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Author: Mori

Illustrator: Huyuko Aoi

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Presented by: *Mori*  
Illustrations by: *Huyuko Aoi*



Then I'll make you regret it.  
I'll make you grumble about  
marrying such an obstinate,  
strong-minded woman.

I'm looking  
forward to it.

# Characters



## Opal

A lady who was forced into a political marriage and became a duchess. She uncovered the misdeeds of the duchy, divorced the duke, and happily married Claude, her childhood friend.



## Hubert

A duke and Opal's ex-husband. After their marriage ended, he turned over a new leaf and skillfully manages his duchy now.



## Claude

The third son of a baron and Opal's childhood friend. Attained the title of marquis in Taisei, the neighboring kingdom



## Stella

A frail young girl residing in Duke McLeod's house. She was said to have an incurable illness, but has found a treatment method thanks to Opal's advice. Currently in treatment.

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## 0. The Duchess in the Attic

It'd been eight years since Duke Hubert McLeod had shouted, "Leave at once! Out! Get out! I'll divorce you! Leave this house right now!" Opal Holloway had been a lot more stubborn and set in her ways back then. She had been infuriated with how she had been treated at his manor and refused to get along with him. In fact, she had gone behind his back to steal away all his assets.

Opal, a debutante at sixteen, had been attacked by a man who was after her wealth. Her reputation had suffered a fatal blow. But instead of hiding herself away in shame, she proudly attended banquets and dinner parties during the social season. Before she knew it, rumors of her lasciviousness had spread far and wide. Her father, Earl Holloway, had had enough of Opal's stubbornness and forced her to marry a debt-ridden Hubert in exchange for a handsome dowry. That decision had kicked off a series of unfortunate mistakes.

The prideful Hubert and the stubborn Opal were highly incompatible; what's more, the duke had been sheltering a sickly Miss Stella. The servants and Hubert had thus treated Opal as a woman who meant the fragile angel harm.

*If I were in that situation now, I'm sure I could handle myself better,* Opal thought. She let out a small sigh as she thought about her past. In a show of frustration, she'd defiantly holed herself up in the manor's attic. Even she could only give a forced smile at her childish antics. But she regretted nothing. It was precisely because she'd taken that course of action back then that her first love had been requited. Perhaps she would've delayed in restoring the McLeod Duchy if she hadn't been so forceful.

"Opal, can I ask what's on your mind?" Claude inquired.

"You just did," Opal replied with a smile.

Claude grinned back. As her childhood friend, he was always on her side. When Hubert had almost failed in his redevelopment of Manhest, it was Claude who'd secretly lent his aid and support, thus helping Opal by extension.

“I just thought that this was a lovely room,” Opal said.

“This is an attic,” Claude replied.

“Yes, a very lovely attic.”

Opal and Claude had toured the manor where they would live together, and their final stop was the attic. When they’d stepped inside the deserted room, memories of her troubled past came rushing back to Opal.

“You see, in my first marriage, I was so frustrated by everything that I cooped myself up in the attic,” Opal divulged.

“Did you really?” Claude asked.

“That’s right. So if we ever fight, you can bet that I’ll retreat right back to this attic again.”

Claude cackled, long and loud, and when he calmed down, he narrowed his eyes in thought, a glimmer of nostalgia visible.

“When we were kids, you always climbed up that large tree when you were angry,” he said, and chuckled.

“Oh? You make it sound like I haven’t matured one bit.”

“Who can say?”

Opal glared at Claude’s teasing before she started laughing along with him. This man was her first love, and the two were set to marry soon. Before all this had happened, Opal had been satisfied with only rebuilding Duke McLeod’s wealth, and was determined to divorce Hubert so that she could spend the rest of her life alone.

But the only true thing she’d learned so far in life was that it was unpredictable. As the two of them made their way out of the attic, Opal looked forward to the future that awaited her.

# 1. The Engagement Period

Three days had passed since Opal came to Claude's manor, her new home in the Taisei Kingdom's royal capital. She and Claude's family had settled down, allowing her to finally enjoy a spot of afternoon tea with her beloved. Their wedding would occur within a couple of days, so the happy couple were allowed to spend some alone time together within the manor. Opal would never get tired of talking with Claude, but for some reason, she'd fallen silent.

"Opal," Claude called out quietly.

"Yes? What is it?" Opal replied.

She set her cup down on the table—whenever Claude had something important to say, he said it in a particularly quiet way.

"I know I had you accept my proposal and then dragged you out here, so what I'm about to say may sound unfair," Claude started awkwardly.

"Will I perhaps meet former lovers and mistresses of yours at future social functions?" Opal asked.

"What? No! That won't ever happen, I assure you."

"Then what other problem is there?"

Opal smiled calmly, but on the inside, she was quite relieved. Though she'd been married herself until about a year ago, she wasn't keen on meeting any of Claude's past lovers. As long as that wouldn't happen, she was fine with anything else coming her way—barring, of course, Claude canceling their marriage. That way led only to despair.

"Well, to be frank... Wait, why did you think they'd be *former* lovers and mistresses?" Claude asked. "What if I still had someone?"

"If you did, I'm confident that you wouldn't have proposed to me," Opal replied. "I'm not worried about you having an affair either."

"I'm happy to have your trust."

“Of course. And in your case, a mistress or an affair wouldn’t be so casual. If it were to ever occur, I know you’ll be sure to tell me that you found someone else.”

“You’re smiling while you talk, so I’m not sure whether to feel happy or sad.”

“Oh? I’ve kept mum on how I really feel because I don’t wish to burden you with it, but to tell you the truth, I would’ve been incredibly distressed if something like that were to happen. So I *must* continue to do my best in hopes that you won’t abandon me. But perhaps it’s not very cute of me to be so obstinate.”

Opal had thought that her mental fortitude was one of her strengths, but there were times when she admired the fragility that other women typically possessed. She sighed, and grumbled to herself for a bit before she noticed that Claude was staring at her in shock.

“Have I said anything odd?” Opal asked.

“Er, I just didn’t think that you thought of yourself like that,” Claude replied. “I would’ve never imagined that you saw yourself as not cute.”

“Huh? People don’t usually see *themselves* as cute, do they?”

“I think they do. Women especially tend to think that about themselves.”

“I’m sure it’s the same for men, then. But those people are conceited and far from normal standards.”

“Stern as always, I see.”

Opal’s instinctually cold reply had her regret all over again that she just couldn’t act more adorably. But this was all because Claude had mentioned hanging around with quite a few women. Indeed, she knew very little about her beloved ever since he went off to boarding school. They hadn’t met for an entire eight years afterward—in all that time, Claude had been doing God-knows-what in who-knows-where the whole time. Opal had realized that she’d only heard rumors.

“Then did something happen? Have you been forced to cancel our wedding?” Opal inquired.

"No, nothing like that!" Claude replied. "Even if something like that were to happen, I'll still marry you. I'm tired of being dragged into troublesome affairs!"

"Well, that's a relief. Then what's going on?"

Hearing Claude's firm decision of marriage might have warranted a word of gratitude from Opal, but she was too embarrassed to do so. She hadn't cared much about keeping appearances up, but now she wanted Claude to find her adorable; Opal was trying to get used to this new side of herself. But as she looked at Claude, she started to wonder if he hadn't perhaps picked up on her new struggle, which made her frustrated and stubborn, creating a vicious cycle.

"It's about me, actually," Claude confessed. "I'm not...well, *accepted* within the social circles of the Taisei Kingdom."

"What a coincidence. I'm treated the same back in Socille."

"That's no laughing matter."

"But you're smiling."

Claude's confession was so trivial to Opal that she felt the strength leave her body. Her honest reply made Claude smile, as if he had only shared a complaint or two instead of the major concern that weighed on his mind.

"Can you blame me?" Claude replied. "You're the one making me laugh. You're you, no matter what, Opal."

"Of course I am," Opal replied. "In any case, it *is* a touch odd for a marquis and soon-to-become duke to be snubbed by society. If memory serves, three generations ago, Earl Roussel married the daughter of Duke Bocceli. Since you have blood ties to the family, it shouldn't be odd for you to receive the duchy of House Bocceli."

"It's true that House Roussel is of noble origin and has blood relations to House Bocceli. But there are some who mock me for my birth; in their eyes, I'm just a foreigner. They're polite to my face, of course, but they insult me behind my back."

"Truly, a coincidence. People always talk about me behind my back as well."

As Opal gave another similarly refreshing response, Claude burst out laughing.

She glared at him half-heartedly before cracking a smile as well. Only when the two finally calmed down and got their laughs out did Claude happily speak once more.

“I knew it. You’re the only one for me, Opal.”

“Wh-What are you... Flattery will get you nowhere,” Opal replied.

“But you’ll marry me, won’t you?”

“Of course. We promised, didn’t we?”

“Even though you might struggle to socialize with the nobility here?”

“I won’t. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, you’re a hero, aren’t you? You should hold your head up high and act proud.”

“Thanks, Opal.”

His gentle smile and warm words of gratitude made Claude appear so handsome in Opal’s eyes, and she once again looked away.

“This kingdom is on the cutting edge of technology with a very advanced railway system,” Opal said swiftly, trying to hide her embarrassment. “It’s surprising to see them still be old-fashioned in some ways.”

“The traditionalists are higher-ranked nobles,” Claude replied. “They don’t like to see commoners with more innovative ideas amassing wealth. The civil war from eight years ago, after all, was sparked by those opposed to His Majesty’s vision of creating a better life for all. The opposition was headed by Duke Bocceli, with the rest of the conservative faction enacting their plot. More liberal, reform-minded individuals like myself have been given posts, but there are a number of moderates just waiting for an opportunity to strike. In truth, many moderates are actually quite conservative. I’m only called a hero to win the favor of the general population. It’s easier for people to unite under a highly visible symbol of justice, don’t you think?”

“It sounds to me like you’re being used. Are you all right with that?”

“I was, but if you don’t like it, Opal, I don’t mind shutting myself in. I can just dedicate myself to managing the land.”

Claude spoke in jest, but Opal could tell that he was serious. He might have

had no intention of abandoning the public, but he clearly had zero interest in the power struggle occurring in the palace. But if Claude wanted to create his ideal world, he needed power. He knew that best, and yet, he still chose to put Opal first and respect her opinion. And so she wanted to repay that kindness in turn.

“Claude, the one thing that I hate the most in this world is running away,” she said. “A strategic retreat is acceptable, but fleeing without even giving a fight is far from what I want. So I’ll fight alongside you.”

He fell silent. Opal thought that her lines were a bit cheesy, but she wanted to be honest with him. Yet all she received was silence in return. Opal sheepishly called his name, snapping him back to his senses.

“Claude?”

“Huh? U-Uh, sorry about that. You were just so cool that you took my breath away,” Claude stammered.

“Are you teasing me?”

“Nope. But I’m a little—no, I’m *really* relieved.”

Claude sighed, his body loosening into a genuine state of relaxation. Opal was worried that she was dragging his reputation down—she’d been divorced once, after all. But he was only concerned for her well-being, and nothing else. Opal had thought that she had steeled herself to do whatever it took for her beloved, but she flinched when she heard Claude’s next words.

“If that’s all settled, then I’m sorry, Opal, but could you join my fight starting tomorrow?” he asked.

“Tomorrow?” Opal repeated.

“I’m planning on visiting the palace tomorrow to announce that we’ll be married. Could you come and meet His Majesty with me?”

“T-Tomorrow? The *king*?! Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Because if I’d told you, you would’ve come with me without a second thought. And I didn’t want you to feel forced into coming along. His Majesty isn’t the type to nitpick and won’t feel bothered even if you refuse to appear in

public. If you so desire, you don't *have* to do any of this troublesome socializing."

Claude had always prioritized Opal. She certainly found socializing troublesome and hated all of it, but for the sake of her beloved, she could work as hard as needed. But once again, she didn't want these feelings to shackle Claude in place, and made sure to compose her face into a serene mask.

"I'll take that as a challenge," she said firmly. "When I marry you, I'll turn all the trouble of socializing into something fun. Just you wait. Soon enough, I'll even rule the social circles of Taisei, and everyone will dance in the palm of my hand."

Claude looked shocked for a moment, but he quickly smiled at Opal's usual stubborn antics. "I'd expect no less from you. You're as reliable as ever."

And so, Opal's new battle was about to begin.

## 2. The Royal Palace

The following day, Opal and Claude left Marquis Roussel's manor and headed for the royal palace. It didn't take long. Opal was aware that they were close to the palace, but she was most shocked that the carriage hadn't stopped once until they reached their destination. That alone spoke volumes about Claude's influence within the palace.

"This might be too late for me to ask, but what position exactly do you hold within the royal palace?" Opal inquired.

"Yeah, I didn't tell you, did I?" Claude replied. "I'm a secretary."

"Don't tell me that you're the secretary-general of the king..."

"Well, I *did* try to file a letter of resignation since I was leaving His Majesty's side, but I think it was put on hold. I'm guessing that I'll just be resuming my post."

"Are the nobles of this kingdom all fools? You're telling me that they won't accept the *secretary-general*?"

"They're very friendly on the surface. Some are even trying to curry favor with me. But behind closed doors, they're content to yap away and spread their rumors. So, Opal, even if you get criticized for not knowing all the customs of this kingdom, I ask that you just ignore them. It's just another way for them to try to get rid of foreigners."

"Hmm, if that's the case, leave it to me."

Opal proudly puffed out her chest, causing Claude to laugh. His smile instilled her with courage. *Out of all the fragile women—no, women that may look fragile, Claude chose me*, she thought. Her strong-minded nature hadn't changed since she was a child, and Claude knew that very well. Despite it all, he proposed to her. She just needed to trust him. The moment she thought so, she felt her anxiety dissipate.

"Then I'll ask one more thing before we're off to battle," Opal said. "Who do

you not want as your enemy?"

"Oh, that's an easy question," Claude answered. "That'll be you, Opal. And only you."

"Claude, I'm serious."

"As am I."

Opal glared at Claude's tease, but he kept a smile on his face. In the end, she couldn't help but crack a smile and continued her serious questioning.

"But you don't want to go against His Majesty, do you?" she asked.

"Quite the opposite," Claude replied. "His Majesty doesn't want to go against me."

"What a bold assertion. If anyone heard you, you'd be punished for your insolence."

"Oh, I'd imagine His Majesty would laugh it off and agree with me completely."

As Claude remained smiling, Opal just gave him a look before giving a huge sigh. He kept joking to skirt around the issue, but there was clearly something up his sleeve. For the past eight years, Opal had thought that she had gone through her fair share of growing pains, but it seemed Claude had gone through even more. He was hiding it, but he surely had to fight for his life while he was here. That only made Opal anxious once more.

Was this marriage truly the correct move? No doubt there was a woman in this kingdom who hailed from a better household and could support Claude better than she. Opal gasped, realizing that her confidence from moments ago had faded. This was no time to be weak; if Claude needed some kind of support or backing, she would be right there for him. Opal might have been a newcomer to this kingdom, but she had knowledge, experience, and wealth on her side. No longer was she the girl who shut herself in the attic while bemoaning her situation. Her emotions were a bit of a mess right now because she was about to meet the king—a normal reaction for anyone.

"Claude," Opal said.

"Yeah? You okay?" he asked.

"I'm nervous, but I'm fine. But I fear that you might come to regret choosing me as your wife."

"I won't."

"Then I'll make you regret it. I'll make you grumble about marrying such an obstinate, strong-minded woman."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Claude let out a jovial laugh, commanding the attention of those around him. They already stood out enough as it was, but now, everyone was boring holes into the new couple. Opal had been in the countryside for a while, but she was used to being stared at and paid them no heed. And Claude also seemed undaunted as he proudly walked at the head of their group. Behind them walked Nadja, Opal's lady-in-waiting, who glanced around the unusual scenery curiously.

"Thank you for coming along, Nadja," Opal said.

"I should be the one thanking you, my lady!" Nadja exclaimed. "You brought me to such a lovely place!"

Nadja was as fearless as always. Opal smiled at her before facing forward once more. For the past few years, the maid had used Earl Holloway's connections to become a lady-in-waiting in training at a certain marquis's house. Nadja wanted to become an excellent servant for Opal, who had no ally in House McLeod, and resolved to stay by the former duchess's side. When Opal had heard about this news from Marcia, Earl Holloway's maid, the noblewoman was moved to tears and had requested for Nadja to tag along for the wedding ceremony. Opal might only have enemies in this kingdom, but she had two powerful allies right beside her. She regained her confidence and smiled at the people who were gazing at her like she was some kind of tourist attraction.

"Opal, don't act so charming in public," Claude said. "I'll get jealous."

"Oh, don't you trust me?" Opal inquired.

"It's not a problem on your end. It's on me. I trust you, but even I can't

prevent other men from falling for you. And I can't allow you to live in the hearts of other men."

"I feel the same. I think I'll grow jealous simply from knowing that you've once grasped the hearts of other women."

"Personally, I'm jealous of the both of you!" Nadja chimed in, quickly putting a stop to the lovebirds' banter.

It was generally quite rude for a servant to interrupt them, but neither Opal nor Claude seemed to mind and instead started to laugh. All the while, the trio had reached their destination. Claude stopped in front of the door, gave a knock, and proceeded to open the door without waiting for an answer.

"I'm sure His Majesty has been notified of our arrival," he said. "We'll be called in a short while, so let's relax here in the meantime."

He glanced around the room before gesturing for Opal to head inside first. She was quickly followed by Nadja, who cautiously stepped inside, and Claude closed the door behind him. He rang a bell, and a lady dressed in the maid uniform of the royal palace immediately appeared. He asked her to prepare them some tea in a gentle tone that made it sound more like a request than an order. Opal was ecstatic to hear it; no matter his rank or title, Claude would always be Claude.

"Is something wrong?" Claude asked in befuddlement.

"Nothing at all," Opal said, unable to suppress an endearing smile.

"You sure?"

She had no idea if she could properly vocalize this warm, fuzzy feeling that welled up in her heart, and decided to keep her thoughts to herself. Claude decided to let the topic go. Just then, there was another knock on the door, and at Claude's response, the man on the other side of the door called back. The marquis opened the door for his friend, ushering him inside.

"Opal, I know this is a bit sudden, but I'd like to introduce you to my friend," Claude said. "His name is Eric Bapot, a baron of House Pradeaux. Eric, this is my fiancée and soon-to-be wife, Opal. I think I've mentioned her quite a few times to you, so there might be no need for an introduction."



“You sure have,” Eric replied. “So much so that I’ve grown tired of hearing it all.”

Opal stood up to greet the gentleman. Eric seemed to be awfully friendly with Claude, but she intuited that the baron exhibited some hostility toward her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Baron Pradeaux. I’m Opal Holloway.”

“Oh? Are you no longer a McLeod?” Eric asked.

“Eric!” Claude said sharply.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. The pleasure is all mine, *Lady Holloway*. Claude has attracted many young and beautiful ladies, but now that I’ve met you, I finally understand why he chose you. You’re stunning.”

“Why, thank you,” Opal replied.

Her intuition was spot-on. Eric was snarky and thorny. Claude noticed this immediately, but he was silenced by a firm smile from Opal. She in no way wanted to solely rely on her fiancé’s protection, always on the defense from others. And Claude had sensed Opal’s unbreakable spirit as he sighed with resignation.

### 3. A Friend

“If you don’t mind, please call me Eric.”

“Oh, I must decline, Baron Pradeaux. You may continue to call me a Holloway, but I’d imagine that you’ll soon refer to me as Lady Roussel.”

“Is that so...”

Opal had made her intentions clear. She had no plans on getting along with Eric, nor did she want him to get between herself and Claude.

The marquis, who’d been silent, suddenly burst out laughing. “Eric, no matter what thoughts you may have, I’m going to marry Opal, and she won’t care what you think about her. If you want to remain my friend, you should either welcome her warmly or say nothing at all.” Claude was laughing, but he made it clear that he would always be sticking by his future wife’s side.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Claude,” Eric replied. He knew his friend very well and chose to back off. “But I apologize for causing the misunderstanding. Please pardon my insolence, Lady Holloway.”

“I don’t mind. I’m not at all bothered by it,” Opal said, maintaining a smile.

Eric swiftly turned back to his friend. “I forgot something very important. Claude, Lord Barba is calling for you.”

“Sorry, but I can’t leave this room right now,” Claude replied.

“His Majesty’s morning plans were delayed, and he just returned to the royal palace. I doubt you’d be called for anytime soon. I suggest you visit Sir Barba while you’ve got the time. His Majesty claimed that the ball in two days’ time will be hosted to celebrate your engagement. Perhaps you need to confirm some details.”

“He’s making a huge fuss again...”

Claude couldn’t hide his annoyance at Eric’s words and gave a huge sigh. Sir Barba was the earl who was the leader of the House of Lords within the

kingdom, and should be one of Claude's allies.

"I'll be fine," Opal said. "Why don't you go to him, Claude? I'll be here enjoying my cup of tea."

"But," Claude started reluctantly.

"Don't worry," Eric assured him. "I'll be her conversational partner in the meanwhile."

That was exactly what Claude had feared—he looked at Opal, worried. She suppressed a chuckle, but he'd seen right through her, and he looked clearly troubled while letting out his third sigh of the day.

"Good grief. I don't feel assured at all," Claude muttered.

"You worry too much," Opal replied with a gentle, caring smile.

Claude wasn't fooled. He sighed once more and turned to his friend. "Eric, I think of you as a good friend, so I'm trusting you to spend time with my precious Opal. I'm counting on you."

"You've got nothing to worry about," Eric replied. "Lady Holloway has her attendant, so I won't do anything shameless."

He winked at Nadja, who stood in the corner of the room. She looked unusually embarrassed as she gazed at the floor. Her training at the house of a marquis had done her well, it seemed.

"Stop fooling around, Eric," Claude scolded his friend before he turned to Opal as though he could hold her back with his gaze alone. "All right, I'll be back soon, Opal."

"Good luck. I'll be waiting here peacefully," Opal replied.

"Right."

Claude nodded and narrowed his eyes with suspicion at Opal's obedient response before he left. The maid soon entered the room with some tea, and she seemed shocked by Eric's presence.

"We'll pour the tea ourselves," Opal said. "That will be all, thank you."

"Very well. Please excuse me," the maid said. She bowed her head, unable to

hide her slight disappointment.

She left the room with a forlorn glance at Eric, the implication crystal clear. It seemed this baron was rather popular with the ladies.

“Are you married, Baron Pradeaux?” Opal inquired.

Eric paused before he answered. “I’m single. Be it a wife or a lover, I have some requirements of my own. Chastity, for example.”

“Oh my.”

Opal had only posed her question out of genuine curiosity, but it seemed Eric didn’t take the query too kindly. His response was prickly, but she smiled and said nothing more. It seemed the old rumors of Opal’s “lascivious” nature were still floating about the Taisei Kingdom. She was used to these nasty remarks, but not Nadja. The maid placed Eric’s teacup on the table with a violent thump, but the fact that she kept her mouth shut was growth in and of itself.

“Thank you, Nadja. I’ll be fine,” Opal said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Eric mumbled offhandedly. He was more taken aback by the fact that Opal had thanked her servant.

Nadja understood the meaning underlying Opal’s words and bowed before she retreated back to the corner of the room. Opal took a sip of her tea and returned it onto her saucer before she spoke to Eric once more.

“Perhaps it might be rude to ask this, but when did you meet Claude?” Opal inquired.

“About four years ago,” Eric replied. “Claude was a friend of my older brother, Tuli, but I became close to him when I returned from studying abroad.”

“Ah, you’re Viscount Amadi’s younger brother, then.”

“You know of my brother?”

“Just his name. I’ve heard about him quite a bit from Claude.”

Eric frowned. Opal had tacitly implied that she’d heard of the viscount, but not the baron. In truth, Opal had been familiar with Eric’s name whenever Tuli was mentioned, but she wasn’t feeling kind enough to divulge this information

and suggest any kind of an olive branch.

“Then you’ll be turning twenty-six soon, won’t you?” Opal asked.

“That’s right. And what of it?” Eric replied.

“Oh, nothing at all.”

Opal smiled again, but Eric looked at her dubiously. The look hardly fazed Opal, who gracefully brought her teacup back to her lips. Eric was the same age as Hubert when she had initially married him. If Eric had been told that he was adorable when compared to the duke, he would surely be angry. That made the situation only more humorous, and Opal took another sip of her tea in hopes of hiding her smile.

Way back when, Claude had stated that he wanted a younger brother. With him being the third son, his older siblings had worked him to the bone, and he always said that in turn he would strive to be kind to anyone younger than him. Opal remembered at the time feeling disappointed that she wasn’t a boy, her hopes dashed that a younger sister couldn’t fill this gap.

“Are you really going to marry Claude?” Eric asked.

“Pardon?” Opal asked. She had been lost in her memories and hadn’t heard his question.

He glared at her. “Claude is a splendid man, worthy of respect and admiration. There are plenty of other women who are more suitable for him, and I simply can’t understand why he chose you.”

“Indeed, Claude is a splendid man.”

“Then why do you choose not to retreat? If you truly love Claude, why not do whatever you can for him?”

Opal had also once thought that a younger woman with more influence and backing was better suited for Claude. However, aside from her age and her marriage history, she was also an excellent candidate herself. She might not have a strong base in Taisei, but back in Socille, she was a powerful force, and was incredibly wealthy. Opal wasn’t sure if Eric had failed to see the facts or refused to see them, but his words were nothing more than an emotional plea.

Naturally, being in a new country, Opal had worries of her own, but what Eric said annoyed her.

“You’re quite naive, aren’t you?” she said.

“Me?! How so?” Eric demanded. “*You’re the one who’s naive!* No one will welcome you in this kingdom! Don’t think you can act as you please like you did in your home nation!”

Her words had infuriated Eric. She felt a sense of *déjà vu*, finding this to be a repeat of eight years ago, and gave a weary sigh. *Do all men of this age act this way? How troublesome.* Amid Eric’s indignant words, she was able to scrounge a bit of nostalgia for Hubert’s furious roars. It was then that she recalled the letters she received yesterday. *I believe I received one from my father, and it was paired with one from the duke.* She’d quickly read her father’s letter first and taken her dog, also named Claude, out for a walk—she had totally forgotten about the other letter. *Just what business does Hubert have with me now?*

“Hey!” Eric shouted even louder. “Are you listening to me?!”

“You’re so loud that everyone can hear you even if they don’t want to,” the marquis replied as he returned to the room.

“Claude!” Eric cried, noticing his friend.

“Ah, Claude. You’re back sooner than I thought you’d be,” Opal replied.

“Yeah. His Majesty called for us sooner than I expected, so I came to fetch you. Shall we?”

“Of course.”

Opal was quite surprised as well at her beloved’s return, but she feigned composure and smiled. Claude followed suit.

“Will you wait for me here, Nadja?” Opal asked as she stood up.

“Your wish is my command,” the maid replied.

“We’re done here, aren’t we, Eric?” Claude asked a bit coldly.

“Y-Yeah,” Eric stammered.

"Farewell, Baron Pradeaux. I enjoyed my time with you," Opal said.

She maintained her manners until the end, but the baron furrowed his brow angrily. Claude said nothing more, and the two turned their backs to Eric.

## 4. The Audience

As the couple left the room, Opal remained silent, and Claude could no longer bear it.

“What did Eric say to you?” he asked.

“Nothing, really,” Opal replied.

“Opal...”

“I wasn’t really listening to him, to tell you the truth.”

“Well, are you okay?”

Despite Opal’s honest response, he didn’t look satisfied. He frowned and gazed at his beloved with worry, but Opal smiled.

“I’m fine, really,” she said. “I expected as much. And what about you, Claude? How are you feeling?”

“Uh, well...”

“You don’t sound okay.”

As he turned grim, it was Opal’s turn to be worried, but she was shocked by his next words.

“When I visited Sir Barba’s office, His Majesty was there,” Claude said.

“Pardon?” Opal asked.

“I thought it was out of character for Sir Barba to call me out, but I was completely tricked.”

Claude’s sigh only made Opal more anxious. If the king had called for Claude before their official meeting, the reason was clear.

“Claude, is His Majesty against our marriage?” Opal asked. “If so...”

“No,” Claude quickly replied. “He isn’t against it. He’s just causing me trouble.”

“I don’t see the difference.”

“He’s still upset that I tried to resign from my post. ‘Who’s more important, me or your childhood friend?’ he asked. Obviously, I’ll choose my childhood friend—you.”

“His Majesty is a...man, isn’t he?”

“Yep. An old man. He’s turning forty this year.”

“Claude...”

“Don’t worry. We always argue.”

Opal looked around worriedly, fearing that someone else would hear Claude’s rough words, ones that he spoke without even trying to smile; he was clearly angry.

“All a secretary-general does is busywork,” he said. “He’s just causing me trouble because my absence increased his workload. Jeez, he’s not a child. I wanted to introduce you to him after I officially married you, but now he’s forcing me to attend this stupid ball. He’s just upset because he wasn’t invited to the wedding.”

“Really?” Opal asked.

“Same goes for today too. He wanted to pull me away from your side and so called me out separately. And because of that, you were forced to be subjected to Eric’s nasty remarks. I’m not wrong, am I?”

“Huh? No, I’m fine...”

Opal was shocked to see a new side of Claude. Since their recent reunion, he always seemed mature and composed, but now he sounded like a child grumbling about how mean his older brothers were. Opal couldn’t help but giggle.

“This is no laughing matter, Opal,” Claude said.

“Oh, but it is to me,” she replied. “You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“Enjoying myself? Me?”

“That’s right.”

Claude had disappeared for the past eight years, and Opal was happy to hear there was someone he could relax and be himself around. Eric might have been annoying, but in his own way, he was just showing his worry for Claude. *Had Claude not appeared, I might have refuted those remarks too*, Opal thought. The nerves that she felt mere moments ago had vanished; she was now eager to have an audience with the king. Just how exactly did this monarch show his upset? How did he pout? This was a man who knew well the eight years Claude was away from Opal, an entire eight years that Opal knew very little about. The marquis stopped in front of a room that was lined with guards. He turned to Opal as though to gauge her emotions.

“Here we are,” he said.

“I...didn’t expect this,” Opal answered.

“Yep. And I don’t blame you.”

When receiving an audience with the king, Opal had expected to be in a grand hall, but this was clearly a private room. This not only displayed how close Claude was to His Majesty, but the king’s proclivities to more casual settings. No doubt he held disdain for stiff meetings and formalities. Opal could feel the curious gazes of the guards who opened the doors, and was ushered into the room by Claude. A middle-aged man stood up and outstretched his arms toward Opal.

“Welcome to my kingdom and to my royal palace. I welcome you warmly, Claude’s fiancée,” he said.

“Your Majesty, her name is Opal Holloway,” Claude said. “As you’ve said, we’re engaged. Opal, this is His Majesty King Alessandro, ruler of Taisei.”

Of course, Opal most assuredly did *not* leap into the king’s outstretched arms for an embrace. Opal stood by Claude’s side and received the introduction, feeling it to be rather distant.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. My name is Opal Holloway.”

“I’ve heard so much about you that it doesn’t feel like this is our first meeting!” Alessandro gushed. “May I call you ‘Opal’?”

“Of course.”

She did a curtsy and stood tall while cautiously examining Alessandro. The king noticed her gaze and smiled; he seemed friendly at a glance, but Opal wasn't fooled. *He feels different, but I think he resembles father.* From an outsider's perspective, Earl Holloway seemed like a very calm and composed man, but in reality his stern gaze never missed a thing. He was astute when it came to political and societal affairs, reading the flow of the world so as to become wealthier faster than anyone else. He utilized his wealth and position to gain influence within the royal palace, further increasing his wealth and elevating his title.

