLeod duchy precisely because Omar was accepting of new tools. He had initially been difficult because of how guilty he had felt about his debts and his embezzling, but he’d provided Opal with plenty of advice about farming. *Right! I’ve done agricultural reform before! I know that I’ll be fine!*

Ever since she was a child, she’d been carefully taught by Trevor, the manager of the Earldom of Holloway, and for the past eight years she had made full use of this knowledge. Her mind churned with adjustments as she sat at her desk and proceeded to write three letters.

Her first letter was for Manthest’s port. The agricultural tools were on standby. She ordered the tools to be sent to Port Pasma, located north of the Bocceli Duchy. Her second letter was addressed to Claude, informing him that she’d safely arrived at the manor with an additional explanation of the current

situation. Her third and final letter was for Omar as she humorously described the circumstances that she now found herself in. As she finished writing, Connelly came and told her that lunch had been prepared.

“Thank you,” Opal said. “I shall be there shortly.”

She had already told the manor that she’d have breakfast and lunch every day in the breakfast room. Her dinner would be prepared in a small dining room, but she knew that she’d need to tour the full manor tomorrow and come up with all sorts of ideas. *I didn’t think I’d tour the land before the manor.*

Perhaps this was unheard of for the mistress of a manor, but it was clear that the duchy was in dire need of reform and required it as soon as possible. The manor could wait. When she told Connelly of her afternoon plans, he masked whatever thoughts he had with an expressionless face. The one thing that Opal knew for sure was that now she had far more allies than she had eight years ago. *I’ll be fine. I’m not even sure if he totally opposes me yet.*

The previous lord of the house, Duke Bocceli, was the enemy of Claude and King Alessandro, but surely the servants had thoughts of their own, separate from their former master’s. She wanted to reform the duchy as soon as possible, but she committed to memory that it was equally important not to hurt the feelings of the servants of the duchy manor. With renewed determination, she left her room for lunch.

3. The Inspection

Once Opal returned from her inspection, she handed Nadja her hat and exhaled deeply. She wasn't physically tired, but she was a touch confused. Her inspection had gone more smoothly than she'd expected, but she only began to question Duncan even more.

When Opal had first stepped out for the inspection, the farmers had all stopped their work and welcomed their duchess with bowed heads, as though to hide the fear in their faces. She was at once annoyed at herself, for she'd forgotten to mention that such gestures were completely unnecessary. She had immediately told everyone that from here on out there was no need for them to stop their work just to greet her.

Duncan had immediately looked at her with suspicion, but he had said nothing more and obediently carried out her orders. At first, he had answered Opal's questions languidly, but as her queries had grown in complexity and detail, he began to solemnly provide detailed answers of his own. He had been on high alert when he noticed Opal speaking to a few residents but said nothing. Once he had realized she had no intention of interfering with the farmer's work, he had started to treat her with the respect that was fitting for the land's mistress, much to Opal's surprise. Not only that, he had even acted as the middleman for Opal when she wished to speak with residents who clearly feared her.

The inspection had gone so smoothly that Opal had thought that she was touring her own land—barring the technological advancements, of course. She had even managed to escape Duncan's vigilance for a moment and had secretly asked the farmers if they wanted new tools to aid in their work. To her astonishment, they had seemed completely ignorant to the existence of seeders and threshers. They had known about scythes, but they held no foolish beliefs that the tools were the items of the devil. Quite the opposite, actually—they had spoken of new technology with a kind of awed respect. *They don't seem to be devoutly religious*, Opal had thought.

Duncan's insistence against these tools only baffled her further. While the inevitable delay of information from the south was entirely out of their hands, the ports they used to import marble must've served as a hub for information as well. There was a chance that the spread of information was being manipulated, much like how Claude had done. In fact, it was safe to assume that some sort of manipulation was definitely going on. *But it's odd that Claude is oblivious to this.*

A matter this important wouldn't have been hidden from Opal had Claude known about it. Alessandro might have been hiding the reports that he received from his representative, but Opal wondered if it really was the case that these reports were hidden from Claude as well. Keen as he was, he should've sensed that something was amiss. If memory served, the last representative had left just half a year ago.

The duchy had had three representatives in the past few years. The first one had died of an illness after a year. The second one had given up after six months, and the third one—the most recent one in charge—had worked hard to reform the duchy for a mere two years. *Should I be worried about the safety of my food? Or should my eyes be more focused on my back?* She joked about assassination to herself as she again scanned the records she'd received from Claude written by the previous representative.

If her life truly were in danger, her husband would've never allowed her to come here alone. Perhaps the first representative had gone through quite a bit of trouble, for they had been instated very soon after the territory was claimed by King Alessandro. *If Duncan has always been this way, things must have been rough.*

It'd been over a decade since Duncan was left in charge of the place, and the previous Duke Bocceli had apparently given Duncan special privileges ever since he was a child. He'd received a proper education. *Education, huh...* Was it possible that his studies and knowledge were skewed? A fair amount of investment was essential to provide farmers with new tools, and it was possible that the previous duke hadn't been willing to do so, regardless of how that choice would impact his farmers. Perhaps he had then taught Duncan that convenient tools were items of the devil that only encouraged indolence in

residents. *I need to learn more about the previous duke.*

The duchy was part of the faction against the king's older brother, now considered the anti-Alessandro faction, but there hadn't been any direct clashes as of yet. Their silver mine, the source of their wealth, had dried up, and the previous duke had suddenly passed away in an unfortunate accident. With no one else to back them, the faction had quickly lost its power.

Opal was still lost in her thoughts as dinner arrived, and as she got dressed and got to her seat, her mind was still preoccupied. Only when Connelly loudly cleared his throat did she finally snap back to reality and notice a young man who stood beside the butler.

"Madam, this man here is Julian, our footman," Connelly said. "He had to run an errand and couldn't welcome you yesterday. Please forgive his belated introduction."

"Duchess Bocceli, my name is Julian," the man said. "I deeply apologize for my late welcome."

"A late introduction won't anger me," Opal replied. "You don't have to be so reserved."

"Really? Oh, I'm so very glad! Our duchess this time is very benevolent!" the footman said.

"Julian, hush!" Connelly reprimanded.

"Oops, sorry."

Julian's innocent smile was charming, and even Connelly didn't seem to be seriously angered. Opal watched this exchange coldly as Julian turned to her, and she smiled back. She turned to face Connelly.



“May I have my meal, please?” the duchess requested.

“Most certainly,” the butler replied.

She realized that she sounded a bit haughty, and in her peripheral vision, Julian gave a deep bow before he left the room. But the astute Opal didn’t miss the emotions lurking under the footman’s sunny visage—he was clearly mocking her. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

Opal was miffed, but she chose to not react too strongly and focused on her meal. The dishes were more or less the food she had eaten yesterday, and the taste was passable. The chef had been employed at the manor since the previous duke, and it was likely the man had cared very little about how his food tasted. Opal was the same. She quietly ate by herself and polished off her dessert before she stood up to leave. It felt silly to go to the living room and enjoy tea by herself, so she decided to retire to her personal bedroom. Once she entered the bedroom she saw Nadja, who must have already predicted her mistress’s movements; she was waiting for Opal with tea prepared.

“Madam, you met Mr. Connelly’s favorite footman, didn’t you?” the servant asked. “Was he handsome?”

“I wonder,” Opal replied. “He wasn’t my type, so I really can’t say. Did you just mention that he’s Connelly’s favorite?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. He’s still so young, but he apparently works as Mr. Connelly’s assistant. It seems he recently was ordered to go north and... Ah, well, in any case, he went to the port there.”

“The port, I see...”

What business does Connelly have there? She’d look into it later, but perhaps it was a necessary errand for a man in his position. Opal was more worried about a different matter entirely.

“Nadja, I don’t know if you would want to hear this from me, but while I think Julian is a good-looking man, I think it would be better if you not involve yourself with a man like him,” Opal said.

“I understand,” Nadja replied. “But from what I’ve heard, I don’t have a

chance anyway. Many ladies have confessed to Julian, only to be spectacularly rejected.”

“Oh? I don’t think there’s anyone in the world who *wouldn’t* accept your affection. But again, I wouldn’t recommend him.”

“Thank you, madam! I think so too!”

Opal gave her warning despite a few unnecessary remarks, and Nadja obediently took that piece of advice with a mischievous grin.

“You see, my ideal man is someone who will shower me with love, a kind man who’ll love me for who I am,” Nadja said. “Mr. Julian sounds very bright and kind, but a popular man like him would just worry me to no end. I want love and a sense of relief, I suppose. Do you think that I’m asking for too much?”

“Nope, not at all,” Opal replied. “In fact, I think what you want is the bare minimum.”

The duchess’s calm agreement made Nadja’s cheeks turn pink with embarrassment. Opal wanted Nadja to be happy—she would have it no other way. Opal gave an encouraging smile and stood up to prepare for bed.

4. A Stroll

It was Opal's third day since she had arrived at the duchy. After she had breakfast, she asked the housekeeper to give her a tour of the manor. The building was well maintained, and Opal found no areas that were particularly in need of changes. To convey her regard, she allowed Connelly and the housekeeper to manage the keys to the manor, just as they'd done until now. She only took two keys from the servants: one from Connelly that opened the room of the duchess and another from the housekeeper that opened the study and the library. The housekeeper, having learned that she could keep her job, looked visibly relieved and relaxed but still remained distant. It'd only been Opal's third day, after all.

But the duchess felt something more was afoot—that at the source of this distance was an emotion that couldn't be solved with time. She felt as though she was being rejected on a fundamental level by the housekeeper and the rest of the servants. Opal was used to receiving such treatment, but her biggest issue by far was with Duncan.

"The manor can wait," Opal sighed. "But the farmland must be reformed at once. Duncan is doing me no favors on that end..."

"I heard that the previous land manager was Mr. Duncan's father," Nadja said, telling her mistress the information that she'd gathered. "He was apparently a stubborn man with zero flexibility—he didn't even allow the residents to take days off when they were sick or injured. The previous duke supposedly really liked how strict he was, and so Mr. Duncan was raised in an equally strict environment. But everyone says that Mr. Duncan is at least a bit more sympathetic."

"I see..."

Unlike her time at the McLeod Duchy, Opal now had a reliable ally on her side, and she decided to continue her grumbling.

"When I recommended new agricultural tools to Duncan, he firmly rejected

me and claimed that they were tools of the devil,” she said. “Are all people this devoutly religious and against these sorts of things?”

“Mr. Duncan claims anything that’s beyond his understanding is the work of the devil,” Nadja replied. “And so he rejects them all: plagues, railroads, and young girls.”

“Young girls? Looks like I found his weakness.”

Opal spoke cheerfully and peppered in some jokes, but she was shocked by all the information that Nadja had gathered. The maid had done more than enough in such a short span of time. It would have been expected, quite frankly, if Nadja had been instead outright alienated by her peers.

“I really can’t thank you enough, Nadja,” Opal said.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” the servant replied. “If Mr. Duncan believes in the devil, then I’m a member of Opalism!”

“Uh, Nadja? Don’t join some weird religion on your own. And Duncan does not worship the devil.”

Opal’s heartfelt words were met with Nadja’s smile and a proud puff of her chest. The duchess made sure to joke back as she burst into a fit of giggles.

Once she finished her afternoon tea, Opal decided to go around the outside of the manor and gauge its surroundings while she took her dog, Claude, out for a walk. She had Nadja help her prepare to head outside and was taking Claude to the entrance when Connelly slowly approached her.

“Madam, where to?” he asked.

“I wanted to take Claude out for a walk,” Opal replied.

“By yourself, madam?”

“I won’t go far. Just a quick lap around this place.”

“But...”

“Claude’s with me too. He’s very clever, so I’ll be just fine.”

She kept her pet on a leash because he wasn’t familiar with the land and people here just yet. Claude restlessly sat at the entrance, possibly feeling

constrained by the leash, or simply just eager to go outside. Connelly clearly looked suspicious, but he said not a word and quietly bowed his head as he opened the door.

“Thank you, Connelly,” Opal said.

“Have a safe walk,” the butler replied.

Claude was excited, but he didn’t pull Opal forward and she was able to walk down with him from the steps of the entrance. She used her free hand to readjust the brim of her hat and looked around. The manor was built upon an impressive plot of land, and she figured that it’d take half a day to walk through just the front gardens.

“Now then. Where shall we go, Claude?” Opal wondered aloud.

The pup wasn’t even a year old yet, and though he had a penchant for mischief he was quite smart. He had tagged along for this trip and was adored by all. Claude obediently sat beside Opal and awaited her orders as she pondered her route.

“All right,” Opal said. “Why don’t we go around the manor, then?”

She began her walk and assumed that a lap around the building wouldn’t take too much time. Claude must’ve wanted to run his heart out, but he matched his mistress’s stride instead. She had just decided to ask one of her young servants who tagged along with her and took care of Claude to allow the dog to run around later, when she ran into another young servant.

“Ah, Julian,” Opal said. “Fancy meeting you here. Are you out on a walk too?”

“No, madam. Mr. Connelly asked me to check up on you,” Julian replied. “This place is lush with foliage, and if you’re not careful you can get lost quite easily.”

“I see. I suppose I should thank Connelly for his concern.”

Julian smiled warmly. His expression was friendly, yet there was an undeniable hint of melancholy to it; perhaps that was what made him so attractive to ladies.

“Madam, shall I take the leash?” he offered.

“Thank you,” Opal replied.

She gave the leash to him. Now that her hands were free, she could focus on the conversation at hand. Claude turned back once but seemed to not care who was holding his reins. He faced forward once more.

“I heard that up until yesterday, you were in Port Pasma to the north,” Opal said.

“I was,” Julian replied. “I went north to monitor the import of the stone that’s used for the walls of the manor. I was there to confirm if the material was being properly unboarded from the ship.”

“Importing stone? Is the manor being expanded?”

“It’s for repairs. During last month’s storm a large tree fell and scratched the walls. We’d used all the stone from our storage, and we needed to replenish our reserves. Mr. Connelly expects the manor to be in a constant state of perfection.”

“Is that so...?”

Opal looked up at the manor; the walls were dazzlingly white, as though they’d been polished daily, and it was clear a handsome sum of money was required to maintain the place. *That’s not an issue in and of itself, but if Connelly’s expectations put undue burdens on the residents, then we’ll have a problem.* She made a mental note to check the ledger for this building later and continued her leisurely stroll. Julian pointed to various areas of the manor and told Opal all sorts of things. They eventually bumped into some of the manor’s gardeners, and he introduced her to them as well.

“How long has it been since you came to the manor?” Opal asked.

“Not very long,” Julian replied. “But everyone has been kind to a newcomer like myself.”

“I see. That’s good to hear.”

He had sidestepped answering her question, but Opal decided not to pursue it further. If she really wanted to know, she could ask someone else. She thus changed topics.

“Julian, what is your impression of Duncan?” she inquired.

“Hmm... He’s a bit strict but honest and diligent,” Julian replied. “I find he’s quite trustworthy.”

“You’re praising him to bits. Why don’t you tell me what you really think? I promise not to tell a soul.”

“I’m trying my best to not trust ladies when they say that they won’t tell anyone.”

“Oh dear. Then I’ve got nothing to say.”

Opal let out a chuckle at Julian’s jokes, and he continued his playful banter as the duchess laughed. She didn’t expect him to be an excellent guide, but she very much enjoyed her first stroll.

5. Putting into Practice

Opal tried again to change Duncan's mind on the new technology the next day, but she struggled to win him over. She brought over a few scythes and carefully explained their uses, but throughout her explanation Duncan only listened quietly, without any indication of his approval; he nodded his head not even once. She then decided a live demonstration would be prudent and enlisted a nearby knight currently guarding the area to hack away at a nearby shrub. Still, Duncan wasn't convinced. It was entirely possible for Opal to just fire him, but she wanted that to be her last resort.

Duncan might be strict, unwavering, and stubborn, but the residents seem to like him. Opal let out another deep sigh as she gazed at the neatly maintained garden outside of the window of her room. According to the information that Nadja had received, Duncan had shielded the residents from the violent previous duke. This was likely why they seemed to cower in fear at her arrival.

How can I convince Duncan to use these scythes? Opal wondered. She could just bypass him and give the tools to the residents directly, but doing so would mean she'd lose his trust, possibly forever. And Connelly seemed to find satisfaction in how she struggled with Duncan. Nadja had once again informed her mistress that the servants were all obedient to Connelly's orders, but only Duncan was given special privileges.

Over the past few days of living in the manor, Opal had come to realize that the servants were all polite and cold with her not because they hated her but because they feared Connelly. He was proving to be the main issue in this duchy, but he also couldn't be fired just yet. Opal felt like she was backed into a corner, and she let out another sigh as she gazed out the window. Upon spotting a certain someone outside, she jumped to her feet.

"I'm going for a little stroll," she said.

"Madam?" Nadja called.

"I'll just be in the garden. No need for you to come with me."

“Could you wait for a few moments?”

Nadja disappeared into the closet and swiftly emerged with a parasol and some gloves.

“The sun’s rays are a bit harsh today,” Nadja said. “Would you prefer a hat?”

“No, the parasol will do just fine,” Opal said. “Thank you, Nadja.”

With the help of her servant, the duchess put on her gloves, grabbed her parasol, and left her room. She descended the staircase and was immediately questioned by Connelly, but she assuaged him with the claim that she was just going for a stroll in the garden and stepped outside. Luckily, the person she was searching for was out in the garden, and Opal approached him with her parasol shielding her from the sun.

“What are you doing here, Julian?” she asked.

“I’m deadheading flowers, madam,” he replied.

“*You*? Is that not the job of the gardener?”

“I don’t have any particular tasks to do at the moment, so I inquired to see if I could offer my assistance elsewhere.”

“Did you, now?”

“That’s right, madam.”

Opal was a bit surprised but didn’t pursue the topic further. Julian gave a slight bow of his head before he went back to work. She quietly watched him work for a while before she opened her mouth once more.

“Julian, how were you able to befriend everyone here?”

The footman thought for a moment before he replied, “I respected everyone I spoke with, always smiled, clearly expressed my gratitude, and took the initiative whenever possible. Everyone’s afraid of newcomers, so it’s only natural to be excluded and feel isolated.”

“I guess in that regard, everyone’s the same...” Opal mumbled to herself. She tilted her parasol back to gaze up at the sky. The Bocceli Duchy was situated in the north, and autumn came earlier here than it did elsewhere. She had no time

to spare. “Thank you for telling me. I’m sorry for disturbing your work.”

“Please don’t be. I wish for nothing more than to be of use to you, madam.”

He bowed deeply, deep enough to be almost mocking, and though it caused Opal to raise a bemused eyebrow, she once again decided to keep her mouth shut. She returned back to the manor and entered her closet.

“Madam, may I ask what you’re searching for?” Nadja asked.

“Would you know of any clothes that are easy to move around in?” Opal inquired. “An outfit that allows one to work in the fields, perhaps?”

“Farming? Will you partake in such an activity?”

“Yes. I’m indeed thinking of doing some farming. All my life I’ve ordered others around, so perhaps it’s time for me to experience such work for myself. If I act, Duncan just might change his mind.”

“Isn’t it easier to just...*fire* Mr. Duncan?”

“Ah, well, that’s certainly one way of doing things. But I’d like to observe for just a bit more.”

“I understand. Then if you don’t mind, would you allow me to lend you some of my clothes?”

“Oh, Nadja, I’d feel so guilty. Your outfit might become dirty or torn.”

This was much different than the time Opal had disguised herself to visit Beth, so she refused. But Nadja only smiled in response.

“In comparison to yours, madam, my clothes are nothing grand,” the maid said. “But if you were to go and buy a set of clothes from a farmer, I fear that it may only anger them further. Yes, I think it’s for the best if you use the attire that I have.”

“‘For the best,’ you say...”

Should Opal dress like a farmer, she’d not only stand out like a sore thumb, but it’d look like she was wearing the clothes as a costume meant to mock the lower classes. Many would cast dubious glances her way—she wasn’t like Julian, hired to become a footman. She was a duchess, after all. Opal could wear one

of her own more comfortable dresses, but they were all woven from fine silk, and such garb would make it difficult to convey the new attitude she wanted to communicate.

“All right,” Opal relented. “Then can I exchange your outfit for one of my dresses?”

“Of course! Thank you!” Nadja replied.

Opal often gave clothes she no longer wore to Nadja, but this time, the maid was permitted to select her favorite from the duchess’s closet herself. Opal hoped that Nadja would consider this a fair exchange. The duchess fitted herself into her servant’s clothes and informed the knights of her plans for tomorrow, leaving them so she could make the necessary preparations.

The next morning, Opal headed out to some fallow land with a few knights and scythes. The land had been rested and was being prepared for another season of harvest in the following year. The knights, who were the first to see Opal raring to go while wearing Nadja’s straw hat, were surprised at first, but none were as astonished as Duncan. He scrutinized the duchess and sighed loudly.

“What are you planning *now*?” he asked.

Opal smiled back. “I thought that I’d offer some of my help.”

Duncan’s eyebrows soared with shock, and the farmers were immediately confused, murmuring among themselves with clear astonishment and befuddlement.

“If I work side by side with you all I’m sure I’ll only get in the way,” Opal said. “If I work in that section over there, I think that I won’t hinder your job too much. You need all the help you can get, don’t you?”

“Very well,” Duncan said reluctantly. “Thank you for your assistance.”

Opal nodded in response. She made sure to give him the respect he deserved and remembered to smile and clearly express her gratitude. But Duncan was her employee, and she was his superior. She would not force the scythes upon him, but neither was she willing to compromise on this.

By the time Opal and the knights had finished cutting the grass of one section, the farmers had only finished around half of theirs. Admittedly, Opal wasn't much help, but the difference in efficiency was crystal clear. Duncan frowned.



“Shall I work on that section next?” Opal offered.

“Please do,” Duncan replied.

“Then I’ll do just that. Ah, but before I get started...”

Opal turned around to face Duncan, who was standing in place, and the farmers, who curiously looked on.

“I bought a few spare scythes in case the blades dulled,” Opal said. “These scythes are still plenty sharp, so if you don’t mind, would you like to use them? As I’ve said, we’ve got enough to go around.”

Duncan had the final say—he could either accept or refuse the offer. Should he choose the latter, he’d be fired, but Opal felt that now the farmers would be more understanding of the decision. She had just directly proven the efficiency of these new tools in front of their eyes; if Duncan refused her offer, her decision to let him go would be justified. His talk of the devil would no longer work here; the farmers looked at the extra scythes lined up on the ridges of the field with unabashed longing. Duncan gazed at the tools, then at Opal, and finally raised his arms in surrender.

“We shall gladly accept your generous offer,” Duncan said, “if you would kindly teach us how to use these tools.”

“Of course,” Opal replied. “It’s rather easy, so I’ve no doubt that everyone here will be more skilled than me in no time.”

She was so happy that she was tempted to cry out in joy, but she managed to maintain her composure and smiled back. As she’d expected, the farmers mastered the scythes in no time at all, and she effectively became useless.

6. The Mines

News of the duchess working in the fields spread like wildfire. At first, no one believed the story, but as Opal continued to appear with her straw hat at any plot of land with grass in need of cutting, the number of doubters decreased. She also provided scythes to locations she couldn't travel to herself, and many people began to believe the stories. As their work efficiency more than doubled with the new technology, the farmers began to welcome Opal warmly wherever she went.

The farmers no longer wore the terrified looks they once had—they now flashed genuine smiles at the duchess. Her reputation as the scandalous Opal Holloway had vanished as well, but this change only further cemented the rumor that her husband had abandoned her. Claude hadn't visited the Bocceli Duchy yet. The servants at the manor also began to treat her more kindly, perhaps sympathizing with her current state. But she knew that she ultimately wouldn't have received their kindness had they not accepted her as their mistress. The duchess took her dog, Claude, out on a walk as she thought about her next step.

"It seems you managed to convince Duncan splendidly," the butler said.

"Yes. Thank you, Connelly," Opal replied. "It's a bit unusual to see you outside."

"It's my duty to maintain not just the manor but the entire duchy. I must at least walk around this palace to get a fair idea of things."

"Ah, and you dispatch people to go in your stead for areas that you cannot attend yourself. Like Julian, for example."

Connelly's words were friendly, but they weren't genuine. Even Claude, who loved people, didn't seem to take to Connelly; he hid behind Opal with his tail tucked between his legs.

"It seems you'd like to see places for yourself, madam," Connelly said. "Are

you truly planning on going to Port Pasma?”

“I am,” Opal replied. “I shall leave tomorrow, as I’ve told you.”

“Is your presence there truly necessary, madam?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Port Pasma isn’t very safe. The people that work at the port are rather short-tempered, and ruffians may be wandering about. I find the better idea would be to ask your representative to go in your stead.”

“I won’t be alone. I’ll have guards with me, of course.”

Connelly slumped his shoulders and bowed. “I apologize for speaking out of line.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

The duchess easily forgave her servant and returned to the manor, Claude in tow. Her mind was filled with thoughts of the future. Port Pasma would soon receive agricultural machines from Socille, and while she was inspecting these new tools, she also planned on a trip to inspect the northern region. The duchy’s greatest source of money was the mines, and a majority of the ores were transported to the port via river. But the water level of the river fluctuated often, and the basin itself was quite small. While this method was more useful than transporting over land, it was still unstable at best. Yet the duchy’s railroad only stopped *near* the manor, and in its current state it was not at all suitable to transport large amounts of ore.

Opal had discussed this issue at length with her husband, and the two had concluded that it was best to lay a railroad directly to the mines from Port Pasma. The port itself would receive some renovations as a result; this was all part of their plan to reform the farmland. Claude might have been more knowledgeable than her with regard to railroads, but there were still some things that she could do. Opal wanted to ensure that preparations had been made for the railroad by the time Claude cleaned up his errands and headed for the duchy. *And I’d like to close the lead mines in the north*, Opal thought.

The rate of production and overall risk of the mines were weighed on a scale, and the mines were still generating a profit, but Opal knew that they’d be in the

red soon. She had also discussed this matter with Claude, and he, too, had been considering a closure of the mines. That didn't mean that they could do so overnight. Despite the dangers, the mines were the livelihood of both the miners and the nearby residents. If the mines were to close, could they still live where they were, or would they have to relocate elsewhere?

The agricultural machines themselves would be dispatched by Omar's subordinates, and Opal thus had very little to do. She'd already discussed it with Duncan, and in the end he had reluctantly allowed the adoption of new machinery. She wanted to catch Omar's subordinates before they began their work and before she headed to the mines so she could briefly discuss the situation. Thanks to the railroad, it wouldn't take long to reach Port Pasma, but the route to the mines was trickier. It was faster to use a carriage than to go upstream, but the trip would still take three days, at the very least. *I recognize how important it is to install permanent routes between major cities, but even so, how things stand now is highly inconvenient for those living in remote areas.*

Opal stared at the map in her study, hoping to find a solution to her woes. The only railroad to the port had been laid before the plague had swept through the nation. It had left the land in quite the disarray for some time, but it had been years now since the civil war had occurred. The fact that they still hadn't improved the railroad was likely due to a lack of funds.

There were countless areas requiring the crown's attention, and it was understandable that the needs of a defiant, remote duchy be firmly placed on the back burner. In such circumstances it would be unthinkable that a nation like Taisei would send one of their accomplished engineers abroad to Manthest, much less four years ago when things had been much worse than they were now. And yet they had.

And now we owe Taisei one... King Alessandro had been reluctant, but he had ultimately relented and dispatched an engineer overseas, likely because in hopes that doing so would eventually prove fruitful.

The Manthest development project had been a huge success, and all the investors involved in the project had raked in quite the handsome profit. This same group was now searching for their next investment, and the Bocceli Duchy was a fine candidate. Alessandro must've expected Hubert to invest, at the very

least, out of a sense of gratitude for the king's investment in the Manthest project; he must have surely picked up on Hubert's naivete during their meeting. Claude, too, must've offered his support once he'd fully understood the situation. *No matter their motivation for doing so, they gave their aid to the Manthest project, and there are no words to adequately describe how grateful we are for that.* Perhaps the one thing that neither Claude nor Alessandro had expected was Opal and Hubert's divorce.

And yet, the duchess felt like even her divorce had been maximized here to its fullest potential. Indeed, Opal held more than enough funds to renovate and invest in the Bocceli Duchy herself. *Ugh, very well...* Opal truly believed that Claude would've proposed to her even if she had been penniless and that if she voiced her complaints about this duchy, he would allow her to walk away from all this, no questions asked. But the duchess didn't want to test her husband's love that way. She wanted to use what she had and do what she could.

Opal cleared her mind of unnecessary thoughts and turned back to the map. The lead mines, also known as the Lede Mines, were the location that she'd wanted to close. The ore was painstakingly transported to Port Pasma, and it was plain for the world to see that this method would generate very little profit. The fact that they'd even managed to turn a profit at all until now was a surprise. It would've been far cheaper in the long run to create a new port that was closer than Pasma and have the ore carried there. While Opal could only inspect the terrain on a map, she spotted quite a few locations that could serve as potential new ports.

"Are the ocean currents the problem?" she wondered aloud. She gazed at the maps, marking the location of each mine. Slowly, but surely, a new perspective came into view, and she furrowed her brow. "It can't be..."

Opal could hardly believe her eyes, but she still slowly traced her fingertips along the routes on the map. A myriad of suspicions flooded her mind, but all lacked any sort of concrete evidence. She jumped to her feet, took out a directory of all the nobles in Taisei Kingdom, and stopped at the column that listed Duke Bocceli's household. As she'd expected, the previous duke hailed from the Socille Kingdom and was related to Marquis Seims, but another unexpected connection came to light.

I'm sure that His Majesty is aware of it... Opal had come from a foreign nation, and she still had much to learn about the nobles of Taisei, but there was no way Alessandro *hadn't* known the family trees of his nobles. Still, the duchess frantically wrote three letters: one to Claude, one to Omar, and one more. When she'd finished sealing them all, Julian knocked on her study door and entered.

"I'm here to turn on the lights," he said.

"Thank you," Opal replied. "I shall return to my room, so I leave the rest to you."

"Of course." He noticed the letters on Opal's desk. "I can send out your letters as well."

"Ah, then I'll entrust them to you."

Opal stood up, and Julian retreated with a single step, head bowed, so Opal could make her exit. She gazed at him and his bowed posture as she left.

7. Port Pasma

“Trevor?! Why are *you* here?” Opal cried.

She had arrived at Port Pasma to inspect the agricultural tools and stood in astonishment at the unexpected appearance of her friend. Trevor flashed a mischievous grin, delighted to learn that his little prank had worked.

“It’s certainly been a while, Mrs. Fred,” he said.

“That name doesn’t fluster me like it used to,” Opal replied.

“Oh dear, that’s a pity. I’ve got one less story to tell the citizens of the earldom now.”

“The fewer, the better!”

Opal had been tense ever since she came to the duchy, and she was grateful for Trevor’s lighthearted, joking tone. She chuckled as she retorted, and Nadja approached them from a short distance away.

“Mr. Trevor?!” she gasped. “Why are *you* here?”

“At least I was able to surprise you both,” he said.

He was satisfied to see that both Opal and Nadja had given him the exact same reaction. Trevor turned to check up on the ship for a moment before he whirled back to the two ladies.

“Can we speak somewhere private for just a few moments?” he asked.

“Of course.” Opal nodded. “In fact, I have quite a bit I’d like to hear from you, so I’ll be taking much of your time for proper explanations.”

“Please go easy on me.”

These conversations invoked a hint of nostalgia, and Nadja smiled as she heard their exchange.

“Madam, there’s a rest stop over there,” Julian called.

“Thank you,” Opal replied.

She thanked the footman for his consideration, and the group walked toward a restaurant that gave her a splendid view of the cargo being unloaded from the ship. They sat in front of the restaurant and placed a parasol to shield them from the sun, waiting for their tables and seats to be prepared. As it was, the group made quite the picture.

“Mr. Julian is a footman of the Bocceli manor,” Nadja explained. “He’s a very considerate and kind man.”

Opal hadn’t introduced Julian to Trevor, but the moment the man had noticed him Nadja had done the honors in her stead, framing him entirely from her own point of view. Though Julian must have heard Nadja, he said not a word to Trevor and instead pulled out a seat for Opal.

“Thank you,” she said.

The footman bowed and headed for the back of the restaurant. It seemed he’d prepare the drinks instead of the actual employees. Trevor pulled his chair back and sat down while Nadja stood behind the duchess. Once they all got comfortable, Opal posed her query to Trevor.

“So let me ask again,” she started. “Why are you here?”

