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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

T'S DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE the future we desire, especially when fate takes us down a path that we don't want, and we lack the means to resist. No matter how carefully we make choices and conduct ourselves, reality can be a harsh, cruel mistress.

As people poured into their local temple, they appeared better groomed than usual at such an early hour. Everyone was in formal wear—suits and dresses—ready to celebrate the joyous occasion. Gray clouds loomed in the skies above, but everyone inside the temple was smiling.

From crowded pews, people kept their eyes glued to a young woman clad in a pure-white wedding dress. Her name was Marie Fou Lafan. Her voluminous hair was carefully braided and pinned, and a veil fell across her face, hiding the makeup that had taken considerable time to perfect for the day's event.

Marie gazed out through her thin veil at the temple's stained glass windows. This building's architecture reminded her of a church from her previous world. The image in the stained glass portrayed the Saint, who had been deeply involved in founding Holfort Kingdom. She, too, wore a pure-white dress and was depicted with her three holy relics: a bracelet, necklace, and staff. There was a deep fondness in the Saint's expression. It contrasted starkly with Marie's, which was clouded, like the skies outside.

This would've been a happy occasion, ordinarily. The weather was beyond anyone's control, but Marie had never gotten to indulge in a wedding itself during her previous life. She'd always wanted to see her and her groom's families gather to watch their ceremony and celebrate. That was one dream she'd desperately hoped to achieve on this second go-around.

Her mood had plummeted to a heretofore unforeseen low.

Life's just hopeless, isn't it? Marie wanted to curse her fate. She was being forced against her will into a wedding before she'd even finished her first full year at the academy.

She snuck a glance at her relatives in the pews. All their faces wore joyous smiles. Normally, they never even counted her as a proper family member, but today every single one of them had attended. Marie knew her parents, specifically, were excited, though not out of a genuine desire to celebrate their daughter's marriage. Most aristocrats, Marie not least among them, were loath even to class the Lafans as proper nobility; nonetheless, they had good reason to be here.

Viscount Lafan, Marie's father, sat beside her mother. He was a lanky man, thin beyond what was considered normal. That could probably be attributed to his alcoholism; his appearance reflected his unhealthy habits. The unnaturally ruddy hue of his cheeks suggested he'd already started drinking today.

"Hard to believe our useless youngest girl managed to fetch such a high price," said the viscount, a little too loudly. "At least now our problems are solved."

Beside the viscount was a plump woman—Marie's mother. She was already draped in presumably newly purchased jewelry. "Such a show of filial piety, marrying to resolve our debts," she purred. "If we'd known how much she'd do for us, we would've doted on her a little more."

Marie hadn't wished for this wedding. Her family had sold her off to a man in whom she had no interest.

She dropped her gaze to the floor. Not one to wallow, she instead channeled her emotions into rage at her family for their part in this. *They'll rue the day, I swear!* She ground her teeth, practically vibrating out of her skin with righteous indignation.

The bridegroom strolled toward Marie. The man heaved an exaggerated sigh as he stopped beside her, wrinkling his nose in an obvious display of disgust. Eyeing him, she cursed him inwardly. Why do you look so miffed? I'm the one who feels cheated here!

Marie's betrothed was an uncomfortably overweight man in his thirties. Despite the years he had on her, he was like a petulant child who refused to mask his dismay over being here. He wore a crisp top-of-the-line suit, but his lack of natural grace made it look ill fitting.

The man peeled his gaze away from Marie, as if refusing to so much as look at her, and grumbled, "Why do I have to marry this half-pint? I prefer women with proper curves. Her looks completely miss the mark."

Marie's blood boiled at his audacity. As if his behavior wasn't bad enough, he had the nerve to openly denigrate her. Your family came to mine, asking for this marriage!

Mentally, Marie was much older than she appeared, since she had memories of her past life. In a physical sense, though, she was only sixteen. Per this world's laws, she was an adult of marriageable age. But whether this union was legal or not, Marie hadn't wanted it. She didn't love this man, and she certainly didn't love being robbed of what should've been an enjoyable student life at the academy. Traditionally, if a woman married early, she dropped out.

Never in a million years could she have imagined her family would sell her off like this. The marriage itself was difficult to stomach, too.

This is total bull! How can such a miserable, unwanted wedding happen in the world of a freakin' otome game?! I wanted a proper ceremony with a man I love!