Though Alessandro had only been monarch for a few years, he'd already managed to rebuild Taisei from both a war and a pandemic, proving his total competence. Claude and Opal took a seat on the sofa, and upon sitting a prickly remark was almost immediately thrown Opal's way.

"Opal, I'm truly ecstatic that I finally get to meet you," Alessandro said. "There were some who wished for Claude to wed my niece, but he seemed completely uninterested in the prospect. It's clear to me now that marriage was never the issue; he simply had his sights set on you. No one else had caught his attention."

"I'm very honored to hear those words," Opal replied. "Claude is rather stubborn, so I'm sure he's troubled you quite a bit, Your Majesty."

While Alessandro flashed a gentle smile, Opal returned a serene one of her own. Claude had guessed Opal's thoughts and had remained silent; the two parties were smiling, but neither of their smiles reached their eyes.

"Indeed, Claude's stubbornness has rendered me speechless many a time!" Alessandro claimed. "There are many beautiful women in this kingdom, but he shook his head at every single one of them, no matter how many invitations. He then went to Socille, claiming that he wanted you for his wife. I'm just genuinely relieved to have him back, all safe and sound."

"I'm happy to hear that, Your Majesty," Opal said. "My love for Claude only grows. Thank you very much for sharing such a heartwarming story."

"I'm pleased as well. We were only able to rebuild this kingdom due in no small part to Claude's efforts. I'm very grateful to him, you see."

"Your benevolence is too much for me, Your Majesty," Claude chimed in. He was unable to remain silent for much longer and glared at the king.

But Alessandro grinned and gave a nonchalant wave with his right hand. "No need to thank me. After all, I plan on working you to the bone from now on. I genuinely do welcome you here, Opal. I'm sure you'll support Claude properly, much like how you tricked your previous husband, Duke McLeod, and stole all his assets away."

## 5. The King

“Your Majesty, you’ve said too much.” Claude immediately refuted him.

“But you don’t deny it,” Alessandro pointed out.

“I’d like for you to refrain from scorning Opal.”

Only a select few people knew the truth behind Hubert’s finances, and it was clear that the king had done some research. He might not have been privy to the details, but it wasn’t difficult to put two and two together. Back then, Hubert’s finances were in bad shape, and during that time he was visited by Opal’s uncle, a legal officer, as well as one of her uncle’s colleagues. Combining this with Opal’s own actions, it was easy enough to deduce the truth.

It wasn’t likely that Claude had spilled the beans. Opal could only show admiration for the king’s knowledge. He likely knew about Omar’s debts as well and probably also knew how the land had been managed. Even if the king spoke the truth, she found it best to refute his words. She didn’t mind how people saw her, but she refused to cause trouble for Claude.

“May I say a few words, Your Majesty?” Opal asked.

“You may,” Alessandro replied.

“I haven’t the faintest clue as to how you found out about Duke McLeod’s assets, but I took them using purely legal methods. I have nothing to be embarrassed about. However, if society caught wind of this, there would be a few...inconveniences, and so, I found no need to announce the truth. Everyone kept quiet about it as well.”

“I see. A safe response, albeit a touch boring.”

Only then did Opal realize that she was being tested. She kept a smile plastered on her face, but inwardly she was annoyed with herself for not realizing this. Claude wasn’t one to miss his beloved’s reaction.

“Please stop this, Your Majesty,” Claude said sternly.

"Now, now, don't get angry, Claude," the king replied. "I admit that my query was a little mean, but if my simple words were to cow her, I wouldn't believe she'd be a fitting wife for you. I'm sorry, Opal."

"There's no need for you to apologize, Your Majesty," Opal replied.

"You see? She's forgiven me, Claude. Don't be so angry with me."

Quite honestly, Opal's words had nothing to do with forgiveness and much more due to Opal blaming herself for her lack of foresight. Nevertheless, she switched gears and gave Claude another serene smile.

"This kingdom is filled with our enemies, Claude," the king said jovially. "But Opal wouldn't need to worry about anything like that. You've truly got yourself a fine wife."

"I'm marrying Opal because I love her," Claude insisted. "I'm not marrying her for your kingdom or for your sake, Your Majesty. I've got no intention of using her for any schemes, so please keep that in mind."

"Oh? But Opal doesn't agree."

Alessandro remained calm and grinned at Opal, having drawn his conclusions as Opal sat with a smile plastered on her face.

"I don't plan on stopping Opal if she chooses to act," Claude said, now resigned. "I *cannot* stop her. If she were the type to obediently hide within my shadow, that would've been great. But she isn't. And that's precisely why I fell in love with her, so there really is nothing I can do. I might be the one hiding behind her, in fact."

"And if you ever do that, I'll pull you out of *my* shadow," Opal replied.

Claude chuckled. Frankly, this meeting wasn't to seek the king's approval for Claude and Opal's marriage, nor was it for the king to determine Opal's character. The king was giving his approval to allow her to do as she pleased. In fact, he wanted her to quickly come out of hiding and present herself to the public. The match between Claude and Alessandro's niece—a princess left orphaned by her late father, the previous king—was most likely proposed by the opposing faction in the court. Put simply, should Claude, the right-hand man of the king, marry the princess, it would strengthen his ties with the royal family

and thus silence any opposition to his power.

But if this match were to proceed and the two were to have a son, it would only cause further strife; Claude could technically make his son the next king. Even if he had no such intention of doing such a thing, Alessandro and those in his circle would suspect him anyway, creating even further discord.

*The princess is turning twenty-two this year, I believe. If she went off to marry the royal family of a foreign nation, no doubt she'd be utilized in a similar fashion. This is a difficult problem to tackle.*

Because of the plague and the civil war, the princess's marriage had been delayed until now. Though Alessandro had two sons of his own, they were still young, and while they might receive some backing anyway, the king was unable to truly act until his sons had matured. In addition, his own wife, the queen, had fallen victim to the plague, and ever since he had become a prime target for more marriage candidates. It was difficult to see from an outsider's perspective, but in many ways Taisei was still unstable.

"Then I shall be direct with you, Opal," Alessandro said. "In two days, there will be a ball commemorating the opening of a new railway track. Won't you attend this celebration?"

Opal accepted any challenge thrown her way. It seemed the king was also keenly aware of the noblewoman's personality.

"I'd like to respect Claude's wishes," Opal replied. "I refuse to be escorted by anyone else."

"You're right," the king agreed. "So, Claude? What will you do?"

"If Opal agrees, we shall attend. I'd hate to be thought of as a coward," Claude replied.

"Then it's settled. I think I know how to handle you now."

"Please don't be so full of yourself, Your Majesty, or our earlier promise is void," Claude said. "Now then, please excuse us."

For the umpteenth time today, Claude sighed and decided to leave. Alessandro watched them go, fully satisfied with the results of their meeting

and content to watch them stand up to leave. Claude extended his hand toward Opal.

"I had fun today, Opal," His Majesty said. "I eagerly await to meet you again in two days."

Opal took her beloved's hand and stood up. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Please excuse us."

Escorted by Claude, Opal returned to their waiting room. She felt curious gazes from all around her as usual, but now relieved, Opal was able to feel more relaxed. Coming to the royal palace to meet Alessandro was worth it. There were some things that she simply couldn't grasp from reading books, and from this experience she was able to find out a bit more about the current state of affairs within the kingdom.

As Eric had mentioned, many women must've approached Claude—there weren't many men who enjoyed his kind of wealth and status and were still single. And above all, Claude was charming. *Though I suppose I'm a bit biased there...*

*Despite Claude being engaged, it is difficult to imagine that all the interested women would just back down easily.* And it wasn't just women that Opal had to worry about. There were surely ambitious and hostile men that would try to approach the marquis as well. By extension, they would try to use her to their advantage. *I understand why His Majesty wanted to look into me, but the amount of research he did can't be done in just a few months.*

Since when had Alessandro targeted Opal? She glanced at Claude and locked eyes with him.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Opal replied. "I was just curious about His Majesty. For how long has he kept his eye on me, do you think?"

"Oh, probably about eight years or so."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, just about eight years. I spoke of you soon after I met His Majesty, and

every now and then, I'd bring you up."

"I won't ask about the details."

"You sure?"

Opal was curious, but she felt like it was best in this case to let sleeping dogs lie. Claude remained grinning; he meant no ill will. He must've spoken about her as a childhood friend, but five years ago, when Claude had decided to invest in Manhest and dispatch an engineer, Alessandro had met Hubert. This meeting had most likely propelled the king to do some research of his own. At that time it was a huge gamble to send an engineer overseas.

Opal had wondered if she was a good fit for Claude, but now her mind was made up that she was. Though she had no supporters in Taisei—and personally, she wasn't sure if she could give Claude a child—she did have connections and money aplenty in Socille. On top of that, her time with Hubert had given her a thorough education in all things land management. Since she'd already received Alessandro's permission, all she had left to do was fight her hardest within the circles of Taisei society. She didn't care if she was up against an opposing faction or anyone else. Any enemy of Claude's was an enemy of hers as well.

*But I have to be careful around his friends. It'll do him no good if I make his friends turn against him.*

As she thought back to Eric, she suppressed a sigh and looked up at Claude walking beside her. Just a year ago, she would've never imagined that such happiness would await her.

"Opal, if you keep staring at me, I won't be able to hold myself back," Claude said. "You want to *avoid* attention, don't you?"

"Huh?" Opal asked.

"Or can I hug you right here and now?"

"D-Don't be stupid!"

"I'm serious."

Opal hastily turned away from Claude's words and walked faster, retreating from the sound of happy chuckling behind her. After Opal gave her beloved a

quick glare, they finally arrived at the room where Nadja was awaiting them.

## 6. The Ball

“Now, now, Claude. Not now. Sit,” Opal said.

“She’s right. You need to restrain yourself,” Claude agreed. “You’re being too spoiled.”

“Claude isn’t spoiled. He’s just so sweet and likes *acting* a touch spoiled.”

“We really should change his name.”

Opal giggled at Claude’s troubled look. Her dog, Claude, had burst out of his room when he sensed the presence of his mistress, and he was currently being held back by the butler, Josephe. Thanks to Josephe, the dog was unable to pounce on Opal; her outfit would have been ruined otherwise. Opal was all dressed up for the ball along with her soon-to-be husband.

A manservant in charge of taking care of the dog hastily rushed out, but Claude only gave a simple warning before escorting Opal outside. Josephe sent them off, covered in dog fur and his attire completely askew. Opal made sure to apologize to the man before boarding her and Claude’s carriage.

Ever since Opal had returned from the royal palace two days ago, she’d been tremendously busy and unable to spend some quality time with her dear pet. She’d spent the time learning about the customs and societal relationships of Taisei from Claude and Josephe, hoping to hammer as much information as she could into her head. While the factions that the men belonged to might have been clear, the women had an entirely separate front of their own. Behind a glimmering veneer and flawlessly superficial displays of kindness, the nobility ruthlessly tried to drag each other down into the dark. One wrong step, and one might plunge into the depths below.

Opal glanced at Claude, who sat across from her, before shifting her gaze to his mother, the baroness, who sat beside her. The baroness had once lived a glamorous life as the daughter of Earl Roussel, but when she eloped with the baron, Claude’s father, she’d been disowned by the previous head. Ever since,

she had lost contact with her friends.

Only recently had she started exchanging letters with her friends once more. This ball was her chance to reunite with her friends after a few decades, but she didn't seem nervous. Instead, she was calmly locking eyes with the baron who sat across from her.

*As always, they've got a loving relationship, Opal thought. I'm sure she went through quite a bit of trouble.* Their barony, which was right beside the Earldom of Holloway, was small and wasn't too prosperous, but the residents there lived a peaceful life without much effort. They led humble and honest lifestyles. As far as Opal knew, the barony had survived two extremely poor harvests as well.

*I strive to be part of a couple like theirs.*

She was aware that her late mother had loved her father, but he had paid very little attention to his family. Earl Holloway might have loved his family in his own way, but that meant very little if that love was never properly conveyed in a way its recipients could understand. No one had experienced his affection. Opal had never even received an ounce of affection from Hubert—his proposal, therefore, had seemed almost random.

"Ah," Opal gasped.

"Is something wrong, Opal?" Claude asked. He and his parents turned to her quizzically.

Opal turned red. "Huh? Oh, nothing at all."

The baron and baroness returned to minding their own businesses, but Claude gazed at his beloved with suspicion. But when he was met with Opal's smile, he gave up and gazed back out the window. They'd arrive at the royal palace soon.

Opal hadn't done anything wrong, but she couldn't help but feel her heart pound—she'd completely forgotten about Hubert's letter. She was being awfully forgetful and dense these days. *I suppose this is what it means to be on cloud nine...*

Until now, Opal had worked tirelessly by herself, and it was reassuring that now there was someone in her life whom she could rely on. And that someone

was her beloved, no less. It was difficult for her *not* to feel elated by that. Still, that was no excuse to act spoiled, and Opal hated doing that the most—she wanted to support Claude, not burden him.

“We’re here,” Claude said. “Are you all ready?”

“As ready as can be,” Opal replied.

“It’s been a while, so I admit that I’m a little nervous,” the baron confessed.

“Oh, you’ll be fine,” the baroness assured him.

The carriage was signaled to stop, and the door opened from the outside. Claude gracefully leaped out and offered Opal his hand. She was followed by the baron, and then his wife—all the while, curious eyes tracked their arrival. Opal made sure to stand up straight and tall.

“Let’s go,” Claude said, offering his arm this time.

“Let’s. Thank you,” Opal replied, placing a hand on his arm with a smile.

The two headed into the venue, and they were immediately surrounded by a large curious crowd. Opal was introduced to numerous people, and she felt herself being sized up. She returned the favor. She could only do so much in a single night, but this was the perfect opportunity to gauge Claude’s precise position as well as her own standing in society. And so, Opal let Claude handle most of the talking, delegating herself to stand silently by his side with a smile glued to her face. She pretended to listen to the people talking directly to her while attempting to eavesdrop on the people chattering a short distance away.

“I was looking forward to a stunning beauty, but she’s not much.”

“But look. All the gentlemen are ogling her.”

“Perhaps she has some methods of seduction that we simply aren’t privy to?”

“Then I’d love to receive some pointers from her. She managed to entice even Marquis Roussel.”

“And Duke McLeod of the Socille Kingdom.”

“Oh? Didn’t the duke dump her?”

“But she received quite a bit of assets as consolation. She got her hands on an

expensive plot of land...Manthest, was it?"

"That's right! She won't just be making money; sooner or later she'll be printing it. She's now one of the most prominent and wealthiest women in the world!"

"Oh, I'm so envious. No doubt quite a few would be willing to overlook her flaws."

Opal was shocked by the conversation that reached her ears. It seemed the Taisei nobles were unaware that the investment she made into Manthest came from her own assets. When she had divorced Hubert, she had received money in exchange for returning his duchy, and this exchange of wealth had given rise to these inaccurate rumors. It was also almost unheard of for women to take the initiative and make her own investments. Opal had to suppress her sigh; like Socille, it seemed that the people in Taisei looked unfavorably upon women becoming independent.

The nobles began giggling, with one of the women saying, "It sounds to me like Marquis Roussel is after her money, then."

"Oh, but you might not be wrong," another replied. "The marquis was originally the third son of a baron in Socille. He skillfully utilized the confusion within our kingdom to sneak into His Majesty's inner circle. That's how he made his way up, anyway. And I've heard that soon, he'll be bestowed the title of duke..."

The topic shifting from Opal to Claude only enraged Opal further, but at that moment the king made his appearance at the ball. At once, everyone bent their knees and bowed to welcome Alessandro. His Majesty proceeded to make a short speech about the new railway and the engagement of Marquis Roussel, commencing the start of the ball.

Alessandro kicked things off by dancing with the young princess—his niece—followed by Opal and Claude. The marquis led the dance, and it'd been a while since Opal had glided across the floor so elegantly, much to her excitement. In fact, it was her first time dancing with Claude in an official setting.

"You're having fun, aren't you?" Claude asked.

"I am. Very much so," Opal replied.

"You seemed angry earlier, though."

"Did you notice that?"

"Of course. When you're angry, you widen your smile. So, what was bothering you back there?"

"The ladies were gossiping. The way they described you was just horrible."

"Ah. Well, you don't need to worry about stuff like that."

"You're not wrong, but..."

Opal didn't quite understand what Claude meant when he mentioned her smile, but he just shook his head with a smile of his own. She wished that she could just smile and brush off any infuriating situations, but she also knew that just wasn't in her nature. Claude started to chuckle at her face even while she still wore a noticeably miffed expression.

It was precisely because of how well he knew her that Opal could be at ease and leave her future in his hands. Thus, Opal was able to maintain her composure as she watched Claude leave to dance the second song of the ball with the princess. Even when the baron and baroness casually slipped away, leaving Opal all alone to handle the ladies that surrounded her, she was able to maintain a smile.

## 7. A Lady

“She was dubbed the ‘Bewitching Lady’ in Socille, so I was curious as to who she was, but quite honestly, I’m disappointed,” a noblewoman said.

“Are you sure they didn’t mean that she’s a witch?” another said. “I’m sure she knows a spell or two to seduce the gentlemen.”

The ladies who surrounded Opal threw nasty remarks interspersed with smug giggles. Opal, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed, more fascinated than anything that she actually had a nickname. At a glance, she noticed a marchioness, a countess and her daughter, another countess, and a viscountess around her. She wasn’t sure if they assumed there was strength in their numbers or if another factor was at play, but Opal found it strange just how blatant these ladies were in their hostility. Opal decided to hold her tongue for now, and smile quietly.

“I apologize for butting in, but I’d love to dance with Lady Holloway,” a man cut in. “May I have this dance with you?”

“O-Oh my, Baron Pradeaux!” a lady gasped. “Are you familiar with her?”

“I am indeed. Marquis Roussel introduced her to me just the other day. Is that not so?”

“Quite right,” Opal replied.

“Will you kindly dance with me?”

“I’ll be more than happy to. Excuse me, everyone.”

Opal took Eric’s hand and left the ladies as she was guided to the dance floor. The noblewomen started to whisper furiously to each other, likely assuming that Opal had used her bewitching powers to seduce Eric. It seemed nobles acted the same in any society, with all their gossiping and artificial manners, and Opal was tired of it. She turned her attention to the man in front of her.

“You’re rather meek,” Eric said.

“Pardon?” Opal asked.

“You said nothing about those nasty remarks.”

“I’m still not sure about their relationships and societal standings, so I cannot be too reckless with my words.”

“I see. So you’re the type to change your attitude based on who you’re up against.”

Opal had thought that Eric had come to her rescue, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. She almost burst out laughing from his foolish assumptions, but she managed to endure it and kept her gaze on the ground. Eric, however, misunderstood her actions as her confirming his assumptions.

“You can act like my words hurt you and beg for sympathy, but that tactic won’t work on me,” Eric said. “I know your true nature. And so do the others; that’s why they don’t invite you to dance. And yet, Claude’s the only one who’s fooled by you. I can hardly believe it. He always acts with a wisdom and intelligence that shocks those around him.”

Opal wasn’t invited to dance by the other men because Claude had declined them all in her stead. And once he was gone, Opal was immediately surrounded by noblewomen—the only one who decided to brave through these ladies to invite her was Eric, and that was all. He had heard nasty rumors about her and then saw only what he wanted to see. He judged her based on his own prejudice and misconceptions. He truly was the spitting image of a younger Hubert, and Opal found herself glancing toward the king—she didn’t expect to lock eyes with him.

Alessandro danced only with his niece before he took a seat. This seemed to be the norm for him, and no one found it odd, but the smile that stretched across his face said it all. He was enjoying this situation. In particular, he was currently having fun watching Opal.

*I knew it. He’s so mean, Opal thought. And it feels like everyone’s dancing in the palm of his hand.*

She found it all extremely humorous, and desperately tried to keep her mind away from her thoughts to suppress her laughter. When she searched for

Claude in the crowd, she found him immediately. They exchanged a glance, and likely reading her thoughts, the marquis began to dance in a more exaggerated and humorous manner.

“Claude looks like he’s having fun,” Eric observed. “Much more fun than when he was dancing with you.”

“Do you think so?” Opal asked.

“You might not want to admit it but—”

“Ah, that was a nice time. Thank you for dancing with me,” Opal interjected as the song ended.

Eric could sense the sarcasm in her voice and turned red; he realized that making his partner upset was far worse than dancing poorly.

“If you’d like, I can bring you a drink,” Eric said. “What would you like?”

“I’d like to have a light meal. Could you take me to a table?” Opal requested. “There might be some unusual foods, and I’d like to choose them myself.”

“Then I shall be your guide.”

“Thank you.”

Opal had asked Claude to keep his distance for a while after he danced with the princess; he wasn’t returning anytime soon. And so, Eric did his best to act like a gentleman. He still sounded proud and arrogant, but Opal decided to take his offer and headed to a room where she could have a light meal. She placed a hand on his offered arm, and walked along, commanding the attention of those around her.

A woman swirling with stories like Opal would undoubtedly be a subject of interest—normally, she’d be surrounded by a crowd of hopefuls wanting to be introduced to her. But unlike the time when she initially set foot in this venue, people simply watched from afar and did nothing else.

“Do I have horns growing out of my head or something?” Opal joked.

“What did you say?” Eric asked with a furrowed brow.

“No one’s trying to speak with me. Or perhaps people don’t like *you*, Baron

Pradeaux."

Her jest was completely lost on him as he fell silent and guided her to a room. Opal asked for a weak drink and some canapés to start her off. While the presentation was different, the dishes didn't differ too much from Socille's.

"Are you eating that much?" Eric asked, gazing down at her plate.

"Is this a lot?" Opal asked as she took her seat.

The room was furnished with tables and chairs so that one could enjoy a meal while being seated. But perhaps due to the ball just starting, there were only a few servants and no one else. Only one other gentleman had just entered the room. All Opal had on her plate were a few light dishes.

"I get drunk more easily if I drink on an empty stomach," Opal explained.

"Usually, you'd have a light meal *before* you attend a ball," Eric countered. "This isn't a banquet, after all."

"Usually?"

"That's right. As you can see, there aren't any other women in this room. I imagine your lack of self-control would lead to getting drunk and humiliating yourself quite often."

"Pardon? Are you implying that I'd get drunk and humiliate myself? What *exactly* have I done?"

Opal suppressed her rage and elegantly nibbled on her food as she awaited Eric's response. Eight years ago, when she married Hubert and was rumored to be wanton, she never got this angry at the rumors. Back then, she knew that she was partially to blame for failing to deny those rumors, and above all, Hubert was her husband. Certainly, he was to blame for never listening to her words, but he clearly had the power and rank to scold her.

Opal had retreated from society and lived quietly, refusing to go out in public even while Manhest was being developed. Once trust was lost, it was difficult to rebuild, but Eric's words had nothing to do with that. Why must she be scolded for simply wanting to eat? As her anger grew, her smile grew broader, exactly as Claude had said.

"Well, you...got drunk and casually went with a man," Eric muttered.

"Casually did what?" Opal asked.

"I-I can't believe you're making me say it! Have you no shame?"

"None at all. Besides, I don't know what you're talking about, Baron Pradeaux. That's why I'm simply asking you. I have *never* gotten drunk to such a point. Never. And only once have I been shamed by society. During a dinner party, I foolishly went out in the garden by myself, and a man aiming for my wealth attacked me, causing me to shout for help. That is the *only* time I came even remotely close to humiliating myself. And I was only sixteen at that time, a fresh debutante. I wasn't aware of the consequences that would come from my cry for help. But even if I had known, I surely would've fought back the same way I did that night."

"But according to the rumors..."

"Ah, yes, *rumors*. How *reliable*. No one has seen the full aftermath of the scandal with their own eyes, but the rumor mill still won't stop. And I refused to back down simply because of that scandal. That's all. I have lived my life with pride ever since, much to the chagrin of those around me. *Normally*, a woman should be protected by a man, never asserting her own rights and living quietly. Perhaps a lady *should* refrain from eating a few canapés at a ball. That's certainly the *norm* for you lot, I suppose."

"But still..."

As Opal spoke at length, finally letting her fury show, Eric was at a loss for words. He stepped away from her, utterly shocked, but he managed to regain his composure. He glared at Opal before speaking once more.

"Then why did Duke McLeod divorce you?" he demanded.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know," Opal replied.

"It's because you were sleeping around and didn't give birth to his heir. What's more, he had to give you some of his assets and—"

When Eric snapped back to his senses, it was all too late. Opal had emptied her glass onto his clothes. When she regained her cool, she had no regrets; in

fact, she thought that her restraint was worthy of praise. As she slowly set her glass back onto the table, Opal grinned proudly.

## 8. A Gentleman

“Wh-What in the...” Eric spluttered in shock.

“I’ve seen many foolish men in my time, but there’s simply no saving you,” Opal replied. As she stood up to leave, he grabbed her arm.

“What a woman you are!”

“And what a man you are.”

Eric was so furious that he completely lost his cool and glared at Opal. But she remained calm and glanced down at her grabbed arm, implying how rude his actions were. He hastily released her from his grip—it seemed he still had some sense left in him.

“And what will you do about my drenched outfit?!” Eric yelped.

“Oh, what do you have to worry about?” Opal replied. “The *normal* women that you so desire will surely lend you their handkerchiefs. Why don’t you borrow one from them? Unfortunately, I don’t have a handkerchief to lend to a person like you.”

“How can I appear in front of everyone in such a wretched state?!”

“Do you think so? The women you refer to—the ones who must remain quiet despite being in danger, the ones who must refuse food despite their hunger, the ones who must bear the sole responsibility of creating an heir, who must not complain after being thrown out on the streets completely penniless after a divorce, who *must* remain celibate, no matter what’s thrown in their life—well, they will surely turn the other way for you. Indeed, they may worry about you, but such women aren’t even allowed to have a mind of their own, I suppose. I’m sure there’ll be no issues.”

“What nonsense are you...”

Eric stopped himself and turned red. At that moment, he realized that every single one of Opal’s words was directed solely at him.

"That's not what I mean..." he started.

"Eric, I suggest you hold your tongue." A man stopped him. "As she says, you'll only be further expressing your foolishness."

"B-Brother!" Eric cried, shedding light on the identity of the man who'd just appeared. "Why are you..."

"Because she is completely out of your league."

"That's not true!"

"Silence, Eric. Lady Holloway, I apologize for my younger brother's insolence."

"Ah, but I find you to be the insolent one, Viscount Amadi," Opal replied. She wasn't sure of his name because there was no formal instruction.

The viscount smiled and bowed sincerely. "You're absolutely right. I'm Viscount Tuli Bapot Amadi. I apologize for my rudeness along with that of my foolish brother."

"Opal Holloway. Charmed, I'm sure. But I wasn't referring to your lack of introduction, Viscount Amadi. I was referring to what you just said."

"Oh?"

The smiling viscount now looked perplexed as he stared at Opal.

Opal nodded and smiled. "You mentioned 'leagues,' didn't you? And whatever does that mean? What if I was in a league below your younger brother? Would you have let him be despite his astonishingly rude remarks? Or will you have helped me, all the same? In either case, I find it to be horrid behavior. While your brother was hurling insults at me, you kept your back turned as you casually sipped on your drink. My so-called league aside, the both of you have zero idea how to treat a woman."

Opal had realized that it was Tuli who had entered the room as soon as she sat down. Eric, on the other hand, was too angry to notice his surroundings. And once again, he was angered by Opal's attitude toward his older brother. Eric tried to speak, but the viscount raised his hand to stop him.

"I apologize," Viscount Amadi said. "I meant no harm. I didn't mean to make you so upset."

His words could hardly be considered anything near a heartfelt apology. Opal's heart grew colder than ice, and in contrast, her smile grew broader still.

"Oh, you *meant no harm*? How lovely," she continued. "And have you ever wondered just how many people were hurt by your words and actions? Rumors that *mean no harm*, games that *mean no harm*—do you think that you can be excused simply because you didn't mean to? Just because you didn't mean to be hurtful, that doesn't mean you're granted a pardon for all your actions. If that's all you truly have to say—if you refuse to take responsibility for your actions, perhaps you should forfeit your rank and title. There's no need for your facetious apologies."

She was infuriated not only by Eric's foolishness but by Tuli's arrogance as well. Nearly a decade ago, Opal had been the target of games and gambling by so-called gentlemen who *meant no harm*. Time and again, she'd been hurt by these actions. The single scandal that she'd been a part of forced her to pay a hefty price, and she was still affected by it to this day. Eric and Tuli had never been spoken to in this fashion before, and they stared at her like some sort of unusual beast.

Tuli and Eric were raised as future heirs of the marquis's house, and they'd been brought up as masters. *They* were the ones on top. Eight years ago, the plague and the battle for the throne had allowed their arrogance to be one of their strengths, earning them a title apart from their household. This boosted their confidence, but with the start of a new generation, this arrogance—a trait of all nobles—would only become a hindrance. Opal didn't want to destroy Claude's friendship with Tuli and Eric, but she refused to bend her beliefs as well.

Her smile faded from her face, her tone icy. "Please continue to be friends with Claude. But please, refrain from showing yourself in front of me as much as possible. I shall do the same and do my best to avoid you both."

As Opal whirled around to head for the exit, she noticed Claude enter. He must've heard her voice as he swiftly stood by her side and gazed sternly at Eric and Tuli.

"I'll be taking Opal's side," Claude said. "I know that I invited you both, but

now I ask that you not attend our wedding.”

After his declaration, he turned on his heel and led a shocked Opal out—he didn’t even wait for a response from Eric and Tuli. Opal followed her beloved’s command and left without another word.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Your flaw is that you try to take responsibility for things that you aren’t even responsible for,” Claude replied simply. He sighed, sounding exhausted. “So you apologize, even though you don’t need to.”

“Claude...”

Opal didn’t regret what she said, but she felt like she could’ve handled the situation differently. She regretted picking a fight with her beloved’s allies.

“But I unnecessarily created a rift between you and your friends,” she said. “And for that, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, do you?” Claude replied. “If our friendship were to break because someone else joined the fray, that’s that. They’re competent at their work, but that’s no excuse for their insensitivity. If they don’t learn to toss aside the arrogance their rank grants them, they won’t be able to keep up with the times.”

“But...”

“You don’t have to worry. They aren’t stupid. They’ll soon realize where they’ve gone wrong. I sound like I know my stuff, but I need to change too. For the past few years here, we’ve been walking forward like mad, which allowed us to accomplish some things, but I think we lost sight of our surroundings along the way. We have to blow a hole through this enclosed society, or it’ll either rot and perish, or be shattered from the outside.”

“Then should I blow that hole open?”

“No, you can do as you like, Opal. His Majesty asked you to do so, didn’t he?”

Naturally, Claude was aware of Alessandro’s true intentions that he revealed at their meeting just a couple days before. Regret wasn’t an emotion that suited Opal; if she had time to feel regret, she’d learn from that failure to do better

next time. With that in mind, she nodded firmly.

“You can leave that bit to me,” she said. All the while, she noticed where they were headed and hastily turned to him. “Are we not returning to the venue, Claude?”

“Nope. We already did what we needed to,” Claude replied.

“I didn’t even greet His Majesty.”

“No worries. He’ll understand.”

“What about your parents?”