“I received a lengthy holiday, which is quite rare for me,” Trevor replied. “I figured that I should do what I love.”

“But the harvest season is coming up soon.”

“That’s precisely *why* I’m here. Back at the earldom everyone understands their role and works very well. They’ve got no need for me. Omar told me about the duchy, and I thought that I could have some fun here.”

He smiled, and while Opal began to question her happiness at their reunion, Nadja burst into a fit of giggles.

“It seems there are many worried and overprotective people around you, madam,” she said.

“And the same could be said for you, Nadja,” Trevor replied. “Miss Marcia asked me to go check up on you and see if you were doing well.”

“Then please tell her that I’m brimming with energy!”

Nadja's cheery demeanor gave Opal some energy too. The duchess smiled, but her expression soon turned dark.

"Does father know about this?" she asked.

"He does," Trevor replied. "I received his permission to come here."

"I can't believe it. It looks like House Holloway's trying to take over another plot of land again."

She turned her gaze inward, murmuring her concerns as she recalled the incident from eight years ago, when she had revealed Omar's misdeeds and had summarily been scolded by Hubert. But if her father had given his blessing for Trevor to come here, it meant that Alessandro had permitted this meeting as well—had he not, this would've turned into an international issue.

"I can see His Majesty's side, but I wonder what my father's plotting," Opal muttered.

Trevor coming to help reform the duchy would benefit Alessandro greatly. Opal was grateful for the help too; there was no question that Trevor could handle someone as stubborn as Duncan. But how would Earl Holloway benefit from sending his precious land manager abroad, where danger surely lurked about? What was his goal?

"My lord is worried about you," Trevor said with a strained smile. "He's awkward and clumsy with his feelings so he'll never admit it, but he truly treasures his family."

"I hope so, but I wonder... In any case, it seems I've dragged you into my business. I'm sorry about this, Trevor," Opal said.

He slowly shook his head. "I wanted to come. Both the land and the people seem tricky to deal with, and I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Ah, of course. You love challenges, don't you? I suppose seeing us was just an afterthought for you, then."

"Oh dear, you've seen right through me."

"You don't even deny it! Oh, what a horrible man you are!"

Opal pouted and did her best to hide how her father's concern embarrassed

her. She took after her father in being clumsy with her feelings, especially when trying to express the affection she felt for her family. Trevor didn't pursue the topic of Earl Holloway and instead laughed with Nadja at Opal's jokes. The three took some time to rejoice at their reunion.

8. Data

Opal had seen Trevor for the first time in a long while, but they parted ways soon after. After overseeing the arrival of the goods from Socille, she was going straight to the mines. She held a meeting with Trevor and the two subordinates that Omar had sent over before she set off from Port Pasma. She was a bit behind schedule, but that was just fine. Her next few days would be spent inside of a carriage.

“You met an old friend for the first time in a while,” Julian said. “You could’ve spoken with him for a bit longer, madam.”

“We’re both short on time,” Opal said. “But *you* could’ve relaxed a bit more.”

“I’m afraid not. I was ordered to tag along with you.”

“How unfortunate.”

The carriage clattered on, carrying Opal and Julian sitting across from each other. As they spoke, Opal tried to suss out his true intentions. He had come on this trip as her guard, and she knew that he hid a gun in his pocket.

“Mr. Connelly was worried about you, madam,” Julian went on. “The miners are a bit rough around the edges, and the mines themselves are rife with danger.”

“I don’t deny that, but wouldn’t you have a hard time dealing with that by yourself?” Opal asked.

“Is that how you view me, madam?” He placed a hand over his chest, where his gun was hidden.

“I do. I haven’t the faintest clue about you and what you’re capable of.”

His terrible acting was apparent as he feigned being hurt by his mistress’s words, but Nadja giggled at the two. During the entire trip, Opal and Julian continued their sarcastic banter to the point where even Nadja mistakenly assumed that they were on good terms. Once they reached their lodgings,

Julian managed to convince Nadja to leave and make preparations for tomorrow in the next room over, leaving Opal behind by herself.

“I should’ve brought another person with me,” Opal muttered.

She hadn’t brought any other female attendants with her, and so Nadja was burdened with taking care of the duchess on her own. Opal hadn’t received any reports of bandits, but she was aware of what danger they could face on their journey to the mines and so had increased the number of guards while deliberately not bringing any woman who would most likely be unable to defend themselves in case of emergency. Opal had brought very few things with her—shockingly few for a noblewoman. Her changes of clothes only consisted of a few dresses. Opal didn’t mind wearing the same dress every day, but Nadja wouldn’t allow it; the maid used her creativity to ensure that her mistress could wear something different every single day.

“She’s a splendid lady-in-waiting,” Julian said. He’d been the waiter for Opal’s meal, and he followed her gaze to the room next door, where Nadja was hard at work.

“She’s my pride and joy,” Opal said confidently. An alarm went off inside her head, and she quickly took on a stern tone. “I won’t allow you to lay a single finger on her.”

She was aware that Nadja and Julian had gotten close during this trip.

“Please be at ease, madam,” Julian assured. “I’m well aware of where I stand.”

“Oh? I do hope so,” Opal replied.

She didn’t miss the condescending grin that stretched across his lips as he bowed his head. Julian had always smiled in this unpleasant manner, but Opal said not a word about it and continued her meal. Tomorrow, she’d traverse rocky terrain to reach the mines and would need every ounce of her stamina. After she ate well, she headed to bed earlier than usual.

Her journey continued the next day, but it went a lot smoother than she’d expected. They were blessed with good weather, but it was also thanks to Julian’s precise orders to the group. They reached the town as scheduled, but

Opal was shocked to see the scenery of the place. Manthest was also a mining town, but the difference between the two towns was like night and day. She knew that Manthest was a place that was easy to work in—as a manager, she had worked hard to ensure it remained that way, but even so, this difference was alarming.

“It’s a bit scary, isn’t it?” Nadja murmured as she gazed out the carriage window with Opal.

The men must’ve all been out to work, and only the women, kids, and elderly remained. They all glared at Opal’s carriage, their bodies malnourished and frail.

“This’ll be tougher than I thought,” Opal said.

Though she was able to make a witty quip, on the inside she was terrified. Opal recalled the first time she’d stepped into the McLeod manor. She’d wanted to flee as soon as she could back then, but her stubbornness and resilience had prevented her from doing so. This time wasn’t about her own stubbornness; this was a problem she had no choice but to fight. She steeled her resolve, determined not to give in, but she felt dizzy when she gazed upon the manor that was suitable for a duke.

“Wow...” Nadja said. No one could blame her powerless voice.

The manor sat atop a small hill overlooking the poverty-ridden town they had just ridden through, and it was so shockingly opulent it would hardly look out of place as the residence of a noble in the royal capital. The exterior was staggering in its excess; no expense had been spared. A plump man came out to greet the duchess.

“Ah, Duchess Bocceli!” the man exclaimed. “Welcome! My name is Cole, and I’ve been put in charge of the Lede Mines as well as this town.”

“Cole, I shall be staying at your place for a while,” Opal replied. “I’ll be in your care.”

Dressed in the most lavish of outfits, Cole respectfully bowed along with the servants of the manor who stood behind him. Unlike the residents of the town, the servants here all looked well-fed and healthy. The wealth gap was practically rubbed in the faces of the town’s residents; no one could fault them

for glaring hatefully at the duchess.

Cole began to prattle the moment she stepped into the manor. He spoke of how skillfully he managed the land and his talent for generating revenue despite the decreased rate of production. In short, he simply wanted to brag about himself.

“The people working in this manor aren’t from this town, apparently,” Nadja whispered to Opal, sharing her newly received information. “This manor was built around a decade ago, and they all moved to this land.”

“I thought so,” Opal replied.

She was tired of listening to Cole, who continued with his boasting even during dinner. Perhaps even the servants weren’t local to the area, and the duchess let out a small sigh. Even if the lives of the town residents were improved in the near future, it would be incredibly difficult for them to ever get along with the manor and its servants, considering the obscene luxuries they’d received until now. It was clear another problem had been added to Opal’s long list. Once Opal was tucked into bed, she fell asleep immediately, exhausted.

She asked to be guided to the mines the following morning, but the friendly Cole declined her request.

“I’m terribly sorry, but with that, I cannot comply,” he replied.

“And may I ask why?” Opal inquired.

“Because it’s dangerous, of course.”

“You have no need to worry on that end. I’ve been to other mines several times in the past, and I insist on inspecting the area. If today isn’t convenient, I shall go tomorrow. If you aren’t willing to guide me, I shall ask for someone else instead.”

She flashed a benevolent smile but made it clear that she was having her way. It was a forceful method, and a bit of a gamble for her to act this way so soon. She continued to speak while carefully observing Cole’s reaction.

“And, ah, would you kindly prepare data regarding the mine’s records of production and exports? I shall visit the study later.”

“Y-You’d like *data*?” Cole inquired.

“Quite right. If you’re properly managing the town as you claim, I’m certain that you keep excellent records as well. I know that you’re a busy man, so you don’t have to be with me when I go over the data. But do keep in mind that I may have some questions for you at a later time.”

“I understand.”

Cole was disinclined to the idea, but he followed the orders of the duchess, much to her delight, and so she stood up to leave. Opal returned to her room to freshen up a little before she headed to the study. Cole was already there, waiting for her, with documents already piled high upon the desk.

“This contains data from the past five years,” he said. “Please excuse me, for I must make preparations for your inspection of the mines. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me later.”

“All right. Thank you very much, Cole,” Opal replied. “You’ve been a big help.”

She smiled, and Cole left the study as he bowed his head. Opal carefully perused the documents; just as Cole had boasted, the records had been kept very well. However, something felt a little...off. The numbers listed in these papers were clean—a little *too* clean. Many of them were common, easy-to-remember numbers, and they were so precisely common that it became suspicious to see all of them so frequently and consistently. Just when Opal stood up to check the shelves in search of more data, there was a knock on the door.

“I’ve brought some tea.”

“Thank you,” Opal replied without looking up. “Could you place it over there?”

Her eyes were glued on the documents when she suddenly felt the presence of someone behind her. A strong knock on her shoulder had her whirl around in surprise, but she couldn’t even cry out; the pain of it forced her to lose consciousness shortly thereafter.

9. The Attic

I'm thirsty... Opal thought as she quickly regained consciousness. Her eyes snapped open, and she tried to jump up, but sharp pain coursed down her shoulder and back, causing her to groan.

"Good morning, Duchess," a mocking voice sounded by her feet.

"Julian, where am I?" Opal inquired.

"Where do you think?"

"The attic."

"I'm impressed. You're really quite astute."

Had he been sitting? The sound of something scraping against the floor reverberated throughout the room as Opal sensed Julian standing up. He approached her with slow footsteps before finally entering her field of vision. His usual mocking grin was stretched across his face.

"Who ordered such foolishness of you?" Opal asked. "Was it Connelly? Or Cole? No matter who is behind this, know that your deeds will be exposed swiftly. You won't escape this unscathed. What are you planning?"

"Oh, I don't care about all that," Julian replied.

"Then you're a fool for involving yourself in this scheme."

"I'd rather be a fool than think that I'm smart."

"I don't think that."

"So you don't even realize it yourself."

"What did you say?!"

Opal tried to remain calm at first, but she couldn't hold back her temper when she heard Julian's insulting words. She cried out angrily as Julian placed a hand on the bed to threaten her.



“Shut up,” he growled. “Don’t cry out, all right? I’ll have to muzzle you if you do.”

“Are you going to kill me?” Opal asked.

“I kicked around the idea of faking a fatal, tragic accident in the mines. But that would force a lot of people to make their way here. Mr. Cole wants anyone in the king’s faction chased out of this place immediately.”

“If that’s the case, confining me here is not a good idea. If I’m not back soon, Nadja will get worried and call the knights to search for me. I’d imagine that they’ll start by searching the attic.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. *If* she can act, that is.”

“I told you to not lay a finger on her!”

In a fit of rage, Opal pushed Julian away. She managed to sit up, but Julian gazed down at her, standing by the bedside.

“Temper, temper,” Julian said with glee. “Her arms and legs are restrained, that’s all. But if you don’t do as I say, I can’t guarantee her safety.”

“And what do you want me to do?” Opal asked.

“Your obedience is delightful. I’d like you to draft a letter. ‘I’ve fallen in love with Julian. The two of us shall live a humble life. Please don’t come searching for me.’ How does that sound? It’s as though we eloped, wouldn’t you agree?”

“If Claude were to ever read such a letter, he’d laugh so hard that he’d tear something.”

Opal smiled as she envisioned how her husband would react to the news. Julian gave a nonchalant shrug.

“I don’t really care if he believes the letter or not,” he said. “I just need everyone else to. I’m sure that Mr. Connelly would back it up too. ‘Madam indeed seemed rather fond of Julian,’ he’d say. That would be enough to satisfy your companions, I think.”

“Is that why Connelly introduced you to me? To seduce me?” Opal inquired.

“Well, apparently, ‘the madam must feel lonely after being betrayed by His

Grace.’”

“How kind of him. But Nadja won’t believe a word of it.”

“Yup. That’s why she’s restrained too. Put this in your letter too; say that you’re bringing her with you. Once the knights are off in search of you, I’ll let you reunite with her.”

Opal was relieved to learn that Nadja’s safety was assured. Julian wouldn’t treat that maid too roughly; he knew that Opal wouldn’t be so obedient had her servant been abused.

“And then what?” Opal asked. “You might be able to buy some time if you claim that we’ve eloped, but Claude will instantly come searching for me when he receives the news.”

“Charming! The love you share with your husband brings me to tears!” Julian cried. “But of course, that’s only *if* he can come.”

“What are you implying?”

The ominous statement had Opal level a glare at Julian, and the footman smirked in reply.

“It’s been seven years since Alessandro took the crown,” he said. “That’s more than enough time, isn’t it? The anti-Alessandro faction didn’t lose—we just recouped in silence, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.”

“You’re not planning on starting a rebellion, now, are you?” Opal asked. “All you’ll be doing is sacrificing innocents for your cause.”

“Mr. Connelly and the others don’t care about the lives that must be lost.”

“Then I *must* protect King Alessandro at all costs. And I’m sure Claude thinks the same. I must fulfill my role.”

“Say what you will, but your *role* is to write a letter for me.”

With a sigh, he offered a piece of paper—the kind that Opal normally used. It was infuriating to learn that her belongings had been touched without her permission, but she did as she was told and drafted a letter. Julian read the contents and gave a satisfied nod.

“Your obedience is welcome,” he said. “We’ve got quite a few people on guard in this manor, so you can’t escape even if you try.”

“Where’s Nadja?” Opal asked.

“I’ll let you see her again once the knights leave the manor.”

With that, Julian took the letter and left the attic. A loud *thunk* echoed from outside the room, implying that he’d locked the door. Opal let out the loud sigh that she’d been keeping within and lay on the hard bed. She had to remain meek until Nadja’s safety was confirmed. *But what should I do after?*

Opal had once locked herself up in the attic of her own volition, but her current situation was entirely different. She had no freedom, and all she could safely do was think frantically of a way to stop the faction opposing Alessandro.

No, I don’t need to do that. I’m sure Claude has already gathered the information that he needs. The question then emerged of why she had even been allowed to visit the Bocceli Duchy by herself in the first place.

She didn’t like the conclusions that she reached, but she was unable to stop her doubts. *No, I refuse to believe it. I couldn’t have been used as bait.* Even if Claude didn’t have that intention, Alessandro very well could. Was that why Claude had been called for an emergency errand? In this context, then, the mysterious letter that had been sent to her had actually granted her the opportunity to meet with her husband while he was called away by the royal family.

Claude seemed surprised that I was headed for the duchy by myself, but... Ugh, no matter. Once this case is resolved, I’ll give His Majesty a piece of my mind! Opal squeezed her dainty right hand into a fist and punched the air high above her.

10. A Tomboy

“Madam! Lady Opal!” Nadja cried.

“Nadja! You’re all right! I’m so glad!” Opal replied.

The following day after the duchess had been trapped in the attic, Nadja rushed into the room. The maid was unharmed and brimming with energy, and Opal breathed a sigh of relief as she hugged her servant tightly. Nadja hugged her mistress back and searched Opal’s body for any injuries.

“Thank goodness. You seem unharmed,” Nadja said. “If even a single hair on your body was hurt, I would’ve never forgiven Julian!”

“Such valiant loyalty,” Julian said. He leaned his shoulder against the entrance to the attic, viewing Nadja and Opal from above. “Looks like *you* didn’t need to worry so much about her.”

“How dare you refer to the madam so casually! Heed your insolent tongue!” Nadja snapped.

“It’s all right,” Opal said. “Nothing good will come from scolding Julian.”

“But...”

The duchess grabbed her maid’s arm to stop her and smiled at Julian. “Couldn’t you pour us a cup of tea? We ladies would like some privacy.”

“Fine,” Julian said. “But don’t even think about escaping.”

With a fearless smile Julian closed the attic door, the loud *thunk* of the lock once again filling the room. The lock itself didn’t seem too strong, but smashing the door would be quite noisy and would no doubt alert the residents of the manor. The entire situation was making Nadja visibly nervous, and Opal patted her hands in an attempt to comfort her.

“Don’t you worry,” Opal assured her. “Julian isn’t planning to harm us.”

“You can’t trust a guy like him!” Nadja refuted, looking like she was about to burst into tears. “I’m so sorry, madam. *I* was supposed to be vigilant. You never

trusted him at all, did you?"

"It's not your fault, Nadja. We're in enemy territory, so I was prepared for something like this. I didn't think that I'd be killed, but to be trapped in an attic? I couldn't have seen that coming."

"Rest assured, madam. I promise to find a way for you to escape!"

"Don't push yourself, my dear. I'm sure that Claude will come to rescue us. And when that time comes we must do our best to hinder Julian."

Opal's tone was playful, but she tightly gripped Nadja's hands and stared straight into her eyes. The maid nodded. Just then, Julian returned, entering the room with a deft hand balancing a tray of tea.

"Oh, you're stronger than I thought," Opal remarked.

"Unlike you arrogant nobles, who don't know a thing beyond barking orders, I am *skilled*," Julian spat.

"Madam isn't arrogant!" Nadja insisted. "She's always working hard of her own accord!"

"Thank you, Nadja," Opal said. "I'm afraid that Julian has been a sourpuss from birth. What a pitiable condition."

"Shut up," Julian snapped.

He huffed angrily and placed the tray of tea onto a small table with a *thunk*. Nadja immediately poured some tea into a cup and took a sip.

"It's not poisoned," Julian said.

"And even if it was, there's no need for you to test it beforehand," Opal added.

"No, that's the one order that I cannot follow!" Nadja declared.

Upon determining that the tea wasn't poisoned, Nadja poured more tea into a fresh cup. If their captors were to become truly desperate, Opal's life may become forfeit, but for now, she didn't fear for her life.

"Thank you," Opal said.

"Of course," Nadja replied. "The tea is actually quite delicious."

Opal took a sip and gave a small nod. The footman had served the house of a duke, after all—he was competent. It was unfortunate that there weren't any sweet snacks to accompany the lovely tea. But there was something more important at hand. Opal returned her teacup to the table and smiled at Julian, who was watching her with a cryptic expression.

"If I must spend my days in this attic, would it not be best for me to have some books to pass the time?" she asked.

"How unbelievably bold," Julian replied. "You understand your position, don't you?"

"I do. I'm your trump card, aren't I? If you use me as your shield, Claude won't raise a finger against you, and if it's money you need, I've got it."

"You're an impudent woman."

"Those words are so tiring," Opal said. "I've heard them since I was young."

"Fine. But don't get too cheeky. *You* might be our trump card, but your little maid over there is irrelevant."

"Wha—" Nadja started, but Opal raised her hand and swiftly stopped her.

Julian grinned and left the attic, making sure to lock the room behind him.

"Madam, why didn't you allow me to refute him?" Nadja asked.

"Because you are important to *me*," Opal replied. "But unfortunately, as Julian says, the people who confined us don't agree. I don't want to put you in any danger."

"But I don't want to hinder you..."

Nadja looked glum, but Opal started to giggle as though to cheer her maid up with the sound of her laughter. The servant looked at her mistress in astonishment.

"It is precisely *because* you're here that I don't have to push myself," Opal said. "Claude will undoubtedly thank you for your work. I'm sure of it."

"That can't be..." Nadja murmured. "I hope he's all right."

It was at this moment that Opal finally realized that with this, the faction

against the crown had made their move. Opal maintained a smile as she nodded at Nadja's words.

"Claude's fine. He'll come and save us in no time," the duchess said. "He's used to this, after all."

"Is he?" Nadja asked.

"Quite so. When we were kids, we used to play a game where I was the captured princess and he was the knight in shining armor. But I hated to await rescue and often tried to escape by myself. He'd often complain that I only caused more trouble for him. But this time, thanks to you, I won't push myself to do anything reckless. He should be able to act without worry." Opal winked mischievously.

Nadja giggled. "Miss Marcia had always said that you were quite the tomboy, but now I know that she was right."

Her maid was a bit more relaxed, and Opal could now feel the same. The two ladies exchanged a smile.

11. Window

“Nadja, it’s time to eat. Help me out,” Julian said as he peeked into the attic.

The sun was already starting to set. Opal had been so engrossed in the books that Julian had brought her that she had lost track of time. Nadja had used that same time to tend to Opal’s clothing and mend a few dresses.

“Wait, I can leave?” Nadja asked.

“If you’re with me,” Julian said. “But don’t think you can escape. No one in this manor will lend you a hand, much less the people of this town.”

“The servants of this manor have willingly offered their cooperation, but the townspeople are doing so under threat, I take it?” Opal asked.

“No need for your unnecessary remarks, madam.”

Nadja was allowed to remain in the manor so that she could take care of Opal. There were two beds in the attic, and luckily, Opal could enjoy her meals with Nadja and sleep in the same room. The duchess wanted to stay by her servant as much as possible.

“Nadja, when you leave this room, you mustn’t leave Julian’s side,” Opal ordered.

“But madam, he’s—” Nadja started.

“The only one we can trust in this manor. Though it pains me to admit it.”

“I understand...”

“Hurry up,” Julian said, annoyed by the ladies’ conversation.

Nadja was hesitant, but she nodded obediently at her worried mistress. Once Julian and Nadja had left, the duchess stood up to stare out the small window. *Unfortunately, there aren’t any trees that I can jump onto,* Opal thought. She had no intention of leaving Nadja behind, but Opal couldn’t help but search for routes of escape. She had loved to climb trees since she was little, but the tallest tree in this residence was about three stories high, nowhere near the

attic that was situated at the highest point of the manor. Even if Opal managed to jump off, the branches of the trees were slender and would likely snap under her weight and the force of her landing.

She reached out to open the window. The building wasn't old, but the windows still creaked, likely because they had been fitted poorly. She had no such concerns in the main bedroom, but it was clear that the construction crew had cut corners when building the attic.

"Don't you even consider something as reckless as jumping onto the trees," Julian said mockingly. He'd returned to the room.

"Jumping? It's more like falling, really," Opal replied as she turned around.

She'd been focused on the windows and had failed to notice the door open. *Wait, was there even the sound of the lock?*

"Madam, your meal is quite splendid," Nadja assured her.

"Thank you," Opal replied.

The maid walked in with a tray crowded with delectable dishes. Opal thanked her servant as she noticed Julian carrying a tray of his own, on it a few empty dishes, glasses, and a pitcher of water. Julian said not a word as he placed the tray onto the table and left. The loud *thunk* of the lock echoed throughout the room.

"He didn't lock the door last time," Opal realized.

"Ah, you're right!" Nadja said. "You could've escaped, madam. Darn, I completely failed to notice it."

Nadja laid out the dishes, her voice rough with frustration. But the duchess smiled and shook her head.

"Even so, I wouldn't have fled. I was just being tested," Opal said.

"You were?" Nadja asked.

"That's right. He wanted to see if I'd flee and leave you behind, or if I was looking for a route of escape."

Opal gave a strained smile. She hadn't even considered simply strolling out

the door and had been entirely focused on the window. *My mind works in mysterious ways...* But Nadja once again looked glum at the reminder that she was hindering her mistress.

“If I weren’t here, you could’ve acted on your own,” she said.

“Don’t be silly, Nadja,” Opal said. “I told you before, didn’t I? Because you’re here, I don’t have to be so reckless. Simply having you by my side allows me to maintain my cool.”

She gripped her maid’s hands and smiled. Opal wished to reassure Nadja and provide her with more courage, but doing so in their circumstances wasn’t so easy. Opal was convinced that help would arrive in a few more days, but she didn’t dare say so to Nadja. The two ladies shared a meal and enjoyed their dessert before they decided to head to bed early.

“Nadja, could you keep the window open?” Opal asked, stopping her maid.

“Is it not too cold for you?” the maid asked.

“I’m fine. In fact, this room feels a bit warm because the sun shines right in. The cool wind is perfect.”

“You’re right.”

The duchess lay on her bed. Because they were so high up, they had no fear of bugs flying through the open window and could instead welcome the refreshing night breeze as it wafted through the room. Nadja must’ve been exhausted. Before long, her adorable snores filled the room, much to Opal’s relief.

It’s been two days since I “eloped.” The knights are probably searching for me, and Cole must be delivering my letter to Connelly as soon as possible. Seven days seems enough time for the royal capital and King Alessandro to be notified of this ordeal. No, I imagine that he’d know far sooner. Perhaps it would take a week for the rumors to spread throughout the entire kingdom, since things were in motion before I was trapped here.

Opal exhaled briefly, organizing her thoughts as she put a plan together. She felt it was practically guaranteed that Alessandro wouldn’t believe she’d eloped; in fact, she’d go as far as assuming that he had predicted that such an

excuse would be used. Obviously, Claude had known that she'd head out to the mines, and yet he'd given not a word of warning. A slight clatter immediately alerted Opal and she quickly rose from bed. At first, she thought that it was the wind, but she quickly deduced that something else had caused the noise.

The duchess slipped out of bed and headed to the window, where she let out a quiet gasp. She clapped her hands over her mouth to prevent herself from screaming in shock. The shadow outside of the window slowly made its way inside of the room.

“Hey there, Opal. Long time no see.”

The dimly lit room was illuminated only by starlight, but Opal would never mistake the voice of her beloved. Even in the faintest of whispers was he able to convey his usual gentle, low tone. He sounded entirely laid-back, as if he'd bumped into her in the middle of the city and not while Opal was trapped in an attic. Opal wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at that. But before she could think of anything else, she leaped into Claude's arms.

12. Reunion

“Claude, do you even know where you are?!” Opal asked.

“Why, I’m by your side, of course,” he replied. His face was cloaked in shadows, but she could tell that he was grinning mischievously.

Opal sighed wearily. “And how, pray tell, are you going to return?”

“We just reunited, and you’re already telling me to go away?”

“Claude, this isn’t the time for jokes. We’re right in the middle of enemy territory.”

“Well, technically, it’s *our* land...”

Opal suppressed a chuckle. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and she was able to see Claude even under the starlight. It’d been so long since she had last seen him, and she was tempted to indulge in a more spoiled attitude, but she immediately snapped back to her senses when Nadja rolled around in bed. The maid must’ve been tired; Opal didn’t want to wake her up.

“How long have you been here?” Opal whispered.

Claude smiled. “Around five days. I came here as soon as I heard you were headed for the duchy. I knew that you’d try to inspect the mines. And since this area is always looking for workers, I was hired pretty quickly.”

The duke looked like a miner. He suited clothes typical of nobility, but it seemed he was equally comfortable in rougher, more utilitarian garb. Perhaps he looked so comfortable because he’d actually done something similar before. Claude hadn’t told Opal of his past just yet, but it was clear that he’d gone through his fair share of hardships. And even now, he was putting himself in harm’s way.

“I wonder how many people have been dispatched over the past few years,” Opal murmured.

“I haven’t a clue,” Claude replied.

“I hope I’m acting as the perfect diversion.”

In apology, Claude gripped his wife’s hands and kissed them. His hands were rough and rugged.

“Claude, are you sure that you’re okay?” Opal asked.

“Sure am,” he replied. “You knew that I was coming, didn’t you? That’s why you kept a door open.”

Claude had purposefully misunderstood Opal’s question. Opal turned her back to him so she could sit on her bed and patted the spot beside her to encourage Claude to sit down.

“I just wanted to be prepared for every situation,” Opal replied. “The windows here are rickety. I didn’t expect you to actually appear.”

She had known that her chances were slim, but Claude always liked to surprise her in the most unusual of ways. Opal had bet on this sliver of hope and had kept the window open in hopes that it wouldn’t creak and alert anyone that it was being opened.

“Opal, I’ve brought you some letters,” Claude said instead of sitting down. “Apologies, but I had to check their contents.”

“Thank you. And don’t be sorry,” Opal replied. “I’d actually already asked for that to happen because I might be in a situation where I wouldn’t be able to read letters.”

“Thank you.”

He handed his wife two letters, hugged her, and stood back up to silently head back out the window.

“Be careful,” Opal whispered.

“Don’t worry about me,” Claude said. “I’ve been trained by a certain little princess ever since I was a kid. The fact I can’t take you with me now as I should makes me feel pathetic.”

“Oh? Then I’ll prepare myself and wait for the next time you come to rescue me.”

Following her playful tone, Claude, who had his leg over the windowsill, drew Opal in for a kiss. It surprised Opal, and Claude gazed at her with solemn eyes.

“I’ll come to save you. I swear,” he said.

He stood on the windowsill and jumped to the roof. When Opal peeked outside, she found that he’d already vanished from sight.

“I didn’t expect His Grace to arrive from the roof,” a soft voice called, filling the room.

“Nadja?!” Opal gasped. “Were you awake?”

“But of course. I kept my back turned though, so I haven’t seen a single thing!”

The maid covered her eyes with her hands, a gesture that made Opal burst out laughing because of how adorable and endearing it was. She was worried whether Claude had managed to safely make it down from the rooftops or not, but all she could do now was believe that he had.

“I’m sorry for being so loud,” Opal apologized.

“No need to apologize,” Nadja replied. “I didn’t expect His Grace to arrive, and it startled me! It happened just as you’d said, madam!”

“He really is reckless, isn’t he?”

“I assure you that His Grace likely thinks the same thing.”

Upon hearing Nadja’s response to her complaints, Opal once again almost burst into a fit of giggles, and she clapped her hands over her mouth. Laughter at this hour would be extremely odd to hear. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she tried to suppress her giggles. Opal had been acting tough, but in truth, she was very anxious. Above all, she’d been worried about Claude’s safety. Neither side was completely safe and sound just yet, but now she knew for sure that he was by her side—Opal held on to these beliefs and vowed once again to fight alongside him.

“Are you all right?” Opal asked. “Do you think you can go back to sleep?”

“I can,” Nadja replied cheerfully. “Sleeping is the one thing that I’m good at!”

After both ladies headed to bed once more, Opal kept her eyes open and stared into the darkness. *His Majesty must've known that the faction against him was finally on the move and had planned on quashing it quickly. I must have appeared to him with impeccable timing, and so he used me as a diversion.* Despite the complex, tangled threads that were behind this incident, the truth was actually rather simple.

Claude might have said that this area was always hiring and in need of help, but his being hired so quickly was nonetheless because of spies that had already been embedded in the region. Therefore Opal's desire to inspect the duchy had aroused not a single complaint. She could tell from Claude's attitude that using her had been his absolute last resort, and he'd been extremely hesitant in doing so. Even in the darkness, she had seen his pain.

King Alessandro must be punched for causing Claude to make such a face, and I would like the honor of doing so. She considered forcing the king to kneel at her feet and say words of gratitude. *Hmph, if you think I'm just a pawn to be used, you're gravely mistaken!*

She already knew who had sent both letters she'd just received from Claude. She was eager to check their contents, but she'd need to wait until it was brighter outside. She sighed to quell her impatience and closed her eyes to rest up for the night.

13. A Fortress

“Hello. Were you able to sleep well last night?” a voice inquired.

“Julian, do you just have too much time on your hands?” Opal asked.

“Of course not. I’ve been tasked with keeping watch on our precious hostages.”

“So you *do* have time on your hands.”

He brought in a tray of breakfast as she gave him a snarky remark. She didn’t expect him to get angry with a simple provocation, but she was shocked to receive a playful smile in return. Nadja was testing the food.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” Opal observed. “How creepy.”

“Say what you will,” Julian replied. “I won’t respond to your foolish words, but why don’t I tell you something nice? The faction against the king has taken up arms and gathered outside of the royal capital. And that moron of a king hasn’t suspected a thing.”