Ever since Marie reincarnated into this otome game, her life had been nothing but hardship. As she polished her healing abilities, the only dream she'd had to cling to was the academy. All the effort she'd put into her magic had come at the cost of her body's growth; learning that had been a considerable shock.

Marie had never told her family about those healing abilities. Thinking she was useless, they were already happy to sell her off. Who knew how they'd exploit her if they discovered her hidden potential?

She didn't trust them.

These people were far worse than her family in her previous life. They were, after all, happy to pawn her off on a rich house in exchange for the promise that their debts would be paid.

Do you jerks have any idea how much misery I had to endure to get here? I finally enrolled at the academy, and although things didn't work out like I

imagined, it's been pretty fun! Now you're ruining it!

A temple priestess came up to the couple, smiling. She wore a golden necklace and bracelet, and carried a similarly golden staff in her hand. The priestess had doubtless overheard the bridegroom griping. The only reason she didn't knit her brows in disapproval was presumably the considerable remuneration his family had offered for the temple's venue and services.

"It is such a blessing that your houses are to unite on this most glorious day. It must be the divine work of the Saint herself. Now then, are you both ready to proceed with the ceremony?"

The bridegroom pulled a face. "Hurry up and get this over with." He had no interest in this marriage, nor in the wedding ceremony itself. After all, he hadn't asked for this, either.

The whole point of this union was to bind their families, regardless of what they actually wanted. The rest of the aristocracy disdained the groom's family, as they were new money. Thus, they sought to incorporate a *real* aristocrat into their line, but not Marie specifically.

As for why the groom's house was going to such an extreme, that boiled down to the unique way in which they'd risen to power. For the most part, their peers either despised them or consorted with them only to serve their own ends; none would discuss any marital alliance. That was why the house needed real noble blood—to gain legitimacy—and they could also have done so via any noblewoman other than Marie.

The priestess's smile strained a bit at the bridegroom's boorish demand, but that disappeared almost instantly. She'd seemingly reminded herself just how much money the temple had received from his family.

"Very well. Let's hurry along, then. Drawn-out speeches must be quite a bore to the younger generation," the priestess said sweetly, focusing all her attention on the bridegroom. She gave Marie only a fleeting glance. Marie's displeasure at this unwanted wedding must've been plain as day on her face, yet the priestess's eyes held not a mote of sympathy. She was probably used to these arrangements.

In this particular otome game, the protagonist had enjoyed a storybook

romance with her love interest. At the end, she and her beloved tied the knot, and the bride and groom were warmly celebrated at their wedding. Yet, in this fantasy world, such a thing was also a fantasy—a dream achievable only by a protagonist.

This world is sickeningly harsh for an otome game. I mean, couldn't it stand to be a little nicer to me? I can't believe I've gotta marry this pig. In a single glance, Marie had figured out her future husband. He'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and had never experienced hardship. He wanted for nothing, since his parents lavished him with everything, and he'd grown up selfish and conceited.

This was the man she was supposed to marry? She could already picture how their marriage would go. After the ceremony, they would live as a loveless husband and wife. As soon as she gave birth to a child for him, the odds were good that he and his family would see her as a tool that had served its purpose. Thereafter, they would treat her like excess baggage.

My last life was an absolute failure, so I swore to myself I'd do better this time around. I vowed to find happiness. This is so freakin' unfair! Marie hadn't struggled and clawed her way this far only to land in such a miserable position. Her eyes shimmered with tears of frustration.

But there was nothing she could do.

However she responded to this predicament, she couldn't wriggle out of it, no matter how intensely she wished it could be otherwise. Her mind sought to escape reality, imagining that someone might swoop in to save her. The first face to fill those thoughts was hazy, indiscernible: the face of her older brother in her last life.

Ha ha. I can't believe I'm still thinking about him after all this time. Her inner voice was self-deprecating, but Marie genuinely believed that her brother would've thought up some way to save her if he were present. Only in hindsight had she realized how reliable he always was. Save me, Big Bro.

In her previous life, Marie had mostly just called him "Brother" or "Bro," only whipping out the entreating, childlike "Big Bro" when she wanted something from him.

As Marie silently pleaded for her brother's help, her mind wandered back to the beginning—back to how all this had started.