“My mom said that she tied up her loose ends. She and my dad are already in the carriage.”

“Then I hope I didn’t make them wait too long...”

“Don’t you worry. In fact, they might complain that we’re intruding on their alone time.”

Claude gave an exaggerated look of exhaustion, making Opal giggle. When they arrived at the carriage, the baron and the baroness were indeed already seated and waiting inside.

“Oh my, you guys could’ve taken your time,” the baroness said.

“Told you,” Claude said to Opal.

She bit her lip and did her best to suppress her smile—soon enough she’d belong to this warm family. She shook herself free of all the negative thoughts and excitedly awaited her wedding reception, scheduled in two days’ time.

## 9. Resolve

The day after the ball, Opal and Claude's family traveled to the outskirts of the capital to House Roussel's villa. The wedding would take place tomorrow at the nearby village chapel, and so they decided to spend the night at the villa. Following the wedding reception, family and invited guests would return to the royal capital, while Opal and Claude would spend three days at the villa for their honeymoon.

Claude was still in the main manor at the royal capital, while Opal was currently being led to the room usually designated for the mistress of the house. As any bride was the night before her wedding, she was restless. The last time she was married, Hubert had spent only one night in the room beside her at the ducal manor. This time, however, Claude would naturally be using the room right next to her. And of course, Opal had no complaints about the arrangement. *What shall I do?* Opal thought instead. *Even Claude would never suspect that despite being married for seven years, I'm still a virgin.*

She was nervous, pacing around her elegantly appointed room, watching Claude's belongings being moved into the room next door. At twenty-seven, she was certainly aware of what happened between a married couple. She'd be lying if she said that she wasn't embarrassed. But with Claude, like always, she felt like everything would be okay. But in the end she just wasn't sure if she should tell Claude the truth. He knew that she wasn't used to romance, not one bit, but Opal had no way of knowing just how *much* he knew—or rather, that she didn't know. Did he truly understand just how clueless she was? *But if some preparations were in order... I'd trouble him. I should come clean first.*

Once she decided her next course of action, her new agony was deciding when exactly she should tell him the truth. This wasn't something that should be done over a letter. But if she were to head to the manor in the royal capital now, she'd return well into the night. *I can just casually mention it. Tomorrow will do just fine. There's plenty of time after the ceremony and before the reception.*

She quit pacing and sat at her desk, satisfied with her answer. She had a few documents she needed to take care of, and had brought them with her when packing for this trip. She opened her bag and spotted Hubert's letter first. She'd forgotten to read it once and ended up delaying reading it altogether. It was high time she tackled her ex-husband's words. When she received the letter, she should've immediately replied by passing it to her surrogate. *I must've been too excited back then.* She sighed at herself as she took a paper knife and opened the letter, taking out the paper tucked within and scanning its contents.

"I don't understand," Opal muttered, placing the letter back on her desk, her eyes fixated on the words.

She should've replied sooner, or sent it right back without opening it, and regretted not doing either of those things. Earl Holloway knew that Opal had cut all contact with Hubert—why did the earl send a letter along with the duke's? But this wasn't her father's fault. Only she was to blame for waiting so long to open Hubert's letter. *Father should've just arrived in this kingdom...* As the father of the bride, he'd be attending the wedding, but his plan was to stay at the royal capital tonight and head to Opal's tomorrow.

He'd head home as soon as the ceremony was over; he was as busy as ever. Like before, Opal's older brother wouldn't be in attendance, and Claude had mentioned it well in advance. *I had no idea that my brother was in contact with Claude... How unfair.* She'd sent a letter to her brother several times, but not once did she receive a reply. And yet, not only was he in close contact with Claude; he'd personally gone and assisted with replenishing supplies in the Taisei Kingdom during the civil war. Opal's brother had even dropped out of university and was now abroad in parts unknown. Earl Holloway certainly knew about this, and only Opal had been left in the dark. *But as long as he's doing well, I can't wish for anything more.*

Opal had hated her mean older brother when she was younger. When he'd gone off to university, she'd lost all contact with him. Even now, she couldn't say she was all that close to him. Still, he was family, and Opal not only loved her brother, but she was worried about him and was frustrated with him as well. *Men are all so selfish!*

She violently crammed the letter back into the envelope, taking her anger out

on the paper, and funneled her anger into her work. She took care of matters faster than she'd thought, and when she was done, she found herself feeling unexpectedly refreshed.

The next morning, with final preparations finished, Earl Holloway arrived at the villa and met with Opal, who was just about to board the carriage to the chapel. Though he'd come all the way from the royal capital, there wasn't a wrinkle to be seen on his outfit.

"Opal, you're as beautiful as you were eight years ago," Earl Holloway said, once they were both settled in the carriage.

She furrowed her brow, but quickly flashed a smile. "Thank you, father."

There was no need for sarcasm from her father; she wondered if he even meant what he said but desperately tried to suppress her annoyance instead. While Opal marrying Hubert in the first place was his mistake, Earl Holloway had done so for his daughter's sake.

"Father, did you love mother?" Opal inquired.

The earl narrowed his eyes with suspicion. "What's with you?"

In the past, Opal had feared her father's glare and had been easily cowed by it, but now, she was able to stand her ground, just a teensy bit. Perhaps it was pathetic that she couldn't be more firm against her father, but Opal mustered up her courage and continued to talk.

"Mother loved you until her dying breath. My brother and I were very dear to her as well, of course, and she loved us very much too. But I can't help but think that she wished that you were by her side more."

"I...promised her," Earl Holloway replied.

"Pardon?"

"I'd already inherited a title when I met your mother, but my father had left behind such massive debt that I was entirely at a loss. I didn't approach your mother because I didn't want her to think that I was trying to get closer to her for her money."

"And yet, you proposed to her."

“No, she proposed to me.”

“Mother proposed?”

“Indeed. And when she did, she told me to stop running away—to stop feeling ashamed for my lack of wealth. *She* had the cash, and she insisted that that was good enough for us.”

Opal was completely flummoxed but tried her best to hide it. “So you amassed your wealth using mother’s money as your base?”

“That’s right. And I promised her that I’d increase her wealth exponentially. When we initially married, I put her through some hard times, and she was already quite fragile to begin with. I decided she should retreat from the capital and relocate to the countryside, where the air is cleaner. I thought it was better for her. So I did my best to maintain the plot of land in order to help her lead an easier life.”

“I had no idea,” Opal mumbled.

“I never told anyone about it.”

Was it a trick of the light? The earl seemed to have puffed his chest out proudly, and Opal averted her gaze to look out the window of the carriage instead, taking in the tranquil scenery. Surely, Opal surmised, her mother must have felt lonely, and while Opal also felt abandoned by her father, it was clear her mother must’ve loved her father, clumsiness and all. This was the man that Opal’s mother had chosen. *I’m not sure if he’s just awkward or completely off the rails.*

If Opal had been in her mother’s shoes, she would’ve preferred to be close to her beloved instead of sheltered in the countryside, fragility be damned. She would’ve done whatever she could to overcome her situation.

“Was all you did—forcing me to marry Duke McLeod and helping us to an almost absurd degree—because you saw yourself in him?” Opal inquired, the realization suddenly hitting her. She turned back to her father.

“I’d taken your stubbornness into account, but I didn’t expect McLeod to be so arrogant,” the earl replied.

"Then is *this* outcome outside of your expectations too?"

"I don't regret turning down Claude's first request to marry you," the earl said. "But I regret turning him down the second time—I should've given him my blessing then. But now, I'm quite satisfied with this result."

"I...agree."

Opal had complaints of her own, but she realized that her father loved her in his own awkward way. Yet Earl Holloway would never admit such a thing on his own, and it was that kind of clumsiness that made the earl who he was. In the end, Opal truly did love her father, in all his awkward manners and behaviors. *I think I understand mother's feelings, just a little.*

Once more, Opal gazed out the window and suppressed a sigh.

## 10. The Wedding

When Opal married Hubert, it had been a dreadfully cold affair; the ceremony was quick, and the few guests who had attended threw out a few languid words of praise before she was taken away. There had been no reception. But today, there were plenty of guests invited on her special day, and villagers crowded the chapel to give their blessing. Opal was overjoyed to receive the kind words of so many people who were genuinely happy for her.

“Oh, Claude, I don’t know what to do,” Opal murmured.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Claude, asked.

“I know that you might find my words to be so horribly trite, but...”

“But?”

“I’m so happy that I’m scared.”

Opal had never imagined she would speak such words. She expected Claude to laugh at her for them, but all he did was give a solemn nod, placing a hand on hers, which was currently resting on his arm.

“I’m scared too,” he said. “I keep thinking that I must be dreaming. I could hardly sleep a wink last night.”

“Claude...” Opal said.

Seeing her usually confident beloved show a weak side made her chest grow tight. The two had just finished the ceremony to become an official couple, but even now her heart pounded so fast that she felt like a maiden nursing an unrequited love. A rapid blush bloomed on her face as she was suddenly reminded that she had to tell Claude a very important fact.

“Right, there’s something I think I...” Opal started.

“Claude, stop making googly eyes at your bride! Come on!” Claude’s brother teasingly called, cutting her off.

The newly wedded couple had just exited the chapel and had frozen in place

at the doorway—it must've looked like they were staring endearingly into each other's eyes. And Opal couldn't deny it either; she'd been staring straight at Claude. She tried to hide her embarrassment and turned toward everyone. Opal had known the baron's family since she was young, and that somehow made her feel even more shy. Claude noticed that Opal had something to say, but sensing the awkwardness hovering around her, he decided to drop the subject for now.

"I wasn't as bad as you," Claude said to his brother, shooting him a lighthearted glare before cracking a mischievous smirk. "But don't get comfortable; I'll make the love you show your wife look paltry in comparison to how I'll love mine."

He turned back to Opal, his bride suppressing her shyness and smiling as well. Claude and Opal boarded their carriage, carried on the currents of all the warm blessings they'd received.

Next up was the reception. Opal let out a sigh.

"You tired?" Claude asked.

"No, I'm fine," Opal replied. "There's just so much to take in that my chest feels full."

She placed a hand over her chest, and Claude said not a word, only flashing a calm smile. Opal loved it when her husband acted in this manner. Words weren't necessary; a simple smile was more than enough to soothe her.

"You're so unfair," Opal grumbled.

"About what?" Claude asked.

"It's like you know everything about me and see through me completely."

"Well, I don't know *everything*."

"But you know about me better than I do about you. Still..."

"Still?"

Opal hesitated for a moment, wondering if this was her moment of truth. Perhaps Claude didn't expect her to remain chaste after seven years of marriage, but she was sure that he'd be understanding.

"I-I haven't ever, um...you know. I-I haven't ever done *it*. I bet you didn't know that," Opal stammered.

"Done what?" Claude asked quizzically.

"Y-You know!" She was so embarrassed that she sounded much more brash than she intended to. A stubborn lady like her couldn't be so honest with herself.

"Know what?" Claude asked, still completely lost.

"Y-You know, what couples do after marriage!"

Unable to tolerate this awkwardness for much longer, Opal quickly turned away and looked out the window. She wasn't able to take in the scenery at all, her senses completely focused on Claude.

"What? But you were married for *seven years*!" Claude said.

"We lived separately," Opal replied.

"Even so..."

Despite Opal trying to put on a strong front, Claude's response was worrying Opal more and more by the second. She didn't think it was a big deal, but perhaps it was for him.

"Is it that weird?" Opal asked glumly. "Is it really such a big deal? Am I not good enough anymore?"

"No, no, nothing like that at all!" Claude cried, vehemently denying her questions. "The problem is that I—" He snapped his mouth shut midsentence.

"Claude?"

"Nothing."

Opal had confessed the truth and mustered all the courage that she had, but it was clear that Claude, too, had something to hide. She frowned, her embarrassment forgotten with this new discovery.

"Claude, what is it?" she asked again.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it," he replied.

“Of course I’m worried about it. You’re only making me more curious.”

“Then I’ll tell you later.”

“What? When’s that?! I can’t wait!”

“That’s my line, I’ll have you know! Why did you even say all this right there and now?”

“Because I didn’t know *when* to say it, obviously! Are you angry with me now?! If I truly am no good for you now, tell me so!”

“I’m telling you that that’s not the issue! You’re not at fault, I assure you! I’m just—”

“What’s wrong? Having a fight already?” Earl Holloway asked.

The newly wedded couple were so engrossed in their conversation that they failed to notice the carriage coming to a stop. In fact, they stayed inside the carriage for so long that Opal’s father had opened the door, wondering if something had occurred. Perhaps the earl had already called out to them and the couple hadn’t heard it.

“Father, you must never open the door without permission!” Opal said, glaring angrily at her father in hopes of hiding her rage.

“Opal, do work to keep that temper and strong-minded nature in check,” the earl replied, much to her increasing fury. “He’ll grow tired of you if you don’t.”

“Yet those very traits are part of why Opal is so endearing,” Claude said with a calm smile.

The bride had nothing else to say, and the earl wearily shrugged before he left.

“Oh no, I guess we made everyone wait,” Claude said apologetically.

He noticed all the servants lined up in front of the manor. After the happy couple received their servants’ blessings, they had to welcome the guests who were invited to their reception. Earl Holloway arrived earlier than everyone else because he planned on slipping out and heading back early. Was the earl’s snarky comment earlier his way of giving his daughter a word of advice?

*Disregard clumsy; he’s far too hard to read.* Opal watched her father’s receding

back as she took Claude's hand and stepped off the carriage. With their hands still intertwined, Claude squeezed her hand and leaned in close.

"I love everything about you, Opal," he whispered.

"Th-That troubles me," Opal replied. "You say *everything*...that's on your mind."

"I'm sorry."

"I lied."

"Huh?"

Claude had supported her when Earl Holloway had been a touch snide, but Opal, out of embarrassment, could only be dishonest with her feelings. And yet the marquis wasn't angry at her—instead, he'd apologized for his actions. Opal hated how she always ended up saying the opposite of what she truly felt; it was time that she bravely took a step forward herself.

"It troubles me," Opal said again, squeezing back. "But I actually really like it when you do it."

"Thanks, Opal. That makes me happy to hear," Claude replied, looking a little sheepish. "But saying that now will—"

"Congratulations on your wedding!" a butler shouted on behalf of the servants. Once again, the marquis had been cut off.

The newly wedded couple was swiftly whisked away, and they didn't have time to sit down and talk things out until night.

## 11. Newly Wedded

The next morning, well after the servants had risen and started bustling around, Opal woke up and at once felt a bit off. When she'd finally snapped out of her drowsiness, she almost screamed at what she saw right next to her: Much to her shock, Claude was snoozing away beside her. Opal soon became embarrassed, but luckily, he was still fast asleep. *H-He scared me*, she thought. Her heart was pounding so hard that it was practically jumping out of her chest as she steadied her breathing and stared at her husband.

She's known him for so long, but until now she'd never gazed at his face at such a close distance. *Huh. There's a small scar on his cheek. Since when?* It looked as though a sharp blade had grazed his face, and Opal furrowed her brow in dismay. She was aware of all the injuries that he'd sustained during his university days, meaning that this injury must've occurred during the civil war. Claude had brushed his recent years off as though surviving a war was no big deal, but Opal wasn't naive enough to take his words at face value.

He might not have been willing to talk about it just yet, but she wanted to hear all about it soon. She reached out her hand to touch his scar, but stopped herself just short of doing so. Claude looked so relaxed and was sleeping peacefully; she didn't want to wake him up. She gazed at his face instead, wanting him to rest for just a bit longer, and contented herself with the slow sensation of happiness sinking in before quietly slipping out of bed.

She had finished getting properly dressed and was enjoying a cup of tea while reading a book when she heard someone call her name.

“Opal.”

She whirled around and saw Claude's face peeking through the bedroom door. Opal hastily stood up and smiled, hoping to hide her sheepish demeanor.

“Good morning, Claude,” she said.

“Morning.”

Despite Opal greeting him with a bright smile, Claude looked a little awkward. Opal was worried if she'd messed up somehow but suppressed her anxiety and decided to act as a wife should.

"Would you like breakfast to be brought to your room?" she asked. "Or will you have your meal in the breakfast room?"

"Breakfast room, please," Claude replied curtly.

He closed the door, and Opal chased after him. If she'd done anything wrong, she wanted to be told so. If she'd made a mistake, she'd do her best to fix things.

"Claude," she called.

"Yeah? What's wrong?" Claude stood in place and flashed his usual smile at her.

"Uh, well..."

Opal faltered for a moment. Was she overthinking things? Was Claude perhaps not in a bad mood at all? Even so, she felt it was best to trust her intuition and wanted to clear up any misunderstandings. Opal couldn't stand the idea of Claude forcing himself to put a lid on his emotions.

"If I...did anything wrong or made a mistake, I'd wish you'd tell me," she said.

"You? Make a mistake?" Claude asked.

"Right. Like last night, for example... As a bride, did I make a mistake somewhere?"

"As a bride?" Claude repeated, taking some time to process her words. After a brief pause, he gasped. "No way! No, no! You're not at fault at all! It's my issue!"

"Yours, Claude?"

"I'm not a morning person, that's all."

"Is that so?"

She was a bit surprised to learn this new fact about her husband, despite knowing him for so long. However, this wasn't anything unusual or a problem at

all. In fact, there were many nobles who weren't morning people; if anything, Opal simply woke up too early. She remained silent and waited for further explanation, but none came.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I'm not quite sure what the issue is," Opal said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, it's a me thing, really," Claude replied. "Since you were sleeping beside me, I thought it was a waste to just keep sleeping. I couldn't help but think of how foolish I looked..."

"Claude, you're always the coolest person in my eyes. Even now, you dazzle me."

"Thanks. I should probably get dressed so that I can look, well, cooler."

"Of course. I shall be waiting for you in the breakfast room."

After Claude smiled and retreated back into the bedroom, Opal returned to the living room and crouched on the ground. She gave a deep exhale and pressed her hands against her pounding chest. *That made me so nervous... I acted normal, didn't I? Not weird at all?*

She was relieved to hear that there were no issues on her end, but anything Claude said was bound to make her smile. Though Opal managed to stay calm, she was really quite embarrassed, her face bright red. She fanned herself with one hand as she got up to ring the bell. A maid soon appeared, Opal having taken the brief wait to smooth out her clothes in front of a nearby mirror.

"Madam, did you call me for me?" the maid inquired.

"My husband would like to have breakfast," Opal said. "Would you please get the breakfast room ready?"

"Certainly."

Opal felt ticklish for being referred to as "madam," but she managed to remain calm. She felt equally shy calling Claude "her husband," which made her order sound much more stern than she realized. She was simply trying her best to remain calm, and in hopes of quelling any fears, she flashed a smile at the servant. The maid looked relieved before she stepped back. Opal had been in

this manor for only two days, so the servants were also trying to get a feel for their new mistress.

While a line had to be drawn between an employer and an employee, Opal wanted to build a good and close relationship with her servants. She wanted to avoid the cold treatment that she'd received at the McLeod manor. *Which reminds me, I have to take care of the duke as well.* She sighed as she recalled the letter, and made her way to the breakfast room herself.

It was easy for her to ignore Hubert, but doing so would only leave questions unanswered. And more plainly, doing such a thing just felt wrong. But Opal wasn't keen on granting Hubert's wish without consulting Claude first. After her husband took his seat at the breakfast room, Opal searched for the perfect timing to switch subjects and, once she did, brought up Hubert's letter.

"McLeod wants to meet you?" Claude asked, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"That's right," Opal quickly replied, making excuses for her delayed response. "I should've declined his request earlier or sent the letter back without opening it, but it just totally slipped my mind. I suspect he'll be boarding a ship here soon. Of course, I still have the option to decline his request."

When Claude noticed Opal's nervousness, his gaze softened, and he spoke in a calm tone. "What do you want to do, Opal?"

Opal felt her shoulders relax and decided to divulge her true feelings. "Me? Well...to be honest, I'm rather curious about what business he has with me."

"I don't blame you," Claude agreed with a smile. "If you don't meet him, I'm sure that you'll just get too curious about things. So yeah, I think you should meet him. But I want it to be two days later, when we return to the royal capital, and I want to be present as well."

"Of course you'll be with me! Thank you, Claude. Having you by my side is such a relief." Opal smiled, feeling much lighter than before.

Claude grinned mischievously. "To tell you the truth, I'm a bit curious as well. I'll just stick my nose in and watch this little spectacle unfold. Besides, if I weren't so curious, I'd be so jealous I'd hide you away in the attic. You'd never

meet McLeod."

"But if you do that, I'm sure I'd do whatever I can to escape."

"I know. That's why I love you so much. You're stubborn and you hate to lose, and you absolutely despise unfair, dishonest situations. That's what made me fall for you."

"Th-That doesn't make me happy at all! I don't like hearing you praise me like this!"

Surprised by the confession, Opal turned red and turned away. Claude laughed loudly, and in the end, she gave in and laughed along with him.

## 12. Reunion

One day had passed since Opal and Claude had returned to their manor in the royal capital, and now in front of the door to the parlor, Opal paused and took a deep breath. She was just about to meet Hubert. Claude took her hand and squeezed it tightly before releasing her from his grasp.

“Thank you, Claude,” Opal said.

“Don’t sweat it. I’m nervous too,” he replied.

“You too?” She couldn’t hide her surprise.

“I *still* can’t believe how lucky I am. But, you see, I’ve gotten better at bluffing.”

Following his mischievous comment, he opened the door. Hubert was all alone, and he stood up as he saw Claude and Opal enter. It’d been a year since Opal had seen her ex-husband, and he was more or less the same, albeit he looked more tired than usual.

“It’s been a while, McLeod,” Claude said.

“Roussel... You really did get married,” Hubert replied.

The two men exchanged a handshake, and the duke turned to Opal. Claude released Hubert’s hand and casually wrapped his arm around Opal’s waist, drawing her close.

“There may be no need for an introduction,” the marquis said. “But this is my wife, Opal.”

“It’s been a while, Your Grace,” Opal said.

“Y-Yeah,” Hubert replied. “Did you two meet while working on the Manhest project?”

Opal hesitated for a moment and glanced at Claude; she wasn’t sure if she could reveal Marquis Roussel’s true identity. The truth was that Claude was the third son of a Socille baron. But this hesitant glance had caused further

misunderstandings, and Hubert turned stern.

“Since when have you two known each other?” the duke demanded.

“McLeod, Opal and I are childhood friends,” Claude replied.

*“Childhood friends?”*

Hubert looked completely flabbergasted, suggesting that Marquis Roussel’s true origins were still widely unknown in Socille. Opal noticed that Claude wasn’t making a whole lot of effort in hiding his identity anyway, and began to explain in further detail.

“Claude is from Socille,” Opal said. “He hails from the house of a baron who has a plot of land right beside the Earldom of Holloway. We were allowed to visit each other’s manors, and we became close since we were kids.”

“Roussel? No, Claude Fred...” Hubert murmured as he mentally went through the list of nobles within Socille.

Claude’s parents were nobles, but they were infrequent visitors to the royal capital during the social season. It was not unusual for the younger generation to be unaware of the baron and the baroness. But Hubert still had some questions of his own as he stared intently at Claude.

“Why is the son of a Socille baron a marquis in Taisei?” the duke wondered.

“My maternal grandfather was the previous lord of House Roussel,” Claude answered. “And unfortunately, the successor died from the plague eight years ago. Coupled with the civil war that followed soon after, I’m not well-known in other nations.”

“But you could’ve at least told me five years ago, when I asked you for support... Is that why Earl Holloway introduced me to you? Were you two in close contact this entire time?”

Hubert’s voice cracked as he struggled to speak, trying to blame Opal and Claude for all the secrecy. Opal frowned; it sounded like Hubert was trying to imply that Opal had been cheating on him when they were still married.

“I last saw Claude when I married you and immediately returned home soon after. I only met him once, and that was all,” Opal said. “Since that day, I hadn’t

received a single peep from Claude until a few months ago. I had no idea that he was in close contact with my father or that he was actually Marquis Roussel."

She was trying to explain herself to Hubert, but as she did so, she started to feel angry toward both Claude and her father; it seemed that every time something important was underway, Opal was cast aside and left in the dark.

"Do you know just how worried I was when you started developing Manhest? That's how you got to meet Marquis Roussel in the first place," Opal huffed.

"I-I'm sorry..." Hubert said. He flinched at the scolding, failing to notice that the topic had suddenly shifted.

"A mere apology isn't enough! I'm still quite angry about it, I'll have you know!"



"Th-Then what can I do to make it up to you?"

Opal then shifted her glare at Claude. "And you, Claude!"

"Yeah?" the marquis replied.

"Don't give me that!"

"Yes, ma'am?" Claude seemed to be enjoying himself, his eyes glazed over with nostalgia.

Opal wasn't quite angry; she was just pouting. She soon realized how childish she was acting and quickly calmed herself down.

"There are a ton of things I'd like to discuss with you, but I shall do so later," Opal said. "Now, Your Grace, I believe that your letter mentioned your worry for Miss Stella's future. Will you kindly elaborate?"

Hubert's letter had mentioned Stella, who by this point Opal regarded as a near total stranger. The little angel clearly despised Opal, and Mrs. Notham must've also been reluctant about associating with Hubert's ex-wife. Opal simply couldn't understand why Hubert went out of his way to make the trip all the way to Taisei.

"Well, you see, I must remarry soon so that I can have an heir," Hubert confessed. "Out of all my potential candidates, I settled on Lady Marianne of the house of Earl Lefond. But the lady has set out a condition for her marriage."

Opal did her best to maintain a smile, stopping her cheeks from twitching. It sounded quite selfish and conceited of the lady, but a marriage between nobles came with troubles of their own. Perhaps she set a condition precisely because Hubert wasn't completely against it.

"And what is this condition?" Opal asked.

"She demanded that I make it clear in writing that I'd cut all ties with Stella," Hubert answered.

"She wants an official contract with your signature, then."

"Precisely."

While Opal wasn't sure if it was Lady Marianne or her mother pulling the

strings, it was apparent that she was exactly as rumored—a stern lady. Since Stella wasn't Hubert's mistress, this move was to further solidify Lady Marianne's position and rank as the duchess. Declaring a condition for marriage practically guaranteed that Hubert and Marianne were engaged, even if there hadn't actually been a proposal. Their relationship had progressed so much that if the marriage were to fall apart, it would cause quite the scandal. It'd be especially scandalous for the lady. *And where exactly do I fit into this?* Opal wondered. She suppressed an exasperated sigh and glanced at her husband; Claude gave her an awkward and sympathetic look.

*Claude told me that I can do what I want, and he's by my side. So I'll do just that and act as I wish.* Opal sighed just a little again before she looked back at Hubert, who was sitting across from her.

"In short, you must choose between Miss Stella or Lady Marianne, Your Grace. Is that not so?" Opal asked.

"That's right," Hubert replied with a nod. He looked relieved by her understanding.

Opal smiled back. "I see. I certainly can't be of any help to you, and to be handed such a dilemma is troubling to me. Please consider your situation on your own."

## 13. Consulting

“What?” Hubert asked in utter shock.

Opal’s response might’ve sounded cold, but it was also the most natural and obvious answer to give. Claude cleared his throat in an attempt to stifle his laughter, snapping the duke back to reality.

“I-I *can’t* decide! That’s why I’m consulting you,” Hubert said.

“And why me? I’m just a stranger to you,” Opal replied.

“But...we were married for seven years. You know about Stella and her situation very well, don’t you? Are you planning on abandoning her now?”

“And I’ve told you that the past is in the past. Your affairs have nothing to do with me now. You’re the one in charge of House McLeod’s future, and you must bear the responsibilities. I suggest you find the answer by yourself.”

This conversation both exhausted her and made her feel nostalgic; she often used to argue with Hubert in this manner. But her weariness had won out. Hubert was shocked, and he clearly looked troubled.

“I’m sure that it’s tough for you to cut ties with Miss Stella. She’s practically your sister, after all,” Opal said. “However, if you would like to take the future of House McLeod into account, then cutting her out might be the choice you need to make. Even if you’re unable to marry Lady Marianne, the other ladies you try to court in the future might believe those rumors and set similar conditions. And you’ve entrusted Miss Stella with quite a bit of money so that she won’t have any financial troubles in the future, correct? Money isn’t everything, but she has Mrs. Notham and the servants that she grew up with, such as Romito and Beth, by her side.”

“Beth is no longer with us,” Hubert replied with a frown.

Claude seemed to enjoy watching the events unfold in front of him; in the end, Opal was providing Hubert some advice. The duke, on the other hand, looked glummer by the second.

"Beth is gone? Did something happen?" Opal inquired with surprise. The maid had loved Stella and served her dutifully. But she quickly found a possible reason and smiled. "Did she go off to marry?"

"No," Hubert replied. "But Beth is pregnant, so Mrs. Notham fired her."

"Huh?"

Hubert didn't even try to hide his scorn and it was Opal's turn to be stunned. She could process his words, but she still found herself unable to believe them.

"Beth tried to give birth to a child without a father," Hubert said with full sincerity. "I cannot keep such a person employed under me."

Opal couldn't let this nasty remark slide. Infuriated, she gave an exaggerated smile. "My goodness! So Beth underwent an immaculate conception! We're witnessing a miracle! What a time to be alive."

Claude grinned, but Hubert raised his voice.

"Don't speak nonsense!" the duke said sharply. "Beth won't divulge the father's name."

Opal continued, her disdain on full display. "Then the child *does* have a father. He seems like a rather irresponsible man, unfortunately."

Upon hearing Opal's icy tone, Hubert finally realized that he'd misspoken. His eyes wandered for a moment, but he swiftly gathered himself.

"Even so, Beth acted irresponsibly. That's a fact," he said.

"In society, it's women who are always at weaker and lower standing," Opal replied. "Why, then, must she always be forced to fight through it all alone?"

"What did you say?"

Opal had gotten a bit emotional, the day her own reputation had been destroyed surfacing in her consciousness. She snapped back to her senses when Claude gently placed his hand over hers.

"Never mind. As I don't know the details, I have no right to speak any more about Beth. In any case, if you truly are worried about the future of House McLeod, I suggest you accept Lady Marianne's condition," Opal finished.

"But then I'd feel so bad for Stella..." Hubert replied.

"Then why don't you talk it over with Lady Marianne once more? Or perhaps, if Miss Stella marries someone, your situation will change."

Opal was exasperated with herself for helping Hubert out even when she said she wouldn't, but Hubert's following words caught her by surprise.

"That's an impossible suggestion," the duke said. "I tried inviting some of my friends to the manor so that they could meet Stella, but every time, she'd have a horrible fit. It seems the thought of marriage is a touchy subject for her."

"You invited your friends to the manor?" Opal asked.

"I did."

It was easy to imagine that Stella would refuse any man who wasn't Hubert, but another realization hit Opal. If the prideful Beth were to choose a suitable man for herself—though she might've been taken by force—no doubt that she'd choose one of Hubert's friends. When Opal was still single, she'd met Hubert's friends a few times at dinner parties. Some of them exhibited questionable behavior, much to Opal's disdain, and she remembered that interacting with them made her quite uncomfortable. Only after she married Hubert did she learn that those men were the duke's friends, and she also suspected that Hubert's nasty attitude toward her came from the horrible lies that those men spewed. *Telling a duke over thirty that he should choose his friends better makes me sound like an overprotective mother. I can't say that. Even so, it doesn't feel right to leave Beth all alone.*

Opal was lost in her thoughts when she felt Claude gently tap her hand. She curiously looked up and was met with Claude's reassuring smile.