Nadja dropped her spoon in astonishment, but Opal only gave a small shrug.

“I pity him, then,” she said. “And? How many soldiers do you have for this uprising? The royal capital is teeming with the king’s personal knights and the royal army. You know that a half-baked uprising will only end in failure.”

“And why are you so keen to know our numbers?” Julian replied. “Are you going to send a letter? I don’t mind that. It won’t arrive in time to make a difference.”

“Oh? Are we not in the middle of eloping? Whether I make it in time or not aside, sending such a letter shall look unnatural. I’m starting to think that the better strategy would have been for you to drag me to the royal capital as a shield, instead of trapping me in this remote location.”

“The royal capital? Alessandro doesn’t value your life at all, does he? You’re just a hostage for Claude.”

“I get it now,” Opal continued, undeterred. “This place—the Bocceli Duchy—shall become a fortress for your faction should the worst-case scenario arise. Perhaps you’ve got a vessel docked on the port of the royal capital so that you may retreat with it should the situation go awry? Port Pasma truly is a convenient place, isn’t it? Because of the port you can sidestep receiving money from me in order to funnel it into your military funds. You can just receive support from Socille directly.”

“Just shut up already,” Julian spat. “Talkative people only look like fools.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that. But as you say, I’ve got much to learn. Would you mind bringing me a few more books?”

“You’re a pain of a hostage.”

“But I’m not a useless one.”

Julian huffed angrily at Opal’s cheeky remarks and left the room, making sure to lock the door behind him. The duchess exhaled and noticed that Nadja had gone pale as a sheet.

“I’m sorry,” Opal apologized. “I’ve made you scared, haven’t I? But you don’t need to worry. Everything will work out.”

“But if soldiers are gathered at the royal capital...” Nadja murmured. “That’s a cause for concern. Madam, when soldiers come to the duchy, what shall you do? I believe that at least you and His Grace should flee Taisei and head back to Socille.”

“Nadja, if you ever feel like you’re in danger, please don’t worry about me. Your safety should come first.”

“I can’t do that!”

Opal’s words caused an already frightened Nadja to become emotional, but the duchess quietly shook her head.

“If I’m ever in danger, there are many people who will come save me,” she said. “As you know, Claude’s lurking around somewhere. And so it’s safe to suspect that I’ve got quite a few allies in this duchy. I hate to be so blunt and frankly macabre, but those allies will view you as an afterthought, Nadja.”

“Well, that’s only natural,” the maid replied.

“You might think so, but I don’t want that. Because your life, even if it isn’t important to them, is very important to me, Nadja.”

“I’m truly glad that I’m beside you, madam. I’m tired of worrying from a distance.”

The maid’s eyes were brimming with tears—she hadn’t shed a tear when Opal married Hubert, but inside she must have been worried sick the entire time. And so, when the duchess had married Claude, Nadja must’ve chosen to stay by Opal’s side.

“Then can you make this promise for my sake?” Opal asked. “Should anything happen, please prioritize your safety.”

“I understand,” Nadja said begrudgingly.

It was clear that she wasn’t keen on this idea, but Opal breathed a sigh of relief. The duchess was certain that *something* was going to occur soon and that they’d be pulled out of this attic. The fact that Claude had faced the risk of exposure to meet her last night, and the glee on Julian’s face this morning, allowed Opal to draw some conclusions about her future. Opal swiftly headed to her desk and drafted two letters with the stationery Julian had permitted her to have.

“Madam?” Nadja asked.

She was shocked to see her mistress’s actions but said not another peep for fear of being a nuisance. Opal had no time to even reread what she wrote as she quickly sealed it up when Julian arrived with some new books.

“Julian, could you send these out please?” Opal asked.

“Huh? Did you actually draft some letters?” Julian replied.

“I have taken you up on your kind offer.”

Julian was peeved by Opal’s boldness, but still he yanked the letters out of her hands. It seemed he had no intention of going against his own words.

“Now then, madam, I suggest you spend your time reading these books,” Julian said.

“I will. Thank you and I appreciate it,” Opal replied.

She ignored Julian’s sarcasm and glanced at the titles of the books on hand before she selected one to read. He glared at her but took the empty breakfast dishes onto the tray and left the attic with the letters. And of course, the loud *thunk* of the lock echoed throughout the room. Nadja gazed at the door anxiously.

“Nadja, do you really think that Claude would leave me here if he didn’t have a plan for victory in mind?” Opal called.

The maid widened her eyes before she smiled—the duchess had successfully managed to alleviate some of her servant’s fears.

“You’re right,” Nadja said. “His Grace would never dare to leave your side if he believed you to be in genuine danger.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far...” Opal mumbled. She smiled with embarrassment.

From their engagement to their marriage, Claude had been overprotective of Opal and stayed by her side under the watchful eye of Nadja. Ever since the married couple came to Taisei and had an audience with King Alessandro, the couple had been apart, prioritizing their tasks at hand. Opal had *chosen* that life for herself, and Claude had simply respected her wishes. She renewed her resolve, determined to fulfill her role properly for the sake of the kingdom, but above all, for Claude’s sake.

14. Lies

“Why, hello there,” a plump man said as he peeked into the attic. “I’m pleased to see that you seem to be doing well, Duchess Bocceli.”

“I’m happy to hear that I look like I’m well to you,” Opal replied.

“Oh dear, you seem to be in a bad mood.”

“Would anyone be glad to be trapped in such a small space?”

“I have no doubt that such a lady of your rank would find this modest space cramped, but I ask for you to endure it for a bit more, Your Grace.”

Opal conveyed her anger to Cole, who’d arrived to check up on her. He was in high spirits, and Julian, who stood behind him, was all smiles as well. It’d been around ten days since Opal had been trapped in the attic, and at this point she’d expected some people to be on the move.

“I’ve got some good news,” Cole said. “Though, ah, perhaps Duchess Bocceli might find it *tragic* instead.”

He was so delighted that it looked as though his large body would burst into a little jig at any moment. Opal didn’t offer him a smile and simply stared at him as she waited for the news. Her anger didn’t seem to bother the man one bit.

“The selfish Duchess Bocceli could no longer endure the harsh state of her territory and fled with a man in search of a more exciting life,” Cole said. “The rumor has spread across the kingdom, but it seems the people aren’t all that surprised by it.”

“Well, of course. That rumor in relation to me is old news,” Opal replied. “And I’m sure that Claude—His Grace—won’t believe such a lie.”

She raised her chin and turned away. Both Cole and Julian grinned menacingly at her strong front while Nadja worriedly stared at her mistress.

“Ah, well, His Grace has... How shall I put it? Ah, he’s gone *missing*,” Cole said. “Oh, how very terrifying it is!”

“You’re lying!” Opal cried. Unlike her attitude until now, she jumped to her feet in shock. Her face turned pale and her hands trembled.

Cole looked grimly sympathetic, shaking his head as he said, “I’m sorry to say, but it’s true. Some say that he disappeared, unable to tolerate your infidelity, and others claim that he left for Socille in search of you. The rumors vary. Ah, but a reliable source has mentioned that he was attacked by bandits on his route back to the royal capital, and he was killed in combat.”

Cole paused and glanced at Opal. The duchess had covered her mouth with both of her hands to suppress her screams of grief and sorrow.

“Of course, this information is kept under wraps,” he continued. “The loss of Roussel is far too great for Alessandro, and should word of this spread to other nobles, those once thought neutral would consider turning against him.”

“Wh-What in the world are you saying?” Opal said. “The neutral faction shouldn’t matter anymore.”

“Your Grace, did Roussel have you marry into this kingdom with such sweet words and false pretenses?” Cole asked. “You’ve amassed quite a bit of wealth, haven’t you? And Alessandro needs every last coin he can get to fight against us.”

Opal shook her head in disbelief, refusing to accept reality, and she sat lifelessly on her bed. Nadja knelt by Opal’s feet and clasped her hands in consolation.

“Thank you, Nadja,” Opal whispered.

“Oh goodness,” Cole said. “Perhaps telling you this was a bit too cruel. I understand how extended time in this place might strain the mind. How does this sound? I’m willing to let you leave, with some conditions.”

“And what would those conditions be?”

“It’s nothing much, really. I just need you to write me a letter.”

“Another one? To whom?”

“Not Roussel, of course. I haven’t the faintest clue whether letters can be sent to Heaven or not, after all. I’d like for you to write a letter to your father, Earl

Holloway, and to your previous husband, Duke McLeod.”

“Claude—Duke Bocceli—is still alive! And if it’s money you need, you just need to speak with my financial manager. Contacting my business partners is entirely unnecessary.”

Opal managed to gather herself together and act bold, but to Cole, it only looked like she was trying to act tough. Indeed, had Claude not appeared in that attic ten nights ago, the duchess would’ve been genuinely worried—she’d have no mental leeway to feign despair. Claude had gone out of his way to appear to her for perhaps this very purpose.

“Indeed, while we need money, the real priority is keeping Socille from butting into our affairs,” Cole said. “I’ve heard that Duke McLeod’s influence has become rather great within Socille’s royal palace, and surely I need not tell you of the fame that Earl Holloway enjoys?”

“And what do you want me to write?” Opal asked.

“Those two—especially Duke McLeod—are greatly indebted to Alessandro. Should the Manthest project of four years ago be brought up by the king, Duke McLeod would do his best to ensure that Alessandro would gain some sort of advantage in Socille. And so, I want you to write to Duke McLeod urging him to ignore Alessandro’s requests.”

Opal shrugged her shoulders in mockery of the request. “And do you think that Duke McLeod will listen to me? We may co-own a company, but we’re practically strangers to each other.”

Julian piped up. “Just beg him to help us spare your life. McLeod foolishly has some lingering feelings for you, it seems, since he broke a potential second marriage with the daughter of Earl LeFond because of them. I suspect that he’ll lend us some money quite happily.”

The duchess glared at him. “How could such an odd story make sense? I’ve eloped with *you*, haven’t I? Do you really think that Duke McLeod will act the way you say under such strange circumstances? And I doubt that the earl would acquiesce to his daughter without a thought. For him, there’s no financial benefit to getting involved.”

Julian shrugged his shoulders as well, paying no heed to the glare. “Unfortunately, our plan to escape ended in failure. Hmm, just say that you got caught by the faction against the king near Port Pasma.”

“And if you can get that ransom money—no, *if* you manage to stop Socille from acting, then you’ve no need for me.”

“Clever, aren’t you? But don’t worry. We’ll need every last coin you have, so rest assured, we very much need you alive.”

“Is that so...?”

Cole quietly watched the two argue for a while, but he soon burst into a fit of boisterous laughter.

“Ah, I see now that Sir Connelly has trained you well, Julian,” he said. “You’ve got both courage *and* wit. Now then, madam, would you be able to prepare the letters that I’ve requested by this evening?”

“And if I don’t?” Opal asked.

“It’s not just your life that’s at stake here.”

Cole gave a conniving grin and glanced at Nadja, who glared right back at him.

“I suppose if the master is strong-willed, the servants tend to follow suit,” he said to himself.

With another raucous laugh, he left the attic. Julian followed but stopped for a moment with a hand on the door.

“Don’t keep us waiting,” he warned. “Tomorrow, the anti-Alessandro faction will start their revolt, and your letter of appeal needs to reach McLeod and Holloway before news of the rebellion spreads.”

Nadja gave a small shriek, but Opal only smiled as she gazed at Julian.

15. Letters

“Lady Opal! What shall we do?!” Nadja cried.

“Don’t worry,” the duchess assured her. Opal remained calm in the face of Nadja’s worry. “I’ll write the letters just as they’ve demanded.”

“But...”

“Rest assured, my pleas won’t change a single thing,” Opal said. “Socille won’t go out of their way to act for Taisei. They didn’t raise a finger eight years ago, did they? I’m quite sure that both my father and Duke McLeod won’t act for Taisei here as well.”

“I’m not sure if that’s supposed to make me happy. Your life is at stake here, madam.”

The maid puffed out her cheeks angrily. Opal found the sight to be so adorable that she let out a small laugh. Simply having Nadja nearby was energizing. *I must thank Julian for allowing me to be with her*, Opal thought.

“Now’s not the time to be laughing,” Nadja said. “Your acting was so superb that I would’ve burst into tears had I not known about *that* night.”

She smiled despite her grumbling, and as the two exchanged a good laugh, Nadja quickly looked gloomy once more.

“But will everything really be okay?” she wondered. “I know that His Grace is safe, but I worry about the royal capital and His Majesty. Will they also be all right?”

“Quite right,” Opal agreed. “There’s no end to our worries, but we can only believe that they’re safe. In any case, the enemy has already received false information. Claude was supposed to have been killed by bandits, but *we* know that he’s alive and well. Everyone’s working hard to do their part, and we must as well.”

After cheering up Nadja, Opal headed back to her desk. There really was no

need for her to write the letters Cole demanded of her; neither Hubert nor her father would ever extend themselves into the internal affairs of a foreign nation. They had a different role. And so, Opal complied with Cole's requests to draft up two letters while Nadja sat by the window to sew Opal's dresses.

Once the duchess signed the letter addressed to her father, she froze. If she were in Alessandro's position, what would she do? What plans would she have in place? She was certain that the king knew about the uprising; frankly, it was baffling why the faction against him *hadn't* caught on to that. *It's not money or soldiers that'll win this battle. It's whoever controls information.*

She thought back to the newspaper company that Claude owned. Alessandro must've owned a media source. *The populace will probably side with the king. The issue here lies with whoever has remained neutral among the nobility and the people of the Bocceli Duchy.* On the surface, it looked as though the nobles who'd opposed Alessandro had been cleared out, but there must've been a few lurking within the neutral faction.

Besides, the duchy had served as a base during the battle against Alessandro eight years ago. The actions of the residents here were anyone's guess. Back then, Duke Bocceli had stood at the helm of the dissent toward Alessandro and rounded up the citizens of his duchy. No actual battle had ensued, but now a different duke was in charge of the territory. Barring Connelly, would the servants and managers who'd treated Opal kindly fight against Alessandro? Would Duncan also join in on this battle?

The man didn't trust Opal, but it was clear that he deeply treasured the residents of the land. *And I wonder if Claude is safe...* She knew that her husband was all right, but her worries were now pointed at her dog. The servants treated her pet kindly, but Connelly seemed to despise the dog. *I'm sure he'll be fine. As long as he stays out of Connelly's way, I'm sure that Connelly won't mind Claude being around.* She truly believed that the servants would act to shelter her pup. Even Duncan couldn't hide his fondness for her pet, but the man must've had his hands full.

Duncan would never allow that land to be turned into a war zone. But he respected the previous duke. Duncan was stern and gruff, but he was trusted by his residents. Opal might have allowed the usage of scythes in the land, but

without Duncan's aid she wouldn't have been able to get the residents to make use of the new technology. She was sure that Trevor could get along with Duncan; Trevor had come to this land knowing full well of the danger of having an unstable government and must've secured an escape route for himself. Opal could only trust him. She suppressed the anxiety fluttering in her chest and was trying to reassure herself when she heard the snip of thread being cut.

"Madam, I'm done!" Nadja crowed.

"With what?" Opal asked.

"Ta-da! A pair of trousers for my tomboyish madam!"

"Pardon?"

Opal was left puzzled as Nadja happily stood up and proudly laid out a pair of pants for the duchess to see. Opal had assumed that Nadja had been busy mending during her free time in the attic, but it seemed Opal had assumed wrongly. *Now that I think about it, I don't think any of my dresses actually required any rigorous mending.*

"Tomboyish madam?" Opal parroted. "And why did you make some pants for me?"

"Heh heh. Miss Marcia told me all about you," Nadja replied. "When you were younger, you'd often climb trees and tear your dresses."

"Ah, so I did."

"But her troubles didn't end there. When you were warned to *not* climb trees and run around in your dresses, all you'd do was take your brother's pants and wear them underneath your clothes. I was told that you apparently said something like 'Problem solved!'"

"I may have said something like that."

Opal awkwardly averted her gaze as Nadja cheerfully exposed her madam's embarrassing past.

"So, when you embark on your escape of love with your husband, I thought wearing a skirt might be bothersome. If you wear these trousers underneath, it'd take one worry off your mind, at least, right?"

“I suppose so.”

A fluttering skirt was the least of Opal’s worries in a bind, but Nadja had displayed her consideration to the best of her abilities. The most concerning part was that the maid, after all these years, viewed Opal as a tomboy. There was no “escape of love” to be had in the first place; it would simply be her flight for freedom.

“Then I shall start wearing those pants from tomorrow,” Opal said.

“Please do!” Nadja replied happily.

The duchess had no reservations in the wearing of pants and decided to make use of Nadja’s kindness. Opal suspected that she’d be transported to Port Pasma or the manor of the duchy soon and knew that there was a chance for her escape. Pants would be a welcome addition during that time.

Most important were her decision-making skills. The timing of both her escape and her obedience must be just right. Should an uprising occur in the royal capital—which it almost certainly would—she wondered how Alessandro would act. The fact that Cole believed that Claude had been assaulted and killed by bandits proved that such a plan had been in the works.

Who in the world could act like a bandit attacking Claude, and what were they up to now? As Opal filled her mind with various questions and answers, she finished writing the two letters to her father and Duke McLeod. She knew that the contents of her letters would be reviewed before they were dispatched and didn’t seal them just yet.

Just as she’d expected, Julian came and scanned the letters before he grinned, but he didn’t request that the letters be rewritten. The duchess looked relieved as she sealed the letters and readied them for sending.

16. Boredom

“Another cup of tea, madam?” Nadja asked.

“That would be lovely. Thank you,” Opal replied.

It'd been five days since Opal and Nadja had been transferred from the Bocceli manor to an inn at Port Pasma. The days had begun to mix together, and Opal was becoming unbearably bored. In contrast, however, Cole and the other members of his faction were restlessly working about, their irritation clear on their faces. Though eight days had passed since their rebellious army had commenced their revolt, they had yet to receive a single update on the battle.

“Assuming they used the port near the royal capital, any mail would only take two days to travel by boat. But they've received no notice at all,” Opal murmured. “Delivery must take much longer by land. I suspect that Connelly's pacing around his precious Pearl Palace.”

“I wonder what's going on,” Nadja muttered. “Is His Grace all right?”

“Claude will be fine. But I'm afraid that I haven't been able to utilize the pants that you made for me. I'm not sure if I'll be able to escape with him at all.”

“You mustn't give up hope. I'm sure that he'll arrive gallantly and steal you away!”

“Should that happen, you must come with us, Nadja.”

The duchess winked at her maid, conveying her confidence. It wasn't just for show; Opal was actually becoming more optimistic about her situation. She was situated on the second floor, but there were people guarding the windows and doors all day and night—she had no chance of escape if she tried to climb down from the trees. But Opal felt that there was no need for her to act; she could simply wait here. Julian claimed that his faction had planned to use the port at the royal capital and head to Port Pasma via ship if their uprising failed. They would use the Bocceli manor as a fortress and hole themselves up there day

and night.

During the previous revolt, the mountain range surrounding the territory had served as a natural fortress for the duchy, and by additionally shutting down the port they could protect themselves quite well. It seemed they were utilizing the same plan this time around too. Back then, Alessandro had failed to completely eradicate the rebels because doing so might have resulted in an overextension of resources; he was not a fool who would fall for the same ploy twice. Opal was almost certain that for the past few years, the king had merely pretended to reform the Bocceli Duchy while embedding his subordinates into the territory. *Oh, I just feel so used...*

Opal not only had the funds to reform the land but was also experienced in such undertakings. Her expertise had led her to take the initiative and travel to the duchy. It was clear that before she ever set foot into the mines, she had been the perfect diversion, and that simply setting foot in the territory was all King Alessandro had needed her to do. Even that had only been possible because she had deemed it safe enough to do, but more importantly because her safety had been assured from the start.

“Why?!” Cole’s furious shouted echoed from beyond the door. “If we failed, why haven’t the others returned to the port?!”

“Oh dear, someone sounds furious,” Opal noted. “He’s so loud even we can hear him.”

“Did he mention something about the revolt failing?” Nadja inquired.

The two ladies glanced at each other and smiled.

“Just as Claude escaped the attack and appeared in the Lede Mines, I’m sure the rebels’ other plans are falling apart as we speak,” Opal said. “But the flow of information was manipulated so that the people here thought everything was going well for them. The real news was delivered on land and finally made its way here. I’m sure that by now Connelly is furious.”

“Th-Then will the rebels *not* arrive at Port Pasma?” Nadja asked hopefully.

“I’m sure of that. First off, there’s no way a rebel ship can dock in the royal port for any length of time without getting caught. A ship is not something

easily hidden. Even if it were disguised as some kind of merchant's vessel, His Majesty would notice it in a flash. And, well, if I were in charge of the situation, upon capturing the vessel, I'd restrain some members of the crew, have my allies sneak in and shut off the power, then lie in wait for any remaining soldiers to climb on board."

"And then you can clean them up in one fell swoop!" Nadja's eyes twinkled happily, like she was listening to a fairy tale.

Opal nodded. "Precisely. I suspect that the sea had been blockaded so that information could only reach Port Pasma with significant delays. Which means that Cole and the others can't escape via the sea. Naturally—"

The duchess swiftly shut her mouth as the door opened without warning. Julian came in with a tray of food, his cheek swollen.

"You were hit?" Opal asked.

"It seems the master is quite angry," Julian replied.

"Oh dear... You should apply something cold to that."

"Just leave me be."

Opal stood up to dampen her handkerchief and press it against his cheek, but Julian gave a gruff wave of his hand. Nadja, who took the tray from him, was angered by his attitude.

"Julian, madam is worried about you," she said. "No need for your rudeness."

"Yeah? And will all this fussing help pay the bills?" Julian asked.

"Don't be silly," Opal replied. "Let's cool that wound."

She took her dampened handkerchief, wrung it out, and tried to press it upon Julian's cheek again. He grabbed her hand.

"You seem rather carefree," he said. "You sure you have the time to worry about others?"

"And *you* seem to be acting rather careful," Opal replied. "Have you decided to surrender?"

"Soon the palace will crumble from the inside out."

“Ah, so it hasn’t yet.”

Julian let out an angry huff and brusquely pushed away Opal’s hand, causing the duchess to stagger. Nadja hastily rushed to support her.

“Julian!” the maid snapped angrily.

“Your mistress needs to put a lid on her cheekiness,” Julian spat. “If she’s not careful, that mouth of hers is going to anger the wrong people.”

He left the room. The handkerchief remained unused, and Opal clenched it within her hands.

“Argh! He’s so *infuriating*!” Nadja exclaimed. “Madam, are you all right?”

“I am. Thank you, Nadja,” Opal replied.

Opal had regained her composure and now stood straight. She went to place the damp handkerchief on the rim of the room’s washbasin. Nadja tried to clear the cloth away but was quickly stopped by her mistress.

“Why don’t we eat first?” Opal suggested. “It’ll be a waste if the food becomes cold.”

“You’re right,” Nadja agreed.

These days Nadja had so much time on her hands that mealtimes had become the highlight of her day. She obediently set up the table and laid out the dishes as she sat across from the duchess. Usually, servants were never allowed to dine with their masters, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and Nadja accepted her mistress’s offer to dine together.

“Seems like Cole and his crew finally realized that the ocean route was closed off,” Opal noted. “He must’ve been so annoyed that he punched Julian.”

“Did you know all this from the start, madam?” Nadja asked.

“Be it by land or by sea, cutting off the enemy’s access to supplies is one of the oldest war tactics there is. In other words, one must always ensure that their supply route is intact during times of battle. If the rebels failed to uphold this principle, then either their commander must be a completely untried greenhorn or their intelligence channels have been so compromised that they’ve for all intents and purposes lost the battle of information.”

“Information warfare...”

Nadja spoke slowly, processing Opal’s words, and swallowed her mouthful of bread. Opal smiled as she took a sip of her wine. Julian occasionally brought wine when passing off the ladies’ dinner. He also brought in tea, and despite his cold words, he was quite the considerate servant.

“Eight years ago, when Taisei was plagued by disease and the citizenry was vulnerable to misinformation, a civil war broke out over the throne,” Opal explained. “I was angry when I learned about such foolish battles, but the people of this kingdom must’ve felt especially so. Regardless of his real intentions, the prince had justified the war by claiming he was acting in the best interests of the people. Though he was considered the face of his faction, he had been mentored by Duke Bocceli, a man of immense power and influence. But what about now?”

“Huh?” Nadja asked. “Now that you mention it, who leads the rebels currently? It’s not Mr. Connelly or Mr. Cole, is it?”

“No. They can’t fully command the rebel army. And just as we don’t know, I presume that a majority of the rebels aren’t even aware of their own general either.”

“If I were a rebel that didn’t know who my general was, I don’t think I’d be all that eager to fight,” Nadja concluded. “I enjoy working because I’m working for *you*, madam.”

“Thank you, Nadja.”

Opal smiled and tore off a piece of bread to put into her mouth. *And that’s the issue here.* The commanders of the rebel army must have known who their leader was, but the foot soldiers, the ones swinging their swords at the crown and sticking their necks out on the front lines, were kept entirely in the dark as to who was their leader. How could one expect high morale in such a state of confusion? The rebels had prioritized secrecy to their own detriment.

“Does His Majesty know? And how about His Grace?” Nadja asked.

“I’m certain that they know,” Opal replied. “I’m sure that Claude confirmed his suspicions when he returned to the Socille Kingdom with me.”

“Wait, he’s known for that long?”

“That’s right. Which was why he couldn’t come with me to the duchy himself and had to fake his own death to appear safely in the Lede Mines.”

Opal smiled happily like a young girl delighted by a successful prank. Nadja, though puzzled herself, smiled along with her mistress.

17. Hostages

“They’ve been bustling around since early this morning,” Opal noted. “I assume *something* has happened.”

“Madam, how are you so relaxed right now?” Nadja asked.

“Ah, but I’m not. See?”

Opal had been reading a book to pass some time, and she lifted the hem of her skirt to show Nadja the preparations she had made underneath. The duchess had been wearing the pair of pants that the maid had fashioned, and Nadja began to laugh.

“Madam, since when have you been wearing them?” she asked. “I didn’t notice one bit.”

“Since only a few moments ago, when you left the room with Julian,” Opal replied. “I can put them on myself, so they’re awfully convenient.”

“I agree. I’m always envious of men, and it’s not just because of the clothes.”

“Oh, but I’m sure that men have their fair share of struggles.”

The two chuckled, but Opal abruptly stood up. She approached the window and quietly peeked out—she’d just heard the sound of gunfire.

“Nadja, prepare yourself,” she warned. “I believe our circumstances will change shortly.”

“R-Right!” the maid said.

She’d made a pair of pants for herself as well, though they weren’t as impressive as Opal’s. Opal had convinced Nadja that the two would escape together, and the two ladies had spent the entirety of the day prior trying to sew some pants for the maid. The day after that the two of them had been shoved into a carriage, and they had smiled then, relieved that their clothes had been sewn in time. Opal was clearly more nervous than before, and Nadja sensed that as she swiftly made preparations.

“The town of Pasma was the base of the anti-Alessandro faction since the previous Duke Bocceli, so they must’ve assumed that it was still under the control of the rebels,” Opal whispered.

She carefully gazed out the window as she kept herself hidden. Confused, Nadja gingerly approached the window to gaze outside, the sight making her gulp nervously.

“Madam...” she whispered.

“They probably wanted to keep bloodshed to a minimum...” Opal murmured.

She clenched her fists as though she was enduring some pain of her own. Outside the window, some distance away from them, was the main street of the town that led to the port. The road was covered with soldiers, and Nadja trembled with fear at first, but when she got a closer look and noticed the uniforms and flags the soldiers bore, her look of fear was quickly replaced by one of hope.

“It’s the royal army!” Nadja whispered excitedly. “Madam, His Majesty has come to rescue you!”

“But we’re still hostages,” Opal said. “Nadja, are you ready?”

“Of course!”

When the trembling Nadja energetically replied, the door burst open. Julian and several other rebel soldiers flooded into the room.

“Hello, little princess,” Julian said. “It’s your time to take the stage.”

“Good. The wait has been dreadful,” Opal replied.

“You just don’t know when to shut up, do you?”

Julian flashed a casual grin and used one arm to order the soldiers to move. They approached the two ladies standing by the window and summarily restrained them.

“Madam!” Nadja shrieked.

“I’ll be fine,” Opal replied. “If we act calmly, I’m sure that everything will be well.”

Two soldiers held Nadja back, but they were only grabbing her arms. Opal, on the other hand, had her arms tied up with rope, after which she was passed to Julian.

“You coward,” Opal said.

“Say what you like,” Julian replied.

“Madam!” Nadja cried.

“Don’t worry,” Opal said. “I’ve already practiced my part.”

Julian kept a mocking smirk on his face as he violently grabbed the slack of Opal’s rope and pushed her back. She always hated his smile. She masked her own emotions and smiled back, reassuring Nadja, but the moment they left the room, Nadja’s mouth was covered. Opal was forced to march in a different direction.

“You!” Opal shouted. “What are you doing to Nadja?!”

“I suggest you worry about yourself first, madam,” Julian replied.

“Don’t mess with me!”

“Mr. Cole only needs you. Just stay quiet and be a good hostage.”

Opal knew that that was the best choice to take and fell silent. The royal army had flooded the main street, and Cole and the rebels had no place to escape. It seemed that unlike the royal army, the rebels didn’t even have enough guns for defense. The only choice they had left for escape was to use Opal as their hostage, with the only remaining escape routes to take being the Lede Mines and the duchy. *But Claude probably controls the mines. Don’t the rebels know this? Are they just ignorant? Or am I? No, Claude won’t fail. There’s no way that he would.*

Opal repeated those statements in her head like a mantra and tasked the rest of her mind with deducing Cole’s train of thought. The royal army must’ve entered Port Pasma while waving the flag of the rebels. If they’d proceeded to swiftly take control of the port as it seemed they had, the railroads must’ve been closed off as well. *But if the rebels use me as a shield, they can reclaim the railroads and flee to the manor, where Connelly is. I don’t know about the size of*

his *army, but a possible reunion between two factions of the rebellion could prove troublesome.* Just then, she heard frantic footsteps. Cole appeared soon after, sweating buckets and with a face as pale as a sheet.

“Julian! We’re completely surrounded!” the man cried.

“Never fear,” Julian replied. “I shall create a path of escape.”

Cole regained some of his cool when he saw how confident Julian was, and he looked visibly relieved as he noticed Opal.

“I thought it would be best to kill her quickly, but I’m glad I listened to you and held myself back,” Cole said.

Ah, so the idea of faking an accident to kill me while I inspected the Lede Mines was his little idea. How frightfully small-minded. Opal remained still and unresistant.

“What’ll we do now?” Cole asked.

“We’ll negotiate, of course,” Julian replied. “Hostages must be used effectively.”

“What are our conditions?”

“To open the station and prepare the train. We’ll rendezvous with Mr. Connelly.”

“And if they choose to pursue?”

“We’ll drop some explosives from the last railcar. You’re good at detonating things, aren’t you?”

“I see now. We can buy some time that way as we wait for some reinforcements.”

“Precisely. We must regroup ourselves too.”

Julian had assumed command at some time during the conversation. As Opal listened in, she glanced at Cole, who seemed to be none the wiser to the change in leadership. A strong tug of the rope forced Opal to step forward, and she walked out of the inn that the royal army had completely surrounded just moments ago. But only one person out of this crowd caught the duchess’s

attention.

“Claude...” she murmured.

“Hi there, Opal,” he said. “It seems I’ve come a bit too late to sweep you away entirely.”

18. Getaway

“Wh-Why are *you* alive?!” Cole cried.

“Oh, I just rose from the grave. Nothing major,” Claude replied.

“Th-That’s impossible! Gah! Do you not understand your situation?! If you don’t move, I’ll snuff out this woman’s life!”

Cole’s furious roars had disturbed the couple’s heartwarming reunion. With trembling hands, Cole fished a gun from his person and raised it at Opal. Claude scowled, but he raised his hands in surrender.

“So you take a fragile lady hostage. Cowards,” Claude grumbled.

“Fragile? Who? Her?” Julian said as he laughed.

Opal glared at him, but to no avail.

“And what are your demands?” Claude asked.

“I-I want you to take us to the station unharmed,” Cole replied timidly. “Oh, and make sure that we can use the train.”

Claude peered intently at Opal’s eyes, and she silently stared back.

“All right. I accept your terms,” Claude said.

“Huh?” Cole asked pathetically. He could hardly believe his ears.