Chapter 1: Summer Break at the Bartforts'

Less than a week of summer vacation was left.

I, Leon Fou Bartfort, had returned to my family's territory for the break. On this particular morning, I found myself waking even later than usual. I say "later than usual," but it was only seven in the morning. Prior to enrolling in the academy, I'd woken at the crack of dawn to help with household chores. Compared to that, this was absolutely laggardly.

I stretched, unable to suppress a yawn. After fishing out a shirt and some pants—and only half buttoning the former—I shuffled out of my room looking disheveled and unkempt. Then I lumbered downstairs. The creaky steps were drowned out by a ruckus that immediately banished my last dregs of drowsiness.

"What's with all the noise this early in the morning?" I grumbled, giving up on my shirt buttons.

Luxion floated at my right shoulder. "Marie is playing with your younger brother," he informed me. "Of greater concern is how late you sleep, Master. The latest of anyone in your household. I suspect you've let yourself slip due to the extended break from the academy. I request you address the issue promptly."

I'd asked only one simple question, but for some reason, Luxion had mixed unsolicited advice into the response.

Luxion was an AI installed on an enormous spaceship. His small unit beside me was a metal sphere with a red lens at its center—a compact, portable extension of the ship AI. It was only about the size of a softball, and it almost made him seem cute. Sadly, although Luxion referred to me as his master and followed my commands obediently, he was still an absolutely constant nag.

"I woke up at seven," I reminded him. "That's plenty early."

"The rest of your family was awake and attending to chores well before then."

"Yeah, well, morning starts earlier in the countryside," I said, trying to distract him from his criticisms.

As I reached the foot of the staircase, the source of the ruckus neared. I looked in its direction. Marie and my little brother Colin came barreling down the hallway from the direction of the living room.

"Come get me!" Colin chirped over his shoulder.

He was still pretty young. It was good to see him so happy and energetic, even when the day had just begun. Luxion's gaze followed Colin closely as he whizzed past with Marie hot on his heels.

"This pattern seems to have become more regular of late," the AI said. "That suggests Marie has integrated herself well into the Bartfort household."

My face puckered. "I guess so."

When Marie first arrived, she'd been on her best behavior for my family, representing herself as a delicate, charming young lady. If her rage-contorted face a second ago was anything to go by, that mask had fully come off by this point.

"Wait right there, you little turd!" Marie screeched after Colin, brow firmly furrowed in concentration.

I could only assume this cat-and-mouse game had resulted from some prank on Colin's part. It must've been successful. Colin seemed cheerful, at any rate.

"I don't wanna!" he shouted back.

Watching the two locked in this cartoonish chase, I heaved a sigh. "Bickering again? I don't get how they keep this up all the time."

"Bickering indeed. Your younger brother's teasing was the cause," Luxion said. "He and Marie were nervous around each other initially, but they are now much more relaxed."

"'Relaxed'? More like unable to contain themselves."

From Colin's perspective, Marie was probably like a slightly older sister.

Despite her small stature, she tried her best to act mature, so he loved picking on her. He wouldn't have gotten any gratification from it if Marie could've shrugged him off. However, she took it seriously each time, which only encouraged him.

I wish she'd act a little more composed, like someone her age should.

As my old man, Balcus, passed through the house, he noticed Colin darting around. He grimaced, and his fist came down right on Colin's noggin. The blow made my brother yelp in pain, tears appearing in the corners of his eyes.

"Owie!"

"Colin, don't tease Rie. Need I remind you that she's an important guest? Yet you keep annoying her," my old man chided. This would only be the start of his sermon.

Marie, who'd screeched to a halt, fidgeted nervously. "Oh, um, Baron Bartfort, no need to go this far on my behalf. I'm not really angry."

That wasn't the most convincing lie. She'd been hot on Colin's heels, screaming at the top of her lungs, moments earlier.

"Sorry about him, Rie," Dad said with a genuinely apologetic look. "It's not that he dislikes you. I hope you won't bear a grudge toward him for this." Dad set his hand on Colin's head and pressed down, forcing him to bow to Marie.

"Oh, of course not," Marie said stiffly. Her eyes darted away.

Sensing how awkward she felt, my older brother Nicks stepped in. He shot me a look, as if blaming me for not breaking this up. "Sure is noisy in here for this hour."