"It might be a bit early for us to visit our home after marriage, but we'll head back to Socille," Claude said, turning to the duke. The marquis gently requested for the duke to leave before continuing. "We'll probably pop in to some societal gathering, so I'll look forward to being introduced to your future bride then."

"Huh? But..." Hubert started.

"Opal already gave you advice," Claude said, more firmly this time. "You need to come to a decision by yourself."

The marquis stood up, and the duke was left with no other choice than to follow suit. Opal stood on her feet as well, borrowing Claude's hand.

"McLeod, I wish for your happiness," Claude said.

"Yeah, thank you. Opal, Roussel, I ask that you two be happy as well," Hubert replied.

"Of course we will."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Opal added.

The two men exchanged a handshake and Opal kept her smile. These fake pleasantries might have sounded shameless, but it was the best that they could muster for now.

"Opal, I'm sorry for troubling you," Hubert said.

"No, I'm sorry for being unable to help you," Opal replied.

"You were more than enough help." He turned to Claude. "Sorry to intrude, Roussel."

"I heard that there were some bandits lurking about in Socille recently. Are you all right?" Claude asked.

"Yeah, they were captured almost immediately. There was some infighting. Their leader was killed, and the entire group dissolved almost at once."

"I see."

Opal hadn't heard of bandits, but it seemed that the matter had already been resolved. Hubert gave one final look at Opal before turning on his heel to leave. He boarded the carriage that was waiting for him and left.

"Are you sure?" Opal asked vaguely. She looked up at Claude.

Her husband quickly caught on to her implication and had wanted to grant her wish. "You're worried about the lady called Beth, aren't you?"

"But will His Majesty allow it?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure he'll understand."

"That you'd be visiting home?"

“It’s where my priorities are.”

Opal had thought she understood his words, but she felt like she couldn’t fully understand *him*. She thought that she knew Claude so well, but the moment Alessandro got involved, that assumption was shaken.

“The past eight years are starting to annoy me,” Opal confessed.

“I completely agree, but it was a necessary eight years, I think,” Claude replied.

“I completely agree.”

The two exchanged a glance and began laughing. It eased their hearts. Opal recalled that she’d never laughed around Hubert, and vowed to treat each laugh she was to experience as if it were precious.

## 14. Returning Home

Opal and Claude stood in front of a manor that was right in the center of Socille's royal capital. The two had just stepped off a carriage.

"I'm surprised you were able to rent a place this close to the social season," Opal remarked.

The manor wasn't too large, but it was traditional and built many years ago, its antique appearance elegant and fashionable. It had been built near Earl Holloway's manor and was located in the ideal spot for the social season. When the social season started, high-ranked nobles would flood the royal capital in droves, and many didn't have a manor in the capital. A residence this grand would've required a reservation of at least a year in advance. Opal stared at her beloved, shocked at where they would be staying despite deciding to return to Socille so abruptly.

"You bought this place, didn't you?" Opal asked. "And quite a while ago too."

"Yep, for investment purposes," Claude replied. "I'm glad I didn't rent it out this year."

"Why didn't you?"

"Wishful thinking, maybe? C'mon, let's head inside."

"You're right."

The two knew each other very well, but they were still making some happy little discoveries between them. Opal took the arm Claude offered and walked up the steps to the entrance, excited to see what further surprises he had to show her.

The doors opened upon their arrival, and Opal was introduced to the butlers and servants of the residence. She observed the room first before stepping inside.

"The interior is fabulous too," she observed.

“I’m happy to hear that,” Claude replied with a smile.

He guided Opal into the living room. She spotted Nadja energetically chattering away with the maids, and decided that the servants could handle unpacking her things. When Opal reached the living room, she gasped at once, awed. The furniture and decor was exactly to her taste.

“How lovely,” she murmured.

She sat down on the sofa and stroked the damask fabric. Claude happily watched his wife soak in her environment. Opal had a mountain of things that she wanted to say, but the words that left her lips were perhaps the most simple and important.

“Claude, thank you for bringing me to such a wonderful home.”

“You’re very welcome,” Claude replied. “If you like it, then it was worth buying this place.”

He smiled like a child who’d successfully pulled off a prank, and Opal felt a tinge of nostalgia as her heart pounded. He wasn’t always so kind when they were growing up. *No, I think he was always this kind to me. He’s just hard to read sometimes*, Opal thought. In fact, she was the cheeky and selfish one. The epiphany embarrassed her, and she turned back to her beloved.

“What’s wrong?” Claude asked.

“I just thought that I’m so glad that I married you,” Opal replied. She immediately realized that her words could cause a misunderstanding, and corrected herself. “I’m not referring to the manor, by the way. That’s not why I said it.”

“I know. But could I still ask for a reason?”

He chuckled at his panicking wife, and Opal hesitated to respond. She quickly found the right words that were short and sweet.

“Because you fight with me,” she said.

“Of course! For you, I’ll offer even my life!” Claude said humorously as he pressed a hand against his chest.

Opal burst out laughing as he looked a bit offended by her reaction. It was all

in jest, and he soon cracked a grin.

“So? Are you prepared for your upcoming battle?” Claude asked.

“I’ve got a sense of where Beth is, at least,” Opal replied.

“Was she at the charity organization that you built? The charity’s goal is to shelter women and support their independence, isn’t it?”

“She wasn’t there. She didn’t visit the place. It seems Mrs. Notham had given the maid a lump sum of money as severance pay. I suppose that’s the only saving grace of this situation.”

Right after Hubert had visited her, she’d written a letter to her surrogate in Socille and requested an investigation into Beth’s whereabouts. This surrogate was introduced to her by her uncle, Jonathan Kensington, and was very competent and reliable. The moment Opal had set foot in the port of Socille, her surrogate had dispatched a messenger to deliver the results of the investigation and Beth’s location.

It’d only been a few days since Opal had sent her letter, and the information she received was rather impressive; she suspected that the surrogate had been keeping tabs on Duke McLeod and his manor for some time.

“Then I’m guessing that you’d need a report on the recent activity of McLeod’s friends,” Claude said.

“That would be a big help,” Opal replied. “Thank you, Claude.”

The marquis had likely looked into Beth on his own. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Opal’s skills—he just wanted to be ready to spring into action and help his beloved wife at a moment’s notice.

“I’ll visit Beth tomorrow,” Opal decided.

“Is it best if I stay back this time?” Claude asked.

“I think so. Beth will only cower in fear at seeing you by my side.”

“Then I’ll arrange a carriage for you. Probably better to have a plain one with no family crest. Oh, and I ask that you please bring a few guards with you.”

“I will. Thank you, Claude.”

They decided to end their discussion on Beth here, and switched topics to the current events within Socille.

The following day, somewhere in the outskirts of the royal kingdom, Opal stepped off her carriage. She looked up at the decrepit housing complex that was her destination. While the building was worn and poorly maintained, the outside lacked any carelessly thrown trash or foul odors. Opal had already done her research and knew that this area wasn't too dangerous. Even so, the coachman and servants were equipped with guns, and her guards followed her a few paces away.

"Now then, shall we go?" Opal asked her maid.

Nadja had been looking up at the building with her mistress. "Yes, madam."

Opal nodded at her coachman, sending a signal. In turn, he pinched the brim of his hat and spurred the carriage away. The vehicle would be stationed a short distance away, and the servants and guards would be standing alert while acting inconspicuous. According to the report, Beth's room was on the second floor, a corner unit on the west side.

Opal and Nadja gracefully walked up the staircase and stopped in front of their destination's entrance. The door was beginning to rot, and there was no nameplate either, but the anxious noblewoman gave a firm knock. She knew that Beth was currently inside of the room, but it still took a good while for the former maid to answer. The impatient Nadja was just about to raise her voice when they heard the sound of a lock being undone on the other side of the door.

"Yes?" Beth asked, peeking out from a small crack she made with the door.

She seemed more tired than when Opal last recalled seeing her, and the former maid had grown visibly older. Opal was shocked to see this depressing transformation of the once strong-minded Beth, and the noblewoman forcibly pried the door wide open with a smile.

"Hello there, Beth," she said.

"What?!" Beth gasped in astonishment.

She immediately tried to fling the door shut, wrestling it out of Opal's grip,

but the noblewoman instinctively took a step forward, jamming her foot between the door and the frame. She endured the tingling pain that coursed through her toes and once again opened the door as wide as it would go.

“Oh dear, Beth,” Opal said. “It’s been a long while, hasn’t it? Why don’t we chat and catch up, for old times’ sake?”

“Are you here to mock me?” Beth asked.

“I only laugh if it’s funny, mind you. But I can’t deny that I might be doing something similar. I’m just sticking my nose into things that aren’t my business.”

Opal didn’t offer any words of sympathy; in fact, she didn’t even try to pacify Beth, and the former maid burst into tears.

## 15. Circumstances

“Y-You’re so awful,” Beth managed to eke out between sobs. “You’re like a demon!”

“What? I think the marchioness is *very* nice,” Nadja replied. No longer could she remain silent. “Sure, she’s a bit stubborn, strict, and refuses to bend sometimes, but she’s very compassionate! She’ll never leave a troubled person alone! You *really* think we came all the way here and crossed the sea *just* to mock you? Yeesh!”

“Nadja,” Opal said awkwardly.

The maid had jumped in to protect her mistress’s honor, but Nadja’s praise wasn’t all that complimentary, and the noblewoman didn’t know what to say except to offer a forced smile. Beth, shocked by an outburst from a stranger, had stopped crying.

“Wh-Who are you?” Beth asked timidly.

“I’m the madam’s maid, her attendant! I’ve known her for a very long time now!” Nadja replied, puffing her chest out proudly.

Beth frowned, upset by those words. “I-I used to be one too. But your mistress was just so cold to me...”

“Huh?! The hell are you on about?! There’s no person in the world more angelic than the madam, I’ll have you know!”

“Um, Nadja, I’m happy you’re sticking up for me, but if you could just...” Opal trailed off and turned to Beth. “Couldn’t you let us inside?”

Opal felt like the conversation was going on a tangent, and both she and the topic at hand were being left behind. To continue arguing at the entrance would only attract unwanted attention, and it was tiring for both parties. Beth, possibly taken aback by Nadja’s sharp retorts, obediently allowed her two guests inside. Opal predicted that the interior of the room would be worn and old, much like the building’s exterior, but the exceptionally sparse space was

unexpected. There was almost nothing to Beth's name other than a tattered rug laid below a small round table and a chair. She had no fireplace, sofa, bench, or even a drawer for her things. Opal was born into wealth; she'd be lying if she knew the humble lifestyle of a commoner, but even she could tell that this room was truly for the impoverished. Beth was living in squalor.

When Opal stepped inside and spotted a door, she was overcome with an inexplicable sense of relief.

"Is there another room in the back?" she asked.

"A bedroom so small a tiny bed completely fills it," Beth replied.

"Where do you cook? Where do you bathe, or wash?"

"There's a communal one. Any other questions?"

Beth stuck out her large pregnant belly and placed her hands on her hips, her stance almost aggressively welcoming further questions. Opal wondered if she should offer words of sympathy, but she smiled as she saw Beth's usual strong-minded attitude.

"I've got a few more, actually, so I'll take your offer," Opal said. "Who's the father of your child?"

Beth gulped. Opal's question was straightforward and frank—she didn't hold back. The former maid turned slightly pale, but it wasn't out of fear or repulsion. Opal stopped herself from asking any further questions and opened the door in the back without permission.

"What are you doing?!" Beth cried.

"A rude guest is always an unwelcome one," Opal replied, excusing her actions.

She sat upon a small bed that didn't even have a mattress, just the hard floor with a thin blanket laid on top. She left her discomfort off her face, instead gesturing for Beth to approach her.

"It must be tough for you to remain standing," Opal said. "Why don't you take a seat here so we can talk?" She smiled, praying that her former maid wouldn't remain so stubborn.

“I’m no longer your maid!” Beth shouted.

“Of course you aren’t. I’ve got a very capable one now. I’ve got no need for a maid who refuses to follow my orders.”

Nadja grinned after seeing Opal’s cutting remark. The chutzpah of these two unwelcome guests suddenly making themselves at home without a care in the world made Beth sigh with resignation. She was no longer angry—simply exasperated. The former maid obediently approached Opal.

“Why are you here?” Beth finally inquired simply.

“Because hearing about you infuriated me,” Opal replied.

“Are you angry at me?”

“I’m angry at you, and everyone around you, in fact.”

Opal’s relentless words made Beth almost cry, but this time around, she held her tears back. Nadja, having fetched a basket while Opal was speaking, stood at the narrow entrance to the bedroom and reached over to hand off the basket. Opal took it and handed it to Beth.

“This timing might be a little late, but I’ve brought you some gifts,” Opal said.

“Gifts?” Beth repeated.

“That’s right. I don’t really know what you like, so I just brought you an assortment of various things. They’ve got a long shelf life.”

When Beth removed the cloth that covered the basket, her face shone brightly, a clear indication that she was running low on food as well.

“Is the father of your child not supporting you?” Opal asked.

“Er,” Beth started awkwardly.

“What an irresponsible man.”

“Lord Keymont isn’t irresponsible! He promised that he’d come for me!”

Beth glared at Opal, failing to realize she’d revealed the name of her baby’s father. Those words were more directed toward herself rather than Opal.

Opal remembered Lord Keymont very well; when she was still single, he tried

to seduce her again and again. When she had read the report on him prepared by Claude, she was relieved to find out that their intimacy seemed consensual, but dumbfounded to also find out that he hadn't changed at all since she'd first met him. She pitied Beth for clinging to Lord Keymont's false promises. She was being fooled while saddled with a child.

"Are you still in contact with him?" Opal inquired.

"I'm waiting for things to die down," Beth replied. "If this becomes a huge fuss, Lord Keymont will be disowned by his family, the household of an earl. That would also affect his inheritance and he would no longer be an heir, which would trouble both of our lives. He stated that he's searching for the perfect timing to bring this matter up to the earl so that the child would be accepted into the family."

"Is...that so," Opal said softly.

Internally, she was furious. According to Claude's report, Jeb Keymont, the second son of the earl, had already received plenty of money and assets, enough that he was set for life if he so chose. All he was doing was allowing Beth to dream of wealth while completely abandoning her, providing her with zero support. To this day, Jeb was leading a frivolous and depraved life.

"All right. I suppose I should be on my way. I'm sorry for suddenly intruding into your house," Opal said. She stood up and lent a shocked Beth a hand, helping the pregnant woman to her feet. "I'd like to tell you that you don't have to send us off, but for your safety, you must lock your doors after we leave."

Opal left the bedroom, and Nadja quickly stood up to follow her mistress. The maid wasn't worried about being scolded for resting her feet; she only felt guilt for occupying the only chair in the house without Beth's express permission. But Beth was oblivious to all of that as she followed Opal. When Opal at last made her way back to the entrance, she turned around once more to face Beth.

"Life might be filled with pain and suffering, but there are also many, many more opportunities for happiness and joy," Opal said. "Please take care of yourself, and don't strain your body overly much."

"I will," Beth answered. Her voice was small and feeble, but she no longer looked pained.

Opal smiled gently in encouragement as she left the old and cramped room with Nadja in tow.

## 16. Reconnaissance

“Oh, what a wonderful day it is! I never expected Duchess McLeod to be standing before us!” the viscountess said loudly, her plump body shaking about.

“I’m Marchioness Roussel now,” Opal replied quietly.

“Ah, so you *are*! And? Where is the marquis?”

The viscountess peered behind Opal’s back, her voice echoing throughout the venue and capturing the attention of a crowd. Opal kept her smile and tried to gauge the viscountess’s true intentions. But quite honestly, it seemed that her head was far too empty to be capable of such things. The fact that her type was surprisingly difficult for Opal to handle made it all the more flummoxing.

“My husband is a very busy man,” Opal said, sounding a touch forlorn. “He’s practically glued to his desk. I couldn’t bear my loneliness and decided to head out, even attending your party without an invitation. Am I a bother?”

The viscountess looked a little sad, clearly sympathetic, before she replied with an encouraging “Not at all! You’re welcome here anytime, dear!”

The viscountess was a blabbermouth—almost shockingly so—but she was relatively a good person. It pained Opal to have to deceive such a nice woman, but this conversation would surely make the viscountess more popular. Opal hoped that this wasn’t a bad trade-off. And she was able to protect the viscountess’s butler, who had allowed her entry despite having no invitation. The viscountess’s hasty welcome was a relief.

Hubert hadn’t told anyone that Opal and Claude were scheduled to return back home to Socille. Opal hadn’t really met anyone on her way back, so her return hadn’t become widespread news among the nobility. Instead of writing letters or talking a walk around the park to make her presence known, she’d decided to crash a dinner party.

Socializing was as glamorous as it was thorny, and a majority of people tended to gather around a woman or man of the hour at such gatherings. As

Opal had expected, when the viscountess stepped away, people immediately rushed in to fill the space. Opal smiled serenely and patiently interacted with each person, but inside her heart had grown cold.

Eight years ago, thanks to the circulation of nasty rumors, women scorned her while men shouted profanities at her. However, due to her rank and wealth, she'd always been invited to social events. Out of pure stubbornness and spite, Opal went out of her way to attend them, but she now saw such actions as foolish.

Another thing she had noticed was that absolutely nothing had changed. Over the past few years, Opal's rank and wealth had increased exponentially—she was formerly Duchess McLeod, and now was Marchioness Roussel. Her money was increasing by the minute. Eight years ago, she had attempted to fight for her dignity. Now she wasn't fighting for Beth's dignity as much as she was acting out of self-satisfaction. There was no need for Opal to take this route; there were a myriad of ways for her to support Beth's life. Just then, Keymont, the man at the root of Beth's worries, called out to her.

"Long time no see, Marchioness Roussel," Jeb Keymont said. "Do you still remember me?"

"I do," Opal replied after a brief pause. "It certainly has been a while, Lord Keymont."

"You faltered for just a second. I take it you needed some time to recall me?"

Opal had only been caught off guard by Keymont's friendliness, but she was further surprised by his words. Keymont should be in his mid-thirties and was a friend of Hubert's, but he was far too childish by half. The entirety of their acquaintance was one dance they'd shared eight years ago. Back then, Opal had found him arrogant and conceited, and it seemed these traits had only grown over the years.

"Sir Keymont, it's a trial to recall a person one danced with just once, eight years ago. I'm sure you understand," Opal replied.

Unfortunately, her sass was lost on him.

"Then we must dance again so that you can remember me more vividly," he

answered.



Opal wasn't given time to refuse as she was essentially pulled onto the dance floor. *I remember him forcing me to dance back then too*, Opal thought. *I ended up giving in to his attitude*. Perhaps Beth had also initially declined his advances but ended up resigning herself to his desires. Opal was lost in her thoughts, but she was snapped back to reality when shocking words were whispered into her ears.

"What did you say?" Opal gasped.

"If you're lonely, I can be your partner. That's all I'm saying," Keymont replied.

"Lonely?"

"Hubert divorced you and you married a doddering old man, didn't you? I don't blame you for your boredom. I can give you a fun time—something even Hubert couldn't have given you. He's a bit of a square, you know?"

Opal had no intention of causing a ruckus tonight. She'd decided to attend this evening party because she wanted to see Keymont for herself. Surely, the report alone couldn't be enough to judge his character. She even looked into Hubert's and Lady Marianne's schedules so that she wouldn't bump into the two. Keymont's words infuriated her, but this time around they also disgusted and repulsed her. Despite it being the middle of a song, she released Keymont from her grip and headed for the exit.

"Marchioness?!" Keymont cried in confusion.

Opal ignored him and gracefully wove through the rest of the dance floor, fully aware of the curious gazes that were on her. Still, she didn't stop. Eight years ago, Opal hadn't felt this repulsed. While youth was certainly a factor and Keymont was arrogant, he was still barely within the realms of being a tolerable person. She met up with Nadja, who was waiting in a separate room, and left the manor. Only then did the marchioness dare to breathe a sigh of relief. Her carriage, which had been prepared to wait for a good while, quickly rolled up in front of her. She stepped inside, and was immensely shocked at once by what she saw.

"Claude?!" she cried.

"Hey there, Opal," Claude replied. "You came out sooner than I expected."

"Er, I... Why are you here?" Opal cast a look of suspicion.

Claude affected an almost absurdly hurt look. "Because I wanted to meet you as soon as I could."

"I'll leave you two be," Nadja mumbled.

"I'm sorry for always making you act reserved, Nadja," Claude apologized.

"Don't be. I'm enjoying it."

"Oh dear," Opal murmured.

Nadja grinned and sat across from the couple as she closed her eyes. Though her implication was that she wasn't listening, she almost certainly was. But Claude didn't mind if Nadja was a part of the audience.

"I thought you might cause some sort of fuss, Opal," he said. "I always try to make sure that I can come to your aid, but I guess I wasn't needed this time around."

"How rude," Opal replied lightly. "All I did this time was leave in the middle of the dance."

"And you left Keymont behind, I take it?" Claude asked.

"How did you know that I was with him?"

"You aren't swayed so easily by people who don't matter to you. Since you came here tonight to meet Keymont, I can only guess that he's the source of your anger."

Claude's smile and his low, calm tone blew away Opal's discomfort. She sighed with relief as she placed her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Claude," she said.

"No problem."

"Speaking of, it appears Marquis Roussel is a doddering old man," Opal said, remembering Keymont's words.

Nadja burst out laughing, but she immediately clapped her hands over her mouth. Claude sighed, resigned.

"I can't believe people still believe that information," he said.

"I used to believe that as well," Opal replied. "I thought Marquis Roussel was rather elderly."

"The surrogate hadn't changed since my grandfather's generation. And Socille still hasn't realized that my grandfather and uncle have passed away. Ah, I get it now. Word's spread that you remarried a very elderly man, huh?"

"Seems like it. Apparently I married him for the prestige and the assets."

Hubert hadn't told anyone about Marquis Roussel's identity; the duke didn't like to socialize, so this was to be expected.

"That's amazing. Just how far up are you trying to climb, Opal?" Claude asked.

"Well, I'm planning on aiming for His Majesty King Alessandro next," Opal replied.

"You're tossing me aside? I'm devastated."

Claude was awfully sweet to Opal, and she was equally forgiving to him as well. Opal had tried her best to stay calm and composed, but she eventually gave in and burst into laughter. Claude did the same. Nadja peeked her eyes open, gazing happily at the couple.

## 17. Charity

The following morning, Opal sighed at the mountain of invitations she had received.

“I’ll admit, this is impressive,” she murmured.

“They figured out where we’re staying after just one night,” Claude observed.  
“Do you think we were being tailed?”

“Or perhaps they looked into every manor that might fit our status.”

“I wonder... I always loan a carriage when I allow people to rent this place. Maybe they found us by identifying the carriage.”

“Makes sense.”

Opal had cut her night short yesterday, and as a result the rumor mill was livelier than a wildfire. Some of the invitations came from people who weren’t even present at the party last night.

“But there aren’t many invitations for you,” Opal said.

“How did you introduce me yesterday?” Claude asked.

“That you’re a busy man who’s glued to his desk.”

“Ah, so maybe people assumed that a doddering old marquis wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“Should I have told the truth?”

“Nah, this is perfect. Now I can move as I please.”

Claude grinned. Opal raised an eyebrow but said not a word. She knew that he had work in Socille as well, and she’d decided she’d learn all about it when it was truly necessary for her to do so. Opal sighed again as she gathered the invitations.

“It doesn’t help that all the Socille citizens you *have* met are rather tight-lipped,” Opal said.

“I let my surrogate handle almost everything, so I’ve never interacted with others much,” Claude said. “Even in Taisei, I only started to show my face in the royal palace as Marquis Roussel fairly recently.”

“Is that so?”

Until a year ago, Opal had assumed that Marquis Roussel was an elderly man, until Earl Holloway had told her the truth. Still, if Marquis Roussel had emerged from the Socille Kingdom, it wouldn’t have been odd if there were a few *more* rumors about him. Claude must’ve had a reason for remaining so mysterious.

“Here are your invitations, Claude,” Opal said. “You should decide if you want to attend any of them or not.”

“Right, I will,” Claude replied. “And what events are you planning on attending, Opal?”

“I haven’t decided yet. None of the ones happening soon, I think.”

“Then what are your plans?” Claude asked.

“Since I’ve got the chance, I’d like to visit my land and perhaps drop by Nobori,” Opal replied.

“Nobori, huh?”

“Is it too far, you think?”

“Bandits have been lurking about there, I’ve heard.”

“Bandits?” Opal repeated. “Are they the same ones that you spoke with Duke McLeod about?”

“No, they’re different ones. A much smaller operation. I’m against you heading in the direction where bandits are, but I’ll see you off until a certain point.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll have guards with me.”

“But I’m still worried.” Claude refuted her. “I’d want to be with you for the entire trip, but I don’t think that’s realistic for me. At least let me be with you for a bit longer.”

“All right.”

Opal had to give in to his gentle persuasion, and Claude smiled, satisfied.

"We'll be apart for a while. It makes me feel like one of those modern couples," Opal said.

"Will you be lonely?" Claude asked frankly.

Opal couldn't help but act stubborn. "No. Not really. I'm used to it."

Claude didn't seem bothered as he grinned. Opal hated herself for being so dishonest, but she was sure that he understood her true feelings. In the end, Opal giggled, and the two decided to end their conversation for now.

That afternoon, Opal dropped by to visit the capital's women's shelter. This was the base of the organization that she created, and many employees were busily working away. Most of them had once received aid from this shelter, but they were now independent and energetically doing their jobs. *All we need now is for society to accept the accomplishments of these women*, Opal thought.

On her carriage ride home from her visit, she was thinking back to her conversations with the employed women there. Almost all of the women sheltered by the facility had either become pregnant without a husband, got fired from their previous employer, or were abandoned by their families. But they weren't just being sheltered; they were also working in accordance with their situation. For example, pregnant women were in charge of cooking and laundry within the facility, and they were allowed to take time off after giving birth. The new mothers took care of their babies while resting well, and they slowly but surely returned to work within their means and their health condition.

Once their children were past one year of age, other women were in charge of taking care of the child as a day care of sorts. Meanwhile, the mother would slowly begin working outside of the facility in hopes of regaining their place in society. The ultimate goal was to become fully independent and leave the shelter while proving that she could sufficiently support herself and her child, but this was easier said than done.

There weren't many workplaces that accepted unmarried mothers. Just as Mrs. Notham had fired Beth, society at large was extremely unforgiving to unwed mothers. Without a letter of introduction, getting work was difficult, and

when fired, many employees were often without one from their employer. To top it all off, even if the child was old enough to look after themselves, a woman was often denied for the simple fact of being an unmarried mother. It'd only been a year since Opal created this organization, but she was already running out of potential employers for these ladies. *I can give them enough money to support themselves, but that isn't a real solution.*

Opal had so much money that she didn't know what to do with it. She could surely support dozens of mothers and children for many decades to come. However, none of this would be a permanent solution. The women that she and her charity organization supported were just the tip of the iceberg; there were thousands of people that she simply couldn't reach.

There were surely many women and children leading impoverished lives in the countryside, unable to receive any sort of aid. At worst they would die, unable to survive the harsh environment they were in. Opal hoped to somehow change society so that people would be more accepting of these women and support them and their children. Opal was no fool—she knew just how much of an uphill battle this was. She had a long and difficult road ahead of her, but she *had* to try. She had to go for it. Surely nothing would change if she didn't do anything.

*You know, when a woman is put in such situations, a man is always involved. It seems unfair that only the woman is left to shoulder the responsibility.* No matter what the situation was, a woman could never become pregnant without a man. Opal's charity organization also sheltered women facing atrocious abuse from their husbands. Everyone had their own circumstances for seeking shelter, but fellow women would always pretend that these troubles didn't exist. They'd turn the other way when they saw another woman being abused or encountered a pregnant woman with no husband. In fact, higher-ranking noblewomen would even mock and scorn other ladies who were put in that sort of situation. *It's their mindset I have to change first.*

It might have been asking for too much for these proud noblewomen to accept such unfortunate circumstances, but Opal, at the very least, just didn't want less fortunate women to be totally shunned from society. And if any of these higher-ranking noblewomen could spare just a little bit of mercy, Opal

hoped that they'd lend just a tiny bit of their aid.

It all started with a single person. If one person changed their mindset, and then another, it would eventually lead to all of society changing their opinions. It might have been too grand of an ideal for Opal alone, but that only made her more fired up for the challenge. She decided to start with what she could do as she curled her hands into fists with renewed energy.

## 18. Old Friends

It'd been a while since Opal had last visited Nobori. She was ecstatic to reunite with Omar, the manager of the McLeod Duchy. She knew that she shouldn't set foot in the region. Instead, she had Omar make the trek out to the city. Opal had wanted to meet with Lind the butler and Debby the housekeeper as well, but she had to settle for meeting just Omar.

"I didn't expect the city to change so much," Omar observed. "It's no wonder that I've grown old."

"Now, there's no need for us to discuss our age, is there?" Opal replied. "I believe this city changed drastically in only the past two or three years. It hadn't changed this much the last time I visited this place."

Omar had apparently never set foot in Nobori for the past eight years. He couldn't hide his shock, and Opal was the same. She had had the opportunity to visit Nobori a couple of times, but it hadn't transformed to this degree during her last trip. Nadja especially was unable to hide her excitement at all the busy streets.

"And how has your journey been? It's gone smoothly, I hope?" Omar asked. He didn't pry for further details, but he could tell that Opal didn't arrive here simply to check up on the land.

"Thank you," Opal replied. "This has been a very enjoyable trip so far."

Once Opal had seen that the land was properly managed, she met with a certain railroad company owner. There was no reason to discuss her motives further, and instead she spoke excitedly with Omar about the newest agricultural tools.

"Ah, Duchess McLeod. It's certainly been a while," a familiar voice called out.

Omar quickly turned pale, and Opal's guards immediately stepped forward, but she signaled that she'd be just fine.

"Long time no see, LeBeau," Opal said with a smile. "I'm no longer Duchess

McLeod, I'm afraid."

"Ah, yes, I think I've heard about that," LeBeau replied. "Then what shall I call you now, madam?"

"Mrs. Fred will do just fine."

"Oh? Did you remarry?"

"I did indeed."

LeBeau was adept at gathering information; surely he knew about her remarriage, but he feigned ignorance. Opal decided to follow suit, keeping Claude's rank hidden for now. It appeared that LeBeau, the man who asked Opal to cover Omar's debt eight years ago, hadn't changed. He always excelled in research.

He made it sound like he had happened to be in the city already, but he likely went out of his way to meet her. It seemed unlikely for LeBeau to be a regular at a salon meant for the public. Opal's guards saw that their mistress wasn't in harm's way and sat back down a short distance away. Nadja had been silent this entire time, but her eyes sparkled when she spotted LeBeau—she was drawn to his cunning appearance and couldn't hide her excitement.

"Since I've got such a lovely opportunity, may I join you?" LeBeau asked.

"I don't mind," Opal replied.

"I-I don't either," Omar stammered.

"Oh, Omar, there is no debt between us," LeBeau said. "Have some pride."

"Right..."

But Omar was still uncomfortable, and LeBeau, fully aware of such a thing, intentionally needled him. The whole affair was tiring for Opal. Though she felt guilty for subjecting Omar to this situation, conversations with LeBeau were always fruitful. Despite his appearance, he claimed his business was fully legitimate, and as a whole he was rather friendly and kind. But it was frowned upon for a lady to be friends with a moneylender, and simply being seen with one would hurt her dignity. Opal figured that she was allowed to spread her wings a little in Nobori—nobody seemed to care. Furthermore, Opal simply

didn't care either. She wanted to hang out with people that she enjoyed being around.