“Are you a moron?” Julian spat. “You’re gonna let us go in exchange for *her*? And what will Alessandro say about this?”

“He’ll agree with my decision,” Claude replied.

“You’re all fools, the lot of you.”

Enraged, Opal tried to kick him from underneath her skirt, but Julian elegantly dodged her attack. That only angered her more, and she glared at him.

“Will you look at that,” Julian said. “The little princess is angry. Could you hurry and prepare our carriage—I mean, the train?”

“Opal, are you okay?” Claude asked, ignoring the condescending order.

“I’m just fine, thank you,” the duchess replied. “I’m furious, though. When I’m free, I’ve got *two* people I’d like to punch.”

“Like I’d let you do such a thing,” Julian scoffed.

Opal wasn’t fine in any sense of the word, but Claude was relieved to see that she still had enough energy to be angry. She was still okay.

“A-All right,” Cole stammered. “L-Let’s go, Julian.”

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” Julian said to Claude.

Claude waved his hand, and the soldiers that surrounded the inn all dropped their weapons, much to the rebels’ surprise. Cole was still quite timid, but Julian flashed a mocking smirk. It was an expression that Opal loathed, but Claude just shrugged at it without a care. It was difficult for the duchess to walk with her arms restrained and a gun pressed against her side, but they managed to make their short trip to the station without being disturbed. Opal was swiftly pushed onto the train.

It took time for the train to get up and running, and Opal spent that time gazing at Claude beyond the window. When the train finally groaned forward, a loud explosion echoed from behind them.

“Did you blow up the tracks?” Cole asked.

“I did. That was my order,” Julian replied.

“Good work! I knew you were skilled with weapons and explosives, but I’m impressed!”

Cole was clearly delighted, relieved in his belief that no one would pursue them. *What a simpleminded man*, Opal thought. With the only railroad to the Bocceli Duchy destroyed, it’d take time to pursue them and to call for reinforcements. *Do they have a plan for where they’ll go once the king’s army has traversed the mountains?* Connelly might not have had a plan in mind, but perhaps Julian had something up his sleeve. She glanced sideways at him; he’d taken the seat beside hers.

“Anxious?” he asked.

“Is Nadja safe?” Opal asked.

“She’s a lot more at ease now that she’s away from you, I bet.”

Opal peered at him, trying to gauge his intentions, before she grumpily turned away to gaze out the window. Their trip was going smoothly. At this rate, they would reach the station near the duchy a little past noon.

“Are all the residents there under Connelly’s control?” Opal asked.

“Servants just need to listen to their superiors,” Julian replied. “None of them have the brains to think for themselves.”

When Opal had first met the servants of the Bocceli Duchy, they had been cold and distant with her, but as they witnessed how sincerely Opal was trying to reform the duchy, the housekeeper and other women who worked in the manor had started to warm up to her. She was worried about the servants that she’d brought from the royal capital, but she was sure that the other employees saw the newcomers as some of their own by now and would do their best to protect them. Duncan might have been unfriendly but... *No, I can’t possibly imagine Duncan siding with me.*

His precious land was in danger of becoming a war zone; surely, he was justified in hating her. But she was relieved to know that no matter what he always supported his residents. *I’m sure Trevor can make a skillful escape too.*

“You sound as though you’ve won,” Opal observed.

“We managed to escape unscathed in front of all those royal army soldiers,” Julian replied. “Of course we’re happy.”

“Unscathed? Is that what you really think?”

Inside the train the rebel faction was celebrating raucously, but the short walk that they had taken to even get to the station had revealed the truly sorry state of current affairs. The royal army had taken control of the area only after several battles had already occurred; the tracks were littered with rebel corpses, their blood staining the tracks a deep, rusty red.

In response to Opal’s question, Julian simply shrugged and made no effort to admonish the rebels.

“It only went well because Claude was the commander this time around,” Opal said. “But I don’t know if you’ll be so lucky next time.”

“Oh, so you know how heartless Alessandro is?” Julian asked.

“Of course. The first manager had apparently passed due to illness, but he was poisoned, wasn’t he? His replacement was the one to figure that out, and he fled the duchy to report back to His Majesty. The third person assigned to this role had to be someone who could skillfully act like they were being manipulated by Connelly.”

“And do you think that you’re safe? You weren’t able to act like you were being manipulated.”

“If I weren’t, I wouldn’t be here, would I? He probably thought that I wasn’t a threat because I’m a woman, or His Majesty ensured that I wouldn’t be poisoned. It’s one or the other.”

She was certain that one of Alessandro’s subordinates would’ve stopped any attempts of poisoning. Opal’s usual boldness had guaranteed Connelly was focused on her, and the king had likely used Connelly’s preoccupation to make some moves of his own. Even Opal had no idea how much he’d done. *And now for the difficult part...*

For the past few years, Alessandro had been slowly cornering the rebels. How many people had noticed it? Both Opal and Claude had served as diversions of their own.

“We’re here,” Julian said.

“I know, I have eyes,” Opal replied. His words snapped her back to reality.

“You’re not cute at all.”

“Too late to notice it, I’ll say.”

Her biting tone earned a violent squeeze of her ropes.

“Come on, stand up,” Julian ordered.

The train creaked to a halt, and Opal was forced to her feet. She stood in front of Julian and stepped off the train, only to set foot into a carriage that was set for the duchy.

19. A Promise

“Welcome back, madam. I’m quite thrilled,” Connelly said.

“Enough of your sarcasm,” Opal said. She stepped off the carriage, still restrained, and scoffed at the butler’s welcome. “I’m tired. Won’t you prepare a bath for me?”

“Oh dear, it seems you don’t understand your situation.”

“Do you really think so? I mean, look at me.”

Connelly acted as though he had come to greet his mistress as usual, but it was clear as day that he simply wanted to see Opal’s wretched state. Bound by ropes, she was escorted by Julian to the room that she’d used before—it seemed she wasn’t going to be trapped in an underground prison, though she wasn’t sure if there was one in the manor at all.

“Don’t think you can escape just because I’ve undone your ropes,” Julian said.

“But everyone seems so sympathetic toward me,” Opal replied.

“They know the consequences they’ll face if they let you escape.”

“And what happened to Claude?” Opal was referring to her dog.

“I imagine he’s doing well even without you. Unlike his mistress, he’s quite honest.”

Julian left, and Opal was relieved to hear that her pet was still alive and well. She swung her newly freed arms and approached the window to gaze outside. She couldn’t see any guards, but a successful escape was probably still impossible. The duchess was worried about Trevor as well, but she feared that mentioning his name would bring attention to him. The scenery that she viewed outside the windows of the train and carriage that she had ridden to this duchy proved that he’d done his work very well. Opal sighed, and then the door opened and maids appeared with hot water.

“Am I allowed to take a bath?” she asked.

“Yes, madam,” a maid replied. “Mr. Julian asked us to prepare one for you.”

“Oh my.”

I guess he’s not completely heartless, Opal thought, but she soon reconsidered; he’d waltzed right into her room while she bathed without so much as a single knock, and the total breach of privacy enraged her.

“Hey! How dare you!” Opal cried.

“You’re *still* in the bath? Boy, you sure like to take your time,” Julian said.

“That’s not the point right now!”

“Who cares if I saw you naked? We eloped once, didn’t we?”

“You numbskull!”

The women attending Opal were surprised by Julian barging in, but at the mention of elopement they gulped nervously, staying quiet. The servants weren’t even sure if it was a lie or not.

“I brought you your letters,” Julian said. “Take your time, I guess.”

“You’re awful!” Opal cried. “Pervert! Moron!”



He turned around and left with a nonchalant wave of his hand, and the duchess could only uselessly hurl insults at his back. Julian paused and turned around; it seemed he'd recalled one more thing.

"Speaking of, the people that came with all those agricultural tools have fled," he said. "Don't cry just because you've lost all your powerful allies."

"I won't cry!" Opal shouted. "Hey!"

She tried to give chase but couldn't do so from the bath, and her childish attitude caused all her attendants to break out into giggles. Despite her precarious position, the duchess couldn't help but laugh along, allowing her to relax more than the bath ever could. After she got out, she grabbed the letters that Julian had left behind. There were three in total, and all the envelopes had already been unsealed.

"I expected as much," Opal muttered.

Two of the letters were from Earl Holloway and Hubert as they provided responses to the letters that she'd written in the Bocceli manor. Opal's father firmly declared that he had no intention of lending any influence or money to the affairs of the Taisei Kingdom. He was as brusque as he normally was, and Opal let out a chuckle. Hubert expressed his worry about Opal and he promised to help her out whenever she needed it. He reassured her that he'd take care of matters in Socille.

Opal reached for the third letter. It was from Omar, and Connelly must've determined that the letter simply discussed agricultural matters as usual. Indeed, the first two pages were about the McLeod Duchy's harvest, with the third page containing tidbits of advice on managing the Bocceli Duchy. The fourth page discussed other news that he wanted to share. Opal smiled as she learned about Lind, the butler, and Debby, the housekeeper, but she burst out laughing when she read the final few lines.

An important bout had occurred in Nobori, and LeBeau had won in a landslide.

"Duke McLeod has grown tremendously over the past eight years," the man had said. "No doubt it was because he was led around by the nose by his

previous wife.”

Connelly must’ve read the letter, but if Julian had too, he would’ve certainly let out a chuckle or two.

“Oh, LeBeau’s a horrid man,” Opal said through her smiles.

LeBeau was likely the only one who could vocalize such a rude thought, and Omar was equally horrible for writing it down so that Opal could read it. The duchess made sure to carefully store these precious letters away. All had been sent to the Bocceli Duchy, and the senders were all aware that someone would read their words beforehand.

Any information that Opal truly deemed important had been sent to the manor of Marquis Roussel, and Claude had scanned them the other day before he gave them to Opal. Claude and Alessandro thus knew that Socille wouldn’t do a thing—to be precise, Opal had made certain that no one would butt into Taisei’s affairs. This act was her way of repaying her debt for the Manthest project four years ago. Hubert had also done his part in his role as Duke McLeod, and it was now up to Taisei and Taisei only to settle this ordeal once and for all.

Dinner was brought in, and Opal ate every last morsel. She slowly sipped on her tea and prepared to rest for the night.

“Madam... Um... Please stay strong throughout this affair,” a maid said.

“I’ll be fine,” Opal said. “Thank you. Good night.”

“Good night, madam.”

The duchess smiled at her servants for trying to cheer her up and allowed them to leave for the night. Having to now go behind the backs of her kind attendants was something she did not relish at all, but after a while, she slunk to her closet and took out a simple dress that she could put on by herself and a pair of pants that she’d removed and snuck into the manor. After she finished changing, she began to read and occasionally checked the time. When she glanced at the clock for the fifth time, she heard soft footsteps approach her window.

“Hello, my princess. This time I’m here to save you for real,” a familiar voice

whispered.

“I’d grown tired of waiting, but you’re right on time,” Opal replied.

As Claude stepped into her room, she flew into his arms. He hugged her back tightly.

20. Planning

“Now then, shall we go for a nighttime stroll?” Claude asked. “It brings back memories, doesn’t it?”

“When was the last time I snuck out of the manor like this under the veil of night?” Opal wondered. “Why, it must’ve been over a decade ago.”

“Don’t actually think about it too deeply.”

“But I fear that my body won’t be as nimble as it once was.”

“My princess, might I suggest that we both refrain from touching upon our ages.”

“You’re right.”

With a faint giggle, she took her beloved’s hand. The knowledge that she could finally escape made her forget her situation as her heart fluttered with excitement. She remembered the fact that as children, the both of them would often sneak out of the earl’s manor at night. At the time they had thought no one knew what they were up to, but it seemed that Trevor had known from the start. This time around, however, Opal was confident that she could evade the watchful gaze of Connelly—Claude had prepared well.

He couldn’t confidently stroll through the residence as though he owned the place, but he had managed to pick Opal up at the usual time—the promised hour when they were kids—despite being in enemy territory. Claude sat on the windowsill and gripped Opal’s hand as he used his other arm to show her the way.

“We’ll go down here, jump onto that tree, and slide down,” Claude said. “You can do it, can’t you?”

“Of course,” Opal replied. “I’d always thought that that tree would be easy to climb down.”

“Then ladies first.”

In such a situation it was expected for the man to lead and guide the lady down the tree, but Claude knew that Opal wanted to be the first to go down. She happily smiled and boldly jumped over the windowsill.

“Be careful of your skirt,” Claude whispered.

“I’m wearing pants underneath. I’ll be fine,” Opal replied.

She heard a muffled grunt and turned around to see that her husband was holding back laughter. The duchess skillfully balanced herself on the branches and used her free hand to press an index finger to her lips.

“Shhh!”

It was clear that he was remembering their childhood days. Opal soon realized that it’d been nearly twenty years since they’d snuck out like this, and even now as a fully adult duke and duchess they were doing the same exact thing. The whole thing was very humorous to her, but she suppressed her laughter, scaled across a wall, jumped down on a large tree that was easy to climb, and slid to the ground. Claude was ready to catch her if needed, but there was no need for that, and the two managed to land safely.

“Over there,” Claude whispered.

She took his offered hand and silently followed him. After they ran for a while, Opal quizzically turned back.

“What’s wrong?” Claude asked.

“No one’s chasing after us,” Opal noted.

“Crap! Were these theatrics not enough for you?” Claude said humorously before he received a violent kick from his wife. “Ouch!”

She was tired of playing the princess, the damsel who from childhood was always, always saved by another. *And in all those scenarios, while Claude and I were knight and princess, was there anyone around us that played the rebel?* Opal was lost in her thoughts as she walked alongside Claude, who was grumbling in pain from Opal’s kick. As they left the residence, they walked through a hunting forest and spotted a small hut, where a very familiar face was standing by waiting for them to appear.

“To think the day would come where the sight of you two sneaking around would make me *happy*,” he said.

“Trevor! You’re all right!” Opal gasped.

Julian had told her that all her friends had fled, but the worry for them just wouldn’t leave her, and at the sight of Trevor she was finally able to feel relieved. She smiled and approached with eager strides. Trevor smiled back kindly to welcome her.

“Lady Opal, I’m over the moon to see that you’re safe,” he said. “I knew you had a habit as a child of undertaking nightly challenges, so I was confident you’d be able to make a successful escape.”

“Oh? But I had quite the adventure,” Opal replied, pouting just a little. “Was it not so, Claude?”

“I was no star player this time around,” Claude said. He soon turned solemnly and bowed his head with the utmost respect. “Trevor, thank you very much for finishing the harvest. I know you were in so much danger, and yet you helped us tremendously. Truly, I don’t know how to express my gratitude.”

“I’d like to thank you as well,” Opal added. “When I returned here and saw the fields had already been cut, I felt at ease.”

“With all the whispering of war I couldn’t stand the idea of soldiers trampling all over this precious land, especially left unharvested,” Trevor replied. “Duncan and the other residents felt the same, so we all worked together. That’s all.”

Was Trevor blushing? Even in the darkness, Opal could see that his face was red. As far as the eye could see, the fields all the way to Port Pasma had been cut neatly. No doubt they’d been able to be so quick thanks to Trevor’s splendid leadership and command.

“Now, we mustn’t dawdle out here,” Trevor said as he cleared his throat. “Let’s head inside. Everyone’s waiting for you two.”

“Right.” Claude nodded.

He opened the door and Opal stepped inside, smiling, and was immediately met with Nadja leaping into her arms and hugging her tightly.

“Madam! Lady Opal!” Nadja cried.

“Nadja!” Opal gasped, returning the tight embrace. “Oh, Nadja... I’m so, so glad that you’re okay.”

“I’m glad that *you’re* okay! When I was pulled away from you, I was just so worried. I tried to head back several times, but the soldier who restrained me threatened that something troublesome might happen to you if I didn’t become obedient. I stomped on his foot as hard as I could.”

Nadja took a step back and carefully inspected her mistress’s body for any scratches before she glanced at the man wearing the uniform of a rebel—the very same man that had restrained Nadja. He gave an awkward smile back. Opal laughed at her maid’s toughness, and the maid puffed out her cheeks angrily.

“This is no laughing matter, madam!” she cried.

“I’m sorry,” Opal apologized. “I assume that among the rebels, only Julian knew how important you are to me, so his plan was to separate us. And if all eyes were focused on me, he thought it was easier to plan his own escape.”

“And now we’re both gone! When he finds out, Julian’ll be scolded terribly by Mr. Connelly.”

“I imagine so. Serves him right.”

Claude chuckled at Opal’s mean remark and drew her to his side, peeling her away from the maid.

“I’d like my wife back, if you don’t mind,” he said. “It’s been a while since we reunited.”

“Of course!” Nadja replied with a nod, her face energetic.

Opal glared at her husband. “*You* have some explaining to do.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow?” Claude inquired.

“Everything will be over by then. We have plenty of time until morning, so I ask that now you tell me every last detail.”

“All right.”

Opal smiled at her husband’s resignation and turned back to her maid.

“Nadja, it’s already so late. Why don’t you catch a few winks?”

“O-Of course,” Nadja replied.

She suppressed her laugh as she heard Opal’s hypocritical words and saw Claude’s look of despair. The maid swiftly left the room. This place had been built for a family and possessed several rooms; Trevor was already gone.

“Opal, we’ll go over there,” Claude said.

“What a lovely place,” Opal remarked.

“It is, isn’t it?”

She gave a slight bow to the soldiers who would likely all sleep together in the same room, and Claude and Opal headed to a room different from Nadja’s. This room had likely been used for storage; there was a ladder in the back that most likely led to an attic or otherwise tiny space barely fit for habitation.

With a giggle, Opal climbed up the ladder and into the attic that was used to store some items. It was cleaned very well, and while there were no beds, there was a down comforter and some cushions to create a sense of coziness.

“It feels like a secret base,” Opal said.

“Yup.” Claude nodded. “Now then, let’s start our... Huh. How many times have we done this? No matter. Let’s start our meeting and hash out some plans, shall we?”

“Roger that!”

It was just like their childhood. Claude decided to host a meeting, and Opal copied what she’d seen before, giving him a brief salute. The two exchanged a small chuckle.

21. A Traitor

By the next morning the royal army had completely surrounded the rebels, throwing Connelly's group into a huge panic. Rebels stationed nearby were unable to adequately respond to the royal army's sudden attack and were forced to surrender. Upon spotting Opal right next to a very alive Claude, Connelly looked around him in panicked shock.

"Wh-What?!" he cried. "Why's *she* with him?! Julian! Where's Julian?!"

But the young footman was nowhere to be seen. Cole desperately searched for a way out, his massive body heaving with frantic effort.

"I-I can't believe it! Roussel's *alive*!" Connelly gasped. "I thought he was dead!"

"I *told* you that he was alive and well!" Cole roared back.

"Who can believe what you say, you numbskull?! And what's with all these soldiers?! I thought the railroad was destroyed!"

But all Connelly's shouting served to do was make Cole cower and mutter Julian's name. Claude wearily inserted himself into the confused conversation.

"Opal and I had always planned to lay down some tracks to connect the Lede Mines, the other mines, and Port Pasma via railroad," he said. "We'd already finished preparations, and not only did we have more than enough building materials stored at Port Pasma already, the port itself docked a vessel ferrying excellent engineers. Whatever damage those explosions did to the tracks has already been repaired. And it wasn't much; the structure was still sound, so only superficial fixes were necessary. We also had some horses on board the vessel."

"B-But the royal army... There're so many of them... And the general..." Cole spluttered.

"Did you *really* think that you could use the same tactics against His Majesty and squeak out a win? It's not as if the first time around was much of a success

anyway.”

He mocked Cole as he turned to Connelly, who glared at Claude with deep hate in his eyes. Claude had gone on horseback and chased after Opal while the other soldiers waited for the railroad to be repaired before they followed. They’d stopped the train far enough away from the rebels that they wouldn’t hear the sounds of a fully operational train and made the rest of the way on foot.

“Just to let you know, your general won’t come,” Claude said. “Before we took control of Port Pasma, the uprising in the royal capital was quashed and the rebels there surrendered. Now that you’ve lost control of the Lede Mines, who in their right mind would choose to save you? You’ve got no money left.”

“Th-The Lede Mines are...” Connelly growled.

“Aren’t primarily used for lead. The mines contain gold, and mountains of it, isn’t that right? The previous duke had defied King Alessandro and fought against him precisely *because* gold was discovered in the mines, correct? It seems you’d been smuggling it via a port not marked on any maps. But you have to know just how vast this region is. Did you really think that you could keep your plans hidden forever?”

Even Opal had been suspicious of the map when she first saw it, and had speculated that it might be concealing something about the mines, or that a hidden port might be somewhere, but it seemed that Claude and his team had already been aware of it. They had simply been waiting for the right time to take control.

“H-How *dare* you?!” Cole roared furiously, his hand reaching into his chest pocket. His precious gold mines were about to be taken away from him. “How dare you take my gold?!”

Claude hastily stood in front of Opal but breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Cole’s panic.

“I-It’s gone! What?!” Cole cried.

“You didn’t notice?” Claude asked wearily.

The round man desperately searched for his gun, but it was nowhere to be

found. Claude, on the other hand, already had his own weapon at the ready. The soldiers surrounding Cole all had their weapons drawn, ready to fire.

Cole screamed in terror.

“Losing the majority of your weapon stock was a big blow to your faction,” Claude said. “It’s too bad that the few weapons left are possessed by people like you—those who don’t know how to use guns and don’t even notice when they’re gone.”

Connelly hastily reached into his own pocket and to his surprise, he retrieved a paperweight instead. He hadn’t noticed that his weapon had been switched out, and even Opal was disappointed by this. She knew the gun that Cole had drawn on her before had been tampered with so that it couldn’t fire, but since the man had had the weapon in his hand it was understandable that he had still thought his gun was fully operational. But Cole no longer had anything in his pockets at all. He sank to the ground and Connelly glared at his enemies with wrath.

“His Majesty had apparently already dispatched some of the army to the mountainous region,” Claude said. “Did you not notice? According to yesterday’s report, all remaining rebels have already been captured. You guys are the only rebels left.”

“How...” Connelly growled, refusing to face his reality. “How did you know?”

“Just like how there were traitors in our faction, there was a traitor in yours. Or perhaps, more precisely, a spy.”

Claude’s casual words were met with Connelly and Cole’s devastation, a shock that drove them both to the brink of total despair. Connelly gasped with realization. He gritted his teeth and spoke with a hatred in his voice he had not had before.

“*Julian...*” he seethed. “It was Julian, wasn’t it?!”

“Julian?” Claude asked as he tilted his head to one side. He burst out laughing. “Ah, right, the man Opal eloped with.”

The duchess wasn’t laughing as loud, but she chortled. “I’m happy to see that it amuses you.”

“Wh-What?!” Connelly growled. “Why are you laughing?! Dammit!”

The married couple’s reactions were entirely inappropriate for the situation they were in. Annoyed, Connelly took a few steps backward. He bumped into some soldiers, gasped, and whirled around.

“Wh-What are you guys doing?!” he screamed. “Don’t just stand there! Charge them and attack!”

Cole snapped back to his senses and nodded furiously. “H-He’s right! Go on, fight! Why else are you guys here?!”

But no one moved an inch. There were a few good reasons for this; the royal army currently held them at gunpoint, for one. And it was important to note that neither Cole nor Connelly had garnered any sense of loyalty from their troops. In fact, many of these men were probably not all that upset with Alessandro either. So here were these two men without the power or influence to mobilize these troops but trying to do so anyway because there was no one else.

“Attempted revolt is a *very* serious crime—perhaps the most serious one you could commit,” Claude said. “You will pay dearly for it. And if at this time you still choose to raise your blades against us, we will take that into consideration when you are put on trial. If you cast aside your weapons right now and surrender, however, I promise that you will at least not be on trial for the greatest sin you could commit. It’s *your* turn to make the choice. You have no reason to obey the orders you’ve just been given. What will you do?”

Claude’s voice rang out and reached the hearts of those who heard it. It wasn’t just Opal’s bias; her husband wielded a mysterious power that drew people to him. Even Connelly and Cole fell silent as one by one, the remnants of the rebel army dropped their swords to the ground.

“Very good,” Claude said. “We must restrain you all for now, but I promise that you won’t be treated poorly. Don’t you dare flee.”

His words weren’t pointed at the soldiers but at Connelly and Cole. As he’d expected, the two men made a break for it. They had no chance of fleeing, but they pushed aside the soldiers of their faction and tried to run back into the manor.

“Move! You useless twerps!” Connelly roared.

“You cowards!” Cole shrieked.

They had managed to make it back to the manor’s entrance when the doors flung open and Claude the dog tackled them to the ground, allowing the royal army soldiers who had pursued them enough time to restrain them properly.

“Oh, Claude!” Opal squealed. “You’re such a good boy! Excellent work!”

She hugged her happy dog and praised him to bits. Her beloved pet wagged his tail furiously and licked her cheek.

“This is odd...” Claude muttered, his grumbling effectively dissipating his previously menacing aura. “Haven’t I done some excellent work? Where is my praise?”

Opal entrusted her dog to a servant that gingerly approached her, and she placed her hands on her hips while glaring at her husband.

“If you want compliments, I’m sure His Majesty will be happy to give you some,” she said.

“How cold,” he said.

“I’m still mad, you know. I’m angry at both you *and* the king. How about you hurry up and end this ordeal?”

“You’re right. I’ll receive a good scolding later.”

His tone was casual, but his expression was serious; a single night was not nearly enough time to explain this series of events in its entirety. The two still had plenty to do and they weren’t finished just yet.

“Opal, could I leave you in charge of the manor?” Claude asked.

“Of course,” Opal replied.

“Then you can take the guards with you.”

Claude called to the nearby knights and ordered that five be selected to watch over the duchess. As he continued to hand out commands to the surrounding soldiers, Claude’s aura grew even more intimidating—even Opal was scared to approach him. This was a side of him that Opal hadn’t known

about until now. She gazed at her husband for a few moments before she gathered the guards and headed back to the manor, thinking to herself that the servants inside must certainly be confused by everything happening.

Connelly had been captured, and now she could only think of one person who could manage both the manor and the duchy. Opal took her dog and her guards deep into the manor in search of Duncan.

22. The Royal Palace

Opal and Claude returned to the royal capital via ship and upon arrival immediately traveled to the royal palace. Claude mentioned that he could go alone—he knew that his wife was tired—but Opal insisted on tagging along with him. The uproar that had been caused by the rebels' failed revolt still lingered within the royal palace, and government officials bustled around while the nobles whispered secretively to each other. All of them were shocked to see Opal and Claude, but the two flashed smiles that implied no one should draw near.

They arrived at the same room they'd used when they returned from Socille, and Alessandro greeted them as though nothing was amiss.

"Hello, Opal. I'm happy to see you return safe and sound," he said.

"Your kind words are wasted on someone such as I," Opal said with a smile and curtsy. "Such benevolence humbles me."

"Ah, so you're angry at me."

Her rage had been conveyed very well, but the king sounded like he was enjoying himself.

"It was I who ultimately decided that we use you as bait," Alessandro said. "Claude was against it until the very end. I ask that you don't blame him."

"Oh, I'm not at all blaming anyone, Your Majesty," Opal replied. "I'm certain that you both saw to it that my safety was assured, but still, there are no guarantees in life. I imagine that the entire situation left him rather frazzled, but above all Claude respected my wishes and allowed me to visit the duchy."

Opal smiled as she explained that *her* wishes had been prioritized over Alessandro's. She wasn't angry at Claude, but her smile deepened.

"But had you told me about it beforehand," she went on to say, "I believe that I could've done a fair bit more. It does so frustrate me to think about."

“You’ve done more than enough,” Alessandro replied. “What else could you have done? Thanks to you asking Duke McLeod and his servants to request the aid of money lenders, you prevented Socille from getting involved in our personal affairs and shut down any funds from going to the rebels.”

“Their names are Omar, the manager of the land, and LeBeau, the one involved in the financial industry.”

“I see. Please thank those two—especially the man called LeBeau—in my stead. They even aided us in obtaining concrete evidence of the rebels’ plans, and we can finally convict them. I believe a reward is in order. Is there anything you wish for, Opal?”

“Just one thing, if you don’t mind.”

“And what would that be? Tell me.”

In truth, Opal needed no reward. She had only done what was expected of her—she’d personally thank Hubert, Omar, and LeBeau at a later date. And while she knew that Alessandro’s arrogance was somewhat necessary for a man in his position, she also wasn’t one to change a decision that she’d already made. She glanced at Claude, who grinned back like he’d read her mind.

“Please allow me to punch you,” Opal said.

“Pardon?” the king asked.

“Just one punch. I ask for nothing more.”

Alessandro looked on in astonishment before he guffawed. Claude also looked a touch surprised but didn’t stop his wife.

“Very well,” Alessandro said. “Because of me you’ve had a frightful experience in which your freedom was stripped from you. You’re newly married into this kingdom, and yet you’ve done plenty. A punch or two is well-earned, I say. Go on.”

He stuck out his cheek. Opal took a few steps forward, clenched her fist, and swung at the king, who immediately gasped in pain.

“Opal, is your hand okay?” Claude asked with worry.

“I held on to my thumb, so I’m fine,” Opal replied.

“Don’t be too reckless.”

“I went easy on him.”

Alessandro was crouched in pain as he pressed a hand against his cheek, but Claude was more worried about his wife’s hand. Opal opened and closed her hand, indicating that she was fine, and ignored the king.

“Claude...” Alessandro groaned.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you be...worried about...someone *else*?”

“Is it not normal to worry about the hand of a frail lady—my wife’s, no less?”

The king gritted his teeth against the pain, and Claude sighed while scolding the king.

“You reap what you sow,” Claude continued. “Personally, I’d like to punch you ten times over, but I’m holding myself back. What moronic husband would willingly volunteer his precious wife to be used as bait? Not a soul, I’d presume. I know that *I* never would. I only agreed to make *myself* bait, and you knew about the incident at the royal villa. You *let* it slide, didn’t you? I only fulfilled my role because I knew that Opal would want me to do so. Please don’t force us into more unexpected circumstances again, Your Majesty, or I’ll flee the kingdom.”

“I’m sorry,” the king begrudgingly muttered.

“Why don’t we let him off the hook for today?” Opal suggested. “Let’s apply something cold to that cheek of yours.”

Claude went to the next room to call for the chamberlain, and Opal remained, placing a hand over her mouth to suppress her laughter.

“Is it really that swollen?” Alessandro asked.

“Just a little,” Opal said. “But it doesn’t stand out. So long as the redness goes away.”

Opal wasn’t laughing at the king’s cheek; she smiled because it’d been a while since she’d seen Claude lecture someone else. When she was a child, she had

often received a good scolding from him. Alessandro surely knew that, but still he pouted like a child.

“You’re perfect for each other,” he grumbled.

“Why, thank you,” Opal replied.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Oh, but I’m still angry, you see. You had bandits attack Claude, and you put him in some other dangerous situations besides, didn’t you?”

“I apologize. But I don’t regret the choices I’ve made. I may have many flaws, but my ability to judge someone’s character and potential is not one of them. I won’t fight a battle I can’t win.”

“Ah, so you *are* complimenting us.”

Opal chuckled, and the king smiled back before he quickly groaned with pain. Claude returned to the room.

“We shall be taking our leave, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Right. See you tomorrow,” the king replied.

“Your wish is my command.”

“Do take care of yourself, Your Majesty,” Opal added before she left. “Please excuse us.”

The chamberlain that soon appeared with some ice gasped in surprise when he saw the sorry state of the king.

“I bumped myself against a chair,” the king said as his excuse.

“We need to ice your hand too, Opal,” Claude said.

“I’m fine,” she replied.

“No, you’re not.”

“Oh, all right.”

Opal wasn’t in pain, and she felt that icing her hand was unnecessary, but Claude wouldn’t budge. He was worried, and she decided to give in this time around. It was clear that he’d been anxious about her while they’d been apart—

Opal had felt the exact same, after all. It was miraculous that they were able to walk alongside each other, be near each other, after what they'd just gone through. Opal used her uninjured hand to grab her beloved's hand instead of his arm as she normally would. Claude looked surprised for a moment, but he soon let out a chuckle. Opal did too, and they held hands on their trip back home, just as they'd done when they were kids.

23. Misdeeds

A day had passed since Duke and Duchess Bocceli had returned, but the kingdom still hadn't settled down. As Alessandro had said, Claude was summoned the following day, when the mastermind behind the revolt would be sentenced. Opal wanted to accompany him, which caused everyone in the Roussel manor to worry for her health; she had just returned to the royal capital, after all. But once Opal smiled and relayed her assurances to her staff that she was well, she boarded the carriage with her husband.