"Good morning, sir," Luxion greeted him politely. "You woke early to practice swordplay outside, correct? What an excellent and effective use of your time. If only Master could learn from your example."

Of course he had to shoehorn in a complaint about me.

Nicks forced a smile. "Mornin', Leon's li'l buddy. Glad you seem in high spirits. Anyway, I'm guessing Colin's in hot water for bothering Rie again, huh?"

"Yep. Can't believe they aren't sick of this routine yet. They're almost like real

siblings," I said with a hearty laugh.

Nicks looked surprised. He tilted his head. "Well, I guess that's not far from the truth. They'll be siblings-in-law."

My jaw dropped. "What?"

Nicks stared at me blankly. He blinked a few times. "Huh?"

"Uh, I mean, you said..." I sought the words and came up short, floundering a bit until I finally composed myself and demanded, "Why would Marie and Colin ever be siblings-in-law?"

I still hadn't fully comprehended Nicks's comment. Was he still half-asleep or something? Or maybe I'd misheard?

Nicks's exasperated stare said otherwise. "Are you serious?" he asked. "Or still half-asleep?" That was the same thing I'd wondered about him.

"Uh, no—" I started.

"Oh, cut the crap, Leon. You dragged an academy girl here to our home, and you've spent over a month together. Any outside observer seeing that would figure you're engaged, or as good as."

His words held water. Marie wasn't actually my fiancée, but the optics weren't great. We'd spent our entire summer break together. If I were an unrelated third party, I'd probably have gotten the wrong idea, too, and assumed we planned to tie the knot.

"The rest of the world would consider you two as good as promised to one another. Given the degree to which you value decency and appearances, you should make your relationship with her official," Luxion suggested, happy to capitalize on the moment for his own agenda. He jumped on every chance to push Marie and me together.

"You shut up!" I said, pointing at him, then turned back to Nicks. "C'mon, you know how it is with Marie. She couldn't go back to her own folks, so I just figured I'd invite her to hang out here. To be nice."

From what Marie had told me, the Lafans were plagued with problems, to the point that they'd told her not to come home. Her only choice had been to stay

at the academy. She'd confided to me about her plan to spend the break dungeon diving to make extra cash. It was so pitiful that I'd invited her to my home instead. Still, it should've gone without saying that I had no ulterior motive.

At any rate, Marie preferred tall, hot guys with loads of cash. I fulfilled the last criterion by virtue of having struck it big as an adventurer, but I wasn't tall, nor conventionally attractive. I was just a regular dude. Not her type.

As for me, I liked girls with substantial boobs, and Marie was flat as a board. We couldn't have been further from each other's types if we tried.

Nicks's eyes softened as he gazed at Marie, who was still fidgeting nervously after covering for Colin. "You aren't gonna find another girl as sweet as her, however hard you look. Plus, Ma and Pops already think you're planning to get hitched."

"You're kidding me!" I burst out.

Was that why they'd been so strangely kind to Marie ever since she turned up? If I didn't clear up this misunderstanding quickly, it was bound to get way, way out of hand.

Nicks's face fell, and he sighed. "Must've been nice, landing a partner the second you enrolled at the academy. I'm having a really rough time. Can't find anyone."

It did sound like Nicks was getting put through the wringer. Unlike me, he was in the academy's general class. It was full of knight families' children and the second, third, and other younger sons of barons. Courtship in that group was very different from that in the upper class, to which I belonged. I doubted Nicks faced trouble nearly as bad as what we were up against, but that didn't mean he wasn't struggling.

"Well, shouldn't you be able to find a partner in your class pretty quick?" I asked. "Or have I got that wrong?"

Nicks scratched his head. "The problem is, girls in the general class want to live in the city. They're looking for a partner with connections and prospects so they can live comfortably in the royal capital, or at least on the mainland. I'm

not even a satisfactory backup option."

Once Nicks graduated, he would have to leave the household and strike out on his own. Zola's son, our half brother Rutart, was the eldest of the household and would inherit everything from my old man, including his title. Nicks was essentially a spare in case something happened. After Rutart became baron, Nicks would be tossed aside, so his position made marriage a challenge.

Nicks's got it rough, too. I wished I could help, but I had my hands full with my own issues. In fact, I was *more* in need of help here.

As eager to end this bleak conversation as I was, Nicks changed the subject. "So, Leon, when'll you guys head back to the academy? The day before school starts? Two days before?"