"Omar and I were just speaking about this, but we're both shocked to see how much this city has changed," Opal said.

"Ah, well, for the past year or so the economy's been in an upswing," LeBeau replied as he sat down next to Omar with a loud thud.

"Oh? How interesting."

Opal hadn't expected this response. As far as she knew, there was nothing surrounding Nobori that would cause the area to experience an economic resurgence. While it was true that the marquis, the prominent lord of the city, also owned a gold mine, such a thing was old news. Ever since the initial purchase, the marquis had regularly pumped a set amount of money into Nobori, but it was hardly enough to create a flourishing economy.

"Have you heard of the bandits who only recently were quite notorious around here?" LeBeau asked.

"I did," Opal nodded. "They had some infighting and broke up, only to be captured, no?"

She recalled Hubert's words back in Taisei, right before he left. According to Claude, even Marquis Seims, the lord in charge of the area, had also fallen victim to these hooligans. He had been attacked by them several times when transporting gold from his mines, with gold stolen on several occasions.

"Well, those bandits blew their earnings in this city," LeBeau revealed.

"Goodness, that leaves a bad taste in your mouth," Opal remarked.

"I couldn't agree more. Many people have died for this gold. Still, money is money. At first, the people here only saw them as wealthy regulars who were generous with their spending. No one guessed who they really were; the bandits would hide their identities by dressing in gentlemanly attire and would lose much of their wealth through gambling. On the flip side, this meant that the other guests and the house won more easily. They were practically stuffing their wallets with cash. My own business is doing well as a result. No one's out here trying to borrow money anymore."

LeBeau's grumbling reminded Opal of Claude's worries. He'd offered to see her midway through her trip because he'd heard that bandits were running wild. Those criminals seemed to be different from the ones that LeBeau was talking about, and that was a problem of its own.

"I can see that crime rates have risen dramatically over the past year," Opal sighed.

"The times are changing a bit too fast," Omar replied, in defense of the city. "Everyone's desperately trying to survive. Those who fail to keep up with the changes are forced to either sleep on the streets or attack those on the streets."

A crime was a crime. No matter how unforgiving and difficult the world was, there were millions who tried their best to lead just and proper lives. Opal firmly believed that there were no excuses that would allow heinous crimes to be committed, but she didn't think it would be productive to express her anger at Omar.

"Those choices sound quite extreme," she muttered instead.

"But he's right," LeBeau said, jumping in to shield Omar. "Please excuse my bluntness, but you must remember that not only are you powerful, my lady, but you're a *winner*. You were born into wealth and a rank, and as you've matured, you've only gained even more power and money."

"When you put it that way, I can't refute your words," Opal replied. "I can't even be angry at criminals."

"Oh no, you can be angry with them. You're free to feel any emotion you like."

"But I should watch my words."

"You *do* attract attention," LeBeau conceded.

"I see. But with my rank and wealth, I shall live freely. It's *my* life to live. I don't really care what society says. If I'm deemed a hypocrite, so be it. But I plan to support anyone who's facing hard times."

Opal puffed out her chest at the end of her small speech, and LeBeau

guffawed, his voice attracting the attention of everyone around them.

“It seems *you’re* the one attracting attention,” Opal said jokingly.

Even Omar started chuckling. Up until that point, he’d felt a bit awkward and apologetic for starting this icy conversation. Nadja, who seemed angry at LeBeau’s attitude, also started to laugh along. Suddenly, LeBeau bowed his head to Opal while still seated. The gesture shocked onlookers, who descended into murmurs.

“LeBeau?” Opal asked.

“I used to hate nobles, you know,” LeBeau said. “But you’re different. You’re a person worthy of respect.”

“Thank you.”

Opal managed to remain calm despite these surprising words, and LeBeau raised his head, grinning.

“This might trouble you, but I’ve been keeping tabs on you for the past few years,” he said. “You’ve given me quite the show.”

“How frightening,” Opal replied, dryly and without an ounce of sincerity. She gave a grand attempt at trembling in fear, and LeBeau burst out laughing once more.

“I don’t have a father, you see,” LeBeau said. “My mother worked tirelessly to raise me on her own. Perhaps you have no need for a boorish, vulgar friend like me, but if you’re ever in need, please give me a shout. I’ll help you whenever you wish.”

“Vulgar? You aren’t at all. Thank you, LeBeau. I feel a lot better knowing that I can count on you.”

Opal was more than happy and grateful at LeBeau’s words. The other two people present also piped up.

“I can also lend you my aid whenever!” Nadja shouted.

“M-Me too! Don’t count me out!” Omar added.

“Thank you, Nadja, Omar,” Opal said with a warm smile. “I must be the

happiest and most fortunate lady in the world to have so many reliable allies."

The words came from the bottom of her heart. The people of Nobori, who normally weren't interested in outsiders, were dying to know the identity of this lady to whom even LeBeau had lowered his head. Opal paid the crowd no heed and spent a relaxing afternoon with her precious friends.

## 19. Denounced

After her fifteen-day trip, Opal returned to the royal capital and attended a ball the following day of her return. She only decided to attend because she learned that Keymont would be present as well. Her reply for the invitation had been a little late, but Viscount and Viscountess Kreusel welcomed her warmly. After she finished greeting them, Opal found herself surrounded by many people.

“Marchioness Roussel, do you remember me?” a lady asked.

“Of course I do, Countess Keymont. It’s a pleasure to meet you again,” Opal replied.

Though Opal smiled back, she was internally panicking at this miscalculation. Countess Keymont was the mother of Keymont, Opal’s target, and the lady commanded quite a bit of power within the nobility. If his mother was in attendance, perhaps Keymont wouldn’t be present for this ball. If that were the case, Opal had to once again choose her events wisely, making sure to not run into Hubert and his potential wife.

It didn’t help that Countess Keymont was a narrow-minded and proud lady. When Opal was still single, the countess had tittered that such a “lascivious girl” should be shunned.

Tonight’s event was appearing to be a bust, and the moment Opal began to feel disheartened by the realization, another familiar voice called her name.

“Long time no see, Opal. I heard that you returned, but I never got a chance to see you. Wherever have you been?”

“It’s been a while, Kiara,” Opal replied. “I came back to inspect my land, so I left the royal capital for a good while.”

“Inspecting land?” Kiara repeated. “Can’t you just leave that to someone else? That’s not something a lady should do.”

“Is that so?”

Opal pasted a smile on her face. Kiara hadn't changed—she remained the stubborn woman who pushed her viewpoints onto others. Until Opal's scandal, she and Kiara had been close, but ever since, Kiara had outright ignored her. And she wasn't the only one guilty of this; almost everyone currently surrounding Opal had done the same thing. Opal, however, wasn't angry at them. While she was hurt and frustrated back then, she realized that it wasn't her heart that suffered, but her pride. And ever since her feelings had been clarified, she couldn't have cared less about these nobles; there was no need to be troubled by the words of unimportant people. *Although, I guess I'd come off as lonely for having no friends in society...*

She'd created many enemies in Taisei already, and Alessandro could hardly be called an ally, much less a friend. If that were the case, she wanted a solid foundation in Socille, her home nation and also the place where she carried the most influence. With that in mind, she smiled and spoke to every person that approached her—anything to help Claude.

The issue was Countess Keymont. Her son, a well-known debauchee, wouldn't have possibly wanted to attend the same ball as his mother. Opal suspected that the two's schedules had unknowingly overlapped. If Opal enacted her plan here, she'd embarrass the countess and earn her ire. The marchioness was torn between moving ahead with her plans for the night or reconsidering, but she ultimately decided to act here.

Everyone needed to know the kind of man Keymont really was. She glanced around the venue and determined that there would be no issues; almost everyone currently present simply enjoyed being involved in new scandals. While some might despise her for what she was going to do, she would have never gotten along with those people in the first place. Opal would much rather have a small number of genuine allies than try to curry favor with a crowd of tiresome nobles. She continued to smile while carefully gazing at the people around her.

Almost everyone who gathered around the marchioness wanted something from her. After all, the wealthy but wanton lady of eight years ago was formerly Duchess McLeod and now Marchioness Roussel. Furthermore, she was one of the most prominent and wealthy people in the kingdom. Women were dying to

know just how Opal managed to seduce such powerful men, while the men were desperately trying to catch her attention.

Among the crowd, Opal managed to engage in a delightful conversation with several people, and eventually she found herself genuinely enjoying her time here. Society was changing, little by little. As industries grew and technological advancements were made, the wealth that was once the sole enjoyment of the nobility was being distributed to commoners as well. Slowly but surely, the average person was enjoying a higher quality of life.

Those who understood that and decided to work harder themselves would never see Opal in a prejudiced light. They would see her as an equal and lend an ear to her opinions while coming up with ideas of their own. Even if some opinions went against her own thoughts, the stubborn Opal felt scintillated by these well-thought-out ideas and found herself gaining new viewpoints. It allowed her to broaden her mindset and set her sights on new goals.

Wealth created power, and both of these factors allowed a person control over others. Opal watched the other attendees of tonight dance around gracefully while she was lost in thought. *Other than the ones I just spoke to, just how many people are going to be able to adapt to the times? How many of them are at this ball?* Opal wondered. *I've heard that Viscount Kreusel is rather progressive, and the rumors are true.*

While many were set in their old-fashioned ways, the people of this party were relatively progressive and willing to accept new ideas. In fact, Opal had been taught that *she* was the one who was still conservative in some areas. She managed to speak about investments with many men and women tonight. That brought Opal great joy, and hope filled her heart. *Maybe I can become friends with them.*

She restlessly focused on the lady whom she'd spoken with for only a few moments—Roanna. The daughter of tonight's host Viscount Kreusel, Roanna hadn't been a debutante when Opal had joined society. Perhaps due to her progressive ideas, Roanna seemed calm and mature, despite being at least five years younger than Opal. *Oh dear, how does one make friends anyway? Do I just walk up to her and offer a handshake while going, "Let's be friends?"*

Opal didn't have any friends, barring Claude, and she didn't know how to go about making more. And even with Claude, she'd always been by his side since she was a child, and the two of them had gotten close before she consciously realized it. It couldn't be a point of reference now. Opal wondered if she should send over a card and ask for friendship like a mature adult, when an overly friendly voice called out to her.

"Why, hello there, Marchioness Roussel. Fancy meeting you in a place like this."

"Sir Keymont," Opal replied.

"Ever since we last met at our previous ball, I heard that you vanished like the mist. To think I could meet you again at this ball is a happy coincidence. I'm a lucky man. Or perhaps this is an act of fate."

"It's a coincidence, and nothing more."

Opal smiled and firmly declined his advances, but Keymont brazenly refused to give up. He grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it.

"Then I suppose I should turn this into fate," Keymont said.

Opal was tempted to slap the grin off his face, but she suppressed her rage and simply shook her hand free from his vile grip.

"I wonder just how many hearts you've broken," Opal said.

"They were a necessary sacrifice to satisfy you," Keymont replied.

"How horrid. And while on most days I don't wish to speak to you, much less see you, there's simply something I must tell you, Sir Keymont."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

He was grinning from ear to ear as Opal did her best to mask her disgust and act proper. There were, in fact, *many* things she wanted to tell him, even if they didn't directly relate to her. She couldn't remain silent when she thought about how Beth and the other women and children in the facility were treated.

"I believe my surrogate will contact you tomorrow, but I would like some of your assets to pay child support," Opal said.

"Huh? What the hell are you saying, you wench?" Keymont spat.

"Excuse me?" Opal replied.

Chatter immediately erupted from the surrounding onlookers of their conversation. Keymont was clearly caught off guard. She'd expected him to act rudely, but she couldn't suppress her rage at being called names.

"You have no right to call me as such," Opal went on.

"Then how else do I call a lascivious woman like you?" Keymont replied.

The women in the crowd gasped and gulped, with some covering their mouths and leaving, as if Keymont's words made them nauseous. Opal, however, didn't bat an eye as she coldly stared at Keymont.

"You and I have no such relationship!" Keymont roared. "We've only danced once or twice before!"

"Indeed. You're exactly right," Opal replied. "We've only danced together once, and for the second time, we stopped in the middle of a song. And yet, you speak to me as though we've nurtured a close relationship. In fact, for whatever reason, that is what you seem to enjoy telling others."

"W-Well..."

No one was dancing on the floor. All eyes were focused on Opal and Keymont. Even Countess Keymont, who had been in another room, rushed back inside the main ballroom upon hearing the ruckus. All the while, Keymont twisted his face with rage, glaring at Opal.

"I was just matching the general atmosphere!" Keymont shouted. "All men in their prime let loose! We dance and party and compete over the amount of alcohol we can drink and the number of women we've slept with! Isn't that right? Right?"

He looked around the men in the room, hoping for some voices of support, but all he received were icy gazes from both the men and the women, coupled with deafening silence.

"Certainly, it may have been a harmless little party for you, but what of the women who had their dignity tarnished?" Opal asked. "I fell victim to these

awful rumors myself, and my dignity was absolutely run into the ground. Fortunately, some people believed my words and took my side, allowing me to rebuild myself. But what about the other women who are less fortunate? What about those who were actually fooled by you, had their reputation ruined, and were forced to even bear your child?"

"Other women, you say?" Keymont parroted.

"A maid of the ducal House McLeod, who used to serve the house, is heavy with your child. And the shelter that I support is currently boarding two other women who gave birth to your children. These ladies were fired from their posts and sought help. All three of them claim that you promised to marry them one day."

Keymont panicked at first, but he breathed a sigh of relief when the other women were mentioned. He likely knew who she was talking about. The countess ran in to break up this conversation.

"Jeb, just what is going on?" the countess demanded. "Did something happen with Marchioness Roussel?"

"M-Mom," Keymont mumbled. "No, it's nothing much, really. The marchioness suddenly started to find fault with me, so I'm a bit surprised myself."

"What?"

The countess turned a harsh gaze toward Opal, immediately assuming the role of a mother shielding her hapless child. Keymont regained his arrogance as he hid himself behind his mother's skirt.

"You mentioned other women, but they're just servants," Keymont said. "I'd never marry the help. And you're a fool for believing the words of these idiots who lack even common sense. We're not even sure if these kids are actually mine."

"But you don't deny that you tried to form a relationship with these ladies while promising them marriage," Opal replied.

"So what if I did? They're just servants," Keymont sneered. "Plenty of others will take their place."

“This child was simply bewitched by vulgar women,” the countess added. “He has no right to be blamed.”

The sheer audacity they’d deluded themselves into having utterly distorted their judgment. These two truly believed that they were the chosen ones of society and had all the right to look down on everyone else. Opal couldn’t believe that people like them—people utterly blind to the shifting tides of the real world—really existed. In fact, there were quite a number of privileged individuals who behaved and thought just like the Keymonts. However, most of them knew how to gloss things over.

And indeed, while no one clearly agreed with Keymont’s actions, some sympathized with him.

“Is that so,” Opal replied. “These women, however, cannot work while they’re pregnant and raise their newborns. They require some sort of assistance. I ask that you take responsibility for them financially.”

“What?! What in the *world* are you saying?!“ Keymont cried. “There’s no way I will!”

“Then I shall give it my all to pry every coin you have from your hands.”

Keymont made his annoyance apparent, but Opal was as calm as ever as she declared her intention. And only the people who fully understood the meaning of her words were shocked by them.

## 20. Mother and Son

“H-Ha ha ha!” Keymont stammered. “Rubbish! You might have a surprising amount of wealth for a woman, but that doesn’t mean you can get your grubby hands on other people’s money. Or what? Will I somehow be seduced like McLeod and be forced to hand over my assets to you?”

“Oh, don’t you know?” Opal replied simply, her composure never wavering. “Money moves money. Surely, you’re aware of that.”

Keymont narrowed his eyes with suspicion, and even Countess Keymont raised a bemused eyebrow. Opal sighed, disappointed with how obtuse they were. Just as Hubert had done eight years ago, Keymont likely had his finances handled by an excellent surrogate or manager, or had his father take care of things for him. The only difference was that unlike Hubert, Keymont’s personnel seemed honest and competent.

“You received a small mine from your father, the earl,” Opal said. “The location wasn’t ideal, but thanks to the development of the railroad, that plot of land has started to generate more money, correct?”

“Y-Yeah, so what?” Keymont replied. “You can’t steal those ores away from me, much less the mine itself!”

“Oh, of course. I wouldn’t even dream of it. The profits you generate from that mine is one of your greatest assets. I’d feel bad for taking that away from you. No, I shall be taking away everything *else* that you may have. I’m a bit worried how I can split it all among the three women, but sacrifices must be made, I suppose.”

“What in the world are you on about?!” the countess cried. She could no longer stay silent and made her own anger as apparent as her son’s.

But Opal only smiled; she had felt bad for ruining this fabulous party hosted by Viscount Kreusel and his wife, but it seemed like they were unexpectedly enjoying the show.

“Sacrifices?! Don’t mock me,” Keymont spat. “Why must I hand over my wealth to those vulgar women?”

“Oh? Then I shall take away the rails that drop by your mine,” Opal replied. “Your mine will revert as it was before, and I ask that you carry your minerals by carriage.”

“You can’t decide that on your own! That’s impossible!”

“Oh, but I can. You see, I’ve joint ownership of the railroad company.”

“What?!”

“You’re not right in the head!” the countess said sharply.

In contrast to Opal’s serene countenance, Keymont was growing angrier and more agitated by the second. And now the countess was glaring at her as well.

Opal had met the owner of the railroad company just the other day, and the owner was carrying some debts incurred by a number of failed investments. When Opal offered her financial aid, the owner happily welcomed her as a co-owner. The railroads themselves were turning a profit, so she felt like this was an excellent investment in general. Another thing to note was that while Opal was threatening Keymont here, she had no plan on acting on her words.

She wasn’t going to trouble the people who were working hard in and near the mine; she knew that Keymont would never see through her bluff.

“You may freeze your other assets, Sir Keymont, but I’d rather you not do that,” Opal continued. “They belong to your children, so I believe it’s best left untouched.”

“S-Such nonsense,” Keymont said, regaining some of his cool. He started to grow more overbearing by the minute. “Is there any proof that those children are mine?! You caught me so off guard that I sounded like I admitted that they are, but I may have never even met these women! In any case, it’s none of your business!”

“He’s right! This is beyond audacious!” the countess shrieked in her high-pitched voice.

Opal kept her smile. “I looked into these ladies’ pasts, of course. I even

received testimonies from former colleagues who worked with them. And quite honestly, you can easily tell that they're your children at a glance. They look like you very much. As for my business, I'm acting as their surrogate. These ladies are far too powerless to stand against a person like you."

"E-Even so, they're illegitimate children! No rules exist that say that they can succeed my house!"

"That really doesn't matter to me. You thoughtlessly stole away the futures of these young women and are trying to destroy the futures of your children as we speak. In lieu of these powerless women, I'm here to take everything you have. Now then, from here on, please speak with *my* surrogate. A surrogate of a surrogate, I suppose. How very humorous."

Opal giggled as she stared straight at Keymont. The countess had nothing to refute, and ended up pressing a handkerchief on her brows as she closed her eyes.

"Will you choose to lose everything, or just a portion of your wealth?" Opal asked. "That's for you to decide. There isn't much time left for you to think, but the answer seems very plain to me."

"I can't believe this, you *bitch*!"

And once again, Opal didn't care. Everyone present was also aware that Keymont was spouting vulgarities because he knew that he'd lost. Opal tilted her head to one side and kept her smile, when suddenly a punch flew out of nowhere, aimed squarely at Keymont's face. The women started to scream, and the countess fainted.

"Don't you *dare* insult my wife," Marquis Roussel spat.



“Claude,” Opal murmured.

“Y-Your wife?” Keymont asked. His hands were on the floor as he looked up at his assailant in astonishment.

The crowd chattered in confusion as Viscount and Viscountess Kreusel squealed in excitement at the long-awaited appearance of Marquis Roussel. Only then did Opal recall that Claude was also extended an invitation to this ball.

“Wh-What? Marquis Roussel isn’t this young,” Keymont stammered, staggering to his feet. “She probably came here with another man who she’s cheating with!”

“Looks like I’ve got permission to punch you again,” Claude replied, raising his clenched fist once more.

Keymont flinched, and Opal stepped in to stop him.

“Don’t, Claude,” Opal said. “He’s not worth hurting your hand over. I wouldn’t want you to get injured. Why don’t I introduce you to Viscount Kreusel and his wife first?”

“Right. Okay,” Claude said.

Relieved by his agreement, Opal glanced at the hosts of the ball. But before the viscount and viscountess could step forward, Keymont’s furious roars echoed throughout the room.

“Marquis or not, this man punched me!” Keymont shouted. “I’ll sue you! And that woman is trying to steal away my fortune! Such an illegal act won’t be permitted! I’ll have the both of you destroyed by legal officers!”

“You know, I think you should worry about your mother first,” Claude pointed out.

The countess was being nursed by nearby ladies as she snapped wide awake, but she only earned a passing glance from Keymont. She was infamous for fainting quite a bit, but it still was rather heartless for her own son to pay her no heed. Opal knew that she was the cause of it all, and tried her best to think up ways to make it up to the hosts of the party who had their splendid ball

interrupted by her actions.

Opal's plan was to make Keymont's dastardly ways known. She might not have been able to recover Beth and the other women's dignity in the process, but at the very least, she wanted to collect money to support them and their children. Needless to say, she'd ensured that everything she did was perfectly legal, and she didn't even require the aid of her uncle, a legal officer of the palace. She was more worried about Claude's hand, but the marquis only grinned back at her.

"It's too late for you to regret your actions!" Keymont exclaimed. "With all these witnesses, you won't be able to get away with this!"

"Quite right!" the countess huffed, more agitated than her son. "I shall provide my witness testimony as well! You've got a nasty personality, tarnishing the name of our household and Jeb! I must have your father, Earl Holloway, be responsible for this as well!"

Opal reacted at that last sentence. "My father has nothing to do with this."

"He most certainly does! I've been lenient with you because you lost your mother early on, but I can't endure your behavior anymore! I imagine Earl Holloway has become so obsessed with money that he's failed to properly educate his children. I even heard that your older brother left in the middle of his university years! How pathetic. A child's wrongdoing is the responsibility of the parent."

Opal had no idea why even her older brother was brought up here, but before she could speak, she felt Claude's grip around her waist tighten. He usually allowed her to do as she pleased, so he must've had good reason to stop her here. In the first place, she had no idea why he was here at the ball at all, and fell silent, staring intently at her beloved. Surely, he wasn't here simply to pick up Opal.

"Are you listening?" the countess demanded. "Good grief, you can't even listen when others are speaking."

"Opal's listening all right," Claude replied. "And I am as well. You believe that parents are responsible for their child's misdeeds, correct?"

“That’s exactly what I said.”

“Then how will you take responsibility for your son’s actions?”

“My son is the *victim* here! He’s been ensnared by the scummy tactics of those vulgar women!”

She huffed proudly as Keymont grinned beside her—he truly was no better than a mischievous child hiding behind his mother. This was no way for a man in his mid-thirties to act. In lieu of Opal’s weariness, Claude voiced his thoughts.

“I could see a young man in his adolescence trying to use that line of reasoning, but it can hardly excuse the actions of a man who’s well past thirty,” Claude said. “And if he’s done so multiple times, it means that he never learns and lacks good judgment. Ah, what do we call these people? A fool who utterly lacks any sense of self-control.”

“What did you say?!” Keymont shouted.

“How dare you!” the countess screeched.

Claude remained undaunted in the face of the furious Keymonts.

“Oh, and by the way, there’s a warrant out for your arrest, Sir Keymont,” he said casually.

## 21. Arrest

“Oh my,” someone from the crowd murmured.

Everyone else was deathly silent, blindsided by this claim. The room was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop before it was shattered by an annoyingly boisterous laugh.

“You certainly know how to entertain others, Lord Roussel!” Keymont laughed. “If that is even who you really are?”

The venue turned to Opal. No one could hardly believe that an arrest warrant had been issued for a noble. While she hadn’t heard of his arrest until now, she could certainly confirm her husband’s identity.

“He is, of course,” Opal said. “Viscount and Viscountess Kreusel, I’m terribly sorry for the late introduction. This is my husband, Marquis Roussel, otherwise called Claude Fred.”

She vowed to apologize and make up for this ruined party later as she introduced Claude to the hosts.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Viscount and Viscountess Kreusel,” Claude said. “I’m deeply sorry for attending this party without even providing the courtesy of answering your invitation. Please forgive me. And I also apologize for ruining such a magnificent ball.”

“Marquis Roussel, I’m so honored to meet—” Viscount Kreusel started with a smile.

“He can say what he likes!” interjected an infuriated Keymont. “No one here knows what the real Marquis Roussel looks like! And he claims there’s an arrest warrant out for me? Absolute drivel!”

It was rude to interrupt someone in the middle of an introduction, and it was equally insolent to label Opal as a liar. And yet, the usually strict countess didn’t admonish her son for his lack of manners.

“H-He’s right!” the countess screeched. “What in the world is this?! Why is everyone letting these rude people do as they please?! You’ve all gone mad, including you as well, Viscount Kreusel! I will *never* forgive you two for humiliating me in such an absurd fashion!”

She’d completely forgotten any sort of etiquette, and the silent crowd started to chatter once more. Everyone was eagerly awaiting how this situation would develop.

“Today, a few bandits lurking around the royal capital have been captured,” Claude said calmly. “They all testified and claimed that Sir Keymont is a part of their group. The warrant was just issued.”

“N-No...” Keymont stammered.

“The bandits were all young people with ranks, and His Majesty issued a royal decree to create all these warrants. The police are stationed outside to restrain Sir Keymont. I was supposed to guide him out of this venue without causing everyone trouble, but as you can see, I’ve failed miserably.”

Claude slumped his shoulders while the crowd watched on in disbelief. Silence settled in once more, with Keymont’s haggard breath echoing throughout the room. The countess had gone so pale and frozen in place that people wondered if she fainted where she stood. Keymont was unable to refute anything Claude said.

“Now then, Sir Keymont, please come with me...” Claude started before he cut himself off.

Keymont made a break for it—he violently pushed aside the women around him and tried to run outside. Screams rang out, and the stunned Opal managed to gather herself and followed the fleeing noble with her eyes. Claude and several other men were already giving chase, finally catching up and restraining Keymont in front of the door.

“Release me, you insolent curs! I’m Jeb Keymont, son of Earl Keymont!”

He shouted and struggled, but almost all the men surrounding him were of equal or greater rank. Even Viscount Kreusel had joined in on the fun. As everyone watched in shock, Keymont was carried away, and Claude slowly

returned to his wife's side.

"Claude?" Opal asked.

"I'll explain it all later," he promised.

"Please do."

She couldn't possibly corner an apologetic Claude in front of everyone else. He smiled gratefully before he turned to the countess. She stared lifelessly at the door her son had been dragged through, but she shot a fierce glare upon noticing Claude standing in front of her.

"That... That child is innocent!" she shrieked. "He's obviously innocent! You did this, didn't you? You tricked my son! My husband will sue you—both of you! I swear it!"

"I did nothing at all," Claude replied. "In fact, there was nothing I could do. But you? You could've done something more for him."

"What in the world are you saying?!"

"A child's misdeeds are the responsibilities of a parent. Is that not what you said? But your child has committed a crime. For the past few months, he's been terrorizing the streets with his friends, acting like bandits and threatening people to steal their valuables. When His Majesty learned that these barbaric acts were committed by nobles, he was infuriated and found them deplorable beyond measure."

"It can't be..."

"I pray that you don't think about simply yourself and your son, but mind the poor victims of this horrific scheme. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Claude remained calm until the end, even when faced with the wrathful countess, but Opal knew that he was actually quite irate. She said not a word and finished greeting Viscount and Viscountess Kreusel while engaging in idle chatter before boarding their carriage. Once they were all alone, Opal broke the silence.

"Nadja's in another carriage," Opal said. "We're finally alone. I'll listen to whatever you have to say."

“I should start by explaining what happened tonight, huh?” Claude replied.

“That can wait till later. But if talking with me will quell some of your anger, I want you to do so. And if there’s anything you want me to do, I want you to tell me.”

Opal had questions of her own, but she was most curious about why the usually cheery Claude seemed so angry. So many things had happened that she couldn’t understand what exactly set him off. Inside of the dimly lit carriage, she stared at him intently, when he suddenly hugged her with all his might. His embrace was stronger than usual.

“Claude?”

“I’m sorry, Opal.”

“Huh?”

“It annoys me beyond belief that such vile words were thrown your way. And I feel bad for interrupting your plan. I hate how a piece of shit like Keymont was allowed to do as he pleased until now. Even with my rank as marquis, I still feel so powerless and pathetic. And I hate that. I’m really, really sorry, Opal.”

He was angry for Opal and the other victims—he’d always been so kind and compassionate to a fault. Opal hugged her husband back and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, Claude,” she said. “But I’ll be okay. Why should I care about what people say when I care nothing for them? I was able to fulfill my goal with Sir Keymont as well. I just wanted to show everyone how he irresponsibly ruined the lives of a few women, but it seems he was far worse than I imagined. Truly, a piece of shit.”

Opal couldn’t find any other way to describe the man and used Claude’s insult. It was no way for a noblewoman to talk, but he chuckled.

“And perhaps tonight’s debacle will change some of the prejudice pointed at the pitiful ladies in the countryside. I hope the victims of those bandits can receive as much support as they can...”

“The bandits that were first captured were quite ruthless, but Keymont and

his friends didn't go that far. Almost all the victims were unharmed, fortunately, and their stolen valuables will be refunded by Keymont and the others. They'll also pay quite a bit in reparations. Most of the stuff they stole was stored away in the manor that served as their base—the items are virtually untouched. And that was our concrete proof. These nobles weren't doing it for the money. They were doing it for the thrill and the fun that came with seeing people cower before them."

"A piece of shit who can't be spared," Opal firmly said once more as she rested her head on her beloved's shoulder. "Claude..."

"Yeah?"

"You said that you felt powerless, but that can't be further from the truth. I was fine by myself, but I was really, *really* happy that you came to my rescue. It was invigorating. And it felt so good to see Keymont get punched."

"Glad to hear it. I acted in accordance with my rage, but I was afraid that you'd hate me and see me as a violent man."

Opal wondered if he was being serious and gazed up at him. The usually confident Claude seemed just a bit more anxious than usual.

"And it's not just me," Opal continued. "I'm sure that there are many people who were saved by you. Your mere presence gives people strength. That being said, I don't want you to shoulder everything by yourself. We promised, didn't we? We'd work together and live in happiness. I'll shoulder your burden with you. So I'd like for you to rely on me more."

Claude hadn't changed since he was young; he'd often try to do everything himself. He'd always come to Opal's aid when she needed it, but when he was in trouble, he never reached out for help. She didn't expect him to change overnight, but she hoped that she could help him little by little. She rested her head on his shoulder once more.

"Thank you, Opal," Claude said, his low, gentle voice reaching her ears.

She felt her body tingle and felt compelled to hide her embarrassment. Opal gazed up at her beloved and flashed a mischievous smirk.

"So, I'll have you explain everything that happened tonight," she said.

“Now? It’s so late,” Claude replied.

“Oh, but the night is still young.”