Last night, Nadja had fallen ill with a fever and was resting in bed. It seemed her exhaustion had caught up with her, and, even bedridden, she voiced her frustration over not being able to tag along with her mistress.

"It's odd, really," Claude grumbled. "Why is no one worried about *me*?"

"It's an accurate reflection of your life until now," Opal answered. "You must've rarely returned to the manor because you wandered about."

"Ah, makes sense..."

"You don't deny it."

"Because I can't."

The duchess cast her husband an exhausted glance, and he grinned back as he placed his hand over hers.

"But I won't wander around anymore," he said firmly. "I plan on leisurely spending the rest of my life in my land with my beloved wife."

"You might not wander about anymore, but it's not as if you aren't needed elsewhere," Opal replied.

"Yeah, I've gotta head to the duchy so that we can build that railroad."

"And I have to speak with Duncan about the seeds that'll be sown next year."

The two shared their future plans and smiled. The day when Connelly and Cole were restrained, Duncan had been found in the underground prison of the

duke's manor. In an act of resistance, he had allowed Trevor and the others to escape before he'd been captured by the rebels. Upon seeing what happened to Duncan, the other servants had chosen to obey Connelly. Opal felt that their choice was most wise; she had pardoned the servants who hadn't aggressively supported the rebels.

Any rebels that surrendered were confined in the duke's manor, and they'd be tasked with helping build and maintain the railroad. Barring those with higher rank, the soldiers would be treated as regular laborers, with someone watching over them of course. Claude had planned all of that in advance, and before Opal had entered the duchy, he'd already made the necessary preparations.

"It's a shame that the rebels were connected to Marquis Seims of Socille," Opal muttered. "It means that all the money that Omar had once sunk into Nobori ended up being used to fund the revolt. It's frustrating to hear."

"I don't think the marquis played a huge role back then."

"Even so..."

She sighed, even as Claude tried to console her. She knew that there was nothing she could've done, but she still felt angered by it all.

"His Majesty and I had assumed that the rebels were gathering funds by burgling places in Socille. The previous duke had passed and the silver mines had run dry, so they needed to make money somehow. When we captured the bandits and questioned them, it was puzzling to see that the rebels were still stockpiling money and gaining funds. It was then that we realized that these bandits were probably not the ones providing the funds, and at this point we turned our suspicions to Marquis Seims. He might have had relations to the previous duke, but who would've thought that he'd take such dangerous risks without reaping a single benefit? We never thought he'd do something like that."

"Which is why you returned to Socille to investigate," Opal said. "It was then that you noticed that the production rates of Marquis Seims's gold mines had plummeted. But despite their noticeable drop in quantity, they hadn't reported anything of the sort to the kingdom. A couple of officers in Socille had also

noticed this discrepancy, and so, you guys started to work together.”

Though the two of them had gone to Socille both for their honeymoon and to visit their hometown, Claude had also used the trip to investigate both Marquis Seims and the bandits. He had kept it all a secret from Opal because he didn’t want to drag her into any danger. But after Opal had heard the story of Nobori from LeBeau and had gone to the Bocceli Duchy to investigate, she had realized that Marquis Seims and the rebels shared a connection. She had then asked Omar if he could request that LeBeau look into the matter—she had also asked Hubert to act as well. LeBeau was a legal money lender, and though he was able to investigate any shadowy misdeeds, he couldn’t do it all alone. He was, after all, looking into a matter backed by Marquis Seims, a man who’d provided a handsome sum of money to Socille.

This was where the power and influence of Duke McLeod came into play. Over the past few years the duke had come to amass more wealth than Marquis Seims, and he also wielded a fair bit of influence within the royal palace. His presence changed the playing board, allowing LeBeau and the other government officials to act as they pleased without feeling hindered by Marquis Seims’s influence. Marquis Seims had gone so far as to engage in smuggling so that he could still contribute wealth to Socille and maintain power within the royal palace. He apparently had panicked when he found himself challenged by Hubert, who now held more power and authority than him. Ironically, Duke McLeod wasn’t interested in simply crushing Seims underfoot; instead, he allowed his strong sense of justice to guide the way.

Hubert especially found Seims’s acts of fraud to be absolutely unforgivable. The duke had always had a strong sense of right and wrong—it was likely that after completely missing Omar’s misdeeds, he felt the need to prove himself here.

“Omar’s a changed person now, and he’s never done anything like murder...” Opal mumbled.

“Are you thinking about McLeod?” Claude asked.

“I’m thinking about Marquis Seims’s misdeeds.”

“I admit that they shocked me quite a bit when I found out. He’d been

falsifying reports of his production for years and had in fact produced more gold than he claimed so that he could export it to Taisei via a base in Nobori. And he was the one in charge of the entire operation and organization. It feels like a story straight out of a fairy tale.”

“Quite right. Since the previous king’s reign, all of Socille’s mineral and ore production has been supervised by the crown. I heard that there was quite a bit of backlash back then, but it wasn’t as though unreasonable taxes were placed. It seems human greed has no bounds.”

Opal sighed once more. Marquis Seims had set it all up—he had acted like he had been robbed and pretended to somehow maintain current production rates so that he could dodge additional taxes. He had then shared a small portion of the hidden wealth with the bandits, who had blown it all in Nobori, meaning that the marquis’s, and by extension, the organization’s, wallet hadn’t taken a hit.

When the time had come to end the scheme, he had faked infighting within the bandit organization and killed them all, silencing them forever. Odds were that had he never tried to overstep his bounds, he could have kept his operation going indefinitely. As it stood Socille was in a tizzy, having just learned that a marquis had collaborated with an outside organization to try to fund a revolt in another country by illegally exporting gold and using bandits to stage his own robbery.

Once discovered, Seims had been stripped of his title and his assets had been seized before he was thrown in prison. The former marquis was now awaiting his punishment—death by poison. Hubert had written out all the details in his letter, which Claude had delivered that night in the attic. Frankly, Socille currently had no time or leeway to deal with Taisei’s affairs.

Naturally, Seims now had no way of sending reinforcements to the rebels, and all of this information had been kept under wraps so that the rebels wouldn’t suspect a thing.

“I think the dumbest part of this entire affair is that had Cole simply followed regulations and submitted the gold to Taisei instead of smuggling it illegally to Marquis Seims, he would have generated far greater profit,” Claude said.

“You’re right,” Opal agreed as she recalled Cole’s smug face.

The previous Duke Bocceli had been against Alessandro taking the throne precisely because the former hadn’t wanted Taisei to become like Socille—putting the kingdom in charge of all ore and mineral production would have severely crippled any private control the nobles of Taisei had over their own mines. Had the common people taken a good look at Alessandro’s deeds thus far, they would’ve never tried to join the rebellion and start such a meaningless battle.

“It may come in varying degrees, but all humans are greedy,” Claude remarked.

“And what greed do *you* have?” Opal asked.

“Oh, I’m quite greedy. I’ll do whatever it takes to see you smile, even if I have to take over the entire world.”

“That won’t make me happy. All I want is to live with you and everyone else as I kick back and live my life leisurely.”

“Your wishes haven’t changed ever since we were kids. Could you just play along a teeny bit so I can act out my greedy desires?”

“Of course.”

Opal smiled as the carriage clattered to a halt. The time had come to silence the faction against Alessandro once and for all. She took her husband’s hand and stepped off the carriage as she walked forward, facing firmly ahead.

24. Growth

The royal palace was abuzz with more people than usual. To preserve fairness, everyone who was allowed to enter the royal palace normally was allowed to attend the hearing for the trial. Many nobles and employees of the royal capital who were usually off today decided to be present for this affair. While they waited for the trial to begin, they whispered rumors to each other about the identity of the mastermind behind the rebellion and the one who'd be sentenced. When Opal and Claude arrived, the crowd quickly made way for them, with furious, hushed whispers commencing in their wake.

"It's quite the crowd," Opal observed.

"They won't all fit in the great hall," Claude replied.

"What will happen to those who can't fit inside?"

"His Majesty said that he'd keep all the windows and doors open, so I imagine that they can peek inside that way."

"But they won't be able to see much."

"The same could be said for those gathered in the hall as well. It's a huge place."

"You're right."

She wasn't sure if her voice could be heard amid all the chattering.

"I can't believe how brazen she is, walking by the duke's side right now," someone whispered. "I suppose those who are unfaithful no longer have any shame to rein themselves in."

It seemed her story of eloping with Julian had spread, and people began to giggle at her, but the duke and duchess ignored it all as they headed for the great hall.

"What happened to Julian?" Opal asked, reminded of her "elopement."

"No need to worry about him," Claude replied.

"I'm not worried. But you're still hiding something from me, aren't you?"

"Not *hiding*, per se."

Why doesn't he just tell me then? Opal wondered. Her husband had a bit of a mean streak to him, and she pinched his arm in response.

"Ouch!" he yelped.

"Oh, quit your exaggerating," Opal said.

He turned away, and she headed into the waiting room first, with Claude following her soon after. The ladies-in-waiting awaited them, and they swiftly prepared some tea upon spotting the married couple.

"Are we allowed to leisurely enjoy a spot of tea right now?" Opal wondered.

"We'll have quite a few spectators—I mean, a large audience, so I imagine it'll take some time for the great hall to settle down," Claude replied. "Some people will probably start fighting for better seats and all that."

"I pity the staff in charge."

"The Royal Guards are in charge of the middle of the hall, so it should be fine. If the audience refuses to listen, they'll get thrown out, no questions asked."

"Then I suppose the guests will fight among themselves."

"Yep. I'd imagine that it'd be quite the show."

"You're a mean man."

Opal chuckled and thanked the servant who brought her tea. Claude followed suit and grabbed his cup. The ladies-in-waiting happily bowed and retreated to the corner of the room. Just as Opal took her own cup, the door slammed open without even a knock.

"Claude!" a familiar man shouted. "What's going on?! The Royal Guards arrived at my manor this morning and took away my older brother and father!"

"They were taken on charges of masterminding a rebellion against the crown," Claude replied.

"Don't be a fool! My mother might be a daughter of Duke Bocceli, but these are false charges!"

“We’ll know the truth soon enough.”

Eric—the son of Baron Pradeaux—had barged into the room and unleashed his anger at Claude at once. It seemed Eric had grown very little since the last time Opal had seen him; last time they met, he’d insulted her and made her out to be a lascivious woman. No doubt he was infuriated because his father, Marquis Bapot, and his brother, Viscount Tuli Amadi, had been restrained. And so Eric had gone to his friend Claude for help.

Opal pitied Eric; it was clear that the young man had been kept in the dark about everything from both Claude and his own family. It meant that neither of them viewed him as useful in any way. *Which is why his actions and thoughts remain immature*, Opal thought. Eric’s father and older brother were guilty, no doubt, and the only question lingering in Opal’s mind about them was just how severe their punishments were going to be. Even if their family—that is, Eric—was acquitted of sin, a thorny road awaited him.

But humans were capable of change, no matter their age. Just as Hubert had managed to corner Marquis Seims and bring his misdeeds to light, Eric could also grow in his own way. With that thought in mind, Opal set her cup down, earning Eric’s attention.

“It’s *your* fault!” the baron shouted as he pointed at her. “Ever since *you* came, you witch, everything went awry!”

“Eric! You *bastard*!” Claude roared furiously.

“Claude, stop!” Opal yelled. “I’m fine. I’m used to it.”

“Used to it?” Claude mumbled as he retreated.

“Baron Pradeaux, is it not about time for you to grow up?” Opal asked.

“What?!” Eric demanded. He raised his voice but soon noticed the maids cowering in fear in the corner of the room.

“Please understand that every remark that leaves your mouth has the power to influence many others. It would behoove you to remember that your words and actions are under the careful watch of many people around you.”

He snapped his mouth shut and gazed down at Opal, much to Claude’s

dismay. But before the duke could speak up again, a loud knock echoed throughout the room. The servants hastily opened it to allow the person entry.

“Duke and Duchess Bocceli, your time has come. Please head to the great hall.”

“Very well,” Claude said to the chamberlain after a brief pause.

He stood up and reached out for Opal, ignoring Eric as he did so. “Let’s go.”

“Of course. Thank you, Claude,” she replied.

She stared only at her beloved as she stood up and headed for the exit. Only then did Eric snap back to his senses as he mulled over Opal’s words. The duchess glanced back at the baron and prayed that Eric would use this opportunity to grow and mature as a person.

25. The Rebels

Guided by the chamberlain, the married couple headed for the great hall where many people awaited them. The crowd was busy whispering rumors as they always were, but they quickly fell silent when they noticed the duke and the duchess emerge. As the people began to speak in hushed murmurs once more, the entire venue seemed to be in a state of silent confusion. The voices that Opal heard weren't pointed toward her and the rumor that she'd eloped with another man; instead, the main topic of discussion was Eric and his family, especially as Eric appeared, silently following behind Claude. It seemed that someone had seen the fuss in House Bapot this morning and started a rumor which had spread like wildfire.

"People love to see others fall," Opal muttered.

"It gives them a false sense of superiority," Claude explained.

"Nadja was frustrated about being unable to attend, but it's much better that she's absent. She'll get exposed to such malicious air being here."

"Opal, are you *sure* that you're all right?"

"I've never been better, really."

Opal was guided to a seat that was up on the main platform of the hall, on the side of the king. She gently reached out her arms in a wide stretch, the exaggerated motion easily catching the attention of the audience. Claude didn't seem to mind and smiled. The married couple soon turned serious, both of them worried about Nadja. The maid had been dragged into this horrific ordeal, and if she so desired, Opal had wanted to let her servant see this incident until the very end. But the maid had fallen ill, and truthfully all this wasn't worth jeopardizing her health. Before leaving the manor Opal had promised to tell Nadja of everything that would occur.

The duchess gazed at the people who'd gathered. No attention was paid to rank or hierarchy within the area designated for spectators, and some were left

without seats and had to stand in order to properly witness the trial. The main platform stood in the center, and the Royal Guards were fanned out in a semicircular arc facing away from the platform and toward the crowd. Some nobles sat right behind them to get a good look. Eric sat in the front despite his late appearance, but no one tried to strike a conversation with the once popular noble.

He was cast aside in a flash.

The people that had tried to curry favor with him just yesterday had turned their backs on him now, hurling insults and casting scornful gazes his way. Opal had experienced such harsh treatment herself and had seen it many times before. Both Eric and Tuli were prime candidates for marriage and had stolen the eyes of many hopeful women. The latter had now become a criminal, and the former was innocent for now but was still treated as a criminal nonetheless. People distanced themselves from Eric and glared at him with repulsion.

“Shall I have him leave?” Claude asked.

“No, he’ll soon realize the reality that he faces. I’m sure of it,” Opal replied.

The duke had noticed that Eric glared at people spreading awful rumors about him from a distance before he turned to Opal and glared at *her*, his eyes blaming her for this entire ordeal. He still refused to properly face his situation, but he was about to get a splash of cold, cruel reality. When Opal turned away from him, she noticed that the crowd had gone noisy. Marquis Bapot and Viscount Tuli Amadi, the masterminds of this entire rebellion, had appeared with several nobles in tow.

Even Connelly and Cole were here. Their hands were restrained in front of them, humiliation painted on their faces. Only Bapot and Tuli stepped forward proudly, but when the viscount spotted Claude, he gulped nervously and hastily turned away. *Surely, the viscount has heard rumors that Claude returned to the palace...*

Though it was clear that Claude’s friendship with Tuli had been built on lies, Opal’s heart ached for her husband anyway. Surely, Claude had trusted Tuli at first; the duke’s personality made it clear that he’d agonized over a decision. The duchess felt glum at the realization, but Claude placed a hand over hers.

“I’m fine,” he whispered. “I acted based on my own beliefs. They must’ve had their own reasons for acting as well.”

Opal nodded slightly and turned back to the rebellious nobles. Aside from Tuli, who had been in Alessandro’s faction, Marquis Bapot and the other nobles had all assumed a neutral stance in the prior revolt. The entire ordeal this time was to encourage those truly against the king to crawl out from their den—in other words, it was a trap laid by Alessandro.

Since the king seemed to even know about Omar, it likely hadn’t mattered whether Opal divorced Hubert or not—the royal had planned on receiving aid from Socille anyway. Naturally, Claude hadn’t offered his assistance simply for the king. In fact, Opal suspected that her husband had quite a few personal feelings that propelled him to do what he did. *Over the past four years, every major detractor of the king was slowly being cornered and trapped.* Indeed, everyone was dancing in the palm of his hand.

Opal, Claude, and even Hubert had been manipulated just as the king desired. It was infuriating to think about, but it also served as a reminder that he was a reliable ally. As their king, there was no greater friend than him. And so, Claude had supported this man for many years. *Sure, it’s annoying to be used, but if it leads to even a bit more happiness for everyone else, I don’t mind. And I could even claim to be proud of my efforts; didn’t I help the king gain even more evidence than he expected? Which is probably why I was even allowed to punch him at all.*

Opal recalled the surprised look on the king’s face—he’d expected Opal would slap him instead, probably—and internally chuckled. When she was a kid, she’d often grappled and fought with her older brother. Thinking about her childhood caused her temper to flare a bit. Ever since they were kids, she hadn’t gotten along with her brother. Because of him, Trevor and Marcia had scolded her to no end, and her mother had looked so sorrowful.

Claude noticed a change in his wife’s demeanor. “Opal, are you okay?”

“I was just thinking about fighting with my brother. That’s all,” she replied.

“Ah, gotcha.”

He had intuited that she was thinking about her brother; he was aware that

the two siblings didn't get along, and he had often tried to act as the mediator, only to fail miserably. Claude was taking a deep breath to mask some of his laughter when the door near the platform opened. That entrance was permitted for use only by the royal family, and as expected, King Alessandro made his appearance.

26. The Trial

The moment the doors opened, everyone seated rose to their feet to greet their king. He finally sat down on his throne, and as though that were the signal, the people bowed at once.

“You may all relax,” the king proclaimed, voice booming throughout the room.

Everyone collectively breathed a sigh of relief, even as the tension in the room was higher than ever. *The fuss that I heard just seconds ago vanished*, Opal thought. The usually friendly Alessandro now emanated an intimidating aura that forbade anyone from approaching. The sheer awe and fear that he commanded in this moment was truly fit for a king.

“We shall begin the trial of the rebel faction of Marquis Bapot and Viscount Amadi by King Alessandro of Taisei,” announced Sir Barba, the leader of the House of Lords. “Witnesses may take their seats.”

It was the cue for Opal to take her seat, and she stared at Tuli. Both the viscount and Marquis Bapot still had an air of arrogance around them, showing no care to the confusion and fear that they’d caused. Their attitude enraged Opal. When she’d returned to the royal capital, she saw people going about their day like usual, but clearly under duress, their expressions creased and worn with anxiety and sorrow. But whenever they spotted Claude’s carriage, adorned with the emblem of House Roussel, their faces had lit up with hope, and they had cheered and waved at him with twinkling eyes.

Claude had humbly stated that while he was revered as a hero in the prior revolt, he was nothing more than a mere figurehead, but Opal could see that his words were quite false. Clearly, the people placed much hope in him. *I don’t know just how far the rumors surrounding all this have spread in the city, but we need to end it once and for all here and make it so that the citizens feel safe again.*

The rebels might have failed their attempt, but the sight of a deluge of rebel

soldiers flooding the streets had been seared into the minds of many. The rumors of Claude being killed by bandits had also spread, and as a whole the people had become anxious about their well-being and the state of the kingdom. Hence, people had erupted with joy—some had even cried—upon seeing Claude alive and well.

“Please, if I may,” Marquis Bapot said. “The atrocities committed by the rebels that Sir Barba has mentioned have reached my ears as well. I understand that many have taken up their swords out of respect for the late Duke Bocceli—pardon me, the *previous* Duke Bocceli—and pointed them at you, Your Majesty. Those acts have angered me greatly as well, and I simply cannot understand why my name must be tarnished in front of many while I’m restrained. I hope to receive an explanation first.”

The crowd began to murmur in confusion; the marquis had committed a breach of etiquette by speaking first, an unusual occurrence.

“Marquis Bapot, your insolence shall not be permitted in front of His Majesty. Heed your tongue,” Sir Barba said.

“All the more reason to voice my rights,” the marquis replied. “This trial tarnishes the dignity of my household. Just this morning, the Royal Guards stormed into my manor, tied up both me and my son, and accused us of crimes we have no memory committing. Since I strongly believe this misunderstanding will be cleared up and apologies will be given for such hasty action, I shall forgive this wrongdoing against me and my family. But to be publicly humiliated as my so-called crimes—if they are so-called—are pressed against me? This, I cannot allow. First and foremost, I’d like to ask why Tuli and I are accused of high treason.”

“Your questions would’ve been answered soon enough had you exercised some patience,” Sir Barba replied. “Your Majesty, may I be permitted to answer the marquis’s query?”

“You may,” Alessandro permitted.

“Thank you.”

Regardless of Sir Barba’s annoyance at the marquis’s audacity, Alessandro’s permission for the trial to proceed caused the venue to turn as silent as a tomb.

Everyone held the same question as the marquis and was dying to find out the truth.

“This revolt was funded by gold from the Lede Mines, located in the Bocceli Duchy,” Sir Barba explained. “The one in charge of the mines was a man called Cole, who stands over there. The man beside him is called Connelly. He served the previous duke and still manages the duchy to this day. For the past four years, since the death of the previous duke, you have been giving them orders, have you not, Marquis Bapot?”

“I know nothing of the sort,” the marquis replied. “I’ve never seen those two men in my life.”

“What?!” Cole cried. “It was *you* who ordered the smuggling operation! And now you attempt to sever ties with us? Unbelievable!”

The marquis cast a cold, steely gaze at the round man. “You dare take such a tone when speaking to me? Know your place, you peon.”

“E-Eek! I-I’m sorry...” Cole trembled and visibly shrank into himself.

Connelly remained silent. Perhaps he had already resigned himself to his fate.

“How curious,” Sir Barba said innocently. “Marquis Bapot, it’s my understanding that you were rather close with the previous Duke Bocceli and had visited his manor several times in the past. And yet, you’re saying that you’ve never seen Connelly before?”

“How could I remember the face of every single servant in his manor?” the marquis replied. “My good sir, I do hope that such horrific accusations aren’t being levied toward me simply because I dared to have *friends*. My son, Tuli, had without a doubt proven his loyalty to His Majesty during the previous revolt. He fought side by side with Roussel over there.”

Bapot was visibly irritated by this point. Tuli didn’t even glance at Claude, and neither man said a word. Opal stayed silent as well and continued to watch the trial unfold.

“We’ve got quite a few witness statements, you see, Marquis,” Sir Barba said. “They, along with the people you’re with, have testified that *you* are the mastermind behind this rebellion. Most of the rebels who attacked the royal

capital just the other day were from a private army with expenses that apparently you helped maintain.”

“What nonsense. Such meaningless testimonies were what led you to pin me as the mastermind?” the marquis replied. “Anyone could cook up the same story and use it to blame whomever they liked!”

He spoke with an aggrieved, theatrical flair, turning to glare at all the nobles who’d been restrained alongside him. They all turned pale and averted their gazes.

“I agree. Testimonies alone aren’t enough,” Sir Barba said. “I admit that we needed some time to gather enough evidence; you’re quite the careful man, marquis. The last time Taisei faced a revolt you had placed yourself firmly against His Majesty but never allowed us to catch you in the act. In fact, you made your son, Viscount Amadi, win His Majesty’s trust. That allowed you to come out on top no matter the outcome.”

“Such insolent words!” Tuli shouted, unable to maintain his silence. “I supported His Majesty entirely of my own accord!”

“How laudable,” Sir Barba replied indifferently. “And *why*, pray tell, did you want to support His Majesty?”

“Wh-Whatever do you mean? Must I have a reason to aid the king?”

I know very little about Sir Barba, but he isn’t the leader of the House of Lords for nothing. It’s little wonder that His Majesty appointed him for the role.

“Where is your will, Viscount Amadi? Your thoughts?” Sir Barba inquired. “To me, it looks as though a hot-blooded young man simply wanted to go against the wishes of his parents as an act of rebellion. But even your anger had been skillfully utilized by the hand of your parent, it seems.”

“I-I won’t allow you to mock my brother any further!” Eric shouted as he interjected. No longer able to hide his rage, he rushed forward, but he was held back by the Royal Guards.

Sir Barba paid him no heed and went on, “Then Viscount Amadi, if you support His Majesty as you say, may I ask why you tried to dispatch bandits to kill Duke Bocceli—for clarity’s sake, I shall call him Marquis Roussel for now.

Why did you try to have Marquis Roussel assassinated?"

27. Evidence

“Wh-What in the *world*?!” Tuli stammered in anger, though perhaps the stutter was because his plot had been revealed. “I was attacked too!” The somewhat nonsensical reply to Sir Barba’s question suggested that the viscount had clearly lost his composure.

“Tuli, hold your tongue,” the marquis ordered.

“But father, I—”

“Silence!”

Marquis Bapot acted wisely here; it was best for Tuli to not say anything unnecessary. But this tactic wouldn’t work during this trial, for Alessandro had gathered not only witnesses but concrete evidence as well.

“Due to his heavy involvement in this ordeal, I shall now ask Marquis Roussel to testify,” Sir Barba said.

“Certainly.” Claude rose to his feet, bowed toward Alessandro, and began his testimony.

“As you may know,” Claude said, “His Majesty had secretly tasked me several times to uncover the identities of those planning a coup d’état. Though I came close several times, I had yet to grasp anything decisive. I became convinced that someone from the inside had been leaking information to our enemies. I then decided to share false intelligence with those I suspected the most of being spies. Only Viscount Amadi acted in accordance with the fake news.”

“That is simply a coincidence,” Tuli claimed. “It saddens me to hear that you doubted me at all.”

“Can you blame me? Viscount, at any given opportunity you would have had an excuse to act as if you were keeping watch over me. And you even utilized His Majesty’s name so that you could call my wife, Opal, to the royal villa where I was staying.”

“Unbelievable! You’re trying to blame *me* for *you* getting caught sleeping with another woman!”

“Indeed,” Claude replied, “there are rumors that Opal and I are having marital struggles. But the reason for it is unknown. In fact, no one should know that the incident at the royal villa was the cause; no one should even know that I was in the royal villa at all.”

“Y-You must’ve forgotten that you told me about it!” Tuli sputtered. “Or have you forgotten how often you’ve confided in me? Yes, that’s right!”

It was very unlike Claude to bring up something so secretive in such a public setting. He must’ve still been furious over the fact that his sleeping habits had been exploited to stage such a horrible scene for Opal to walk into. And so, he’d given Tuli an out. To intentionally mention this topic brought forward no concrete evidence in support of the accusations against Tuli and the marquis, but perhaps it satisfied Claude that he at least got the chance to tell Opal his feelings.

The duchess gently knocked the floor with her shoes as a signal to Claude that she understood what he was trying to do here, and Claude loudly cleared his throat. Alessandro, for his part, watched the couple with glee.

“If you know of my wife’s accomplishments in Socille, it’s no difficult feat to assume that she’d head to the Bocceli Duchy,” Claude said. “But since the Bocceli manor was the rebel’s home base, her presence was highly inconvenient to your plans. For example, if you had many weapons stored away, you wouldn’t want her to catch wind of that. You tried and tried to change her schedule, but my stubborn wife headed to the duchy anyway, and you both were forced to swiftly change your plans.”

Opal didn’t mind being called “stubborn” by Claude, but it seemed Marquis Bapot was upset by Claude’s explanation. “I know *nothing* of the rebels. Don’t lump me in with them. I find it most unpleasant.”

Claude ignored the marquis and continued. “Any unexpected change in plans will bring discord. Even if you managed to hastily remove the copious number of weapons stored in the manor and store them on a ship from Port Pasma to head to the royal capital, that would mean depriving your own forces of

weaponry. How could you stand a chance against a royal army fully outfitted with guns?”

Only then did Opal realize why the rebels had been so easily suppressed. They’d had no weapons to fight back—it was a pure difference in power. As Claude had mentioned, the weapons that should’ve gone to the rebels had vanished when she’d met Connolly; no doubt Claude had taken them all. She recalled that when she first arrived, Julian had been sent to Port Pasma to check on something. Opal was miffed by Julian, but she knew that she should be satisfied for having served as an excellent diversion.

“Speaking of discord, Tuli, I’ll have you know that the secret orders I’d received from His Majesty were also bait,” Claude said.

“What?!” the viscount gasped.

Claude spoke so swiftly on the course of events it seemed that those watching could not keep up, but that hardly mattered. What was important was that Tuli became abundantly aware that he had no place to flee. The viscount *would* be charged as a rebel.

“The orders I had been given by His Majesty had already been given to others a few days in advance,” Claude explained. “They accomplished their tasks just as I was on their tails. If I act, the enemy will as well, though personally I would’ve loved a bit more time.”

Alessandro smiled at Claude’s small complaint. Surely, it would’ve been just fine to give Claude a few orders *after* he accomplished his goals—the man was bait. But Claude was never given the luxury of a bit more time. While it was partly to keep him on his toes, surely another part of it was for Alessandro to have his fun as well. The king was enjoying this trial too, after all.

“Unfortunately, I have no room for doubt. I’m certain that Viscount Amadi had leaked information to the rebels,” Claude said. “And from my source, I discovered that you planned to have soldiers disguise themselves as bandits and have me killed. So in response I acted ahead of you and switched out these bandit soldiers with my allies.”

“Y-You could’ve falsified all of that by yourself!” Tuli cried.

“Perhaps so. If so I could very well summon the people I ordered to pretend to assault me here as witnesses, but if you insist on claiming ignorance to this plot, it will be pointless. So instead I shall present to you hard evidence that you cannot deny.”

Marquis Bapot scoffed; to him no such proof existed. He must have been careful enough to destroy any physical evidence and made sure not to sign anything he’d sent to his accomplices. Sir Barba permitted Claude the submission of evidence, and the two men turned to Alessandro for his permission as well. The king silently nodded in agreement.

And so, several ledgers and two stationery boxes were brought in, the sight of which made Cole turn deathly pale. The witnesses who delivered this evidence rose to their feet to provide detailed explanations of what had been brought in. They sounded as though they were speaking directly to the king, but what they were actually doing was ensuring that the audience could clearly comprehend the legitimacy of the trial.

One by one, each piece of evidence was laid out, and as the witnesses’ explanation continued the apprehended rebels slumped their shoulders—as they had nowhere to flee. In contrast, the audience became more excited and invested in the case. Had blood been shed, the audience would’ve surely acted differently, but to them, this trial was more like a show to be enjoyed. Marquis Bapot didn’t have a single piece of evidence that tied him to the crimes and so he stood tall, with Tuli imitating him.

“Next, the letters in this box shall be explained,” one of the officials said. “We were only able to obtain these thanks to the assistance of Marchioness Roussel. Would you kindly explain these letters to everyone, Marchioness?”

“Most certainly,” Opal said.

She stood up, causing the room to chatter once more. They were surprised that a woman was allowed to take the stage at all. Opal ignored their reactions and opened the box to take out an envelope. She raised it high in the air for all to see the seal and the sender. The seal was opened, but the emblem could still be made out.

“These letters have been sent from Marquis Bapot to Marquis Seims of

Socille,” she started.

“Impossible! It’s a forgery!” the marquis said as he jumped to his feet and pointed at Opal in accusation. The composure he had summoned earlier had completely vanished.

Opal ignored him and continued. “Up until a year ago, it seems you always sealed your letters with your family crest, but as an extra precaution you stopped doing so. You even stopped signing your own name. The contents of the letter, however, can easily point to the sender, which *is* you.”

The crowd silently watched on, surprised by the marquis’s outburst.

“The letter is about the smuggling of gold and the request for swift preparation of reinforcements when the rebellion starts,” Opal said. “I won’t read it all out, but His Majesty and the other officials have already examined the letters. As I mentioned earlier, recent letters lack a signature, and you’ve ordered for the letters to be burned once read, but Marquis Seims didn’t follow those orders. Though the two of you agreed to cooperate with one another, neither of you actually trusted the other. Marquis Seims likely kept the letters in case anything happened, and thanks to that, we were able to obtain concrete proof of your misdeeds.”

“No! I’ve written no such thing!” Marquis Bapot exclaimed. “It must’ve been someone else... Roussel! You framed me, didn’t you?!”

“I wouldn’t go to all this trouble just to drag *you* down,” Claude replied.

“What did you say?”

The marquis desperately tried to deny his crimes and tried to blame it all on Claude. Opal’s husband, however, didn’t even entertain this idea. Bapot took a few moments to process Claude’s reply, his face turning scarlet in realization.