If I had my way, we'd return the day of the opening ceremony. There were too many preparations to make before then, though; we had no choice but to head back early. Then there was the weather to worry about. If it got bad, we wouldn't be able to fly, so a day or two before would actually be cutting things kind of close. It was customary to leave even earlier.

"That's the plan. Can't believe the break's already over. I really don't want to go back to bride hunting." Just thinking about it made my stomach knot with dread.

Nicks shared my sentiments. "Don't remind me," he said.

We sighed in unison, trading beleaguered looks, but something about that was so hilarious that we both let out bitter laughter.

"I'm graduating this year. If I can't land a girl soon, I might end up some old lady's second husband." Nicks said it with a touch of dark humor, but my heart ached with sympathy. As he implied, someone in his circumstances might need to get hitched to a widow, who in most cases would be significantly older. Nicks would be lucky if there was only a decade between them. It was perfectly possible that she'd be twenty years or more his senior.

"C'mon, don't give up yet." I nudged his shoulder. "If I can do anything to help, just say the word."

"Knock it off," he shot back, pulling a face at me. "And don't look at me like

that. Nothing makes me feel more pathetic than pity from my little bro."

Why did this world have to be so hard on guys? Maybe the problem was more how vicious it was toward us background characters. Some guys in this world didn't have it so rough, after all—namely the love interests, who were all heirs to great houses.

Those guys were probably enjoying their summer break with the protagonist Olivia at this very moment. Oh, how I envied them.

A few days later, Marie and I made our way to a floating island near my family's territory. Luxion had located and hauled it all the way here for me. This would be my territory in the future, but at the moment, it was deserted.

Thanks to the robots Luxion had manufactured, which toiled day and night, the island would be fit for settlement soon enough. Thus far, Luxion and his minions had built me a cozy little log cabin—a secret base, if you will. I'd invited Marie to check it out, since we had more in common than most, having both reincarnated into this world from Japan. As for what we were doing there...

"Today we'll have grilled freshwater fish with a touch of salt for flavor."

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!" Marie squealed in delight. "You've got pickled veggies, too!"

We made a habit of retreating here every once in a while to enjoy nostalgic flavors from our former lives, including this freshly steamed white rice, clear soup, grilled freshwater fish, and last but not least, lightly pickled vegetables.

A normal Japanese person would probably consider this a boring, run-of-the-mill meal, but when you lived in another country—or worse, another world entirely, like us—getting your hands on even these dishes was a real challenge. I couldn't have put the meal together all by my lonesome, that's for sure.

I was lucky to have Luxion as a partner. He'd originally been built as some kind of migrant ship. Survivors of old humanity were meant to board him and escape to outer space, where they would search for a new home. He'd come equipped with the necessary features to aid them in that endeavor.

Luxion was basically the only reason we had white rice and clear soup.

"I do kind of wish we had grated radish and soy sauce, though," Marie said with a frown, not entirely satisfied with our limited menu. "I'm getting tired of this clear soup, too. I'd love *miso* soup. I mean, we're Japanese. Being Japanese and eating miso soup kind of go hand in hand."

I nodded repeatedly, entirely agreeing. "I know exactly what you mean. Unfortunately, miso and soy sauce are both fermented. They take time to make."

Marie shot Luxion a look. "You're not as great as you make yourself out to be. Are you *really* a cheat-tier cash-shop item? You should have miso and soy sauce *preprepared*."

"Since it appears you have forgotten, allow me to remind you that you two *insisted* these products be fully natural. That is why they require considerable time to create. I have explained on multiple occasions that I could produce a suitable substitute with an identical flavor and mouthfeel," Luxion shot back haughtily. "You refused it."

Given Luxion's exceptional resources, making a substitute would have been a piece of cake. But, at the end of the day, a substitute was only that—a substitute. We might get something that tasted *like* miso soup, but it wouldn't *be* miso soup.

"I want the real thing," I said.

"Me too," Marie agreed.

We declared that we were going to eat, ignoring Luxion's response as we dug into our meal. The fish was grilled to perfection; its exterior had a slight crunch, while the interior was soft and flaky. *Now* this *is Japanese food*. Holfort had its own seafood, but it wasn't the same.

Luxion watched us, exasperated, and spun clockwise. "As much as you two gripe, you have no trouble devouring the dishes I prepare," he grumbled.