“Very meaningful words, my lady.”

Claude gave a joking smile in return. It felt just like the old days. The two continued their playful banter until they reached their manor.

## 22. Explanations

The two of them went to the study as soon as they returned to the manor. Opal sat on the sofa, receiving a glass of liquor from Claude. The dizzying events that had occurred tonight made her in the mood to drink a little. Claude poured himself a glass and sat across from Opal.

“Where shall I start,” he mumbled.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” Opal replied. “I’ll ask the questions, and I want you to answer them. If at any time you can’t, just say so.”

“Got it.”

It was likely better to listen to a full explanation from the beginning, but Opal’s mind was filled with so many questions. She didn’t care about chronological order and was dying to hear answers first.

“Did you know about Sir Keymont’s crimes from the start?” she asked.

“Nope. I learned about them today,” Claude replied. “And since I knew that you were attending that ball, I rushed over.”

“I see. What about the bandits? Did you know that they were all nobility?”

“Well, the bandits had been suspected of being young noblemen from the start. But because we were dealing with that kind of people, the investigation had to be conducted very carefully. If we arrest nobles without evidence, we can’t recover easily from that kind of blunder.”

“I can see why the information wasn’t leaked. But why were *you* involved in the investigation, Claude?”

“It just...happened, I guess?”

Such a carefree reply made Opal cast a doubtful glance at Claude. She wasn’t sure if he was teasing her or simply couldn’t give a straightforward answer to her question. But that didn’t seem to be the case; Claude chuckled and proceeded to clarify his answer.

"It's true. I was actually gathering information about the bandits because of a different matter entirely. One of my new acquaintances is a law officer who was looking into the recent bandit-related incidents, so we decided to work together and exchange whatever information we had."

"A different matter? And what would that be?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you just yet."

"I understand."

Opal was less worried about Claude's secrets and more concerned about his safety. She didn't pursue the topic much further but made sure to grumble her dissatisfaction.

"No wonder you were so willing to head to Socille," she said. "You had matters to tend to here. If the incident with Beth didn't come up, would I have been left all alone in an unfamiliar kingdom?"

"Never," Claude replied. "I didn't have to physically be here—it could've been someone else. I only decided to come myself when I saw how you reacted to McLeod talking about that maid."

"It just feels like you're pulling all the strings. I prepared so much for tonight, but you came in and took all my momentum when you arrested Keymont. Wait, what will happen to his assets? The child support?"

She'd forgotten all about it when Keymont was arrested; those who were incarcerated generally had their assets seized.

"It'll be fine," Claude assured her. "Keymont's assets will be seized, but with the proper paperwork, we can secure funding for his children."

"I certainly hope so. What will Keymont and his friends be charged with?"

"As I said earlier, we were lucky that no one was hurt. At worst, they all have some scratches, and the biggest issue was the theft of valuables. I'm guessing that's what they'll be charged with. And the items will probably be returned soon along with extra compensation, so I imagine that they'd be released pretty soon."

"What? So you're saying that scum will walk free, along with the rest of those

no-good men? They can just *be* around society? They're menaces, all of them. These legal officers are negligent! I must be sure to complain about it to my uncle."

Despite her anger, she refrained from cursing, but her relentless remarks made Claude chuckle.

"This is no laughing matter, Claude," she said.

"Yeah, I know. But since their assets will be seized, they'll have no choice but to rely on their parents and brothers. And this news will spread to the edges of society by tomorrow. It's quite likely they'll never be able to show their faces again."

"Why do none of them think about working to earn their money? And I wonder, would they *truly* be shunned by society? The unfortunate victims were all commoners without a rank, I believe."

Just as Keymont had scorned Beth, there were many nobles who looked down on those outside of their prestigious circle. Her real worry was that even after what had happened after tonight's ball, Keymont would ultimately be forgiven for his sins.

"Speaking of which, tonight's gathering felt different from usual," Opal said. "It wasn't too stiff and formal. People were even willing to listen to my usual bluntness—barring one pair, of course. It seems that Viscount and Viscountess Kreusel are both wonderful people."

Eight years ago, there would've been more men proudly taking Keymont's side. While there were still many vulgar people in the crowd as usual, there were also a couple of nobles who properly accepted Opal without any prejudice. Opal had been able to speak with many men as if they were truly equals.

Claude nodded in agreement. "The viscount seems to be a progressive man, and like-minded people probably gathered at that party. The events he hosts are more casual and generally skew younger, but none are boisterous or controversial enough to raise eyebrows. Unmarried women can attend these events without worry."

"I've been away from the social scene for a while, but even I can really tell how the times are changing. Or perhaps I was too prejudiced about socializing and failed to see other facets of the scene. Not everyone acts like Keymont or the countess."

She'd been dragging the event from eight years ago with her until now, and assumed every noble she met held similar values as those horrible people from her past. Really, she was becoming no better than those people. *And who would want to be friends with such a stubborn, snarky woman who hates to lose?* Opal thought, full of regret. She sighed and noticed someone staring at her, causing her to look up. Claude was smiling at her.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"You're really cute. Absolutely adorable."

"Y-You're just seeing things! I'm turning twenty-eight soon! There's no way that I'm cute!"

"You think so?"

"I know so!"

Opal was happy to be showered with praise, but in her embarrassment, she turned away. She knew that this was precisely the behavior that made her not cute and was instantly depressed by her lack of honesty.

She gasped. "Tonight's debacle would reflect poorly on Miss Roanna, wouldn't it?" Opal murmured.

"What do you mean?" Claude asked.

"My denouncement of Sir Keymont and all my rudeness toward him."

"Do you regret what you did?"

"No. In fact, I find it unfortunate that his arrest became more impactful than what I'd denounced, actually. But all that aside, who would want to be friends with someone who always causes a stir? In fact, I think people would be more inclined to distance themselves from people who cause drama."

Any person would be angry if their parents' ball was ruined. Even if Viscount Kreusel was understanding of the situation, the entire family was owed a

proper apology.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure that you and Lady Roanna will become good friends,” Claude declared, trying to put an end to Opal’s worries.

For some reason, this confident statement stung her heart. “Do...you know Miss Roanna?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“Then how do you know?”

“Any person you want to befriend won’t be so bothered with such boring and trifling matters.”

Opal was secretly relieved to learn that he didn’t know Roanna; the marchioness was aware that there was no need for jealousy, but her heart wouldn’t listen to her mind. She knew that she’d continue to feel this way whenever a charming lady appeared in front of her and Claude. Still, she couldn’t imagine that she’d part ways with her precious beloved.

“Thank you, Claude,” Opal said, smiling as brightly as she could at her husband’s kind words.

“Sure,” Claude replied.

Opal had no idea just how charming and bewitching her smile was. She was so oblivious that she quickly changed topics without a care.

“Do you know Viscount Kreusel?” she asked.

“Just his name. It’s my first time meeting him,” Claude replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Er, well, I introduced you to him, but I probably would’ve looked like an idiot if you were already acquainted with the viscount.”

“That *would* be a little funny.”

The thought of such a humorous scene made the two of them chuckle. They placed their glasses back onto the table and held hands on their slow walk to their bedroom.

## 23. The Newspaper

By the morning following the debacle at Viscount Kreusel's party, the news had spread like wildfire. Everyone around the country had been informed. To Opal's surprise, it was the headline for the public newspaper.

"Isn't it a bit *too* soon to publish an article on this incident?" Opal asked, setting the paper onto the table. "Did someone leak information?"

The article depicted a sensational story about the sons of nobles being the culprits behind the bout of bandit activity. While Opal knew that this was a major case, she was surprised that the article had gone into a great deal of detail. The events at the ball and even Claude's words were all accurately written out, and it even included some tidbits that Opal knew nothing about, such as inside information about the Ministry of Justice.

"Literacy rates have been on the rise recently, and newspapers are becoming a form of public entertainment," Claude said. "Since everyone was bound to catch wind of this story sooner or later, I'm sure that the Ministry of Justice pushed this through hoping for an accurate retelling of events. The bandits, enemies of the people, ended up being rendered as just noble dolts—I mean, those from higher echelons of society. I'm sure this will anger the general population greatly. They are already angry with the nobility as it is, and something like this has the potential to rouse some real discontent in them. The ministry wants this story to show how just and good nobles worked with the law to take down some bad apples."

"I think it's a splendid idea to have the citizens receive equal rights. But if it happens too quickly, issues are bound to arise. I think some matters are progressing far too swiftly," Opal confessed. "It scares me a little."

"I don't blame you. Socille, Taisei, and other nations are changing so rapidly that it's almost dizzying. If we dawdle for even a second, we'd be left behind, unable to adapt with the changing times." He grabbed the newspaper on the table, opened it up, and pointed to a different article. "I'm rather jealous of this,

you know. Besides, who even wrote this? Is this *Alan Marron* messing with us?"

Claude sounded unusually upset. Opal was so focused on the Keymont article that she wondered if she'd missed anything important. She looked over the article Claude had pointed out, and was so shocked by what she read that she hastily snatched the paper from the table to get a closer look.

"What in the *world*," she murmured.

Opal traced the words with a finger, frowning as she did so. The article discussed not only the crime, but went into detail about Opal denouncing Keymont for his crimes. The headline read "The ally for frail women, Opal Holloway, formerly Duchess McLeod, takes an epic-ally bold stand!"

"They got my name wrong! How rude!" Opal cried.

"Huh? Oh yeah, now that you mention it, it *is* wrong," Claude said.

"I'm Marchioness Opal Fred Roussel! This must be revised. I must file a claim at once!"

She angrily perused the papers, searching for a contact, when Claude burst out laughing. Opal raised her head quizzically.

"Why are you laughing? Isn't this what you were angry about, Claude?" she asked.

"I was angry about what the article was saying," he replied. "This journalist praised you to bits. That's fine—nothing he said was false. But read this last sentence. 'I would love to get to know her better.'"

"It's just a closing line. But if you don't like it, I'll file a claim about that too. I'm not interested in anyone but you."

"That's not what I mean."

"Then what is it? I'm sure that this journalist doesn't know that I've remarried. Imagine being unable to do your own research properly," she scoffed.

Opal found the address of the newspaper company and furrowed her brow. It wasn't too far away, but she was about to visit House Kreusel to apologize, and she didn't know if she had time to spare.

"Maybe I can make some time in the afternoon," she mumbled.

"Are you actually going to go? It'll be a huge fuss," Claude said.

"It's already a huge fuss anyway. I'm not going to just file a claim either. I thought I'd ask for donations. If that's also included in the article, it'll help promote both the newspaper company and my organization. And other companies or people might feel compelled to donate too. There's no reason to miss this opportunity."

Claude laughed once more at Opal's enthusiasm. He'd never get bored when he was around her. The headline and closing line aside, the article was basically this: Opal Holloway had requested that Jeb Keymont pay child support for the women he had irresponsibly impregnated. She asked Keymont to use his assets for his children in hopes of providing them better futures. She cornered him about his misdeeds at Viscount Kreusel's ball and, in front of a crowd, boldly denounced him. Opal had received an exorbitant amount of wealth from Duke McLeod upon their divorce, and she used those funds to increase her wealth further, hoping to support the impoverished and those in need. Most notably, she started an organization to help shelter and support women, hoping to make them more independent, and was currently trying to extend her reach in order to aid people outside of the royal capital.

The part mentioning the countryside outside the capital was likely a conclusion drawn from the fact that Opal had gone to visit Nobori. And she actually *had* started to build her charity organization in various regions, hoping to extend her aid to many others. Claude felt guilty—Opal was in the midst of a grand plan that could quite literally change the world, and yet he'd whisked her off to Taisei.

"What's wrong, Claude?" Opal asked, noticing her smiling husband turn solemn. "Do you think it's rather unladylike of me to do this?"

"What? Nothing like that, no," Claude replied.

She had many things that she wanted to do, but first and foremost, she wanted Claude to be happy. She wanted to treat him as the most important person in the world. Ever since she had accepted his proposal, her thoughts on this had never changed.

“You’re doing your best to help the less fortunate people of this nation, but here I am bringing you to Taisei in the middle of your work. And I’m not even sure if I made the right call,” Claude said unexpectedly. “You’re brimming with energy right now.”

“Of course I am,” Opal replied. “Some of my recent worries have been resolved. Of course I’m happy.”

“Your worries?” Claude repeated.

“I’ve been wondering this entire time how I could reach out to more people. How can those in need find out about the shelters and my charity organization? People of the royal capital know, but those way out in the countryside aren’t so lucky. Even a big city like Nobori knew nothing about my organization. But thanks to this newspaper article, I might get a broader reach. Little by little, my situation might change. If I can get more supporters and volunteers too out of this, then I’ve really got no complaints.”

“That’s true.”

“And my help isn’t limited to the people of this kingdom. I’d like to help those in Taisei too. Their technology may be more advanced, but their views are still very traditional. And there are still people recovering from the plague and the civil war. I was born and raised in Socille, so it’s easy enough for me to assess what people here need. And though I may not have many yet, I have some people here who are willing to help me in this. I don’t *need* to be here anymore. I’d like to help those in Taisei now. I can’t help it; I’m a busybody.”

Opal puffed out her chest, much to Claude’s relief, and he flashed the most dazzling smile he had. Her heart skipped a beat before it started pounding away.

“Thanks, Opal,” Claude said.

“Y-You’re welcome, I guess?” Opal replied, flustered. “Ack! The time! We should leave soon.”

“You’re right. And if we’re late, you won’t be able to go to the newspaper company.”

“Exactly! I’ll see you later, Claude!”

She rushed out of the room like she was fleeing it. It'd been nearly a month since they'd married, but she still found herself being nervous with every mannerism and word that came from her husband. After leaving the room, she sighed and proceeded to recite her daily tasks to herself in an effort to be more calm. She just barely managed to do so.

## 24. The Viscount

Upon reaching House Kreusel, Opal and Claude were greeted by the viscount and his wife. The marquis and marchioness immediately apologized for their insolent behavior the night before. Opal had intended to just speak about the matter with Keymont calmly, but he'd defied her expectations and instead caused a huge scene that was out of her control. She had become brazen and shameless before she knew it, and she'd regretted it immediately, swearing that she'd never do such a thing again. She disliked causing scenes.

"You invited me to such a magnificent ball, and all I've done is ruin the occasion. I'm terribly sorry," Opal apologized.

"Oh, there's no need for you to worry about such a thing. We've long recognized Sir Keymont as a predator, a true enemy of women and the less fortunate. It was a splendid idea to denounce him publicly so that everyone will know what he's done. I never knew that he'd even committed crimes and stolen from people," the viscountess replied warmly with a smile before her tone turned sympathetic. "I do pity the countess, however." Perhaps the viscountess, also being a mother, could relate to Countess Keymont to a certain degree.

The viscount firmly denied her claims and grumbled, "Don't waste your pity. She and the earl have already filed a complaint to the Ministry of Justice. She claims that it was all a mistake."

"Did she pin all the blame on us?" Claude inquired with a strained smile.

True to her word, the countess had gone to file a complaint.

The viscount nodded grimly. "It seems to be that way, yes. But his arrest and the arrest of the rest of his friends are the fruits of honest labor done diligently by the legal officers and police officials. I presume that their silly pride can't take the facts without blaming someone else."

"Then the easiest thing to do is to blame it on me and my notoriety," Opal

replied.

But that would be a useless endeavor. She'd been living in a different nation, and it was clear that she was completely unrelated to these thefts. To have a famous newspaper ally themselves with her and condemn Keymont's scandal was also a big win. Opal, however, needed to tread carefully in order to protect the identity of Beth and the other women from the public. The general populace might have been sympathetic toward these women, but they could easily turn cold when actually faced with all these unmarried mothers and their children. Opal was lost in her thoughts, contemplating a change in her strategy, when she was snapped back to reality by a heavy sigh from the viscount.

"Every now and then, I'll meet someone and wonder how in the world they managed to graduate from university," he said. "Sometimes, I don't know how these people are even able to manage their land."

"Looks like that place had a few professors who would automatically grant A's to students just for being nobility," Claude replied, letting out an awkward chuckle. "And if a noble hires a competent manager, they can manage their land easily."

Opal thought back to Hubert. The duke seemed to enjoy studying, and it didn't seem like he received any special treatment from his professors, but he was, in a way, unlucky when it came to hiring managers. She'd met Omar just the other day in Nobori, and he'd turned over a new leaf to become an excellent manager, but she learned that Hubert had recently begun to aggressively get involved with management as well. *But what will he do about Miss Stella?*

Opal had gone out of her way to avoid Hubert, but she hadn't heard any rumors of the duke's marriage at all so far. The situation likely hadn't changed much. As usual, he was waffling over his decision. This recent incident had led to the arrest of Keymont and two other friends of Hubert—the saving grace was that the duke was completely uninvolved. They had all been friends since their university days.

"I used to want to attend a university, but now I'm having second thoughts," Opal muttered.

Claude quickly caught on that she was referring to Keymont, and replied, “Not all students dislike studying, and there are plenty of excellent professors as well. You mustn’t look at the minority and cast judgment on the whole.”

Opal turned red, realizing that she had spoken her thoughts again. “I know that, of course. From speaking with people like you and Viscount Kreusel, I can see how such people are not the majority. I’m just a bit frustrated, I suppose. My older brother quit midway.”

“That’s true.”

“Indeed,” Viscount Kreusel agreed. “If universities began accepting people who were eager to learn regardless of rank and gender, fewer people would attend university who had no real desire to learn. I would think that universities and society would become more diverse, and it’d be a change for the better.”

“Goodness, dear,” the viscountess chimed in, though she was still smiling. “Because you say stuff like that, Roanna is independent and powerful, and refuses to marry anyone still.”

The viscount chuckled. “My words have nothing to do with that.”

It was clear that the couple loved their daughter very much. Opal envied this loving relationship and smiled when the person in question entered the room.

“Marchioness Roussel!” Roanna cried happily, her face beaming with twinkling eyes. “I’m happy to see you here!”

Opal was so happy to be warmly greeted that she was tempted to do a little dance right on the spot, but she did her best to maintain her composure. “Hello, Lady Roanna.”

“Right, yes. Hello!”

The marchioness felt that hiding her emotions was another uncharming side of her, but it seemed Claude saw right through her. He suppressed his laughter as he witnessed Viscount Kreusel introduce his daughter to Opal and Claude. The three ladies changed places, and the viscountess, Roanna, and Opal decided to sit on the sofa by the window and engage in a lovely conversation. Claude and the viscount were stationed in front of the fireplace.

“Did you read today’s paper already?” Roanna asked, touching upon the debacle of the night prior. “That illustration of Sir Keymont resembled him so much! It had me laughing quite heartily ever since this morning!”

“Roanna, that’s quite unladylike,” the viscountess scolded. Despite her admonishing her child, the viscountess’s tone wasn’t sharp, and a smile was on her face.

As Roanna had said, the caricature of Keymont was rather tasteful and entertaining.

“I must apologize to you as well, Miss Roanna,” Opal said. “I’m very sorry. It was such an enjoyable night, but when I was faced with Sir Keymont, I just couldn’t suppress my anger.”

“Oh hush,” Roanna replied in a completely unladylike manner. “I’ve never had such a joyful night before! What’s more, when Marquis Roussel punched that nasty, perverted Sir Keymont right in the face, I felt so refreshed and happy like never before! Ah, what a rush!”

“Roanna,” Viscountess Kreusel warned.

“You said the same thing too, didn’t you, mother? You said that that was the absolute highlight of the evening.”

“My goodness. I’m trying to act like a competent mistress of the household, but you’re ruining me.”

The viscountess dropped the act of an overbearing mistress and chuckled with delight. The ladies continued to discuss the newspaper article, Keymont’s repulsive deeds, and how best to shelter women and support their independence—all topics considered quite uncouth for ladies to speak on. Opal was overjoyed to discuss these topics with fellow ladies, and she was pleased to spend an insightful and enjoyable time with the two Kreusels.

Claude and Viscount Kreusel also joined in after a while, and as the minutes ticked by, other guests of the viscount also joined in. Opal spent as much time as she could cultivating these new friendships, enjoying it every step of the way.

## 25. The Newspaper Company

After Opal and Claude left House Kreusel, they headed for the newspaper company. Opal had put on a tough front in front of her husband, but she had never visited a newspaper company before and was a touch nervous.

“I hope we can meet the author of that article,” she said.

“Even if he isn’t there, I’m sure that the editor-in-chief will be present,” Claude assured her in his usually relaxed tone.

The realization hit her. “Wait, are you actually involved with that newspaper?”

“Nah. I’m friends with the company’s owner, but I’m not involved in how it’s run.”

“And what about in Taisei?”

“I’ve got one newspaper I’m in charge of, yes.”

“I had no idea...”

Opal sank into her seat with exhaustion. Her current situation was a great example of this, but it was clear that those who controlled the presentation and flow of information were a vital presence in the political arena. Alessandro would never let newspapers do as they pleased. Naturally, a king directly involved with running a newspaper company would make the people highly suspicious; they’d assume that the paper would be biased and couldn’t be trusted. It was likely that Claude ran his newspaper company while hiding his identity.

“Would you like me to make a list of my wealth goals and hand it to you?” Claude asked.

“No, I’ll have you tell me each and every one of them when the time comes,” Opal replied.

“All right. I’ll do that.”

Opal was aware that Claude was an adult man, but every now and then, she was forced into painful awareness of the parts of his life that he hadn't revealed to her yet. It'd only been six months since they reunited after an eight-year-long separation. And they hadn't been apart for just their entire adult life either. When Claude entered the dorms as a university student, she was only able to meet him during long vacations. Naturally, there were still many things about him that she knew nothing about.

She'd also be lying if she said that she *wasn't* curious about Claude's business in Socille. If he didn't need to return and could easily have another person take over in his stead, that implied that this substitute likely blended in with Socille's high society quite well.

"I can't let my guard down around you *or* King Alessandro," Opal sighed.

"That was sudden," Claude replied.

"You're not an enemy, are you?" Opal asked.

"Not to you or Socille, I promise."

"Hmm, then I suppose I'll let you be."

"Thank you, madam."

"You're very welcome, good sir."

Claude knew exactly what Opal was talking about, but the two decided to keep their conversation vague. She knew that while he might have had a few secrets, he'd never lie to her. As they ended their exchange, the carriage stopped in front of the newspaper company.

"There are quite a few people gathered. And I see children too," Opal observed.

"Newspaper companies always have some sort of busywork that anyone can do," Claude explained. "Everyone's here to work. More precisely, they're hoping to get some pocket money for their troubles."

"Manhest is always lacking in workers, but I suppose it's just that everyone wants to live in the city."

"I think it's all about image. I can't speak for everyone, but I think some

people think they can make it big in the city.”

“That reminds me, I believe the owner of this company came to the royal capital from a farming village, and started out as a shoeshiner. Or so I’ve heard. He’s the textbook example of starting from the bottom and working his way up.”

“He always says that he learned how to run a business from shining shoes, not school.”

“Very impressive.”

Opal couldn’t hide her amazement as she waited for Claude to step out of the carriage. She borrowed his hand and stepped off as well. At once, the crowd in front of the newspaper company turned to her, causing her to flinch, but she managed to hide it. Opal immediately tilted her head up and smiled as she headed into the building. The moment they stepped inside and reached the reception counter, Claude waved at the security guard and confidently escorted Opal to the third floor, clearly used to this place. They reached the main room of the editorial department, and the man seated in the very back called out to them.

“Ah, Mr. Fred,” the man said. “How unusual to see you here.”

“Hello, Mr. Editor-in-Chief. It’s really been a while,” Claude replied. “This is my wife, Opal. Opal, this is Marc Ponsero, the editor-in-chief of this newspaper.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ponsero,” Opal said.

“The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Fred. It’s my lucky day if I get to meet a lady as beautiful as you.”

Marc clearly was familiar with Claude, but the editor-in-chief didn’t seem to know that Claude was Marquis Roussel.

“We’re here to meet a reporter of yours, one Alan Marron. Is he here today?” Claude asked.

“He is indeed,” Marc replied with a happy smile. “Are you here to inquire about this morning’s article, perhaps? I can’t give you our source, but it was well written, wasn’t it? Our papers just flew off the shelves, and we’ve just

reprinted more."

When he mentioned a "lucky day" earlier, he was clearly referring to the reprinted papers instead of Opal.

"Alan just returned from an interview. He apparently got additional information pertaining to this morning's article. I ask that you don't take too much of his time, please," Marc said before turning to the reporter, stationed at a desk in another part of the room. "Hey, Alan! Alan! Over here!"

"Yeah, yeah, what is it?" a low voice muttered as a man, presumably Alan, raised his head from a mountain of papers and documents. "I told you that I'm busy—"

The moment Alan locked eyes with Opal, he jumped out of his chair, knocking it to the ground. Even within the bustling editorial department, the loud clatter of the chair rang throughout the room.

"Lady Opal? You're Lady Opal!" he cried.

"I-I am..." Opal replied.

At Opal's tentative reply, Alan—a young man in his twenties—speedily wove through the narrow gaps of the many desks arranged around the room and rushed to Opal's side. A little taken aback by his excitement, she found herself instinctively inching back, and the young Alan was stopped by Claude.

"Sorry, but please step away from my wife," Claude said sternly.

"Huh? Oh, sorry. I'm, um, I'm just *really* happy that I finally get to meet her," Alan replied.

"Do you know my wife? She doesn't seem to know you."

The entire department fell silent at the marquis's icy tone. Even Marc looked on in astonishment as he watched over the situation.

"Of course she doesn't know me," Alan explained. "I've just admired her for over eight years!"

"Eight years?" Claude asked.

"That's right! My father used to serve the house of Duke McLeod, and I

spotted Lady Opal several times from afar. And thanks to her, I was able to get an education, and I became a reporter. Thank you so much, Lady Opal!"

Alan spoke energetically, like he was talking to his superior officer, standing upright in an almost sprightly way. Opal peeked out from behind Claude, but she didn't recognize this young reporter. Opal had indeed ensured that every employee of House McLeod, along with their families, could receive a proper education, but there were just so many people that she couldn't recognize them all.

"And what is your father's name?" Claude asked irritably.

Alan smiled. "Kayve. My father is called Kayve. We have no family name, so I just picked my favorite food instead."

## 26. The Reporter

“My goodness!” Opal cried. “You’re Kayve’s son? Oh dear, I’m so sorry that I didn’t recognize you!” Upon hearing Kayve’s name, she jumped out from behind Claude and gripped Alan’s hands in her own.

“Th-That’s fine. I don’t blame you since I take after my mother,” Alan replied. “But my mother passed away ten years ago, so I’m just told that I look like her. My father often used to tell me that if my mother was still alive, he could’ve made the duchess live in the manor more comfortably.”

“Did he really say that?” Opal asked. “But Kayve treated me very well. I felt bad for being unable to thank him before I departed, but I hope that my letter of gratitude reached him properly.”

“It did. My father was moved to tears! But he stated that it was a shame that he couldn’t provide a response. He can read, but not write, I’m afraid.”

Kayve was the only servant who was kind to Opal when she was isolated at House McLeod and had very little support. The coachman had mentioned wanting his son to go out and work soon, and so, Opal had ensured that all the servants and their families could receive an education. Meeting Alan reminded her of the better parts of her past, and she couldn’t help but show her joy.

“Opal,” Claude said rather coldly. “It’s good to reminisce about the old days, but you came here for a reason, didn’t you?”

“Right, of course,” Opal replied. She had completely forgotten about it for a moment and was about to request for a revision of the article.

“W-W-W-Wait just one minute!” Marc stammered before Opal could make her request. “By Lady Opal, are you *the* Lady Opal? The very Opal Holloway, formerly Duchess McLeod, that’s in this morning’s article?!”

“That’s me, is what I’d like to say, but there’s a bit of an error,” Opal replied. “I came here today to ask for a revision.”

“Y-You’re the real...Opal Holloway, formerly Duchess McLeod...”

“As I’m trying to say—”

“She’s here, in the flesh! This is a huge scoop!”

Marc cut Opal off and shouted excitedly, encouraging the rest of the room to become just as excited as he was. Everyone jumped out of their seats and tried to rush to the marchioness’s side.

“Quiet, please!” Claude’s stern voice filled the room.

He didn’t shout too loudly, but everyone froze in place, silence settling in the room once more.

“We’re happy to be received so warmly, but it’d do us no good for you all to jump up at once in this small room,” he went on. He didn’t sound angry at all. “Someone might get injured. Please, calm down for a few moments.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry, Sir Fred,” Marc said. “I was just lost in my excitement. Come on, everyone. Return to your seats.”

As everyone snapped back to their senses, Marc waved them all back to work and they obediently took their seats. But being curious was the job of reporters; they pretended to go back to work as they sneaked glances at Opal.

“I’m sorry to cause a fuss,” Opal apologized. “This morning’s paper was very interesting, and I quite enjoyed the read. In particular, I’m grateful that my actions from last night were portrayed in a very positive light.”

“I did nothing like that,” Alan said with a beaming smile. “I only wrote the truth!”

“I won’t ask your source and how you obtained all that information. However, there’s a bit of an error, and I’m here to ask for that to be revised.”

“An error?!” Marc cried.

Alan grimaced awkwardly; he must’ve known that she remarried.

“I’d like for you to revise my name,” Opal requested. “I remarried Marquis Roussel, so I’d like for you to call me Marchioness Roussel, Opal Fred.”

“Huh? Marquis Roussel?” Marc gasped in shock. He knew about Claude Fred, but not that the man had become Marquis Roussel.

Alan had known about Marquis Roussel, but hadn't guessed the true identity of the mysterious Taisei marquis.

"Huh? So this man is Marquis Roussel? I thought that he was a doddering..." Alan trailed off awkwardly.

"Old man?" Claude finished. As Alan looked even more confused, the marquis burst out laughing. "Did you hide her remarriage because you thought it'd affect Opal's reputation?"

"Er, well...yes."

As Alan nodded, Opal tilted her head to one side, perplexed.

"After divorcing Duke McLeod and receiving money in compensation, remarrying an old rich man standing at death's door might leave a bad impression on the public," Alan explained.

"Ah, I see," Opal said.

She didn't care about her reputation, but if that all connected to her charity work and donations, then it was best for her to be represented in the most positive light possible. She flashed a grateful smile at the young reporter.

"Thank you, Alan. You were worried about my charity organization too, weren't you?" she asked.

"Huh? Well, erm..." Alan stammered.

"But I have nothing that I should be ashamed about. In fact, I'm proud of what I've done. Would you kindly revise the article for me?"

"I shall."

"Whoa, hold on! Please wait!" Marc shouted, physically putting himself between the two.

"Is there a problem?" Claude asked.

"Not a problem per se, but I've got a lot of questions! Sir Fred, are you truly Earl Roussel of Taisei?!"

"I've been graciously bestowed the title of marquis now."

"Ranks aside, Sir Fred, what exactly is your relationship with House Roussel?!"

Marc quickly reached for a pen and a piece of paper on a nearby desk. Everyone around him thought that rank certainly *shouldn't* be cast aside, but no one said a word and waited for Claude's response with bated breath. He glanced at Opal and grinned before turning back to Marc.

"Sure, I can tell you," Claude said. "But I will ask to be paid for this interview."

"Of course," Marc stammered. "We'll pay the market price."

"Very well. I shall ask for ten times that amount."

"That's unreasonable!"