“Don’t get all cocky, you brat! You managed to charm the doddering old Roussel, snuck into the close circle of His Majesty, and then took the gold to—”

Bapot’s spiel of hatred was cut off by a ledger that hit him smack in the face. Though he had managed to shield most of his face in the nick of time, the corner of the book had still hit his forehead. He groaned in pain.

“Oh, goodness me!” Opal cried in horror. “Such precious evidence just flew out of my hands!”

Her terrible acting couldn’t have possibly fooled anyone. It was crystal clear that she’d thrown the book, and the audience, including the Royal Guards who stood nearby, froze in astonishment. The deafening silence that followed was only broken by the boisterous guffaws of Claude and Alessandro.

28. Rights

“Father! Are you all right?!” Eric cried from a distance away. He glared at Opal, and the audience, having been reminded of his presence, recoiled from him. “You *wench*! How dare you assault my father?! Even if he’s being accused of a crime, you have no right to physically attack him! You should be ejected immediately!”

“Oh? But he insulted my precious husband,” Opal replied. “Surely, then, it’s my right as his wife to stand up in his defense.”

“What in the *world*?” Eric exclaimed.

Alessandro interrupted the exchange, saying, “Marchioness Roussel, do continue.” The implication was clear that he was on Opal’s side in the argument.

Opal did a small bow of gratitude, much to Eric’s dismay.

“We’ve already thoroughly examined the letters and know that they haven’t been falsified, Marquis Bapot,” Opal said. “And Marquis Seims has also admitted his connection with you. I’ve had Duke McLeod and Viscount Kreusel serve as witnesses in this testimony and received their signatures as well.”

“Duke McLeod was formerly your husband,” Bapot pointed out.

“He was. And?”

“How could I trust this testimony? You could’ve pulled some strings to convince him.”

“For what reason?”

“As of late Duke McLeod has been throwing his weight around within Socille’s royal palace. Perhaps Marquis Seims had become a bit of a nuisance to him. And the same could be said for Roussel. As the most trusted subject of His Majesty, he may have viewed me and my son as eyesores. No doubt you two colluded to create this conspiracy that involves both kingdoms.” The marquis

confidently turned to the audience. “Do you not all agree with my assessment?”

At once, the nobles that took a more modest and neutral stance began to whisper furiously to each other. Claude and Sir Barba gazed upon the people with complete exasperation while Alessandro watched on, thoroughly amused.

“Marquis Bapot, your theory is a very interesting one, indeed, but I ask that you enlighten me,” Opal said. “Why must *Duke* McLeod find *Marquis* Seims a nuisance, just as *Duke* Boccelli finds you or *Viscount* Amadi an eyesore? Must they go to such great lengths to ruin you? Both my current husband and my former husband enjoy far greater status and wealth than one can ever dream of achieving. Ah, and while my assets may seem like a paltry sum in comparison to theirs, I do have some money as well. If the reason for the cause of this entire ordeal was simply financial strain, then I could’ve lent all the support that I could muster.”

Opal’s remarks were laced with a hint of sarcasm; the audience was able to recall that this woman had achieved a high status back in Socille and boasted impressive wealth. Taisei’s noble society had been heavily influenced by baseless rumors and had recently only pretended to allow Opal into their circle while internally still looking down upon her. No one had even begun to imagine how frightful she’d be as an enemy. But now the audience, once buzzing with whispers, fell silent, with some even sitting taller, as if finally paying attention.

“How deplorable,” Viscount Amadi said. “You stand here and brag of your ability to make use of powerful men. You’re just as the rumors say, a lowly wh —”

Tuli’s scathing remarks were quickly cut off with a punch to his face. The Royal Guards had noticed Claude marching forward, but none of them stopped him or chose to punish him for his actions.

“Claude!” Eric shrieked. “How dare you hit my brother?!”

“He insulted my precious wife. Surely, then, it’s my right as her husband to stand up in her defense,” Claude replied as he waved his right hand.

Opal rushed to her husband’s side and clasped his hand. “It’s turning red. Does it hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Claude said with a smile.

“But...”

“Roussel, enough with this farce already,” Alessandro grumbled angrily, referencing the exchange that he’d seen the day prior.

The audience once again looked astonished, but this time, no one felt an ounce of sympathy for the assaulted viscount. None of the hushed whispers were in his defense. Opal and Claude bowed toward the king as they returned to their positions, away from Marquis Bapot and a glaring Tuli, who rubbed his aching cheek.

“Then please, allow us to continue,” Claude said. “Here’s the secret ledger for the Lede Mines, detailing the amount of gold that had been produced. It almost exactly matches Marquis Seims’s ledger where he noted the amount imported, and the officials in Socille have confirmed as much. I’ve received the signature of Kensington, the legal officer in charge, along with several other officials.”

“How?!” Cole spluttered. “How did the officials in Socille get their hands on that ledger?!”

Opal tilted her head to one side. “Why, because I told them all about it, of course.”

“And I’m asking *why*! How?! I got rid of that ledger as soon as I could!”

Opal was puzzled by Cole’s confusion—the answer was obvious to her. Perhaps this was just Cole refusing to own up to his rather atrocious mistake.

“When I was trapped in the duke’s manor at the foot of the Lede Mines, Julian brought me this ledger so that I could pass the time,” Opal said.

“Julian! I knew it!” Cole growled angrily.

Both Connelly and Marquis Bapot reacted at the mention of the footman’s name. When Opal had been trapped in the attic, Julian had brought not simple books for her to peruse but Cole’s hidden ledgers—proof of misdeeds. Opal had then gathered some numbers and asked her uncle in Socille to conduct a brief investigation. The letter detailing her request had been entrusted to Julian.

“You didn’t get rid of the ledger yourself?! You had *Julian* take care of it for

you?!” Connelly shouted.

“*You’re* the one who said that he could be trusted!” Cole wailed.

“He was introduced to me by Marquis Bapot in the first place—”

“Quiet!” the marquis bellowed, silencing Connelly and Cole as they passed the blame back and forth between each other.

The venue also fell silent, and the marquis pointed a wrathful glare at Opal.

“Indeed, I’ve exchanged a few letters with Marquis Seims. We had a friendly, cordial relationship,” the marquis admitted. “But your so-called *evidence* must be a forgery that took advantage of my relationship with him. I know how careful Marquis Seims is, and he must’ve known that the officials were working toward a conviction. What baffles me is how it seems like he didn’t do a single thing to stop them.”

“There are some acts so malicious no one is able to forgive them,” Opal replied. “Perhaps someone had acted before the officials did.”

Even before the officials or Hubert had had a chance to act, Opal had gone to LeBeau to ask for his aid. Opal almost smiled when she recalled the legal money lender instantly agreeing to her request, and frantically tried to keep a solemn expression.

“So *you* must’ve acted first,” the marquis spat.

“Marquis Bapot, I don’t appreciate you taking that attitude with my wife,” Claude said. “Apologize to her.”

“I’m fine, Claude,” Opal said. “I’ve no need for insincere apologies. I’m very much aware of how he and his son view me.”

Claude stood up and drew his wife close to his side as she gently patted his arm. By this point Eric could no longer stand both Opal and Claude maintaining their composure even during a time like this. He marched forward, pushing past the Royal Guards, to point a finger close to Opal’s face.

“This woman has fooled both Claude and Duke McLeod!” he shouted. “Please be careful, Your Majesty! She’s a demon who can charm any man in her path! No doubt Julian was also seduced by her feminine wiles!”

“Oh dear...” Opal murmured.

It's been a while since someone called me a demon, she thought without a care. Claude angrily clenched his fist for another punch, but Opal hastily grabbed his arm first.

“Opal...” he said.

“It's not worth getting angry about,” Opal said. “And His Majesty is...”

She trailed off before she could mention that the royal was enjoying the scene; the king's smile had transformed into a grin that practically encompassed his entire face. Puzzled, both Opal and Claude exchanged a glance before they gulped at the figure that appeared. He walked past the married couple, approached Eric, and punched him right in the face before the Royal Guards could react. The audience screamed in terror.

“Julian!” Opal gasped.

“Julian?!” Cole and Connelly cried in shock.

Tuli looked visibly surprised, and Eric was unable to utter a word as Julian was restrained by the guards—the baron could only look up at Julian in astonishment.

“What are the guards *doing*?!” Marquis Bapot shouted. “And why is *he* here?!”

“Because I've been called as a witness,” Julian replied casually. “And the guards have done their job, no? But can you please let me go? I have every right to punch this man.”

Sir Barba gestured for the guards to release the footman, and they hesitantly let Julian free. No longer in the outfit of a servant, and in splendid attire fit for an audience with the king, Julian smoothed out his garments.

“The *right*? What rights would an adulterer possibly be able to claim?” the marquis roared with fury.

The audience was aware of the rumors that Julian and Opal had eloped, and observed the proceedings with tense excitement. As people began to whisper and murmur, Julian bowed gracefully at both the marquis and the crowd.

“It’s certainly been a while, Marquis Bapot,” he said. “And I’ve been indebted to you both, Mr. Connelly and Mr. Cole. I’m truly pleased to meet everyone present here today. I’m sincerely honored. My name is Julian Holloway, and I’m the older brother of Opal, my nitwit of a little sister.”

29. Siblings

"H-Her *older brother*?" the marquis stammered in disbelief.

"Quite right. My younger sister was insulted. Surely, I have the right to stand up in her defense?" Julian replied with a mocking tone.

The stunned crowd began to mutter once more. Earl Holloway was renowned within Taisei as well, but here was the sudden appearance of his son, a man shrouded in mystery even in his home nation. A different kind of screech emanated from the audience, and Julian smiled at the excited squeals of the women in the room as they fawned over him.

"I ask you all to take good care of my younger sister," he said. "She's got a needlessly strong sense of justice and possesses quite the strong will. I know such things can be a bit annoying, but I can assure you she's got a few adorable sides of her own."

As always, Julian knew how to please a crowd, and Opal was angered by her brother's unnecessary remarks. His smile always seemed to be mocking whoever received it, and it infuriated her to no end. Claude sighed as the siblings began to argue again, but Opal paid him no heed as she sent a taunting gaze at her brother.

"Annoying? *You're* the annoying one, Julian," she said.

"Not as much as you," Julian replied.

"You left university without finishing your education and now what are you up to? You think you're *so cool* for your part in all this, don't you? How about you actually do your duty *before* blabbing about your rights?"

"Shut up, you little twerp. Dad's still alive and well, so it's not like he needs me just yet."

"Says you! You're just making excuses now!"

"All right, all right, let's not quarrel in front of a crowd," Claude said, butting

in.

“Oh? So I imagine you’re taking *his* side, then?” Opal spat.

“No, no, I’m on *your* side. I always have been.”

Opal felt nostalgic; when they were kids Claude had always been dragged into their sibling fights. The three of them fell silent when they heard Alessandro laugh.

“Your Majesty, it certainly has been a while,” Julian said coolly as he swiftly switched gears. “I apologize for what you just saw. It wasn’t proper to bicker in your presence.”

Opal was annoyed, but she meekly added, “I’m very sorry, Your Majesty.”

All the while, Claude suppressed his laughter.

“Indeed, it’s been a while, Viscount Holloway,” the king said. “Thanks to you acting in secret, we were able to sniff out the rebels sooner than I expected. The citizens of this kingdom no longer have to tremble in fear of a needless battle and can live in peace. And for that, I must thank you.”

“Your kind words are wasted on someone such as I. Such benevolence humbles me,” Julian replied, using the exact same words that Opal had the day prior.

Clearly, he’d been listening in. Even Claude hadn’t noticed Julian’s presence during the meeting, and he cracked an awkward smile at the realization he had been there the whole time. *Looks like I need to punch Julian once—no, at least two or three times*, Opal thought. She turned back to Marquis Bapot. The marquis’s face had turned red, and both Tuli and Eric sported swollen cheeks.

“Now, with all this evidence, I suppose it’s time for me to cast judgment,” Alessandro said.

“Please wait!” the marquis exclaimed. “Your Majesty, are you going to believe the words of these...these *foreigners*?!”

“Marquis Bapot, the foreigner whom you speak of is a viscount in the neighboring kingdom of Socille and is set to be the future Earl Holloway. And when our kingdom was tormented by the plague, Viscount Holloway, with no

regard to his own safety, personally transported crucial medical supplies to remote areas of the kingdom. He has done us a great service. How many of you here can say the same? How many of you helped the residents of our kingdom when they suffered from pestilence?”

Alessandro’s questions caused everyone in the audience to shift uneasily in their seat. Opal had heard tidbits of Julian’s deeds from Claude, but as she heard the situation described by Alessandro, she viewed her brother in a new light. *I didn’t think that he personally went to those remote locations. I’ll let him off with just one punch then.*

By nature Julian was a nonchalant person, one who wandered around and cared little for his studies. While Opal had been kept in the dark about her brother’s actions after he dropped out from university, her father surely knew of his son’s whereabouts. No one had told her about it, much to her annoyance, but during that time Opal had had her hands full with reforming the McLeod Duchy. *Maybe they didn’t want me to worry needlessly, not when I had so much on my plate.*

No doubt Julian had played a huge role in Claude allowing Opal to visit the Bocceli Duchy by herself. Reuniting with him at the duke’s manor had come as a shock, of course, but in the moment she had chosen to deprive her brother of any joy her shock might have given him and decided to feign total ignorance instead. Had there been even the slightest doubt about their relationship, she knew that Julian would’ve mocked her to no end. His actions that followed also left her vexed, but now wasn’t the time to get swept up in her personal feelings.

Alessandro rose to his feet and slowly made his way down from his throne to grab Marquis Bapot’s letter to Marquis Seims from the boxes of evidence presented.

“I also carefully examined these items,” he said to both the marquis and his son. “And so, I have ordered for your arrest. I allowed the public to view this trial to prove its legitimacy while providing you the chance to apologize for all the confusion you’ve caused everyone. But with all these witnesses and with all this evidence, you *still* choose to deny your sins, even blaming others for your heartless actions. Truly, I cannot see one going any lower than this.”

Alessandro spoke slowly and calmly, his emotions carefully masked from observers but only serving to invoke sheer terror into all who heard him. He flipped the envelope over and stared at the broken seal.

“This crest is one that I know very well,” the king said. “I believe it’s the emblem of House Bapot, and this writing resembles yours, marquise. If this is a fake, it’s remarkably intricate—I fear that my privy seal cannot be trusted either. That will pose an enormous problem and threat to our kingdom.”

He took another letter and turned it around, comparing its front and back several times. The king went down the line and grabbed another, then another, following the same process. No one said a word as the venue watched with bated breath.

“This letter is from Marquis Seims, addressed to the one in charge of the Lede Mines,” Alessandro said. “And this one is from Marquis Seims to you, Marquis Bapot.”

“That... I...” the marquise stammered.

When the king raised the letter in the air, the marquise looked on in disbelief before he angrily turned to Julian. Julian had likely been hired by the Bapot manor while Tuli was away and so had stolen these papers during his stay.

“And if you insist that these are fake as well, then we must go to Socille and investigate the truth,” Alessandro said. “As pathetic as it may sound, this issue has now become an international one.”

Marquis Bapot turned pale and closed his eyes. If Marquis Seims’s letters were proven to be real—and they most certainly were—Bapot would be convicted as a felon not only in Taisei but in Socille as well. The king had already made his decision, and resisting any further would only add to the marquise’s long list of crimes. He slowly opened his eyes and glanced at Eric, who was being restrained by the Royal Guards.

“I have nothing more to say,” the marquise said.

“Father!” Eric’s desperate scream rang out.

Opal was both impressed and made weary by the king’s cunning. Despite the high treason, the marquise’s family hadn’t been convicted of the same crimes as

an act of mercy. While it was unknown whether the marquis actually loved his family or not, the king knew that Bapot would surrender to preserve his family line.

“He’s a noble, through and through,” Julian muttered before he stepped away.

“The polar opposite of you,” Opal remarked, stepping away as well.

“And of you too.”

Opal reached for Claude as he sat beside her, and he firmly squeezed her hand. She placed her hand over his and silently watched the rest of the trial unfold.

30. Favorite Foods

“Oh my...” Opal murmured as she read the letter she’d received just this morning.

Claude, who’d been reading the morning paper, looked up. They’d been busy ever since they’d returned to the Bocceli Duchy, but they had recently been able to spend some time together after breakfast.

“What’s up?” Claude asked.

“Roanna has apparently declined Duke McLeod’s proposal,” Opal replied.

“Has she, now?”

“She said that their marriage couldn’t possibly work if they didn’t love each other.”

Opal had been exchanging letters with the daughter of Viscount Kreusel, fostering a steady friendship with her. She had had no time to write letters the last time she had stayed at the Bocceli Duchy, but now that the fuss had died down, they were able to write to each other once more.

“Viscount Kreusel allowed Lady Roanna to decide for herself, huh? That’s amazing,” Claude remarked.

“I agree.” Opal nodded. “And Roanna hasn’t missed it either. ‘My parents have even told me that they don’t mind if I stay single, if that’s what I desire. I cannot thank them enough, and I’d like to repay their kindness someday in a different form,’ she says.”

She scanned through the thick letter that Roanna had written and didn’t raise her head—she was remembering her first marriage. Her father had forced her into it, but she now knew that he had done so because he had believed it was the best choice for her. Still, every now and then, she’d feel a sense of melancholy about it.

“Opal,” her husband called out.

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry,” Opal said. “I was engrossed in the letter.”

She hastily looked up, knowing that her obvious fib had been seen through. But that didn’t stop her from acting like she was reading the letter anyway. Claude took the letter from her hands, placed it on the table, and grabbed his wife’s hands as he kissed her.

“I love you, Opal,” he said. “I always have and always will. That’ll never, ever change, even in the future.”

“Claude...” she murmured.

He always knew what to say—somehow, he always gave her the words she yearned to hear. He’d come to her rescue when she needed help and cheer her on when she felt glum. She didn’t need to ask him to spoil her for him to do so. And yet, Opal struggled to find the words to express herself. She could only place her hands over his and stare into his eyes.

“Can you guys stop flirting so early in the morning? It gives me heartburn,” Julian grumbled as he barged in.

Opal whirled around angrily. “And *you’re* being immensely rude by just entering our manor so early in the morning without so much as a by-your-leave. But you’ve always been this way.”

Julian entered the breakfast room and grabbed a seat without even being offered one.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “I don’t expect any kind of hospitality from you.”

“Why would I worry? You’re not welcome here,” Opal replied.

Claude gave a strained smile at the siblings’ squabble and waved a reassuring hand at the worried butler, who had trailed behind Julian as he entered the breakfast room. The newly hired servant was excellent, but he had no idea how to handle Julian forcing his way into the manor. The butler looked visibly relieved and left, leaving the three behind.

“So? Did something happen?” Opal asked.

“Does something need to happen for me to be here?” Julian replied.

“Of course. It’s not as if I invited you here. You were having fun in the royal

capital, weren't you?"

"I don't have a duty to report to *you*. And I don't need to tell you anything—you probably know anyway."

Opal very much knew what her brother had been up to. While Opal and Claude had needed to return to the Bocceli Duchy to reform the land, Julian had remained in the royal capital, cleaning up the aftermath of the rebellion and blending in with noble society. Opal couldn't bring herself to clearly express her gratitude, and Julian teased her for it as he grabbed a muffin on the table. At Opal's shocked expression Claude burst out into laughter.

"Julian! That's *my* muffin! Give it back!" she cried.

"I thought you already had breakfast," he replied. "Don't tell me you're still eating?"

"Oh, shut up! You *know* I like my muffins! You're just taking them from me on purpose!"

"That's why I keep telling you to keep close the things you love."

Opal always had the habit of saving the best for last. Julian knew that well and bullied her for it. Claude gave up on interfering and left the siblings to their quarrel, but Nadja came in with some more tea and let out a giggle.

"Ack! Pardon me," she quickly said.

"Nadja, you don't need to apologize. You haven't been rude to this jerk at all," Opal assured her.

"Hey there, Nadja. Long time no see," Julian said. "Sorry for deceiving you."

"Y-Yes, it's truly been a while!" the maid replied. "I deeply apologize for all the rude things that I've said without realizing your true identity."

"Don't worry about it," Opal said. "It's well deserved, and it's my fault for keeping quiet about it."

"But..."

"I'm quite thirsty," Julian said. "Do you mind pouring me some tea?"

"O-Of course!" Nadja replied.

The maid had recently learned of Julian's true identity and was deeply sorry for her previous insolence toward him. He hadn't returned to the Holloway manor for over a decade, and so Nadja had never met Julian until now. It might have been impossible to tell Nadja *not* to worry about the eldest son of the family she'd served, but Julian had managed to shift her focus by asking for some tea.

"So? What now?" Claude inquired.

"Haven't decided yet," Julian replied casually. "I should probably make a return to my house, even just once. It's been a while, and I'm craving Marcia's muffins."

"That so...?"

Claude nodded, relieved. Julian had spent much of his time taking risks with no regard for his own life. Eight—now nine—years ago, he'd worked hard to save the lives of many who were terrorized by the plague in Taisei, and continued to act as Alessandro's spy. Claude had ties to Taisei, and he'd fought with Julian over the dangers of involving himself so thoroughly in another nation's affairs; surely, there was no reason for Viscount Holloway of Socille to go this far. But in the end, Claude had given in.

"I bet Marcia will give you an earful before you even get to touch a muffin," Opal huffed. "And I hope you get scolded by Trevor too. You managed to evade him once by pretending to have never met him before in Port Pasma."

In truth, Opal was relieved to hear of her brother's plans, but as usual she couldn't be honest about her feelings. Claude managed to hold his tongue; if he laughed here, he knew that Opal would become even more stubborn.

Trevor and Duncan had worked together to calm the citizens that were confused by the rebellion, and had taught them how to thresh their crops. Trevor hadn't waited for Opal's return and had gone back to the Socille Kingdom—to the Earldom of Holloway.

"I'll go speak with Duncan," Opal said. "You're going to Pasma, aren't you, Claude?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "I'll be back by tonight."

She intuited that Julian and her husband wanted to speak in private, and so she stood up to leave. Her husband quickly lent his hand and helped her to her feet. Julian also stood up as a show of etiquette, but he stared at his sister and did nothing more. Opal ignored her brother and smiled at her husband.

“Thank you, Claude,” she said. “Please let me know when you leave.”

“Sure thing,” he replied.

He watched her leave as he smiled awkwardly, and Julian had already taken his seat once more to sip on his tea. Claude sat back down, in full awareness of how emotionally stunted these two siblings could be.

31. The Future

“And how’s Eric?” Claude asked.

“Haven’t you already received the report?” Julian asked.

“I want to hear it from you.”

“Needless to say, he’s like a different person now,” Julian replied. “He tried desperately to exonerate his father and brother, only to have their crimes irreversibly proven in front of his own eyes. He’s blank and aimless now, like he’s lost all will to fight.”

“I expected as much.”

The more one looked into the crimes of Marquis Bapot and Tuli, the more apparent their atrocities became—and to family, such acts were made even clearer. Tuli had rebelled against Alessandro in the first place because Claude had been promoted to not only marquis but to Duke Bocceli. Ignorant to the true reasons behind Claude’s promotion, Tuli had drowned in his own jealousy and as a result paid very dearly for his immaturity.

The issue now was how Eric would develop after this. If he exhibited any hatred toward the king or Claude, unfortunately, the young baron would likely be forced to take at least partial responsibility for his family’s crimes. This was inevitable; they would have to act this way to prevent any notions of revenge or other issues. It wasn’t limited only to House Bapot—it extended to all the families that had been involved in this rebellion. From now on, they would all be secretly kept under surveillance to ensure that they didn’t do anything fishy.

The king had requested repeated investigations since the trial, but ultimately his first judgment remained unchanged. Marquis Bapot and his son would be executed for their crimes of high treason. Alessandro had wondered how society would react to the sentencing, but there was surprisingly very little uproar. And so, with that final piece decided, Julian felt it was high time that he left Taisei.

“Will you return to the royal capital for the next social season?” Julian asked.

“Nah, I’ll probably stay here a while,” Claude replied.

“Everyone will be saddened to hear it. They’re all desperate to establish themselves with Duke and Duchess Bocceli, and they’ve begun to chase *me* around because of it. It’s so annoying, and I’ve had enough of it.”

“You sure they don’t just want to get close to you?”

“Of course they do. That goes without saying.”

“A little more humility wouldn’t be remiss.”

Claude was laughing at his childhood friend’s words when the two men heard the sound of a visitor. They fell silent and listened in. It seemed a letter had arrived. After the men discussed a few more matters, they decided to end their conversation so that they could get back to work. It was then that Opal rushed into the room.

“Opal, no need to rush,” Claude said as he stood up and approached his wife worriedly.

“Restless as usual,” Julian remarked.

“Oh, shut up, Julian,” Opal snapped. She took her husband’s hand and sat down on the sofa. “Claude, I just received a letter from Duke McLeod.”

“What does it say?” Claude asked.

“He’s going to relinquish his title.”

“Bit of an extreme reaction, isn’t it?” Claude said.

“Whoa, talk about attention seeking,” Julian muttered.

In contrast to how worried Opal was, both Claude’s and Julian’s responses were quite chilly. At once Opal realized that she hadn’t explained the situation clearly and proceeded to reveal the contents of the letter.

“He’s not going to do it right this moment, but he wrote so in his will,” Opal said. “In it he states that he probably won’t marry any time in the future and so would be unable to leave an heir. With the issue of a successor now apparent, he doesn’t want to hand the title and responsibilities over to distant relatives

that he's unfamiliar with, though he does plan on handing over a portion of his assets to them."

"He's just angry because his proposal was rejected," Claude said. "Just leave him be, Opal."

"Wait, someone declined the duke's proposal?" Julian asked with interest.

"Argh! You guys!" Opal cried angrily. "Take this news more seriously. Relinquishing his title might be an issue, but more importantly he's saying that he'd bequeath his land to *us*!"

Forfeiting his title was shocking enough, but the idea of Hubert handing over his duchy to Opal, a total stranger at this point, was the truly puzzling part. Claude raised a bemused eyebrow while Julian grinned.

"You don't need to be so worried, Opal," Claude said. "Once he gets over his broken heart, I'm sure that he'll change his mind."

"Hmm, checking in on the nobility in Socille once I return is starting to sound interesting," Julian said. "Claude, you're going to Pasma, right? I'll go with you and board a ship back home from there."

"You aren't going to stay the night?" Opal asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"Of course not."

Claude smiled at his stubborn wife as Julian nonchalantly waved his hand. Opal didn't know when she'd meet her brother again, but she didn't try to stop him from leaving. The duchess did, however, follow them out to the entrance.

"What? You gonna send me off?" Julian teased.

"I'm sending off my *husband*," Opal replied as she turned away from him.

Claude was already ready to go, and he received his coat and hat from the butler before he gave Opal a quick peck on the cheek. The carriage was already waiting for him outside.

"I'm off, Opal," he said.

"Take care, Claude," Opal said before she mentioned her brother as an

afterthought. “And I guess you too, Julian.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you again, you little dummy,” Julian said. He tousled his sister’s hair, thoroughly making a mess of her once carefully groomed updo.

“Agh! *Julian!*” she shrieked.

Julian laughed as he raced down the steps to the carriage. “Hope you give birth to a healthy child! Not that I need to worry about that!”

“Oh, shut up! I know, you big dummy!”

The butler nearby was a bit shocked to hear unladylike words come from the duchess, and Nadja burst out laughing. Claude also let out a chuckle as he hugged his wife and placed a hand on her protruding belly.

“What a troublesome mother and uncle this child’s got,” Claude said.

“It’s all Julian’s fault, not mine,” Opal insisted.

“I know, I know.”

Claude was always on her side. He kissed his wife, his gentle lips soothing her heart—she couldn’t hide how lonely her brother’s departure made her feel, not from Claude.

“I’ll be back by dinner,” he said. “Don’t push yourself.”

“I know,” Opal said. “I’ll rest easy here.”

She smiled at Claude in reassurance, holding back tears, but Claude couldn’t help but still be a little suspicious; Opal’s limits were far different from the typical woman. He sent a pleading look to Nadja. The maid nodded firmly in return, reassuring the duke.

“Claude, hurry up!” Julian called.

“What a selfish guy,” Claude said.

“He really is,” Opal agreed.

It was Julian who had barged into their manor and decided to tag along with Claude and was now rushing the duke to leave. Opal and Claude chuckled at Julian’s usual antics before the duke made his leave, walking down the stairs. With one hand carefully placed over her large stomach, Opal waved her other

hand as she saw them boarding the carriage and then the carriage itself pulling away from the manor.

She'd had this dream ever since she was a little girl: to have a wonderful husband and together foster a warm, inviting family. Slowly but surely, her dreams were coming true, and she was taking another step closer to her ideals.

Opal gently placed her other hand over her stomach, cradling the life slowly growing inside her, and returned to the manor to work.

Extra Story 1: Julian

1. University Days

It was deep in the night, and Julian was scaling up a tree in order to enter his room from the window. The moment he passed through the window was when he noticed a familiar figure standing in the darkness, waiting for him.

“Julian, you snuck out of the dorms again?” Claude scolded. “What have you been doing?”

Julian clicked his tongue; he was sure that he had locked his room before leaving. “It’s got nothing to do with you. Besides, you’re not one to talk.”

It was Julian’s third year at university. He’d finally gotten a room to himself, but Claude still managed to sneak right in. He didn’t have a spare key, so Julian had no idea how his friend had entered the room. Perhaps Claude had used a bit of wire to pick the lock, as Julian had occasionally done in the past.

“Were you out fighting?” Claude asked.

“It was nothing major, really...” Julian replied before he was cut off.

“If you don’t ice your wound, it’ll be swollen by morning.”

Claude had grabbed Julian’s chin and angled it right underneath the bright moonlight streaming through the window. Julian’s left cheek was red, and he had a cut on his lip. It was clear that he’d been punched, but Julian wasn’t the type to take a hit lying down. Sure enough, when Claude grabbed Julian’s right arm, he noticed some scratches on the back of his hand.



“You’d better ice your hand too,” Claude said. “Got it?”

“What are you, my mom?” Julian spat.

“Something like that, yeah.”

And then Claude, now satisfied seeing Julian return, left Julian’s room. Now alone, Julian loosened his outfit and fell onto his bed. If he didn’t listen to his friend’s advice and ice his wounds soon, he’d surely be scolded by his professors tomorrow.

“If you’re gonna nag me, at least finish what you start...” he muttered as he closed his eyes.

“And that’s exactly why I brought you cold water and a towel,” Claude said.

Julian snapped his eyes open and saw that Claude was at the entrance with a washbasin. *At least ask before you enter*, Julian thought, but he knew that if they were too loud, others would notice. The young Holloway said not a word and lay face up on his bed, allowing Claude to treat his wounds.

“Why’d you fight?” Claude asked.

“I don’t remember,” Julian replied.

“Just say it already.”

“They pissed me off.”

“You should have asked me to come.”

“Then it would’ve turned serious.”

“I *want* it to be serious.”

Julian’s reasons for fighting were vague, but Claude knew that it must’ve been about Opal. Claude, usually so serene, transformed into an entirely different person when Julian’s younger sister, Opal, was involved. Despite Claude pressuring him to tell him about the fight in detail, Julian never mentioned the names of those he fought. If Claude ever learned who exactly bad-mouthed Opal, he’d surely try to exact revenge. He had excellent grades and attended university on a scholarship; it was foolish to ruin his bright future with a suspension or an expulsion right before his graduation.

Julian sighed. “You’ve done enough. I’ll do the rest myself, so you should go back to bed.”

“Keep something cold on your injuries, all right?” Claude said.

“See, I’m the kind of handsome that means wounds actually look cool on me, okay?”

“Interesting. Does that mean you’d like a few more?”

“Okay, okay, I’ll take care of them.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah.”

At the sound of the door closing, Julian shut his eyes. He’d been friends with Claude for over a decade now. Young Julian hadn’t made any friends his age, and he had been elated when he formed a friendship with Claude, who was a year older. Julian would show the baron’s son around to his favorite spots, but to his annoyance, his younger sister had always tagged along. Time and time again, Julian had bullied Opal and chased her away, but the determined girl always returned to challenge him.

Her stubbornness infuriated him. The two siblings had fought often, only to be scolded each time by Trevor and Marcia. Julian had always found that unfair. He was always told to be kind to women, including his younger sister, but there he’d been covered in scratch marks that she’d inflicted upon him. How could it be right for him to always be on the receiving end of such treatment?