Marie in particular beamed as she wolfed down her food. "Oh, man. The flavors just taste so familiar. I love it. I feel like I finally know what people mean by 'comfort food."

Since Marie and I were originally Japanese, these comforting dishes were soul food in the most literal sense.

"Luxion said he can make us miso soup and soy sauce in just two more years," I told Marie.

Her eyes lit up with anticipation, and her lips pulled into an adorable smile. "Two more years! You better invite me to visit when the time comes. Man, I really want to find fish that tastes like salmon here so I can have grilled 'salmon'—with a big helping of rice!"

Her words stirred memories of my sister in my previous life. *Right. She loved salmon, too.*

Meanwhile, Marie was busy fantasizing about the future dishes Luxion had promised. "If we have soy sauce, we could make *butter* soy sauce." A full grin stretched across her face.

It was rare to encounter a woman who took such joy in something as simple as soy sauce and miso. For a split second, I pictured my little sister sitting in Marie's place. It had to be my imagination playing tricks on me.

"If you're that eager to indulge in those products, I will make processing them my highest priority," Luxion said. "Setting that aside for the moment, however, your second term is about to begin."

Marie and I were both so focused on our food that we essentially shrugged him off.

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"Yep."
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"Guess so."

After a substantial pause, Luxion continued, "If this world is indeed an otome game, as you two claim, then the climax—and any potential problems it brings—are just on the horizon. Would it not be wise to prepare countermeasures before the start of term?"

The way he spoke indicated he didn't fully believe our story about this being a dating sim. Yet the fact remained that all the predictions I'd made up until now had been right on the money. That was presumably why Luxion wanted to

discuss possible countermeasures. There was no need, though—I'd already made my decision in that regard.

"I've got no intention of involving myself with the plot," I said. "Miss Olivia and His Highness are getting along great, aren't they? I don't want to butt in and make things more complicated than they need to be."

"Yeah, rocking the boat would just make more hassles than necessary. I'll pass," Marie said. Then her brow furrowed, and her mouth puckered. "I've got to admit, though, something about Olivia's weighing on me."

"Are you talking about how she seemed a little off before summer break?" I shook my head and shrugged. "She probably just had a bad day or something, right?"

Before accompanying me to my family home, Marie had bumped into Olivia for a moment, and she'd noticed Olivia wore a particularly dark expression.

"I hope that's all it was," she said, not sounding fully convinced.

"She's got the crown prince," I reminded Marie. "And the other love interests. I bet she's having the time of her life enjoying her break right now. Pretty sure there's a bunch of summer events for upping her affection scores with the guys."

Marie nodded slowly, recalling various game cutscenes. "I guess there's no issue if she's having a good time." She hesitated. "Wait. Actually, there is."

"There is?"

"I'm kind of jealous." Her face said she wasn't joking.

I was at my wit's end with her envy issues. "Seriously? You still haven't given up? Pretty sure I remember you babbling about how the love interests weren't really your type. You're obviously still hung up on them, though."

Not long ago, Marie had attempted to steal Olivia's position out from under her by approaching the prince and other love interests. Her designs ended in failure, and she'd sworn up and down she was over them. She wasn't, though—not if she was still this green with envy.

"If you're referring to the prince and his friends, then you've completely got

the wrong idea!" Marie snapped. "I just envy Olivia if she's having a great summer vacation—that's all I mean! If she's shopping or taking trips and vacationing in all kinds of places, how can you expect me to sit back and wish her the best?! As if that's not lucky enough, she's got a bunch of rich, kind, sexy guys tagging along with her! That's the kind of adolescence every girl yearns for. How could you expect me *not* to be jealous of that?!"

Ah, so that's it. She can't stand Olivia having a blast during summer break when she hasn't had the same opportunity. Especially after Olivia got everything Marie couldn't.

"Doesn't matter to me either way," I told her. "But just so we're clear, this is summer *break*, not summer vacation."

"You really like to nitpick the tiniest, most irrelevant details, don't you?" Realizing she wouldn't find a sympathetic ally in me—not on this particular topic, at least, since in her mind I wasn't really trying to "enjoy" our break—Marie huffed and turned away.