"Oh? I believe the information you'll receive is equal in value," Opal chimed in, grasping Claude's intention. "My husband, Marquis Roussel, is still enveloped in mystery within Socille. So much so that everyone assumes that he's a doddering old man. He made his first public appearance last night, but almost everyone still finds the marquis to be shrouded in mystery. This will be a huge scoop for your paper."

"A huge scoop?" Marc parroted eagerly.

"My condition is for you to donate every last coin of my interview fees to Opal's charity organization," Claude said. "And please donate it under this company's name."

"Can...we promote our donation?" Marc asked.

"Of course. Please do. I'll tell the company president all about it."

"Thank you! Then we'll take you to a separate room!" Marc turned to the young reporter. "Alan! Come on!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Alan shouted.

With graceful steps—as though he would start dancing at any moment—Marc excitedly led the couple into a separate room. Opal and Claude followed close behind, and Alan hurried back to his desk to fetch some writing utensils before coming along as well.

The interview itself didn't take very long, but the article published the following morning was a superb one. It detailed a dramatic romantic tale between Opal and Claude, grasping the hearts of, in particular, many ladies who

were lucky enough to read the story.

## 27. A Love Story

“How curious,” Opal muttered as she finished reading the papers. “To think that all I wanted to do was visit the company for a revision, and to promote my charity.”

“Then this was a huge success,” Claude replied.

“I can’t argue with that, but take a look at this headline,” she said, pointing to the headline. “‘A first love, viciously torn apart! Even the sea can’t sink the love between childhood friends!’ Goodness.”

“It makes for an interesting romantic novel.” Claude was as easygoing as always.

“Maybe for a novel, yes.” Opal sighed and set the paper onto the table. “But at least Duke McLeod isn’t being portrayed as a villain.”

“We don’t want to cause trouble for anyone. That’s the basic idea.”

It was too late to do anything now. The biggest revelation from this article wasn’t about Opal’s real name or Marquis Roussel’s identity—it was the romantic tale that led to the marriage of these two lovebirds.

This was a love story—a *first* love story—between the daughter of the wealthy and prominent Earl Holloway and the third son of a poor baron. The lovebirds were keenly aware of their difference in ranks and assumed that they never could be together. When Opal was set to marry Duke McLeod, Claude wished for his beloved’s happiness and retreated from her. With Opal lost to him, he lost sight of *himself* and, in the spur of the moment, threw himself into Taisei’s civil unrest. He met with his uncle and worked his way up to gain more power.

Meanwhile, Opal was hard at work to ensure that fewer women would go through what she did. And so, she started up a charity organization to support women’s independence as well as impoverished children. Over the years, she contributed greatly to her charity work while wishing for the happiness of

others.

As the years passed by, Claude obtained magnificent levels of wealth and power, but his beloved Opal still wasn't by his side. His days felt empty and cold. Hoping to somehow connect with her in any way that he could, he invested in the Manhest development, where he met Duke McLeod. The duke learned of the two childhood friends' deep, loving relationship, and decided to free his wife. From there, Opal reunited with Claude to rekindle their love and was living happily ever after.

"They're not completely wrong, but they're not totally right either," Opal mumbled. "This makes me feel weird."

"At least your charity organization is mentioned," Claude pointed out. "Not a bad result, overall."

Opal impatiently tapped the table with her finger while Claude calmly sipped on his coffee. Seeing how calm Claude was allowed Opal to gather herself together as well.

"I guess so..." Opal said. "But I should write a letter of apology to Duke McLeod. We used his name without his permission."

"I'll draft up the letter," Claude replied. "Since I was the one who mentioned him."

"Then can I leave it to you."

"Of course. You're going to go meet with her, aren't you?" Claude asked, referring to Opal's next appointment.

"That's right. Now that my uncle gave me his permission, I'll go see Beth."

Opal had implored her uncle—Jonathan Kensington, who was a legal officer—to allow a portion of Keymont's seized assets to be used to support his three children. Her uncle had finished the necessary process in a day and had given Opal his response—naturally, the fast turnaround was due to Opal's thorough preparations. Because the Ministry of Justice had seized Keymont's assets, his signature and permission fortunately weren't needed.

"Should I go with you?" Claude asked.

"No, I'll be fine," Opal replied. "I'll ask for more guards than usual, and if we travel together, we'll stand out."

"You stand out plenty by yourself."

"I'm going to go in secret this time around."

"Huh?"

"I'm trying to give Beth a second chance at life. If she knew I was involved, it would be difficult for her to accept the money, so I'll be heading over in a disguise."

Claude was silent. He looked tempted to say something but reconsidered, saying only, "Just be careful, okay?" He flashed a kind smile.

"I will." Opal smiled back.

The following afternoon, Opal and Nadja left the manor via the back entrance and boarded a carriage—rented by Opal's manservants—and headed straight for Beth. The front entrance of the manor was crowded by swaths of reporters and other people, the former desperate for intel on Marquis Roussel and the incident with Keymont, while the latter gathered simply to join in on the excitement. Women in particular came to visit in droves; they could relate to the published love story, and they admired and respected Opal.

"It's too late for these people to realize how splendid you are, madam," Nadja said with a pout as the people on board settled down. "You've *always* been a wonderful person ever since you were much younger."

"Thank you, Nadja," Opal replied.

Within this rented carriage sat Nadja, Opal, and two other guards.

"If Beth still won't show an ounce of gratitude after all this, I'll never forgive her," Nadja grumbled. "But I will admit it would be strange for her to change so suddenly..."

Opal gave a strained smile as she gazed out the window. As the carriage rode along, the scenery slowly changed, the buildings more worn and crumbled as they reached their destination. Opal had borrowed Nadja's personal clothes for

this trip, so she didn't think she'd stand out.

"Okay, let's go," Opal said, as the carriage came to a stop.

"Yes, madam!" Nadja shouted, more fired up than her mistress.

The two ladies disembarked, and just as before, they walked up the old staircase and knocked on the door.

"Hello, Beth. How do you feel?" Opal inquired.

"Madam," Beth murmured.

Before she could react, Opal swiftly entered the room and Nadja closed the door behind her. The marchioness observed a stunned Beth—she looked pale, and her stomach was so large that it seemed she could go into labor at any moment.

"I'm sure it's tiring for you to remain standing. Let's sit down," Opal said.

She opened the bedroom door as she'd done before, but Beth didn't stop her this time. All she did was obediently sit beside the noblewoman.

Opal gazed at the unusually quiet Beth with suspicion. "Are you in pain? Where does it hurt? Your stomach? Hips? Or do you feel sick?"

"No," Beth replied quietly, and she soon fell silent.

"Beth?"

"I-I'm scared..."

"I don't blame you."

Who wouldn't be afraid just before giving birth? And in Beth's case, she had to face this experience all alone. Opal was curious about the rest of Beth's family, but it would be crass to inquire about it now.

"Beth, why don't you stay at the charity facility that I'm supporting?" Opal offered. "You're so close to giving birth, and doing so here is rather inconvenient. There are many reliable mothers at the facility, so they can walk you through the process without any worries."

"But..."

“And you don’t have to worry about money either. I also talked it over with Sir Keymont. He will provide you with child support.”

Opal didn’t want to leave Beth here all alone, and wanted to ease any financial worries she might have had too.

But Beth wiped her tears away with her sleeve and glared at Opal. “I read from the papers that he was arrested! He’s the father of my child!”

Following her outburst, she closed her eyes and fainted onto her bed.

## 28. A Scolding

“Beth? Beth?!” Opal called out worriedly.

She’d learned that in these situations it was best to not move a pregnant lady, but she had no idea where to go from here. At Opal’s outburst, Nadja angrily stormed in from the adjoining room.

“She just fainted,” Nadja said. “There’s really nothing to worry about. She probably fainted from being too agitated. You’re not in peak condition when you’re pregnant.”

“But that only makes me worry *more*,” Opal replied. “Will the child be okay? She seems to be breathing, but I didn’t expect her to faint.”

In the face of such an unexpected situation, Opal’s trusty maid was as calm as ever. She placed a hand over Beth’s forehead, checked for a pulse on her wrist, and rubbed Beth’s enlarged belly.

“All the blood rushed to her head, I think,” Nadja said. “Her stomach doesn’t look too strained, so I’m sure she’ll awaken soon. Ah, see?”

As she gripped Beth’s hands and rubbed them, the pregnant lady blinked and slowly opened her eyes.

“Wait here,” Nadja said, patting Beth’s hands. “I’ll bring you some water.” The maid stood up and left the room.

All the while, Opal sat quietly, at a loss for what else to do. She thought that she should talk, but she was afraid of Beth losing consciousness again. Opal had never been pregnant, nor had she given birth, and she’d never nursed a sick person either. When her mother had been sickly, she’d read a book and spoke with her—and that was almost twenty years ago. The marchioness breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing Nadja’s return.

“You don’t even have a water pitcher,” Nadja said. “I had no other choice but to bring the madam’s juice.”

She handed Beth a glass and sat on the side not currently occupied by Opal. As the three ladies were on the bed, it immediately started to creak under the weight. Beth must've been parched. She downed the glass quickly and gave a huge sigh.

“Have you calmed down now?” Nadja asked, taking the glass from Beth’s hand. Her tone turned fierce. “All right then, let me give you a piece of my mind, lady. You better cut the crap. You should be showing madam your gratitude. But look at you spouting *complaints*! You’re beyond ungrateful!”

“Nadja, we can discuss that next time...” Opal said. She didn’t want Beth’s health to be aggravated in any way.

The maid shook her head. “You’re too nice! You gotta be firm with people like her or they’ll never know how blessed they—”

“I *am* grateful to the madam!” Beth interjected.

“What?!” Nadja fell silent at the denial.

“Wh-When madam married Duke Hubert, I acted unbefitting for a servant and treated her terribly. But I believed that I was doing the right thing. I thought I was protecting Lady Stella from the evil madam. I never once doubted what I was doing.”

“I thought so,” Opal said.

“So Mr. Romito, the butler, and the rest of us servants tried to chase the madam out. I only understand now just how foolish we were. But back then, I thought that we were on the side of justice. And I truly believed nothing evil could stand against justice. I was infuriated when Lady Stella was forced to move, and when the madam divorced Duke Hubert, I rejoiced, convinced that justice had finally prevailed.”

“Wow, you’re more naive and thoughtless than I thought,” Nadja remarked, unable to stop herself.

Opal had silently listened, hoping that talking about the situation would lighten whatever psychological burden was weighing Beth down. The marchioness hastily scolded her maid at her outburst, but Beth gave a defeated smile and nodded at Nadja’s words.

“You’re absolutely right,” Beth said. “I am a fool. I’m a fool beyond saving. It’s why I even believed Lord Keymont’s words. ‘I never married because my heart wouldn’t accept any lady that came my way. But when I met you, my heart finally came alive. You’re truly the one for me.’ That’s what he said. I was overjoyed and believed him. That’s how stupid I am.”

Beth wiped her tears away as Opal and Nadja exchanged a glance. Keymont’s lines were cheesy, but for Beth to remember every word he said demonstrated how strongly they affected her. Neither of them could mock that.

“I trusted a person that I shouldn’t have, and dismissed a person I should have believed,” Beth went on. “I deserve all this. Mrs. Notham fired me, but she gave me enough severance pay for me to live on for the near future. But when I think about what’s to come, I just get so anxious.”

“I agree,” Opal said. “When considering the child, you can’t use that money so easily. But don’t worry. As I said earlier, I received the funds from Sir Keymont. What you need is rest, and it’s best to sleep in a place where you can feel at ease.”

“But I have no right to receive your benevolence!” Beth protested. “Please give that money to the other two ladies!”

“Ah, so you knew...”

“Yesterday, when I was out shopping, I caught the headlines on the papers...”

Beth had even learned about Keymont’s arrest; these two revelations must have come as a great shock to her. The other two ladies afflicted by Keymont were under the care of the charity facility’s manager, and they could pass the time by talking with other occupants. But Beth was here all by herself; it was little wonder that she grew emaciated to the point of passing out.

Opal stood up, determined to drag Beth out of this room. “Come now. Crying will get you nowhere. You’ll become a mother now, so it’s best to be somewhere safe.”

“No, I’ll stay here,” Beth insisted. “I don’t have the right to—”

“Argh! My God! You—” Nadja interjected angrily, but she was stopped when Opal raised her hand.

Opal smiled gently at Beth. “Beth, could you kindly just *stop* being so stubborn for once in your life? I don’t deny that you’re a fool, but here you are trying to be a fool again. Make no mistake; I’m not doing this for you. What I’m worried about is your soon-to-be-born child. And one more thing: I received child support from Sir Keymont. That money belongs to your child, not you, and you have no right to decline in their stead. And of course, I’ve made sure that a trustee distributes this money properly. Do you understand now?”

Beth turned pale at Opal’s harsh words, and the marchioness worried if she’d been too cold, but eventually, the former maid of House McLeod nodded.

“You’re right. May I have a few moments?” Beth requested. “I’ll gather my things.”

“You just need to bring necessities,” Opal called, taken aback by how easily Beth agreed. “I can have someone else gather the rest of your belongings later.”

Beth was fighting back tears but mustered a smile. “I don’t have many things to my name. I only need a few moments.”

“I’ll help,” Nadja said.

The two ladies stood up and headed to the next room. Beth stopped for a moment and whirled around to face Opal once more.

“I’m truly grateful to you, from the bottom of my heart,” Beth said. “You refused to abandon a fool like me, and even extended a helping hand...”

“I don’t think the current you is a fool,” Opal replied with a smile.

Beth gave a sheepish smile in return—and for the first time, the marchioness had seen Beth smile from the bottom of her heart.

## 29. A Visitor

The following morning, after Beth had been transported to the shelter, Opal was spending her time checking on a few invitations when the butler rushed to her side, stating that she had a visitor. Though it was incredibly rude to visit someone without a visiting card or giving prior notice, Opal had expected this guest. She remained composed, telling her butler to get the guest inside, and quickly retreated to her room to prepare. She wanted to let Claude sleep for a bit longer, but she was certain that he wanted to be present for this meeting.

“Good morning, Claude,” Opal said.

“Mhm...” Claude mumbled.

“Come on, wake up.”

“Five more minutes...”

Opal knew that he wasn’t an early riser, but she didn’t expect Claude to be this much of a sleepyhead; his eyes were firmly closed, and he turned his back toward her as he pulled his covers over his head. Opal glanced at the clock—it wasn’t *too* early, and in fact, it was perfectly reasonable for one to be up at this hour. She determined that she could be a bit forceful and summarily pulled the covers away from his face.

“Claude, it’s morning. Rise and shine,” she said.

To be precise, it was almost noon, but Claude still refused to wake up. This was going to be a tough battle. She grabbed Claude’s bare shoulders, for he had gone to bed shirtless, and shook him awake.

“You’ll catch a cold if you sleep like that,” Opal said. “Come on, wake up and get dressed—”

She had been standing on the side of the bed, but she was cut off midsentence and soon found herself lying beside her beloved. Opal felt no pain; her arm had been grabbed and she was pulled to Claude’s side. She surmised that he was already awake, and looked up at Claude, now in his arms. He was

sleeping peacefully, without a care in the world. She could even hear his steady breathing.



“Unbelievable,” Opal said.

This was the first time she tried to drag him out of bed, and now she was possessed of the knowledge that her husband certainly *was* quite bad at getting up in the mornings. She wriggled around and gently patted Claude’s cheek.

“We’ve got a guest. Wake up,” Opal said.

“Mmm...” Claude mumbled.

“It’s Duke McLeod.”

At once, Claude’s eyes snapped awake and he gazed down at Opal in his arms.

“Huh? Opal?” he asked in confusion.

“Good morning, Claude,” Opal replied. “We’ve got a guest. Will you wake up for me?”

“Right... It’s Duke McLeod?”

“That’s right.”

*Didn’t I just say that?* Opal wondered. Claude parroting her answer had her furrowing her brow at her beloved in an intent stare. Was he teasing her? Claude sat up, and only then did he notice that Opal was lying in bed with him. What’s more, she wasn’t in her pajamas; she was wearing proper attire.

“Did I do something to you?” Claude asked.

“Oh dear, don’t you remember?” Opal inquired.

“Sorry, no...”

*This is worse than I thought.* Opal sat up and let out a huge sigh as Claude turned white as a sheet.

“Did I hit you or something?” he asked.

“No, of course you didn’t,” Opal replied.

“Whew, thank goodness.”

Seeing how relieved Claude was made Opal tilt her head to one side. He seemed as serious as ever, but that only raised more questions.

“Have you ever punched anyone in your sleep?” she asked.

“Um... Many times when I lived in the dorms,” Claude confessed.

“Really?”

“When it comes to waking people up, they can be really ruthless,” he said, referring to his friends back in university.

“Oh my...”

Claude grumbled to himself as he helped Opal slip out of bed. His friends from university were all extremely busy, and he hadn’t met a single one since their graduation, but Opal had occasionally heard bits and pieces about them. She was happy to learn another side of her husband and burst into a fit of giggles.

“Go on, go on,” Claude urged. “McLeod’s coming, right?”

“Ack! That’s right, he’s already here!” Opal cried.

“What? Where’s his calling card?”

“He had none. He dropped by very suddenly.”

“How very typical of him.”

Opal forgot about her guest for a split second, and she hastily stood in front of the mirror to tidy her hair. She wanted to change, but deeming that there was no time to waste, she decided to greet the duke in her current outfit. Just as she was about to leave the bedroom, her husband grabbed her arm.

“Claude?” she asked.

“There’s no need to rush. *He’s* the one who dropped by without any proper warning, so it’s well within our rights to have him sit a while. I want you to wait for me until I get ready. Let’s greet him together.”

“Okay.”

Opal had initially intended to buy some time by heading for the living room first, but she decided to follow her husband’s request. When it came to Hubert, she wanted to respect Claude’s wishes as much as possible. She returned to her room and had Nadja help her get quickly changed. Just as Opal tidied her hair into a very simple look, Claude arrived to pick her up.

“You look perfect,” he said.

“But I fear we took too long,” Opal replied.

“It’s his fault for visiting us without prior notice.”

“I can’t imagine he’d care too much for that if he’s angry.”

“Angry? Why?”

“Because of the newspaper article.”

“Ah, right.”

The romantic tale of first love was incredibly popular, despite it being so new; even the wide sea couldn’t stop the story from spreading all over. The newspaper company once again reprinted that issue, and even published a follow-up article this morning. The number of reporters that were crowding Claude and Opal’s manor had only grown. No doubt Hubert’s visit would create another eye-catching headline tomorrow.

“Then wouldn’t he invite us to his manor instead of visiting us?” Claude asked.

“The duke isn’t *that* brazen,” Opal replied.

“You think so?”

With that, Claude gently knocked the door to the living room and opened it without waiting for an answer. Hubert stood up to greet the two, as calm as ever. There was no anger on his face, puzzling Opal even further; what business, then, did he have with her? She gave a smile befitting the mistress of the household and welcomed the duke before looking apologetic along with Claude.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Claude said. “We were surprised by your sudden visit.”

“Our apologies, Your Grace,” Opal added.

“No, I’m sorry for my sudden visit,” Hubert replied. “But our schedules just never seemed to click. Every time I thought about visiting you two, the manor was always empty. I feared that I’d never get to meet you both if I missed today’s opportunity.”

Hubert exchanged a handshake with Claude and gave Opal a small nod. The duke didn't seem upset with the article. Claude didn't want to beat around the bush; when everyone settled into the sofa, he posed his question.

"So, why did you visit us? Is it about the newspaper article?" Claude asked. "I only spoke about how Opal and I started out, but I'm sorry that your name got dragged into the article as well."

"Ah, no, I should be the one *thanking* you for that," Hubert replied. "It seems society is seeing me in a far more favorable light."

"That so?"

Both Opal and Claude were shocked to learn the effect that the newspaper had in just one night.

Hubert smiled. "For years, society has seen me as a prideful and unyielding man. While all of that is true, breaking up with Opal has changed popular perceptions of me. My attitude back then has been misconstrued in a more positive light."

When the duke and Opal had divorced, Hubert had insisted in public circles that she had saved him and not the other way around—back then he had hoped that his words would help Opal's reputation, even a little. He had insisted that Opal had rejected his proposal, but now society saw his words as simply an excuse to cover up how he let his beloved go so she could marry her first love. His reputation soared, and women in particular swooned upon hearing such stories.

"Then may I ask why you're here?" Claude asked.

"It's more of an apology. And a report of sorts," Hubert replied.

"What do you mean?" Opal asked, tilting her head to one side in befuddlement.

Claude was also silent, pensively lost in his own thoughts.

"Right," Hubert said with a solemn nod. "First, I'd like to apologize about Keymont and his friends."

"I don't understand why you must apologize, Your Grace," Opal replied.

“Eight years ago, I paid no heed to what people said and believed the words of Keymont and his friends—I trusted their description of Opal Holloway. Of course, this doesn’t excuse the horrible manner in which I treated you, and I understand that it’s too late to regret my actions. Even so, I’d like to apologize. I’m truly sorry.”

“It’s already in the past. I ask that you let it go.”

Hubert cracked a wry smile. “Then I’ll take your kind offer and end this apology today.”

“Please do,” Opal replied, relieved to see Hubert’s sunny demeanor.

The duke, however, soon turned stern once more. “I’m beyond appalled by Keymont and his friends’ actions. I’m infuriated. When he was much younger, he was prone to silliness, but I never expected him to turn to a life of crime. I’ll write a stern letter to the Ministry of Justice to demand a harsher punishment for him.”

“Have you never been invited to participate in...those deeds?” Claude asked. He seemed genuinely curious but maintained his serious composure.

“Never. Ever since I was a student, I was never invited to such things. I’m too much of a square, apparently.”

“But you interacted with him every now and then, didn’t you?” Claude pointed out. “Did you notice him scurrying around and whispering to someone? For example, could he have been following the orders of someone else?”

“No, I don’t recall anything like that. You seem awfully invested in this case,” Hubert remarked.

“I’m just curious, that’s all,” Claude replied. “This kingdom was recently suffering from a different slew of bandit attacks, after all.”

“That was truly awful. My heart goes out to Marquis Seims. He seemed to have incurred quite a bit in damages.” After sympathizing with Seims, Hubert gasped and turned to Opal. “There’s actually one more thing I must apologize and thank you for.”

“And what might that be?” Opal asked with a smile. She had an inkling about

what he was about to say.

Hubert awkwardly cleared his throat. “It’s, er, about Beth.”

“Yes?”

“All too late, I know, but I finally understand the meaning of the words that you said just the other day. Beth doesn’t want to give birth without marrying a man either. Though I find it foolish she was deceived by Keymont, my own attitude toward her was nothing but prejudiced. And for that, I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need for you to apologize to me. In all honesty, Beth should be the one to hear these words.”

“You’re right. But would she even accept my apology?”

“That, I cannot say. But I shall tell her about your feelings.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“Of course. And how are Mrs. Notham and Miss Stella doing?”

“They were very shocked.”

“I see...”

Opal had no idea what these two ladies were shocked *about*, but she found no reason to pursue this line of questioning. Beth was trying to enter a new chapter of her life. While it would surely be different if Beth wished to reconcile with the duke’s household, Opal felt it was for the best if Beth got involved with House McLeod as little as possible now.

“And you practically did my job for me,” Hubert said. “I should’ve been the one to denounce Keymont and demand child support, and I can only thank you for your actions.”

“Just make sure that such a horrific incident never happens again. That’s all I ask,” Opal replied.

“The matter with Beth happened in my manor, so your concern is valid. I’ll be sure that it never happens again. And I’d also like to donate to your charity organization.”

“Thank you,” Opal replied with a smile.

Hubert looked visibly relieved, like a weight had been lifted from his chest, and it was then that Opal realized that in his own way, Hubert had changed. The arrogant attitude that had once always followed him around had dissipated, like some kind of evil spirit that possessed him was gone.

“Finally, I’d like to report back,” Hubert said. “I told Lady Marianne and her parents that I wouldn’t marry her—that I wouldn’t ask for her hand. I also apologized to them.”

“Oh my,” Opal murmured, surprised by Hubert’s boldness. She’d assumed that Hubert would give in to the lady and end up marrying her.

“She’d mentioned that she had other potential suitors, aside from me, and that she struggled to come to a decision,” Hubert revealed. “If she ends up immediately announcing her marriage with another man, society would assume that I’ve been rejected once more.”

“Oh dear.”

Opal didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t too surprised. Her most dominant feeling at this news was exasperation toward Marianne. If the information she told Hubert was true, her words were understandable, albeit rather rude. But if this was her plan to make Hubert jealous and encourage him to marry her, she was utterly foolish. Hubert was, ultimately, a simple man.

“Did Lady Marianne accept your refusal?” Claude asked.

“She was furious at first,” Hubert confessed. “She did set a condition for me to have her hand, and she spoke so ill of Stella that the earl scolded her. When I urged her to marry her other suitor and wished for her happiness, she fell silent, as if before my mention of him she had completely forgotten his existence.”

“And what about her parents?”

“The countess was quite angry with me. She said that she would tell everyone of how horribly I treated her daughter—I asked her to do just that. It truly *is* my fault for dragging this potential marriage out so long because of my indecision. When I offered to pay reparations, the earl firmly declined. He claimed that I wasn’t officially engaged to his daughter anyway.”

“I see.” Claude remained calm before he gave a mischievous grin. “Sounds to me like this incident will heighten your reputation again.”

“I doubt it. I might get a pass for the first time around, but if I’m rejected twice, it implies that something is wrong with me.”

“You think so?” Claude asked.

“I know so,” Hubert replied.

Hubert chuckled. Opal watched the two men converse and was puzzled by this friendship. From a woman’s perspective, friendship between men was truly mysterious. She knew that she had no way of fully comprehending it, but she ended up thinking about it anyway.

“I get it! Work buddies!” Opal cried. That was the only conclusion she could come up with that wasn’t exactly friendship; before she knew it, she’d vocalized her answer.

“Yep,” Claude replied, seemingly having read her mind again. He suppressed a laugh and nodded.

Hubert, however, was completely left behind, instead thinking that Opal might have been talking about his business venture. “Are you referring to Manhest? Did something happen?”

“Huh? N-No,” Opal stammered, snapping back to reality. She remembered that she *did* actually have a suggestion in regards to the city and quickly changed gears. “I do have an idea in regards to the lack of workers in Manhest. Could you two hear me out?”

“I’ve already said what I needed to. I don’t mind,” Hubert replied.

“I’m all ears, of course,” Claude added.

The three switched to business mode as they discussed Opal’s suggestions and hashed out some details.

## 30. Advertisement

Amid the huge crowd, Opal and Claude smiled as they waved and boarded their carriage. The people, meanwhile, were begging for them to return.

“Marchioness Roussel, you *will* come back soon, won’t you?!”

“Thank you for everything Lady Roussel!”

“Please come back soon! I’m begging you!”

“Marquis Roussel, *this* kingdom is your hometown! Please remember that!”

From here, the couple would head to the station a decent distance away, where they’d board the train for the port that would take them back to Taisei. Once Opal sat down beside Claude and their carriage pulled out, she sighed. Ever since that newspaper article came out, Opal and Claude received a warm welcome no matter where they went. Opal tried to be kind and respond to these welcomes, but she felt guilty knowing that the public didn’t know the whole truth and were, in some ways, being fooled.

“The biggest issue is the lack of workers,” Opal mumbled.

“But if we were to view it a different way, that’s the *only* issue,” Claude said. “Everything else is going smoothly.”

The two had finished all their work in the royal capital and had arrived at Manthest to inspect the place. The amount of ore being mined was good, and the land was developing with no issues, but the demand didn’t meet the supply. A major issue for the region was the worker shortage. Needless to say, there were other minor issues that needed to be tackled, and each and every one of them needed to be resolved. But Opal already had a plan to resolve the lack of workers in Manthest.

“Have the preparations been made?” Claude asked.

“They have,” Opal replied. “I even had Alan come all the way out here with me. He said that he didn’t want to publish any lies.”

“Lies, huh?”

“Regarding my name, he claims to have been *hiding the truth*. Not lying.”

“I guess it all depends on how it’s phrased,” Claude mused.

Opal was currently Marchioness Roussel, but she *technically* was the former Duchess McLeod. There were no lies there. She was free to use a higher rank if that suited her needs, or to use both if she wished. However, she wasn’t keen on using Hubert’s rank and had opted to only be associated with Claude.

“Are you sure you don’t need to see a draft?” Claude asked.

“I’m sure,” Opal replied. “Alan might tend to exaggerate things, but his articles are easy to read and understand. If Alan were to write a negative article about Manhest, that would only imply that that was the impression he received. And that’s just fine. We failed to notice it, in that case, and I’d love to read his take on the city regardless.”

“But wouldn’t that drive away the workers that we so desperately need?”

“Then we just need to work hard to improve the city so that we *can* gather more workers. We might have to decrease production for a while. Oh, but this is just my idea. If you, my father, and Hubert are against it, I’ll follow the majority opinion.”

“Yeah? You sound like you’re fired up for a fight, though.”

Claude chuckled. In order to resolve the worker shortage in Manhest, they had decided to post an advertisement in the most popular newspaper read by the public. But Opal didn’t want to just have an ad for workers. She wanted to hire a reporter to do a full-blown feature of the place. A normal advertisement might have been a safe bet, but with an in-depth article, she hoped that potential workers would get a better idea on the workplace environment and type of work that was done in Manhest, and thus increase interest in the area among readers.

She even told Alan that as long as he didn’t interfere in their work, he could even interview the miners themselves. Opal and Claude promised that they would listen to the complaints of not just the workers, but of everyone working hard in Manhest. They further promised to lend an ear and do their best to

improve the working environment for all employees and residents.

"You keep saying negative things, so I assumed that you changed your opinion from yesterday," Opal said. "I thought that you'd become against my idea."

"I'm for it, of course," Claude replied. "And Earl Holloway and McLeod have trusted us with this task. But there are a lot of people out there, and they all have different views. Some people might see Manhest in a more negative light, and I can't guarantee that these views *won't* shackle us later on."

"I know that. I've been on the receiving end of people's ill will my entire life. That's why I can rise up and fight against it. That, and because I know that the world isn't just filled with nasty, mean remarks."

"But for this interview, if you're putting yourself out there, that would also make you vulnerable to any potential attacks and jabs."

Claude seemed to be in a less than good mood since they arrived at Manhest, and Opal finally understood why. She smiled at her husband. Since Opal had become famous anyway, she decided to publicly announce that she was one of the co-owners responsible for the development of Manhest, using herself as a walking advertisement. Claude had been worried for her all this time. He wasn't outright against it because he knew the effect that she had and respected Opal's opinions.

"But if I remain in the shadows and some kind of problem surfaces in Manhest, *you'd* be the one vulnerable to these attacks, Claude," Opal said. "It could be my father or the duke. In any case, we're all working together to resolve any issues, aren't we?"

"But there's a difference between us and you—"

Claude cut himself off, frustrated with what he'd said. *He* might have respected and accepted Opal's talents, but society did not. Opal couldn't help looking hurt, but she regretted her lapse anyway and quickly plastered a smile on her face.

"I'm sure I'll start to hear the words 'this is why women are' more and more often," Opal said. "And that makes me mad. I might get so frustrated that I'll burst into tears. But I'll still fight it all and face those comments. And when I do,

I want you by my side, Claude. When you tell me that things will be okay, as you usually do, I really do feel much better. I feel better with you here."

Claude smiled, his eyes solemn and sincere. "Oh, you can leave that to me. It's the one thing I'm good at."