And just like it upset Julian to be scolded to be more kind, it upset Opal to be scolded and chided to be more ladylike. She was stubborn and hated to lose. Even when she grew older, these traits hadn’t changed, and she ended up boxing herself within the confines of her strong personality. *She’s such an idiot*, Julian thought.

Had their mother still been alive, both Julian and Opal might have turned out differently. Even if they had still received a scolding, they wouldn’t have been told to conform to society’s ideals of what an older brother should be or how a lady should act. In front of his mother, Julian could be a little more honest with himself, a little more spoiled. And so, when he went off to the dorms for his

studies, he had envied Opal; she wouldn't have to go to school and leave their mother's side.

When he returned home for the holidays he'd bully Opal and make her cry. Claude always jumped to Opal's defense in those moments, which annoyed Julian too. Still, despite it all, they were all family, including his father, even if the man only interacted with his children occasionally.

Everything had changed when their mother died. Opal stopped crying, Julian became a problem student, and Earl Holloway no longer returned to the manor. They'd become so disinterested and uninvolved with each other that Julian had only learned of his sister's debut when his classmates had asked him to introduce her to them. Opal had been raised by friendly, kind people in the earl's manor, and he knew that society would not grant Opal that same kindness.

Even so, Opal had been far too careless. Upon hearing a guy bragging about a supposed rendezvous he'd had with Opal, Julian had snuck out of his room to clobber the man. It hadn't turned into a huge fuss because the guy felt guilty for his crimes, and Earl Holloway had also wielded his power to cover it up. Had Julian not gone to beat that guy up, Claude would've done so, and even more brutally than he had.

And so every time Julian was mocked because of his sister, he went out and fought whoever dared to run their mouth. It wasn't just a way for Julian to let off some steam; it was also to allow Claude to maintain his composure. Julian had heard that Claude had gone to Earl Holloway to ask for Opal's hand in marriage but been denied. *What's so good about her? She's so cheeky.*

Julian had told his friend that there was no need to sacrifice himself to spare Opal's dignity, but the young Holloway had only received a solemn gaze in return. Only then had Julian realized that Claude was seriously in love with her. He must've hidden his feelings because of their differences in rank. To better himself, Claude had dedicated every free moment he had to work at the port; he'd sneak out of his dorms to earn money.

Julian was influenced by his friend and also began to work in the city. He'd passed through his rebellious phase causing a fair share of issues, but the only

reason he was able to come out the other side relatively unscathed was because he was under his father's protection. Julian realized that whining about his circumstances while being financially dependent on his family made him no better than a selfish child.

Three years passed. Claude had managed to stay on top of his studies and earn some coin while doing manual labor. He had used his scant earnings to start investing and had gained a decent sum.

"You can't fight my dad straight on," Julian mumbled to himself in the darkness.

His body couldn't move from exhaustion, but his mind was wide awake. He knew that Claude would soon return to Earl Holloway to once again ask for Opal's hand in marriage. *Surely, my dad must have a reason for allowing Opal to do as she pleases despite the nasty rumors that swirl around her.* All too soon, his predictions would unfortunately be proven correct.

2. Inseverable Ties

Julian went to Taisei with no particular goal in mind. It just so happened that there were a number of lucrative jobs to be found in Taisei, importing medical supplies being one of them. He'd quit university altogether, tired of both the bootlicking professors in the special class and his classmates, who'd walked around believing they were chosen from on high for reasons unknown and unverified. Julian didn't feel like returning to the earldom, but he didn't want to wander around aimlessly and throw himself into hedonism like his peers either. Claude, ever the nag, had already graduated and departed for a foreign nation. Now with time on his hands, Julian simply thought that he should earn some money—he hadn't expected to reunite with Claude in Taisei.

"Julian!" Claude cried. "Why are *you* here?!"

"To bring medicine and stuff, of course," Julian replied.

"But what about university?"

"I quit."

"How could you be so foolish?! Surely, the earl would have had something to

say about that!”

“He would, if I had told him.”

“*What?!*”

It amused Julian greatly to see someone as composed as Claude turn frantic with surprise, but it seemed his childhood friend still loved to lecture others.

“What in the *world* are you thinking?” Claude scolded. “You only had a year left of school. And you must be crazy to come to this dangerous area. You’re the *heir of House Holloway*. You’re acting far too irresponsibly. Go back home as soon as you possibly can.”

“You’re so annoying,” Julian grumbled.

Claude was only a year older, but he always acted like he knew so much better. Julian’s complaints only made him scowl.

“It’s not just the plague here that you have to worry about,” Claude said. “A civil war might break out soon. It’s dangerous here. Go home.”

“And will you head on home anytime soon?”

“No, I...”

“Oh, so *I* have to go, but you don’t? Are you mocking me?”

“Of course not. But unlike me, you’re important to the—”

“I can’t believe you’re saying that to *me!*”

Julian’s social rank and standing always had been sore spots for him—they had genuinely tortured him at times—and he couldn’t forgive Claude for touching upon it. The young Holloway punched his childhood friend, and Claude took the blow, falling to the ground. Even he hadn’t expected a fist, it seemed. Julian paid no heeds to the screams that erupted from around them as he bent to kneel over Claude and gripped his collar, bringing him close.

“What’s so different between you and me?” Julian said as he wiped some blood from Claude’s nose and showed it to him. “Are you immortal? There’s blood flowing through your veins, just like me! You can get hurt and get sick too! And in the worst-case scenario, you can die, just like the rest of us! We

both have people who're worried sick about us, don't we? Or is this important thing that you speak of referring purely to our ranks?"

Claude stared at Julian's left thumb, tainted scarlet with his blood. Julian wiped the blood onto Claude's collar to sully the outfit.

"What, a broken heart has you throwing your life away?" Julian asked.

"No, that's not it at all," Claude muttered.

"Then why are you here?"

"Probably for the same reason as you. They've got lucrative jobs here."

"So am I any different from you after all?"

"No, except for how short-tempered you are."

Julian huffed angrily and gruffly pulled Claude to his feet.

"I won't say you've been completely rejected just yet," the young Holloway said. "Opal's dense, and my dad's oppressive."

"And you're violent," Claude added.

"Looks like you're just shit out of luck."

"But I'm having fun anyway."

Claude pressed against a nostril, huffed to let the blood out, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"All right, what now?" Julian asked.

"I'm not telling you to apologize, but a little care for me wouldn't go unappreciated," Claude replied.

"Don't worry, I haven't broken any of your bones."

"Oh, how kind of you."

Julian offered not even a word of concern—perhaps this haughtiness was a trait of the Holloways. But Claude loved them all very much.

"Are you really going to press on here?" Julian asked.

"It's my job," Claude replied. "I'll do what I've been hired for."

“Then we’ll be together for a while.” Julian frowned, implying that he wasn’t keen on being paired up with his nagging childhood friend, but Claude grinned. “Your nose is still bleeding,” Julian pointed out, sounding completely unapologetic.

Claude furrowed his brow jokingly. “Gee, I wonder why.” He cleaned the blood with his thumb and wiped it on Julian’s collar.

“Hey!”

“Would you rather it be *your* blood that paints your clothes?” Claude asked, implying that he was willing to return the favor.

“Sorry.”

Only then did Julian finally apologize. The two men grinned at each other, and at this point the audience that had gathered around them was quite relieved.

3. Camping Out

Julian and Claude were on their way to deliver medicine to citizens in crucial need of care, and the two had decided to camp out for the night.

“Julian, did you hear what happened?” Claude asked.

“Hear it? I saw it,” Julian replied jokingly. “The owner of that inn cheated on his wife, and she chased after him with a butcher knife when she found out. It was hilarious! Ouch!”

Claude’s glove flew at his shoulder. The leather glove barely hurt, but Julian winced like he was in great pain.

“Are you picking a fight with me?” Julian asked.

“I would’ve if I were the owner of that inn,” Claude replied. “You’re the one who ratted him out to his wife, aren’t you?”

“Hey, why am I getting blamed for speaking the truth?”

“Don’t stir the pot. We’re all just passing by, so don’t involve yourself too deeply with others. Because of you, we have to camp outside now.”

Had it been Opal, her strong sense of justice would’ve made her speak up

about the affair, but Julian had clearly done it because he'd thought it would be funny, much to Claude's annoyance.

"Then don't be all vague and coy with me," Julian said. "Just say that you're talking about that fake prince— Ow!"

Another glove went flying toward his face, and at once he rubbed his smarting nose. Julian could have easily dodged the hit, but instead he took the attack to his face, with Claude completely ignoring it all.

"Don't be so loud!" Claude hissed instead. "We don't know who's listening in on us."

"Here? In the middle of nowhere?" Julian asked. "If anyone's around, I'll gladly welcome them to sit around the fire with us."

They were camping between the trees, away from the worn-in path that travelers had made over the years. It was just wide enough for a small carriage to pass through, and the two men had ridden their horses through the area before settling in for the night. Their steeds didn't seem at all bothered that they were spending time between the lush foliage instead of in comfortable stables.

"Glad to see that you're having fun," Claude sighed.

The path itself wasn't a common road, so it was far less likely for anyone to be straying off of it. The tiny town that they'd passed by in the afternoon had developed with the support of the village nearby, and they were mostly self-sufficient. Julian and Claude had worked tirelessly to deliver medical supplies to them and had often utilized the only lodging in town. It was then that Julian had noticed the inn master's affair. Once all the medicine had been delivered and it was their last day in the area, Julian had decided to tell the mistress of the inn what he had learned.

"Well, any time trouble wants to come knocking, I'm prepared for it," Julian said. "Are you, Claude?"

Claude swallowed nervously. While delivering medical supplies he'd heard anxious whispers almost constantly; even the king, apparently, had fallen victim to the fatal disease wracking the kingdom. The royal monarch had no male heir,

and it was rumored that his younger brother, His Highness Alessandro, would ascend to the throne. But a number of nobles opposed Alessandro taking the crown. While the reasons had been unclear at first, it was now revealed that the late king had an illegitimate son. This was an obviously shady development, but if even remote locations like this town knew of the rumors, the royal capital must've been in a total uproar.

"You're always thinking a step ahead of me," Claude said.

"Not really," Julian replied. "For one, I didn't think that you'd ask for that idiot's hand in marriage."

"I didn't really plan on it. I'm just a coward."

"Nah, you're just timid. There's a difference."

Julian braced himself, expectant for something else to be hurled at him after the thorny remark, but Claude was busy preparing the fire.

"You're not gonna refute me?" Julian asked.

"How can I? It's the truth," Claude replied.

"I don't hate how gracefully you can admit it."

"And I don't hate your sharp, insensitive tongue either."

"Okay, now you're just insulting me."

"I'm just telling the truth."

"Yeah, yeah, you're always right."

Despite Julian's pouting tone, a smile stretched across his face. After everything they'd been through, they were still able to enjoy some playful banter, as they'd always been. They could only do so because they understood each other so well.

"In front of us siblings, you want to remain as the calm and just guy who looks after us, don't you?" Julian asked.

"What's with this 'us' stuff? I don't care about you," Claude replied.

"Okay, *that* hurts!"

“I’m the youngest of three children. You’re not wrong that I wanted to act like an older brother to you both.”

Claude’s expression remained indifferent, his face illuminated by the flickering orange light of the campfire. Julian was silent for a while as he set up a place to sleep.

“Fine, you can be my hypothetical older brother,” he relented. “I mean, since you failed to become my *actual* brother-in-law...”

“You don’t hold back, do you?” Claude replied.

“But that’s what you like about me, right?”

“Well, I don’t *dislike* it, I suppose.”

It felt silly to get angry over this kind of snark. Claude took some meat and began to grill it over the fire as Julian sat across from him and took out a bottle of liquor from one of his bags.

“You’re well prepared,” Claude remarked.

“I decided to get involved, after all,” Julian replied.

Claude froze in place. Julian wasn’t just referring to the fact that he was camping out for the night.

“Are you serious?” Claude asked. “I don’t think you can make much money.”

“I don’t really care about that,” Julian replied.

“You really should.”

“I’m not listening to you.”

“You should listen to what your older brother is telling you.”

“And have you done the same, growing up? I can presume you were entirely obedient to your siblings?”

“No...”

“Exactly. And what’ll you do when you find that your older brothers might be in danger?”

“I’ll try to save them.”

“Exactly.”

Claude sighed as Julian sat up with a proud tilt to his chin. The young Holloway heir was always bothered by his youthful face, and at times like these he only looked even more childish. What was troublesome was that he looked exactly like a young Opal when he did so.

“No winning an argument against you siblings...” Claude muttered.

“Hey, don’t group me in with that idiot,” Julian replied.

The fact that Julian would get angry when he was compared to his sibling resembled Opal so much, but Claude didn’t say a word about it. There were more important matters to focus on.

“Besides, if you’re telling me to not get involved, the same should apply to you,” Julian said, returning to the topic at hand. “Why should you care about the royal family of *this* kingdom?”

For a moment, Claude hesitated on his answer. He wasn’t trying to hide things, per se, but it felt like he had missed the right timing to tell the truth.

“You know of my mother’s origins, don’t you?” Claude started.

“Yeah, the house of Earl Roussel,” Julian replied.

“You know quite a bit.”

“Purely by accident. When I was a kid, I overheard my mom and your mom discussing it, but soon after I forgot all about it. I only remembered again when I came to this nation. You seem awfully concerned about that house.”

“I’m not...”

“If you wanna take over that house, I’m in.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

Claude chuckled as Julian joked with a serious face. Julian hated everything that came with his social rank—more precisely, he hated everyone who was attracted to the prestige of his name. But over the past few years his thoughts about the matter had changed.

“Both prestige and money aren’t bad to have,” Julian said. “I know it’s late to

realize it, but here I am. When I need to, I can take advantage of both and get ahead.”

“And if *you’re* the one being used?” Claude asked.

“Then I’ll use them back, many times over.”

“Take it easy.”

Claude wondered if tit for tat was some kind of House Holloway philosophy, but he knew better than to vocalize his thoughts. While Julian might have sounded terrifying, in reality he was almost impossibly kind to those less fortunate than he was. Earl Holloway was notorious for being cruel and coldhearted, but he was equally known for his honesty and fairness. Hence, Claude had backed off on Opal, convinced that the earl surely had a good reason to force her into marriage with a duke. Had it not been the case, Claude would’ve stolen her away and fled. *But if Opal had rejected me first, that would have been that*, he thought.

Claude’s mind was filled with various thoughts as he chewed on his dried meat. Eventually he swallowed his mouthful, lingering negative feelings included. Beyond the fire, he spotted Julian chewing on his share of the tough meat. Tonight would be chilly, and they would likely sleep next to each other. Claude chuckled—it felt like he and Julian had just eloped.

“What gives?” Julian asked.

“Nothing. Just thought that this whole situation was funny. Here I am, out in the boonies with you,” Claude said.

“You’re the one who tagged along.”

“A cheeky little brother, aren’t you?”

“I can repeal our sibling bond if you want.”

“Please don’t. I’d feel so lonely.”

Julian shrugged and began to eat once more. The meat that they had was very tough to chew and tasted horrible. The more remote their location was, the worse their food tasted. The same tendency could be said for any nation, but the difference in Taisei seemed much more extreme. Silence settled in on the

duo as Julian washed down the meat with some alcohol.

“Once we return to the royal capital, I’m leaving you,” Julian said.

“Oh dearest, if you’re leaving me, at least ask me out on a date first,” Claude joked.

“Ugh, stop it. Your jokes aren’t funny at all.”

“Opal would laugh at them.”

“No lingering regrets at all, eh?”

Julian threw the bottle, and Claude skillfully caught it, removed the top, and began to chug.

“If I get lucky and see the old man’s face, I plan on leaving the kingdom,” Claude said.

“No need to lie so blatantly,” Julian replied. “I know you’re going to stick around here for a while.”

“There’s no need for you to get involved in all this.”

“I already am. It was my dad who managed the preparation for all this medicine, and I’m the one who personally delivered it.”

“For the current plague, sure. But you shouldn’t get involved in the battle that’s to come.”

“What difference does it make?” Julian replied. “It’s the king’s younger brother who ordered us to deliver this medicine to remote locations in the first place. And on top of that I’d like to throw a wrench or two in the plans of those idiots who don’t like what we’re doing. This *is* a personal reason, you see. I don’t like them. So it’s only natural for me to harass them.”

“It’s not natural at all, but I guess we’ve got no other choice...”

“I don’t need your permission.”

“But you’re letting me act as your older brother, right?”

Claude threw the bottle of liquor back, and Julian clicked his tongue as he caught it. The bottle was considerably lighter.

“You drank a bit too much, I’d say,” Julian grumbled.

“Yeah, that’s what older brothers do,” Claude replied.

“Man, brothers suck.”

With that, he stood up and took out a gun. Claude tightly gripped the unsheathed blade he kept beside him.

“You can say that again,” Claude replied. He gave a deep nod and jumped to his feet; moments ago an arrow had been shot into their camp. “I didn’t think bandits would be here this far out.”

“Maybe it’s their side gig,” Julian answered.

“Looks like they’ve got a competent archer.”

Claude paid extra attention to the area the arrow had been fired from as he slowly made his way to where their horses were tied. Julian, on the other hand, walked in the opposite direction with his gun drawn. He knew that there were some bandits within the trees, cloaked by darkness. The two men had noticed the bandits’ presence early on, likely because the bandits themselves were inexperienced. Once Julian saw that Claude had plunged his sword by his feet and grabbed the reins of the two steeds, he fired his gun at the tree where the bandits were. There was a low groan, followed by frantic footsteps.

“A gun!”

“No good! Run!”

The horses stomped their hooves gently, surprised by the bandits, but didn’t flee. They were trained very well. Claude calmed the steeds as Julian approached.

“Glad they left with just warning shots,” Julian said.

“The people here might’ve heard of guns, but they’ve probably never seen one for themselves,” Claude replied.

“Should we move somewhere else?”

“I doubt they’ll return.”

Julian gently patted the horses before he quickly went back to the fire. He

knew that the smell of gunpowder might offend the steeds.

“It’s not like we’ve got anything anyway,” Claude mumbled as he returned to the fire.

“Just our ranks,” Julian pointed out playfully.

Claude smiled. Before they reunited, Julian had hated to discuss his rank, but now, he was able to crack a joke about it.

“But such things are useless out here,” Claude said solemnly, with a sigh. The bandits must’ve come from a neighboring town.

“If they attacked us and word about it spread, their families and villages would be destroyed,” Julian added.

Aside from their gun and sword for self-defense, Claude and Julian were dressed like normal townspeople. Since they’d been handing out medicine for free, they only had some coin for their travels and two trusty steeds. The bandits had wanted everything from them.

“If I died out here, I’m pretty sure my dad would say that I deserved it somehow and that’d be that,” Julian remarked.

“My parents would be struck with grief, but I don’t think revenge would be on their minds,” Claude said. “I don’t think others would let it slide. Especially you. You’re a viscount, Julian.”

Those who enjoyed high ranks also had greater responsibility to bear. Naturally, it was their duty to protect the weak, but at times, they’d be forced to fight against those of similar ranking to fulfill their duties. In reality, this contradiction was a source of real anguish for Julian and Claude, but they were finally able to come to terms with it.

“Claude, since the moment we reunited, just how many times have we been attacked?” Julian asked.

“Uh... Four... No, wait, five times, maybe?” Claude replied.

“That so?”

“And we’re the lucky ones. Almost everyone’s suffering in poverty.”

Julian went to pick up a few dried twigs and tossed them toward Claude. They had a silent agreement that they would take turns sleeping to keep watch, and Julian wanted to gather a bit more wood to keep the fire going.

“Claude, you should sleep first,” Julian offered.

“All right. Thanks,” Claude replied.

It wasn't like they could get a good night's sleep camping outside, but if they dozed off, they'd quickly lose track of time. Whenever Julian slept first, Claude would always keep watch longer than they'd promised. Now he placed his unsheathed sword by his pillow, lay down, and curled himself up in blankets in front of the fire. Julian sat across from him. He broke the dried twigs into smaller pieces and tossed them into the fire. The crackling of the flames echoed throughout the area as Julian gazed at the warm fire in a daze.

He'd only accepted this job for the simple reason that he could earn good money, and fast. The pestilence that currently raged within Taisei was quite similar to one that had ravaged the continent two decades prior. Recently, a medicine had been developed against it that worked very well; thanks to this medical advancement, his home nation, Socille, hadn't suffered much. There was a reason the plague had spread so far in Taisei.

This island nation had closed off all ports when the pestilence had swept through the continent, protecting them from any foreigners that could carry the plague. Back then, many higher-ranking nobles had died of the illness, and the previous king, along with the other nobles of Taisei, had feared the sickness would spread to an extreme degree. And indeed, as the current plague spread within Taisei, the higher-ranking nobles had fallen victim once more.

They just don't have the stamina to fight back, Julian thought as he used a long branch to poke at the sticks in the fire, adjusting the strength of the flames. Claude hadn't moved an inch, but his back was turned, and Julian wasn't sure if the man was asleep. The viscount stared at Claude and thought of what he would do next.

Rumors said that Earl Roussel was quite elderly but still had so much energy that it seemed as if he could chase off the plague himself. Unfortunately, some of his family members weren't so healthy and had passed away. Julian assumed

that Claude was putting on a tough front; he often hid his true feelings.

He'd hidden his romantic feelings toward Opal and hid the fact that he was hurt. Julian had thought it would be best if he was away when Claude visited the earl's house, but the viscount now planned to keep watch until he was sure that his old friend was all right. If Claude was left to his own devices, he would surely act to save the kingdom without any regard for himself.

The nobles who disagreed with Alessandro taking the throne had purchased every single grain of the medicine that the kingdom had and holed themselves up in their land, refusing contact with others. And yet, none of them had distributed this medicine to their own residents. Most of the medicine that made it to the hands of the people was provided by Alessandro personally taking money out of his own funds to purchase it from other nations. He then hired Julian and others to distribute it. Julian wasn't trying to be a knight in shining armor, but his words to Claude weren't a lie. He didn't like these nobles, not one bit. And that was the only thought that propelled Julian to stop the faction against Alessandro.

4. A Puppet

"Julian, what in the *world* are you doing?!" Claude asked angrily as he entered a guest room, wearing the outfit of a servant.

"Being a puppet," Julian replied, from a casual slouch in a chair within the same room.

Claude had said something just a few months ago when the two had met while delivering medicine to remote areas in Taisei. When the two had returned to the royal capital, their jobs fulfilled, Julian had parted ways with Claude but still stayed within Taisei, where the likelihood of a civil war was increasing by the day. He had not only stayed in Taisei but had wormed his way into the faction against Alessandro in order to better check up on them. And so the two friends met once more in the Taisei countryside, but this time deep behind enemy lines.

"You *idiot*!" Claude hissed. "Do you not know just how much danger you're in?!"

“Safer than you, actually,” Julian replied. “Why are *you* in enemy territory anyway? Your face is known. And keep it down. Don’t be rude to the guest of your master, Mr. Servant.”

“Oh dear, pardon me,” Claude said coolly. He placed the tray of tea down, poured himself a cup, sat down, and took a sip.

“Wait, why’re you drinking the tea?”

“Huh? You want some?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Thought so.”

Claude had brought in the tea without being ordered. He was planning on apologizing for his mistake but on his way to do so had caught a glimpse of the “guest” who had managed to sneak into a room and retreat.

“You got hurt?” Julian asked. He had noticed Claude’s injury from the moment the man had stepped inside; a large piece of gauze had been stuck on Claude’s face.

“Yeah,” Claude said, right before he used a joking line that Julian had once stated. “See, I’m the kind of handsome that means wounds actually look cool on me.”

“Shut up, moron.” Julian’s tone was prickly, but he was relieved that the wound didn’t seem to be serious. “So, have you got an escape route?”

“From this room, you can jump out of the window and walk along the walls to jump onto the roof of the kitchen. And from there, well... What would *you* do, Julian?”

“If I do it my way,” Julian replied, “I can get to the back exit and jump off from there, since the roof’s a bit lower. But if I find myself near the food storage shed I can jump off that roof instead, since it’s the shortest route to the stables.”

“So you *have* been thinking of an escape plan,” Claude said, acting like an older brother.

“Of course.”

Normally, Julian was able to keep a cool head, but remarks from either Claude or Opal always managed to easily rile him.

“Let me ask again. What are you doing here?” Claude inquired.

“I’m not here of my own will. I came to take a peek at the king’s illegitimate child, and somehow, that became me. By the way, next time you meet my dad, ask him for the *real* story of my birth.”

“Your jokes aren’t funny.”

“Whoa, I didn’t think a day would come where a serious guy like you would call me boring. This hurts...”

Julian jokingly pressed a hand against his chest in pain as Claude elegantly brought his teacup to his lips. It didn’t look like Julian was sneaking around, but he had no need to. Alessandro simply had a huge advantage.

“They don’t even know who you are, and they’re trying to make you their fake prince?” Claude muttered. “The anti-Alessandro faction must have their backs against the wall.”

“I guess there’s no hiding my grace and elegance. A pity,” Julian replied.

“Yeah, guess your cherub face came in handy.”

“I’ll kill you right here.”

The late king’s illegitimate son was said to be around seventeen. The king was said to have visited numerous foreign countries during his prime, and if along the way a child had come out of his travels, such a thing was a convenient possibility for the enemy faction to utilize. Both Julian and Claude could change their speech as they pleased, and now they put on the mannerisms of commoners.

“All right, I’m gonna head back,” Claude said.

“Bring me a souvenir next time,” Julian called.

“Visit me instead and I’ll give you a warm welcome.”

“Ugh, what a pain.”

“Listen, Julian. Come visit me, all right? Promise me.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll meet again. We’ve got this unfortunate, inseverable bond after all.”

“I’ll see you later.”

Claude stood and cleaned up the teacup as he left. Julian gave a nonchalant wave of his hand and didn’t even watch his friend leave. They were both in the middle of danger, but neither was inclined toward mopey farewells. Julian remained seated as the door closed, and he leaned back in his chair, lost in thought.

Claude appeared in the royal palace as the representative of Earl Roussel and stood at the forefront in support for Alessandro. Claude’s face was widely known among the populace, and yet, he’d managed to sneak his way into the heart of enemy territory. Such a thing heavily implied that the civil war was leaning in Alessandro’s favor. Throughout the conflict only one large battle had occurred; the rest had been smaller skirmishes.

Still, morale was steadily decreasing. Perhaps Claude’s injury had come from one of the battles, but then again, many had been injured in combat, and he didn’t stand out. But if, for example, there were rumors of the king’s illegitimate son—more specifically, of a man pretending to be his son—passing away, the enemy faction would be destroyed.

The false prince’s death had been kept under wraps. The enemy needed Julian to act as his replacement. And so, he spent his days in a small manor in the countryside, barely meeting anyone else. Claude’s sudden appearance had been an excellent way to pass time; Julian assumed that Claude had appeared only to catch a glimpse of the fake prince. *Looks like they’ll be on the move soon*, Julian thought.

No matter Earl Roussel’s choice, it was clear as day that Claude would side with Alessandro. Julian had wanted to distance himself from Claude and as a result managed to infiltrate the enemy faction by himself. In doing so, he had managed to get his hands on some very interesting information. Naturally, he wasn’t willing to divulge his juicy intel to Claude and Alessandro with zero strings attached. *Looks like it’s time for me to go too*.

At this rate, he knew that he’d be used as a human sacrifice. Julian had

several escape routes in his head which he hadn't told his friend about, and he pondered over his future actions.

Alessandro would inevitably take the throne soon, but it was clear that there was a thorny path ahead of him. Julian had heard of Opal getting involved in some rather interesting affairs back in Socille, but he had no plans of interfering in her business and decided to let her be. While it was unclear whether Claude was doing it unconsciously or on purpose, he was moving in a way that prevented any information about Opal from reaching him. Had he known what she was currently doing, surely he would have already returned to Socille to be by her side. *Or maybe, unexpectedly, it's Alessandro exerting his power here.* Usually, the more bad news any information contained, the more likely one was to hear about it.

If Claude was still kept completely in the dark despite it all, it was likely that another party was blocking the flow of information. And if that were the case, and someone was indeed filtering the information getting to Claude, then Julian liked the future king more and more.

A few days later, the leader of the faction against Alessandro—the mastermind of the rebels, Duke Bocceli—passed away due to an unfortunate “accident” in his carriage. Julian's favor toward Alessandro only grew. The viscount had already prepared his path of escape, and he slipped out of the manor with a smile stretched across his lips. Clearly, Alessandro wasn't a naive royal who lived in comfort in the royal palace—oh no, he had some plans of his own.

Bocceli's fatal accident wasn't Claude's doing. He might have at most known about it and given his tacit approval. Julian now had a new goal in mind. He'd borrow Claude's help to secretly meet with Alessandro. If the royal was exactly as Julian expected—and Alessandro almost certainly was—the viscount would sneak his way into Marquis Bapot's circle. He had no doubt that he could pull off such a thing. As he rode his stolen steed away from enemy territory and straight for the royal capital, he was so cheerful that he could have broken out into song right then and there.

5. Bon Voyage

Julian had arrived at Port Pasma while deeply reminiscing about the past. His entire trip had gone by swiftly, no doubt because the rails had been repaired and the train had been replaced with the newest model soon after the rebellion had been quashed. The time had come for Julian to board the ship that was headed for Socille.

“I’ll see you around, Julian. Take care,” Claude said in farewell.

“Care isn’t necessary, not for me,” Julian replied. “It’s not like I’m gonna jump off the ship or anything.” He was unable to be honest with his feelings, even until the very end, and the two instead engaged in a conversation that was filled with jokes and serious remarks.

“You might not, but someone might push you off,” Claude replied. “You’ve likely earned the ire of many people, men and women alike.”

“That I can’t deny. But if we’re speaking about danger, it’s you who should be more careful. Others probably hate you a lot more than they hate me.”

“I know. Thanks,” Claude replied honestly.

“No need to thank me.” Julian hid his embarrassment. “Oh, and don’t let that idiot Opal run wild.”

Claude couldn’t hide his smile; he loved the two Holloway siblings very much. Julian had gone out of his way to visit House Bocceli because he was very much worried about his pregnant sister and wanted to check up on her before he left.

“Opal’s a wonderful lady,” Claude said. “Surely, you know that best, Julian.”

“Looks like you need to get both your eyes *and* head checked by a doctor,” Julian replied.

“You think so? I also think that you’re the greatest friend that one could ever have.”

“Yeah, you definitely must’ve hit your head somewhere.”

“You’re so mean.”

Julian scowled as Claude burst out laughing. The viscount turned around to

leave.

“And if she’s my younger sister, that makes you my *younger* brother,” Julian mumbled.

“Oh, you’re right,” Claude replied.

“You idiot.”

Julian hadn’t said such a simple insult since they were kids, and he was already walking up the ramp and into the ship. The sun was behind Julian, making his expression difficult to see. Claude shaded his eyes with his hand as he watched his friend leave, but just before Julian stepped into the ship, he whirled around.

“I’ll see you around, you moronic older brother!”

Julian’s face was obscured by the light, but it looked as though he was smiling. He was a precious friend, an older brother, and a younger brother to Claude.

“Just know that I love you, buddy!” Claude shouted as he waved with both of his arms using all of his might.

“Idiot!” Julian’s voice was carried by the wind.

Julian disappeared from the deck of the ship, and Claude was left on the wharf, having made a stunning confession of love. Needless to say, he was famous in Taisei, and those who hadn’t seen Julian were shocked to hear him say such a thing. The story immediately made its rounds in the social circles of both Taisei and Socille. But Opal—Duchess Bocceli—would burst into a fit of giggles every time she heard it, much to the confusion of everyone else.

In fact, Claude would chuckle along, and even King Alessandro would use every opportunity he could get to mention the tale. And so, Claude’s—Duke Bocceli’s—confession of love would remain an eternal mystery to outsiders.

Extra Story 2: The Wedding

1. Putting to Bed

While Opal was seated in front of the mirror, a loud and adorable wail echoed from afar. Claude's tired but determined voice came after, and Opal locked eyes with Nadja through the mirror. The two ladies exchanged a smile.

"Fussy today, isn't he?" Nadja remarked.

"Yes, but we met a lot of people, so I suppose it can't be helped," Opal replied.

"Will you go help him?"

Opal strained her ears, heard something, and smiled as she turned back to the mirror. "No, I think he'll be all right."

A powerful friend had just come to Claude's rescue. This was Opal's second visit back home ever since she'd given birth, and this time she was staying in her husband's home, the manor of Baron Fred. Claude's mother, Baroness Fred, had known Opal since she was young. The two ladies got along quite well.