Opal pressed herself against his warm chest and peered into his eyes. "Thank you."

"I haven't done anything," Claude said.

"You've done everything," she refuted.

Claude gazed into Opal's face and gently touched her soft cheek. Opal almost closed her eyes, expecting a kiss, when he pinched her cheek.

"Hey!" she cried.

"Your cheeks are easy to pinch, as always," Claude said.

"I don't know what you're on about! They're *not* easy to pinch!"

She slapped his hand away and Claude grinned; ever since they were young, he had the habit of pinching her cheeks every now and then.

"Come on, you need to smile," Claude teased. "You'll ruin your reputation, Marchioness Roussel."

"Marchioness Roussel worries not about her reputation!" Opal shouted, stomping Claude's foot as hard as she could. As Claude crouched to the ground and groaned from the pain, Opal added coolly, "Come on, *you* need to smile. You'll ruin your reputation, Marquis Roussel."

"Opal—"

Claude was cut off by a knock on the carriage door. Opal cheerfully answered and the door opened.

"Why don't we solidify the reputation of Marquis and Marchioness Roussel?" Opal suggested.

"What? That you're stubborn and hate to lose?" Claude joked.

"Oh, I don't mind that."

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

After a quick banter, the two smiled and stepped off the carriage. They waved their hands at the crowd within the station, and boarded the VIP railcar for guests. It was a quick ride to the port—they’d arrive in Taisei by sunset.

“Are you ready to head back to Taisei?” Claude asked.

“I was born ready,” Opal replied.

“Then let’s go.”

He nodded at Opal’s firm reply and signaled to the station master outside. The shrill whistle of the train cut through the air, and the seats rattled as the train groaned forward. Opal and Claude continued to smile at the people outside the window, and waved as they departed.

## 31. Information

The sun had already started to set when the ship pulled into the bustling Taisei port.

“Is there some kind of festival at the port today?” Nadja wondered as she stepped onto the deck and looked down. “It’s already so late, but there are so many people.”

“No, nothing like that. They’re just providing a warm welcome,” Claude replied.

“Welcoming whom?” Opal asked, cocking her head to one side. She glanced around, wondering if there was some kind of celebrity on board.

“Us, Opal.”

“Pardon?”

“The Taisei Kingdom has finally realized how fantastic of a couple you two are!” Nadja concluded. She nodded proudly and puffed out her chest.

When Opal had entered Taisei to marry Claude, she’d received no such welcome. She had no inkling that she would ever see so many people waiting for her. The thought gave her pause. But eventually, she smiled at Nadja as she walked off the ramp.

“That’s right. You’re quite popular here, Claude,” Opal said.

“Sure, but they didn’t gather for me,” Claude replied. “I suspect they’re after you, Opal.”

“Me? Do they want to see Marquis Roussel’s bride?”

“You boldly confronted a predator while being a business owner dedicated to supporting less fortunate women. They’re all out here to see you for who you are.”

While some people in the crowd seemed to gather out of a general curiosity, they all seemed to greet her warmly. When Opal and Claude stepped onto the

port, the crowd was held back by both the guards of the port and the men that Claude had hired, barring anyone from getting close to the marquis and marchioness. Opal continued to smile and wave as they made their way through the crowd; she'd become so used to doing it now.

"They knew we'd arrive because all of this was prepared in advance," Opal guessed. Seeing the special railcar at the station helped her put the pieces together.

"I think so," Claude agreed.

The fastest way to return to the royal capital was by train, but there were none available for the general public at this hour.

"Now I understand why everyone's so welcoming," Opal said. "But I still can't understand just how quickly this information has spread. Just a few weeks ago, I was the 'wanton Opal Holloway.' But even the general public knows about me now. It's unnatural and puzzling."

Only when she vocalized her thoughts did she understand what had actually occurred. She saw Claude smiling, and her suspicions turned into confirmations.

"You manipulated information, didn't you?" Opal asked.

"I wouldn't say that," Claude replied. "It's just that until fairly recently, society news wasn't distributed to the general public. The newspaper company we were involved in only increased their sales in the past year or so, and only after that did they start listing more stories about the nobility. Everyone's just interested in nobles."

"And what did you do?"

Opal wasn't about to let Claude off with a vague response, and he gave in. He had nothing to hide, anyway.

"I did my best so that you wouldn't be on the papers here or back in Socille," Claude confessed. "I haven't been involved at all in this recent incident. To be fair, it's difficult to cover up such a large debacle."

"Did you already know Alan?" Opal asked.

"Nope, that was all a huge coincidence."

“I see.”

There were quite a few more questions in Opal’s head, but she gave up on asking them for now. She needed time to organize her thoughts and process the information she received, or she wouldn’t be able to ask the *right* questions. But one thing became clear: The nobility of Taisei didn’t know much about Opal because information about her was being suppressed. Unfortunately, it was difficult to have everyone stop talking about her, and rumors were bound to spread. Opal gazed up at her husband beside her.

“Do you have any other questions?” Claude asked.

“You were hiding your identity—and Marquis Roussel’s—quite well,” Opal said.

“I just made use of everyone’s preexisting misconceptions. That’s all.”

“So you *were* manipulating information!” she cried, angrily slapping his knee.

“Ow!” Claude couldn’t hide his surprise.

“You big liar! You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?!”

She turned away angrily, and Claude did his best to stifle his laughs; as usual, Opal was the one to give in and crack a smile.

The next morning, Opal arose later than usual, tired from her long journey. The sight of the piles of invitations and visiting cards on her desk from people hoping to meet her—all awaiting her reply—made her sigh. Claude was still fast asleep. She wasn’t sure if she was allowed to make the final decision for all of these requests, but in the end she ended up turning down all visitors. *You really intend to visit the manor of someone who just recently returned from abroad?* Opal thought. *These people really should have a care for us.* She had been surrounded by people these past couple of weeks and was frankly exhausted by it all.

When she was still single, Opal had gone to tea parties or concerts nearly every day and often was out and about at night at dinner parties. The energy she had back then amazed her now. Older women had also followed this tight schedule; perhaps Opal in particular simply didn’t have that much stamina. /

*must be psychologically wiped out too. Ugh, to spend my days leisurely in the countryside... Opal had spent nearly seven years in the McLeod Duchy, and all her days were devoted to improving the lives of duchy's residents and helping the land flourish. She knew that socializing was an important aspect of her work, but she yearned to live in the countryside once more.*

*I've heard that the Roussel March is doing well, but we'll be bestowed with the Bocceli Duchy soon. And if rumors are to be believed, the Bocceli Duchy is pretty behind technologically. I'm sure it'll be worth reforming. Opal divided the invitations in two piles: ones she was going to decline and ones she would consider.*

*Ever since Claude had mentioned the Bocceli Duchy, Opal had spent some time looking into it on her own. If the information she had was accurate, the duchy had to be reformed as soon as possible. I don't have a network in Taisei yet, and I've got no friends, but that's not important. I should first focus on reforming the land. There's no way to tell when the next storm or drought could come this way.*

Opal had made an unexpected return to Socille, but she didn't need to worry about Beth anymore. The marchioness would soon receive a letter informing her that the former House McLeod maid had given birth. The act of childbirth might've been filled with surprises, but Opal was sure that the ladies of the facility would support Beth every step of the way.

After the birth, Beth could take some time to herself and slowly consider what she would do next. The other two ladies who'd already given birth to Keymont's children had apparently decided to live in regional cities as widows. Once the child reached adulthood, they would receive a lump sum of inheritance, but until then, each woman would receive enough to get by from a trustee. Once Opal gathered up the invitations, she stood up, already dreading the daunting task that was to come—she had to write a reply to each one, and decline many invitations. *Perhaps a secretary, to handle this busywork on my behalf?*

"I think it's worth considering," Opal said to herself.

She sat at her desk and decided to first draft a plan to visit and inspect the Bocceli Duchy. When Claude woke up, she could consult him for advice. Writing

replies to invitations wasn't important right now. As she busily thought about how she'd visit the duchy, she realized that her exhaustion had vanished. Au contraire, as she began scribbling away in her pocketbook, she was as vigorous and lively as ever.

## 32. A Send-Off

Some time had passed since Opal and Claude had returned to Taisei. Opal was in her room writing letters when her husband entered.

“Opal, could I have some of your time?” Claude asked.

“Sure. Whatever is the matter?” Opal asked, setting her pen down.

She knew from his tone that he had something important to say, and she stood up to sit beside him on the couch.

“I just received a summons from His Majesty,” Claude revealed.

“Did something happen?” Opal asked.

“That’s my guess. I hope it’s not anything too serious, but I think I’ll be back late. I won’t be able to escort you to tonight’s dinner party.”

“I understand. Then I’ll attend by myself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing for you to apologize about. I’ve gotten used to socializing here, so I can take care of myself just fine.”

Her heroic deed in Socille had spread throughout Taisei’s nobility as well, and upon her return, the invitations no longer sounded like they were reaching out to her out of obligation—many were practically begging her to attend, promising a warm welcome to various events. Still, it was a touch unfortunate to attend an event all by herself. But Opal hid her thoughts with a smile.

“Opal, you’re so reliable that sometimes, I get a little lonely,” Claude sighed.

“Oh? Well, I’m just hiding my loneliness and putting on a strong front,” Opal replied teasingly. “I know what must come first.”

“Sorry. I know what I just said sounded quite selfish.”

Claude immediately apologized and backed down. It was still difficult for Opal to act spoiled in these kinds of situations, or even pout. While she was

searching for the perfect response, Claude suddenly kissed her and stood up.

“Huh?!” Opal gasped.

“Forget whatever selfishness I may have spouted,” Claude said. “You’re you, no matter what.”

“Wh-What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

The two had spent most of their lives as childhood friends, practically loving each other as siblings would. But this familiarity unfortunately meant being more flirtatious and acting like normal lovers was quite difficult for them to achieve. Opal was caught off guard with that kiss, but before she could do anything, Claude was already headed for the door.

Before he left, he turned around and said, “I’ll be off.”

“R-Right. Take care,” Opal stammered.

She hastily stood up and gave him a send-off as Claude left with a happy smile. The sudden impulse—wanting to see Claude out of the door of the manor—came to her, but she squashed the idea; it felt silly to chase after him now. All she could do was stare at the closed door, sink into her couch, and let out a loud sigh.

“I’ll never get used to this...” she murmured.

It’d been two months since they had gotten married. Opal had begun to spend a lot more time with Claude, but the atmosphere rarely turned romantic between the two; she often became flustered during surprise attacks. What’s more, Claude seemed to be enjoying her reactions, much to her frustration. *Does he not feel lonely about tonight? No, that’s certainly not the case.* The selfish request that Claude had mentioned earlier was no doubt a reflection of his true feelings.

They might have felt lonely being apart, but there were many things that they had to do separately. Opal was obliged to socialize among those who once snubbed her, while Claude had his own work to do that Opal knew very little about. Though he never explicitly told her what he did, Opal had a few guesses of her own, and she suspected that they weren’t too far from the truth.

Taisei had just overcome a plague and a period of civil unrest, and was now flourishing even more than Socille. However, dissidents—those remnant factions that opposed the king and supported the former prince—still prowled about. For the past few days, Opal had gone out of her way to attend as many tea parties and evening events that she could, and at these events, she asked many seemingly innocent questions about the current state of Taisei under the guise of genuine curiosity, her trusty smile pasted over her face.

The women she met happily funneled Opal what they knew. Among the various rumors, there were many of them that sounded harmless superficially but were quite dark if one knew the full story. *Who exactly is funding this opposing faction anyway?* Any sort of activity required money. While some nobles might have been secretly providing some funds, Opal had no idea where the enormous amount of wealth that certainly was required of a movement like this could have come from. When Alessandro became king, these people couldn't keep hidden assets; the king would've done his research and seen to that.

*Is that why Claude was looking into the Socille bandits?* The bandits had supposedly stolen quite a bit of gold and jewels which would turn into a respectable heap of cash. Perhaps it was somehow siphoned into Taisei, and the rest was used up in Marquis Seims's territory in cities such as Nobori.

The remaining goods that Keymont and his goons had stolen had yet to surface either. Claude might have been looking into it as well, thinking that perhaps these stolen goods were used to fund opposition to the crown. *It's all just conjecture, but it lines up eerily neatly.* As Opal was satisfied with the conclusions she drew on her carriage ride back home, she was eager to check her answers with Claude. He likely couldn't tell her everything just yet, but he would divulge the truth once it was all over.

But when she returned home, she was disappointed to receive a letter from Claude, stating that he would be unable to return home for a while.

“How long is ‘a while’ anyway?” Opal wondered aloud.

Though she knew how unlikely it was that she would be able to confirm her theories with Claude tonight, she was still very disappointed. Claude had

promised Opal that he'd look into reforming the duchy he'd been bestowed tomorrow. They planned on hashing out some related details. The Bocceli Duchy was highly suited for agriculture, but it was behind on technological advancements, and with the entire kingdom requiring funds for its civil war, the residents of the Bocceli Duchy had thus been forced to shoulder heavy taxes. They were exhausted. *And I believe there were a few mines in this area as well.*

Among the numerous mines, the northernmost lead mine was continuing its humble operations, but Opal worried that the fine particles of lead dust from such work would affect the workers' health. She figured it was best to close operations of the lead mine soon. With all this in mind, she was strongly wanting to visit the duchy herself. Opal could handle everything on her own—planning, prospecting, and executing—but she wanted to share the work with another. She wanted to tackle this problem with Claude.

But as it currently stood, she didn't know when her husband would return. It was best for her currently to act by herself.

"Fine, I'll do it all myself. I'm quite good at that!" Opal declared loudly, her determined voice echoing out in the otherwise empty room.

## 33. A Letter

“Are you all by yourself *again*?” Eric asked, voice full of mockery, as he approached Opal. For the past few days, she’d been attending evening parties alone.

“I am,” Opal replied politely.

But Eric continued to be rude. “Don’t you feel pathetic? Every night, you show up to the parties all by yourself. Claude likely has no time for all the socializing you like to do.”

“This is a charity event. May I ask why you are in attendance, Baron Pradeaux? Our donations could help children who lost their parents to the plague or the civil war. There are many other charity events hosted in the evening. Surely, you know that?”

Opal smiled and Eric turned red, but he quickly laughed through his nose.

“Then why isn’t Claude with you? If the both of you are together, I’m sure your contributions to the cause would be all the greater,” Eric said.

These charity events usually required a fee to attend, with the fees themselves being gathered up and donated to charities. No doubt Eric was implying that two people attending would double the donations the Roussels could provide.

“Where is your brother, Viscount Amadi?” Opal inquired, her remarks pricklier than a rose’s thorns. “If the both of you are together, I’m sure *your* contributions to the cause would be no doubt even greater.”

“My brother has some business to tend to, so he’s not in the royal capital...”

Eric stopped himself from fully answering the question, finally understanding Opal’s implication. If the viscount was busy and out of the capital for business, Claude was in the same situation as well. Eric hadn’t changed one bit. Opal didn’t expect the baron to completely turn over a new leaf in such a short amount of time, but she felt it was wiser for him to think before he spoke or

acted. The previous incident had earned his ire, but anger tended to blind one's rational thinking.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," Opal said politely.

She stood up and left before Eric could say anything more. The night was still young, but she planned on greeting the host and leaving soon after. She had plans to visit the Boccelli Duchy tomorrow morning. Opal glanced around the venue and was relieved to find the host quickly. In truth, she wasn't fond of evening and tea parties. However, recent news stories about them had lent to a trend of increased charity parties, with Opal often receiving an invitation as a guest of honor in which she gave out advice to aspiring philanthropists.

This was a wonderful development, and Opal was eager to do whatever she could, but if that caused her to abandon the well-being of her residents, she wasn't practicing what she preached. Crops wouldn't idly wait for her to get things ready; she had to visit the duchy as soon as she could and do whatever was necessary. Certain measures had to be taken. *If my investigation is accurate, there are plenty of places I can improve upon.*

Opal was in her carriage ride back home when she sighed once more. She wanted to embark on this endeavor with Claude and visit the duchy with him. As much as she waited, no response came from her husband. Perhaps he was too busy or the situation he was in didn't allow for communication; Opal wasn't angry, but she was very worried. Ultimately, she decided that no news was good news, and decided to act on her plan at once.

Upon returning to the manor, Opal was immediately handed a letter by the butler. *Who would send a letter at such a late hour?* She checked the sender, but the name didn't ring a bell. She didn't know of an Alex, but she went with her intuition and hurriedly unsealed the envelope.

"Oh my..." Opal gasped.

Alex was a false name—the sender was actually King Alessandro. He stated that Claude was staying in a royal villa. However, the king's letter wasn't simply to notify about Claude's well-being and location; he suggested a prank, asking if Opal could visit the villa tomorrow morning to surprise her husband.

"Hmm, what should I do..."

Luckily, this villa was en route to the Bocceli Duchy. If she left early, there wouldn't be too much of a delay. This was a childish prank, no doubt, but this was the kind of person that Alessandro was. Motivated by the hint of nostalgia Alessandro's suggestion roused in her, Opal decided she wouldn't mind going along with his plan. There were still a few questions that she wanted answers to as well. And so, Opal told her servants about her slight change in plans and eagerly went to sleep with hope filling her heart.

The next morning, Opal left with Nadja, some other ladies-in-waiting, maids, and manservants. Her travel took two carriages, and both reached the villa without any issues. The soldiers at the gate were surprised at her arrival, but they saw Opal's guards and the carriages with the house's crest, leaving no room for doubt. They allowed her to pass. She received the same treatment within the villa as well and was quickly allowed to head to the room where Claude was staying.

Opal felt like the security was too lax—this was her first time visiting after all—but she felt like those issues could be dealt with later and entered the living room. Extravagant furniture decorated the space without looking too gaudy. Overall, the rooms were furnished to Claude's taste. The biggest perk, perhaps, was that his room was in the west wing, meaning that the sunrise didn't trickle into his eyes. It was carefully located in the shadow of the nearby watchtower so that the sunset wouldn't shine in the room either. Judging from the servants' reactions, it was clear that Claude often stayed in this villa. *I found a new side to him here.*

Opal finished the tea that was provided for her, and stood up. She'd been in the room for a while, but Claude still showed no signs of waking. She had even engaged in idle chatter with the maid and wasn't particularly quiet when she entered the room initially, but Claude didn't make a peep. He might have gone to bed late the night prior, but it was high time for him to rise. Opal headed for the door that led to the bedroom and knocked.

"Claude?" she called.

There was no answer, but she could hear some rustling beyond the door. Clearly, someone was inside, and she knocked once more.

“Claude? I’m coming in.”

Praying that she didn’t get the wrong room, she opened the door and froze in place. Upon the bed was a woman, who shrieked upon seeing Opal.

“Opal?!” Claude spluttered hastily.

He was half naked in bed as usual, but in the same bed was a mysterious lady who—until she had drawn the covers up hastily—was also half naked. As Opal was greeted by the sight of the two in bed, she gripped the handle of the door and smiled.

## 34. Departure

“Claude? Who is she?” Opal asked.

“I...don’t know,” Claude confessed.

“I see.”

“What? How could you forget me? How cold you are, dear marquis,” the woman whined.

“May I have the lady leave? I’ll be waiting in the living room,” Opal said quietly.

She kept the door open and returned to the living room, leaving the other woman’s protests behind her. Opal was determined to drown it out as she sat back onto the sofa while sipping on a new cup of tea. Claude entered, looking apologetic.

“Where is she now?” Opal asked.

“I had her leave from a different door,” Claude said.

“I see.”

Inside, Opal was relieved that she wouldn’t have to see that woman again, and gazed intently at Claude’s messy hair as he sat across from her. For a split second, his head had vanished from her line of sight as he bowed profusely.

“I’m sorry, Opal. I made you witness something unpleasant,” Claude apologized.

“Could you explain the situation to me?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He raised his head, trying to gauge his wife’s emotions.

Opal stood up and poured him a cup of tea.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No problem. Now, go on,” she urged as she smiled and sat back down onto the sofa.

Claude nodded with an awkward smile. “I’m really, *really* sorry. I know this sounds awful, but I seriously don’t remember much. I remember heading to bed late last night...”

“Did you drink any liquor?”

“No, not a single drop.”

“I see...”

He could’ve easily blamed it on a drunken mistake, but seeing Claude reply so honestly made Opal giggle.

“Aren’t you angry with me?” he asked with suspicion.

“Oh, I am. I’m furious, in fact,” Opal replied. “But I want to know your reason for doing so. In short, you woke up, and she was already there, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t even notice her until you called out to me. I’m sorry.”

He earnestly lowered his head once more, and at that Opal’s anger with him dissipated. She had no idea how he *couldn’t* notice a woman slipping into his bed, but she was keenly aware that Claude really wasn’t a morning person.

“No matter,” Opal replied. “I’m not angry with you anymore. The question is, who set this up? Even if this was His Majesty’s doing, I won’t forgive him.”

“His Majesty?” Claude inquired.

“That’s right. I was called out by this letter, you see.”

She took out the letter she received last night from her bag and handed it to Claude. He frowned upon reading it.

“This isn’t from His Majesty,” Claude said. “The signature looks very similar, but this is a forgery. There’s no seal either.”

“I thought so,” Opal relied. “I wondered if there was no seal because the contents of this note seemed rather personal, but I wasn’t sure if His Majesty was the type to obstruct you while you were working.”

“Wait, so you carelessly came here while knowing that this might’ve been a trap?”

“I’ve got guards with me,” Opal pointed out. “And I’d imagine that the suspect

can't do much within the royal villa. Also, I wouldn't put it past the king to pull this sort of trick to shock you."

"You've got a point there..."

Indeed, Opal had wondered if she was walking into a trap the night prior, but she felt that it was all the more reason to reunite with her beloved. She kept that bit to herself. Still, Opal was disappointed for a moment, wondering if Alessandro was the type to pull such a nasty prank, but before the feeling could settle, Claude hastily came to the king's aid.

"He would never try to fake an affair with another woman or anything," Claude said. "This is a bit too mean, even by his standards. He's more the type to pull an innocent prank so that we can spend more time together, that's all."

"I see..." Opal said.

Claude sighed, clearly looking tired. "This isn't really a prank. It's closer to harassment. If this was anyone else but you, Opal, I doubt I would've been able to explain myself and apologize."

"Which means that whoever did this wants to tear us apart," Opal guessed. "I'm suspecting that a man is behind it."

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm just speculating here, but if this was done by a woman, she would be after you. She'd want you for herself. And if so there's no way she'd send *another* woman to hatch this scheme."

"Makes sense." Claude nodded along. "That woman was apparently hired to do this, but I wasn't able to find out who hired her. She mentioned that if she babbled, she'd lose one of her regulars."

"Goodness," Opal exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me so from the start?"

"Because it just sounds like I'm making silly excuses," Claude replied, slumping his shoulders.

It was a bad habit of his to try to solve everything by himself, but Opal often did the same; she couldn't blame him too much without sounding like a hypocrite.

“But you must tell me such important information. What was the goal of this?” Opal wondered.

“Only a handful of people know that I’m here,” Claude replied. “I’m not really in hiding, but maybe the suspect wanted to stop me from acting.”

“You can’t come back home yet, I’m guessing?”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Got it.”

Opal was disappointed, but she did her best to not let it show. If this ploy was meant to stop Claude somehow, she was worried; he was putting himself in danger.

“Are you sure this isn’t dangerous?” she asked.

“No worries there,” Claude replied.

“I understand.”

She didn’t fully trust his words, but she couldn’t get in his way either. Opal decided to take his words at face value for now—she took a deep breath and smiled.

“I suppose we’ll be living separately for a while,” Opal 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 replied. “When will you depart?”

With Opal headed for the duchy, they hoped that the suspect assumed that the couple was having a nasty fight. They had no idea who was behind this silly farce, but Opal decided to leave it in Claude’s hands—this suspect had dared to impersonate the king, after all.

“I’m actually headed for the Bocceli Duchy right now,” Opal replied. “If I keep putting it off, it’ll be harvest season before I know it. I thought it was better to act quickly and do what I can. I sent a letter, just in case, but I’m glad I got to tell you my plans directly.”

“Right now?” Claude asked in surprise.

"Is there a problem?" Opal inquired, tilting her head to one side.

The two had been in discussions about inspecting the duchy; it wasn't odd for Opal to act. Claude soon reverted to his usual, casual expression.

"I just think that the residents will be surprised," Claude said.

"I would imagine so," Opal replied. "But I want to see them act naturally instead of faking enthusiasm."

"I agree. I think most of them will welcome you warmly, though. But there might be some people who oppose the king still lurking about. Please, *please* be careful about your surroundings."

"Of course."

Opal nodded firmly and stood up. If she didn't depart soon, she'd be late for her lodging for the night. She'd already secured a room, but under a different name.

"I probably shouldn't send you off, I take it?" Claude asked.

"You're right," Opal agreed. "I'll just leave this place and act hurt by what I saw."

"Okay. Then I'll act angry and pretend to search for that woman. I might be able to find whoever let her in, or anyone who was in contact with her."

"That sounds like a plan. Be careful, Claude."

"I will. And if anything happens to you—no, even if there's nothing going on, please contact me. Send it to the manor."

"Got it."

Despite saying that he wouldn't see her off, he stood up and walked with her to the door. Opal looked up at her beloved and smiled.

"I'll be off," Opal said.

"Good luck, Opal," Claude replied.

He gave her a brief hug and quickly released her from his grasp before taking a step back. Opal's smile turned into a look of embarrassment by the gentle send-off, but the moment she closed the door, she stomped off, clearly

displaying her fury for the world to see. With a stern expression, she headed for Bocceli's duchy.

## Extra Story: A Picnic

“Why didn’t you come?” Claude asked.

“Because my brother told me that women only drag men down,” Opal replied. “He said that I shouldn’t come.”

Claude was a friend of Opal’s older brother. The young girl was ecstatic when Claude had invited her to a picnic, but on the day of the event, her older brother had ordered her to stay behind. Opal pouted and hid away in her favorite spot. The five-year-old was furious that she was excluded not because of her age, but due to the fact that she was a woman.

When Claude had returned from the picnic and came searching for her, she remained hidden despite having her name called.

“You could’ve just ignored all that,” Claude said, sounding glum. “I invited you because I knew that *you* would be okay.”

“What do you mean?” Opal asked.

“Well, you’re very brave.”

“Brave?” Opal’s heart fluttered at those words.

“Yes,” Claude said, “so stop pouting and come down, Opal.”

Yet Claude’s weary remark only made her stubborn once more.

“No,” she shouted. “I’m not pouting or anything!”

“Right...”

Claude sighed at the foot of the tree Opal was currently perched in. Opal was sitting atop one of the tree’s large limbs—her favorite spot. After a long silence, she heard footsteps slowly fading into the distance. When she hastily looked down between the gaps of the branches, she saw Claude walking away. Opal immediately regretted what she’d done. *I shouldn’t have been so stubborn*, she thought. But it was too late for that. Claude had gone out of his way to pick her up, and he surely was disappointed that his olive branch had been rejected.

Opal stood up, wondering if she should chase after him and apologize, but she soon sat back down. What if she got rejected *after* chasing him down? Only then did she realize just how heartless her attitude was, and she quivered ever so slightly. As seconds ticked by, she felt more pained and depressed by what she'd done. Claude must've been furious with how stubborn and dishonest she was; the thought of his rejection filled her mind and terrified her. Amid her confusion, one thing gradually became clear.

"I have to apologize!" she decided.

It was her fault for being so stubborn. Even if he ended up hating her, it was only proper for her to apologize. She gathered up her courage and steeled her resolve as she tried to stand up once more. Just then, a pair of footsteps echoed throughout the area again, becoming louder and louder. When she peeked down, she saw the top of Claude's head, and Opal widened her eyes in shock as he skillfully climbed up her tree.

"Could you hold this for me?" he asked, offering a basket to her.

"Okay," Opal said, quizzically receiving it.

The basket was apparently too bulky for him to hold while sitting on his favorite branch. Opal averted her gaze from Claude and peered into the basket; she was stunned by what she saw.

"Claude," Opal started.

"I asked Marcia to get me some things," Claude replied.

"Are you going on a picnic again?"

"This *is* a picnic."

The tree branch he was on made it so that he was right beside her, and he reached into the basket, taking out some thin slices of bread and cheese—treats that Marcia had quickly whipped up for them. The basket also contained some fruit along with a bottle of juice that was sealed with a cork.

"C'mon, let's eat," Claude said. "I heard you haven't had lunch yet."

"Mhm..." Opal replied feebly, receiving the bread from him.

She felt like she'd burst into tears, but she refused to have this lovely picnic

ruined by her crying. Opal mustered the brightest smile she could offer.

“Thank you, Claude.”

“No problem. You need to balance yourself since we’re not eating on solid ground, but you’ll be fine, won’t you?” Claude grinned.

“Of course I will!” Opal received the courage that she needed to add, “I’m sorry about what I did earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

Opal couldn’t help but ask, “Why do you always forgive me so easily? Why aren’t you angry with me?”

It always happened, without fail. Whenever Opal did something she felt was wrong and apologized to Claude, she was forgiven without a second thought. It always puzzled her—surely, Claude could be angry with her if he wished.

“Because you always apologize, especially when you feel like what you did was wrong,” Claude replied. “How could I get angry at that?”

“You’re so weird,” Opal mumbled.

“You think so?” He laughed.

Opal was happy to see such a gentle smile on his face, and she decided to focus on eating.



# Afterword

Hello, it's nice to meet you all. I'm Mori. Thank you for picking up the second volume of *Duchess in the Attic*. Once again, I strongly believe that you picked up this volume thanks to the wonderful color illustrations done by Huyuko Aoi. Opal and Claude are living energetically with the royal palace as their background, which accurately portrays the content of this second volume. Yeah, there's nothing about an attic in this volume, ha ha.

A bit of a spoiler warning for this volume: This is about Beth the servant, who had been repulsed by Opal in the first volume and treated the duchess horribly, finding herself in an awful situation of her own. Opal couldn't let Beth's situation slide, so she decided to return to her home nation to set things straight.

Beth was the trigger that forced Opal to fight against society in her home nation, hoping to somehow revolutionize it. But this time around, she has a reliable ally on her side—Claude. I feel like you can read this volume without worrying about her too much.

As I'm writing this all out, I keep thinking that this wasn't how it was supposed to be. I'd even told my editor that I planned on having Opal live a new life with Claude in their land as they work to reform the agricultural issues there. I also had my editor think of a completely different cover illustration before that was all scrapped for this story... I'm truly, truly sorry for the trouble that I caused.

And yet, my editor didn't even flinch at my sudden decisions and managed to pivot to quickly adapt the new plot that I came up with. Thank you so much.

Thank you to Huyuko Aoi for handling the illustrations for this volume as well. They look wonderful. This book was able to be published due in no small part to my editor, Huyuko Aoi, and of course, to everyone who picked up this volume. Thank you so much, from the bottom of my heart.

I'll keep doing my best so that I can write interesting stories for you all to read. Truly, I'd like to thank all of you too.

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Author: Mori

Illustrator: Huyuko Aoi



# Duchess in the ATTIC



# Duchess *in the* ATTIC

Presented by: *Mori*  
Illustrations by: *Huyuko Aoi*



Then I'll make you regret it.  
I'll make you grumble about  
marrying such an obstinate,  
strong-minded woman.

I'm looking  
forward to it.



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Duchess in the Attic: Volume 2

by Mori

Translated by piyo Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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