Opal prepared for bed, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders. When she quietly entered the room next door, Claude had just gotten up from bed. He looked so proud of himself that Opal almost burst out laughing. His expression very much resembled that of his tiny son, who had just met Marcia and Trevor in the afternoon. The baby had often looked just as proud of himself.

"Lud seemed fussy tonight," Opal whispered.

"Yeah." Claude nodded. "Mom was worried and came to take a look."

"Has she left already?"

"Yeah, since Lud stopped crying."

Opal peered into the adorable face of her sleeping son. Lud looked like he'd been crying, but Opal feared that wiping his tears away would only wake him.

She quietly stepped away from Lud's bed instead and approached her husband, who was sitting in a nearby chair. She kissed him on the cheek only to be pulled into him, to sit upon his lap.

"Were you able to get a bit of rest?" Claude asked.

"I was. Thank you," Opal replied.

Usually, the two would rock their son to sleep, but Claude had known that his wife would be tired today and insisted on putting his son to bed by himself. He had urged Opal to relax and take a long bath.

It'd been a year since Ludrick, or Lud for short, was born. The couple worked together to raise their little love with tender care. While the two had employed a wet nurse, both Claude and Opal made sure to spend as much time together with their child as they could.

"Claude, I'll watch over Lud for a while," Opal said. "Why don't you head to bed first?"

"All right." He nodded.

She got off his lap, and he stood up to leave. He gave his wife one final kiss before he retreated into the bedroom next door. After he left she quietly approached her son's bed. Lud had puffy, squishable cheeks and a tiny button nose. Claude had remarked that Lud's slightly pouting lips were the spitting image of Opal's, but she always thought that his dark brown hair and determined eyes and eyebrows resembled Claude's very much.

When she had gone to introduce her son to Marcia and Trevor, they had both chuckled and mentioned that Lud resembled both his parents very much. When the boy clung onto something to stand up and stubbornly insisted on walking by himself, just which parent did he resemble more? No one could say.

Opal was tempted to scoop up her precious son and rub her cheeks against his, to take in a deep breath of the sweet scent all babies had, but she resisted the temptation. She instead silently took in her baby's peaceful, slumbering face. She'd never get tired of looking at the adorable face of her dearest son.

"Opal, you should get some rest," Claude whispered as he stood next to his wife and gazed at his child. "You'll wake up early tomorrow too, I bet."

"I know," Opal replied.

The two always lost track of time when they spent it with their son. They'd each hired a secretary to increase the efficiency of their work, but they surely would've been tardy to a variety of events already without being reminded. Only when Asha gingerly entered the room did the duke and duchess realize that it'd gotten late.

"I apologize for disturbing your precious time with your son," Asha whispered.

"No, we're the ones who caused you trouble," Opal replied. "I'm sorry."

"If anything happens, feel free to let us know at any time," Claude added.

"Of course. Good night," Asha replied.

"Good night," Opal and Claude said.

The two finally retired to their bedroom. Opal removed her shawl before she snuggled into bed. Claude slipped under the covers beside his wife and turned off the light by his pillow. Usually, they'd read a book or peruse some documents before falling asleep, but the two were exhausted after a long day.

"Good night, Claude," Opal said.

"Night, Opal."

She got a gentle peck on the cheek from her husband and closed her eyes. She must've really been tired; when she opened them again, it was already morning. Claude was still fast asleep beside her. She slipped out of bed, wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, and went to check up on her son.

"Good morning, madam," Asha said.

"Good morning, Asha," Opal replied. "How was Lud last night?"

"The young master slept very well. He's a very good boy, and even I was allowed to catch a few winks last night."

While they spoke Asha skillfully changed Lud's diaper. He had become fussy recently and had caused Opal and Claude some trouble, but the wet nurse was clearly skilled in her ways.

"Tomorrow, you shall be leaving before noon, correct?" Asha asked.

“That’s right. We’ll be away for two days,” Opal murmured. “I’m quite worried.”

“Of course. I don’t blame you, madam. But please, I ask that you leave the young master in my care.”

“I’m not worried as much about Lud. I’m more worried about whether I can bear to be apart from him for so long.” No matter how busy she was, ever since Lud was born Opal had never spent the night out.

Now that Lud was all clean, he was scooped up into the air and squealed happily as he flailed his arms and legs.

“The papers have been reporting about it for months now,” Asha said. “The wedding in two days’ time will surely gather such a large crowd that people will spill out of the venue. I’m afraid such a thing might overwhelm the baby.”

“You’re right.” Opal nodded. “And I don’t want him to be out in public just yet.”

“I understand. The young master is clever and adorable. Many young girls would pay him quite a bit of attention.”

Lud’s hefty weight was another thing about him that made him so dear to Opal, and she hugged her son as she took a final deep whiff of her baby’s sweet scent. Meanwhile, Asha doted on the baby while she cleared away the dirty diaper. Ludrick would no doubt inherit the massive fortune that Duke Bocceli had amassed; to Opal’s shock, she was already receiving proposals for her son’s hand in marriage.

Opal sighed as she gave her son back to Asha and entrusted her with his care. Claude would still be asleep for a while yet, and the duchess wanted to feed her son breakfast.

It was only her third day at Baron Fred’s manor, but the servants had already memorized Lud’s schedule. The baroness had raised three splendid sons of her own. Opal knew that Lud was in safe hands, but as the following day arrived and she boarded the carriage, she was still reluctant to leave her beloved son’s side.

2. Groomsman

Once the married couple had stepped off the carriage and boarded their train, they were finally able to relax just a little.

“Feeling lonely?” Claude asked gingerly.

Opal chuckled and nodded. “Very much so. But you feel the same too, don’t you?”

“Enough that I’m even a bit angry at McLeod.”

Every now and then, Claude had business to tend to—Alessandro’s fault, mainly—where he was forced to spend the night away from his manor. Whenever he returned, he would passionately greet his wife and son, expressing how much he had missed him. Even he had never spent more than two full nights away from them.

“McLeod’s wedding is a joyous occasion,” Claude said. “It’s something I’ll gladly celebrate. And I’m sure it’ll have him rewrite that silly will of his too. But if we were just normal guests, we wouldn’t even have to stay the night.”

The railroads had developed considerably over the past years, but unless a special carriage was used, it was quite difficult to go to and from the royal capital within a single day. Claude played up his own irritation in hopes of distracting his wife from her worries. Opal knew Claude’s intentions and frowned as she touched upon a different topic.

“I understand how bachelor parties work, but don’t get too carried away,” she warned. “If anything happens, I won’t forgive you. And that has nothing to do with me being the bridesmaid.”

“Don’t worry,” Claude said. “McLeod’s an earnest guy, and I’m a groomsman too. It’s my responsibility to safely deliver him to the wedding venue.”

The couple had been selected as the bridesmaid and groomsman of the ceremony. Usually, single people were selected for this honor, but Hubert’s current age and rank made it difficult for him to select people who fit that bill. And so, Duke and Duchess Bocceli had graciously accepted the invitation, causing a shock wave throughout the nobility. The wedding was said to be the largest event of the season.

As a side note, during Opal's first wedding, she'd had neither bridesmaids nor groomsmen in attendance.

"I'm more worried about the other groomsman," Opal remarked.

"I think...he'll be fine," Claude said.

"You *think*, do you?"

The two sighed as they recalled the other groomsman—Julian. Two years ago, the viscount had suddenly appeared in Socille's high society, and ever after he'd attracted attention wherever he went. The most famous tale that swirled around him was of the first time he'd met Hubert and put out his hand for a handshake.

"Oh, so *you're* the incompetent duke who was cast aside by silly little Opal? Fascinating!"

For a viscount to give a duke such attitude was beyond insolent, but Hubert had only given an awkward smile and nodded in complete agreement with Julian's words, much to the relief of the crowd. Still, the event was shocking; it had even made the papers. Upon reading the papers, Claude had been struck speechless, while Opal had been visibly incensed. Julian was normally very good at acting favorable and friendly; never would he show such blatant hostility toward another person. Clearly, him doing so here was his revenge for the duke making his sister suffer for a good several years. If Hubert had dared to act angry or offended, Julian very well would've thrown a punch or two.

But Julian would never be honest with his feelings, and he would hate for his sister to become aware of the reason behind his actions. Opal only mentioned how foolish her brother was, half angry and half exasperated by the whole thing. She was keenly aware of how protective her brother was of her, though he'd never honestly admit it.

"I've seen you and Julian interact for over two decades, but I still can't wrap my head around the bond between two men," she said to Claude. "How in the world did he and Duke McLeod become *friends*? I even heard that Julian had acted on Hubert's behalf to help facilitate his marriage even happening."

"Huh... Yeah," Claude said. "How *did* he do it?"

Julian was skilled at getting close to others. He was short-tempered but also very friendly; while he had caused trouble during his university days, he had been viewed favorably by his professors and labeled a lovable rascal of sorts, much to his dismay. Julian wasn't completely devoid of enemies, obviously, but most were just jealous of him.

As he got older, he became even more adept at intuiting what others expected of him and was able to act the part very well. By that point his enemies had become nearly nonexistent. Clearly, he was having fun while acting like a good friend of Hubert's. Claude would go so far as to assume that Julian was *toying* with the duke. The viscount was popular in society, but all of it was just a bit he was playing; the moment he grew tired of it, that would be the end. Only Opal, House Holloway, and Claude knew Julian's true nature.

"I hope Julian can one day find a partner who understands him well," Claude remarked.

"That won't be easy," Opal said harshly. "I doubt there'd be anyone who could comprehend the bizarre things that go through his convoluted mind."

It seemed the siblings were often cold to each other. Claude gave a forced chuckle as Opal looped her arm around his and leaned on him.

"But I'm not worried," Opal said. "I don't understand him one bit, but you seem to get him quite well, Claude."

"Well, I sure hope so," Claude replied.

"So I'm relying on you."

"Of course."

After his firm reply, he planted a kiss on his wife's head. The pair of siblings, who couldn't possibly be honest with one another, were just so very dear to Claude.

Claude and Opal spent much of the rest of their trip in silence, only speaking when one or the other couldn't help themselves from mentioning their son. Though it was necessary, they still rued the fact that they'd left Lud behind.

3. Bridesmaid

The royal capital was bustling with people. Opal hadn't mentioned her arrival to anyone, but there were only a few trains that came from the Earldom of Holloway, and so her actions were easy to predict. Duchess Bocceli, who rarely showed up to societal events, would be in attendance for the wedding of Duke McLeod, arguably one of the largest events of the season. Furthermore, she was Duke McLeod's ex-wife.

While some welcomed her warmly, many were secretly hoping for some kind of messy drama to unfold at the ceremony. Many reporters and curious bystanders not only crowded the premises of the station but flooded outside. A small pandemonium had broken out. Claude had hired twice as many guards as usual, but even that didn't seem enough.

"You okay?" Claude asked.

"I'm used to it," Opal replied.

"That's not really a good thing, but I do wish you luck."

"I wish the same for you."

Opal smiled at her husband's consideration as they each boarded a separate carriage. The two would be apart until the ceremony. When her carriage finally creaked forward, she breathed a sigh of relief. It had been so noisy in the station that she hadn't been able to even speak two words to Claude. She was glad that they'd decided to go over their plans while still on the train.

She reviewed all of the plans she had in place for the time up until tomorrow's wedding. The carriage forded the river of onlookers gathered in front of the gates of Viscount Kreusel's residence, where the bride was waiting. The moment she stepped into House Kreusel's manor, both the bride's mother—the viscountess—and another bridesmaid appeared, looking visibly relieved.

"Duchess! What shall we do?!" the bridesmaid cried.

"Now, let's calm down. What happened?" Opal asked with a smile on her face.

Internally, she was wondering if perhaps the number of flowers ordered had

been insufficient or if the wedding dress had been delayed and would no longer arrive in time. Unfortunately, the answer she received was the worst of them all.

“That child has holed herself up in her room. She says she doesn’t want to get married anymore,” the viscountess explained, sounding a touch more calm than the bridesmaid.

The bridesmaid—the younger cousin of the bride—was in a state of absolute panic as she added, “Can you believe it?! Every woman in the world would kill to be in her place!”

The irony of saying that to Opal, a duchess who had once been in that envious position and had still divorced Hubert, was lost on the bridesmaid. She was still young and had just made her debut in society; her carelessness wasn’t entirely her fault. Opal recalled the time when she had been excited to make her debut and had dreamed of so many ideals, only to have them all dashed by a freezing torrent of cold, harsh reality.

“What shall I do if the wedding is canceled?!” the young lady cried. “I’ve already bragged about it to so many friends! I won’t get to dance with Viscount Holloway!”

It was tradition for the newly wedded couple to dance at the wedding, followed by the bridesmaids and groomsmen. It seemed the cousin was more worried about dancing with Julian than about the bride.

“Quite right. He’d be hurt if the ceremony was canceled,” Opal said, refusing to elaborate that she was referring to Duke McLeod.

Opal flashed a reassuring smile at the apologetic viscountess and headed to the bride’s room. She asked for some privacy as she did so, and alone, she knocked on the door.

“Roanna, it’s me, Opal. I just arrived. If you don’t mind, could you let me in?”

There was a rustle and then some footsteps before the door swung open, and Opal was dragged inside.

“I just can’t!” Roanna cried as she clung onto the duchess. “I can’t marry the duke!”

“Then shall we cancel the wedding?” Opal asked calmly.

“Huh?”

“We can still do so, if you like.”

Roanna, the bride-to-be, widened her swollen eyes, damp with tears. She quickly looked down.

“But the wedding’s tomorrow,” she mumbled. “It’s too late to call it off...”

“It’s better than marrying him and regretting the decision for the rest of your life. Your parents will understand.”

“Everyone compares me to you,” Roanna admitted. “I know that you’re a far more splendid lady than I ever can be, but the more people make the comparison, the less confident I feel about myself.”

“Has Duke McLeod ever compared you to me?” Opal asked.

“No, not once.”

“Then that’s the truth right there. And if you don’t mind me saying, my marriage with His Grace ended in failure. Even if I *was* the most fantastic lady in the world, our marriage ended in divorce. And ours was a political marriage. Neither of us had any say in it. But Duke McLeod has chosen you of his own accord, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, I think so...”

“You don’t *think* so. You *know* so. He *definitely* did! The only person in the world who can even dare to voice their opinion against the current duke is His Majesty alone.”

As Opal calmly stemmed the torrent of anxiety flowing out of Roanna, the bride was slowly regaining her cool. And indeed, Roanna had every right to be proud of herself. She was likely the only woman in the world who could make the arrogant and prideful Hubert propose to her publicly, in front of a huge crowd. And this was his second proposal; he’d already been rejected by Roanna once before.

“Let’s think about every problem that might come from this marriage,” Opal said. “First, the stupid little comments from other people that made you afraid.

They're nothing more than jealous insults. And aren't they just for the reporters to sell more papers?"

"Yeah," Roanna sniffled.

"Unfortunately, that will continue for years to come. If anything, and I mean *anything* happens between Claude and me, for example, rumors will quickly spread about how poorly our marriage is doing. If that happens to you, what would you do? Would you like to not marry?"

"No, I can't let such nasty people have their way and ruin my chances of marriage."

"How right you are!" Opal said in praise. "Your behavior is commendable! Now for the next issue. You can ignore the comparisons that people make between you and me, but I think it's more painful if *you* begin comparing yourself with me. And there's nothing I can do about that. But what I can do is tell you the truth. I was married to Duke McLeod for seven years, but in all that time we must have spent only a month together total. And not once did we share a bedroom."

"That can't be..."

"It's the truth. Even before we married our wedded life had been all but destroyed. We hated each other so much. Knowing this," Opal said, "the rest is up to you and how you choose to process what I've told you. Even if you're at the venue you can still cancel the wedding. You can even choose to prolong your engagement, if you wish."

While many had their suspicions about Opal's first marriage, only the wedded couple and Claude knew the full truth. As Opal divulged all to Roanna with a reassuring smile, the bride-to-be was shocked.

"All right, I think we can move on to the most important issue of all," the duchess said. "Are you perhaps anxious about whether your marriage will go well?"

"I am," Roanna replied.

"But no one can see the future. I had no guarantees that marrying Claude would go well. But such worries can be resolved if both of you work together.

I'll continue to do my best, and strive to be the best self I can be so that I can remain by Claude's side. And I'm sure that he'll be doing the same. This is an issue between the two of you, so only you and Duke McLeod can resolve this anxiety."

"You're...right."

"Even if things don't go well, it won't be your fault."

"Why do you say that?"

"My second marriage has gone very well so far, but I ended up divorcing Duke McLeod. In other words, doesn't it become clear that in my previous marriage, it must have not worked out because *one* side was at fault? At the very least, to the most insignificant outsiders, things will appear as such for you as well."

"No..."

"Think about it. Roanna, you've already declined His Grace's proposal once. If you decline to marry him now, everyone will whisper that it's because of Hubert and that something must be wrong with him."

"That can't happen! I can't possibly embarrass Duke Hubert any further!"

Roanna raised her voice, turning pale at Opal's sound logic. The duchess internally breathed a sigh of relief and decided to change topics.

"I heard that you've gotten quite friendly with Julian," she said. "My older brother's got a nasty streak to him, doesn't he?"

"Not at all," Roanna replied. "Lord Julian is very funny and kind."

"What? He's tricking you for sure. Julian's never honest with himself. And he's *mean*," Opal grumbled.

Roanna giggled. "That's only because you two are siblings. I fight with my younger brother all the time." The longer they talked about her future husband, the calmer Roanna became. "Besides, I only decided to marry Duke Hubert thanks to Lord Julian."

"So I've heard. I could hardly believe my ears when I heard the news."

"But it's true! Lord Julian gave me the final push forward. I didn't have

confidence in myself, and I couldn't believe Duke Hubert's heartfelt words. I kept telling myself that I only liked him as a friend, but I finally realized my true feelings."

"I see..."

Opal was happy to hear Roanna's blushing words; they were the true sign of a maiden in love. The duchess was dying to hear how exactly Roanna had managed to make the prideful and haughty Hubert propose to her once more, but that would have to wait until another day. There was no time to talk about Julian right now.

"I'll do anything if it means you'll be happy, Roanna," Opal said. "So I hope that you won't hold back and tell me your true feelings. Do you still want to marry Duke McLeod?"

"I do. I want to be his wife," Roanna said firmly.

Opal smiled. "Then we've got no time to spare for tomorrow's ceremony."

The duchess stood up and sprung into action. First, she had to soothe Roanna's swelling eyes. She asked the viscountess to request some tea and something to cool Roanna's eyes with before returning to her seat. Then she heard both complaints and romantic tales of Hubert and shared the same, talking at length about her beloved Claude. And of course, when she started to talk about her adorable Lud, she simply couldn't stop. The two women smiled and laughed as they prepared for tomorrow's wedding.

4. Eternity

Due to various issues, only close relatives and the like were allowed to attend the wedding. But of course, that wouldn't stop the crowd, and many reporters were on standby outside the venue, hoping to catch even just a glimpse of the ceremony. They were joined by curious nobles and onlookers who hoped to see this unprecedented event from their carriages. Since they all knew that the public was practically dying for details, they allowed one and only one reporter inside, to stave off the possibility of a riot.

The reporter, who went by the name of Alan Marron, wrote a fantastic article

about the ceremony, and it was in every newspaper in the kingdom. Every company reported the highest newspaper sales in history and made record after record off the story. The wedding was indeed a splendid one.

When Roanna and Hubert made their vows for eternity, Opal and Claude were so moved by the scene that they held each other's hands and locked eyes, silently renewing their own vows as well. Julian saw it and laughed through his nose.

Early the following morning, Opal and Claude boarded a train home and breathed a sigh of relief.

"We can finally head home," Claude sighed.

"Yes, I finally get to see Lud," Opal added.

"You think he's been good?"

"I wonder... He's been restless recently, so he might cause a bit of trouble."

In truth, they'd wanted to head home last night, but the festivities had continued well until midnight, even after the newly wedded couple had left. Opal and Claude attended the ceremony until the very end. Since Hubert didn't have any close relatives or parents, the younger Duke and Duchess Bocceli had assumed the role of his guardians instead.

The reception that was held at McLeod's manor was expertly handled by Roanna and Viscountess Kreusel; Bart and the other servants carried out their orders beautifully. It was all thanks to Roanna and her mother that Opal, along with Bart and the other servants, were spared any awkward moments. Mrs. Notham—who had once acted as Hubert's mother—and Stella were nowhere to be seen in the manor. Mrs. Notham had attended the ceremony, but Stella had claimed that she felt unwell and left before the reception. This was completely out of Opal's control, and she quickly switched gears.

"And? Was the groom able to spend the night before the wedding with no issues whatsoever?" Opal asked with a smile. She was met with Claude's frown, and she added, "Did something happen? Be honest with me."

"Julian..." Claude mumbled.

"I *knew* he was up to no good."

Upon hearing his wife's stern tone Claude resigned himself to his fate. As she'd expected, Julian had been quite involved in causing some trouble.

"Uh, Julian suggested calling for some women to play around with," Claude mumbled. "He was joking, of course, as he usually does."

"And?" Opal asked. She knew about her brother's jokes, but she was still angry. As she thought about what she'd do the next time she saw him, her smile only grew deeper.

"McLeod became furious. I predicted as much, but the issue was that Julian had the duke chug quite a bit of strong alcohol beforehand."

"And then what happened?"

"The duke didn't let it show on his face, so I hadn't noticed a thing, but it was pretty bad."

"How so?"

Opal had seen Hubert drink in the past, but not once had she seen him drunk. She'd only seen him drink a glass or two at most.

"McLeod drunk is horrid. He began lecturing us," Claude said.

"That isn't anything new," Opal replied.

"Oh, but it *was*. He kept going on and on about the current state of society, what a noble's duties should be, and the disintegration of public morality as a whole. He wouldn't shut up until the morning."

"That's quite an ordeal."

Hubert had the tendency to lecture others, with a manner of speaking that was both verbose and redundant. If he had continued to lecture until the morning, then it must have indeed been torture. But neither Claude nor Hubert had let their thoughts show during the ceremony, and they had seemed completely normal. Opal was impressed, but she sympathized with her husband as Claude suddenly looked a bit miffed.

"And yet, Julian managed to find a way to escape!" he grumbled. "I was alone,

forced to go along with McLeod's whims! I tried my best to weasel my way out by using trees or porcelain dolls in my stead, but none of it worked!"

Opal knew that she shouldn't laugh here, but the mere thought of Claude desperately looking for his replacement was humorous. She managed to suppress her laughs by staring into his face.

"Are you all right now?" Opal asked.

Claude was never good at waking up early, and now he had been forced to do so two days in a row. Perhaps he felt ill but managed to hide it.

Claude smiled at his wife, but this grin never quite reached his eyes. "Physically, I feel fine. But it's been a while since I felt like strangling Julian with my bare hands."

"A while?" Opal asked.

"Well, yes, it's been a while since I've seen him."

Opal couldn't help it. She giggled at her husband's complaints. He always prioritized her, but sometimes even she couldn't get between his friendship with Julian. Opal had always called this a bond between men, and here it was on full display. She didn't hate it at all. There were times when she felt exhausted by their silly squabbles, but it was fun to watch.

"Then the next time we see Julian, I'll be sure to give you a helping hand," Opal said.

"I'm counting on you," Claude replied.

They grinned at each other with a new plan in mind. The train would soon pull into the earldom, and once they reached the station, they would be a short distance away from the baron's manor. Opal was slowly growing restless, and Claude watched his wife with fond eyes.

When the carriage finally rolled up to the manor, Lud was in the entrance with the baroness, ready to greet his mother.

"Lud! I'm home!" Opal cried.

Her son reached for her from within the baroness's arms. Opal scooped up her child and Lud squealed happily.

“We’re back, Lud,” Claude said. “Thanks for looking after him, mom.”

“Thank you so much!” Opal added.

“Welcome back, you two,” the baroness replied. “Lud has been such a good baby. I’m sure that you two are tired. Go on, rest up and spend some time together as a family.”

They took the baroness’s kind offer, and the three lazed about in their room. The duke and duchess thanked Asha and requested she take some time to rest.

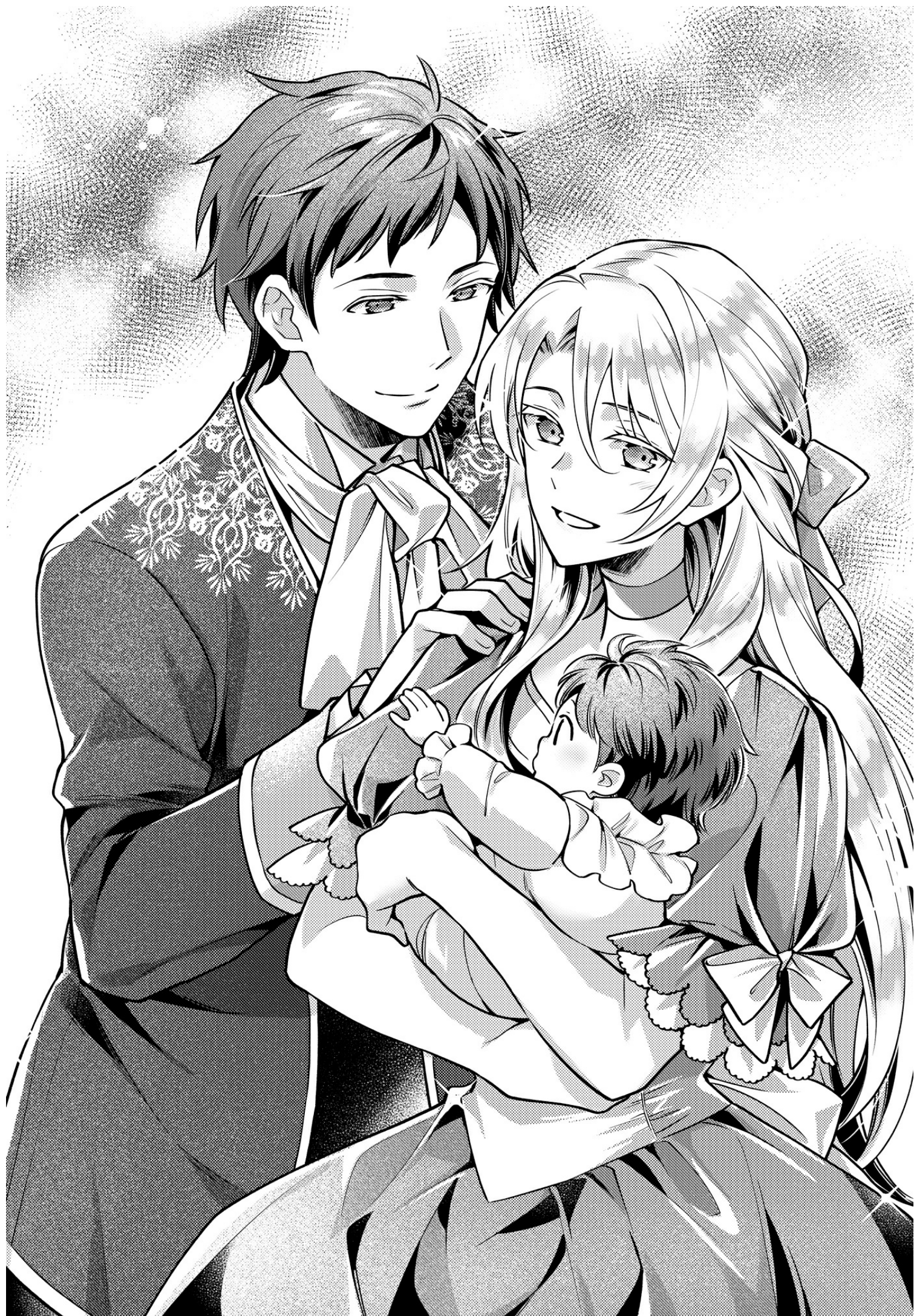
“How curious,” Opal remarked. “I’ve only been away for two days, but I feel like Lud has grown quite a bit.”

“Kids grow fast, as they say,” Claude said. “But I wouldn’t want to miss a second if I could help it.”

“You’re right.”

Lud clung onto something to stand himself up but fell back on his bottom. Undeterred, he stood up again and took two or three steps before he tripped and cried. Claude pacified his son. Opal watched on, vowing to treasure these moments with her family.

The following year, Opal would give birth to a second child, a daughter. Claude doted on her so much that the duchess feared that in the future he’d let his daughter get away with anything. Around the same time, the McLeods announced the birth of a long-awaited son, causing quite the fuss.



And the fuss continued to grow due to Hubert's passionate requests to Claude; he hoped to arrange an engagement between his son and Claude and Opal's daughter. Needless to say, Claude sternly denied all such requests. In fact, he claimed that he wouldn't allow his daughter to marry at all.

Even so, Hubert wouldn't relent, again and again going up against Claude's equally stubborn refusal on the matter. Neither wife wanted to get involved during those times, and instead they discussed all manner of things about the current state of society.

Would the future see House Bocceli and House McLeod become one big family? Everyone else watched on with bated breath.

Afterword

Hello all, and long time no see. Mori here. Thank you so much for picking up the third volume of *Duchess in the Attic*. It's thanks to the support of all of you that I'm allowed to release the third volume. I'm sure that some of you became interested after reading the manga version, and I can only thank Maki Hayashi for drawing the characters so splendidly. Even I was dying to know how the manga continued!

It's filled with original scenes, and if you haven't read it, I highly recommend it! My favorite is Trevor, and in the web novel, he was nowhere to be seen, but as I added on to this volume, he suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Spoiler alert: We were able to finally catch a glimpse of *him*. He'd been heavily hinted at in previous volumes, but only now is he able to shine and make a firm appearance.

I was worried if people would figure out his identity when I was writing the web novel, but I received a lot of comments stating that they never saw him coming, and I just felt so lucky and happy to read those words! Were you able to notice him? I can only hope that the illustrations further worked to mislead the reader...

I must thank Fuyuko Aoi for the lovely illustrations. Thank you so much! They even continued to illustrate the cover for me, and I'm just so happy that I get to see Opal and Claude drawn so splendidly. What's more, this extravagant volume borrowed the assistance of Syuri Yasuyuki for the illustrations and the art in the book!

When I was told of this excellent news, I couldn't help but be moved to tears by such a lavish reward. I hope that you all enjoyed the amazing artwork of Opal and Claude!

I'd like to thank my editors, the manga department, and everyone else involved in the making of this book. And above all, thank you very much to everyone for buying this book!

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Author: *Mori*

Illustrator: *Huyuko Aoi*
Yasuguki Syuri

Dulchess
in the **ATTIC**





Even in a new city,
she finds herself
trapped in an attic once again!

Hello,
little princess.
It's your time
to take the stage.

Duchess *in the* ATTIC

Presented by: *Mori*
Illustrations by: *Huyuko Aoi*
Yasuyuki Syuri



Hey there, Opal.
Long time no see.

The dimly lit room was illuminated only by starlight, but Opal would never mistake the voice of her beloved. Even in the faintest of whispers was he able to convey his usual gentle, low tone. He sounded entirely laid-back, as if he'd bumped into her in the middle of the city and not while Opal was trapped in an attic. Opal wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at that. But before she could think of anything else, she leapt into Claude's arms.



Characters

Claude Roussel

After graduating from university he went to Taisei, which was in the midst of a civil war, and helped Prince Alessandro become king. His efforts were rewarded with the bestowment of the title of marquis. He married Opal after the end of the civil war, but the anti-Alessandro faction is still alive and well, keeping Claude busy.

Opal Roussel

Married Duke Hubert McLeod, but romance didn't blossom between the two. She did her best to reform the McLeod Duchy, which until then had only produced losses. She then divorced Hubert and remarried her childhood friend, Claude. She established a charity organization to support women gaining their independence.

Hubert McLeod

Lost his parents at an early age and was raised completely spoiled by his environment. When he began his marriage with Opal, he was poor at land management and had been saddled with various debts. When Opal took his duchy away from him, he turned over a new leaf and studied hard, making him now an extremely competent noble in Socille.

Alessandro

The current king of Taisei. Relies heavily on Claude, who helped him become king.

Eric Bapot

Also known as Baron Pradeaux. Respects Claude greatly, and is against Claude's marriage to the scandalous Opal.

Nadja

Formerly a maid in the Earldom of Holloway, she became Opal's personal maid when Her Grace moved to Taisei. Very honest and cheery.



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Duchess in the Attic: Volume 3

by Mori

Translated by piyo Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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