"The more enjoyable Miss Olivia's summer break, the closer this world gets to true peace and harmony," I said. "All we've got to do is keep our mouths shut, sit back, and cheer from afar as she follows the game plot."

"Yeah, yeah. I know that." Marie frowned, still displeased.

Even so, I genuinely meant it when I said I couldn't have cared less about Olivia and her break.

Chapter 2: Earl Offrey and His Family

W HILE LEON AND MARIE enjoyed their time in Bartfort territory, Olivia was on campus in the girls' dorm. She sat on her bed, hugging her knees to her chest. She'd drawn her curtains shut tightly; the room was pitch black, although the sun was high in the sky outside. She'd also drawn her blanket up over her head. Tremors ran through her entire body.

Olivia's room was a complete mess. The other girls who'd remained on campus for the summer had taken to ransacking her room whenever she left it. However thoroughly she tidied up, they'd sneak in the moment she went out and trash it just as badly as before. It didn't matter that Olivia locked her door every time she went out. The culprits seemed to have access to the master key.

Olivia had repeatedly broached the issue with her professors and the dorm supervisor, but no one took her seriously. Unlike everyone else at the academy, she was a commoner. That was the root of the problem, really.

The academy ordinarily educated the sons and daughters of nobility; it was the institution that reared them into proper members of high society. Only pure luck and happenstance had allowed a common girl like Olivia to attend as a scholarship student.

The other students couldn't stomach the thought of sharing these grounds with someone like her. And it wasn't just them. Some professors treated her with cold spite. None acted against her openly, but they ignored any students who picked on her.

As Olivia sat in the darkness of her ravaged room, she muttered to herself, "It's all right. I'm still fine."

There were dark circles under her eyes. Her fingers clutched a letter from her hometown.

"I've just got to keep pushing ahead. Ma, Pa, and everybody else are cheering

for me. I'd feel real sorry to 'em all if I let stuff like this get me down." She dissolved into her hometown accent as she spoke, tears trickling down her cheeks.

This letter from home was the only real support or comfort Olivia had right now. In truth, she wanted to return there. The only reason she hadn't was that she lacked the money for that trip. It was expensive to journey all the way back by airship, and she couldn't easily get her hands on such a sum, given her poor background. Olivia was fortunate that her scholarship fully covered her tuition, but she hadn't been awarded enough money to return home anytime she liked. That was why she'd spent the summer at the academy.

Being unable to return during each break wasn't an issue; she'd prepared mentally for that before enrolling. No, the real problem was her present circumstances.

She'd wanted to use this summer break to immerse herself in her studies, in hopes that her learning might better match her classmates'. Reality hadn't been so kind.

Olivia wiped away her tears, dragging herself out of bed. It was time to pick up the pieces—or pick up the mess in her room, rather—and do the studying she'd planned. No sooner had she made this decision than an impatient knock sounded at the door, sending a cold shiver down her spine.

"Eek!" Olivia cried in surprise. Her hand flew to her mouth.

"Miss Olivia," a professor's irritable voice boomed on the other side of the door. "The crown prince is waiting for you outside. Please get ready quickly and go receive him." The second they'd said their piece, they angrily stomped off, their footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Olivia could guess why they were in such a foul mood. It was probably difficult for a professor to accept that Crown Prince Julius Rapha Holfort had become enamored with a commoner like Olivia.

She'd only just stopped crying, but fresh tears now streaked down her cheeks. "Why won't he leave me alone?" she wept. "Why?"

Julius was only one of the highborn men who'd made a habit of spending time

with her throughout summer break. It wasn't their intention, but their interest was causing her trouble. Their regular visits only made other female students more indignant, which was a huge problem for Olivia.

The worst part was that the men's constant visits meant she couldn't secure the necessary time to spend on her studies. Mornings were the best chance to hunker down and focus since there were fewer girls on campus. Once evening crept in, they started returning to the dormitory. They would pound incessantly on Olivia's door, heckling her, or confront her when she tried to go outside. That made studying impossible. Thus, Julius and his four friends were stealing Olivia's precious review time.

"All I want is to study more."

In truth, Olivia wished to reject their invitations, but she wasn't at liberty to do so, given their difference in status. True, she'd been brazen enough to slap Julius during their first meeting, but she hadn't known who he was. She did now. A commoner couldn't refuse the crown prince.

The same went for the other four prestigious heirs. They all outranked her dramatically, as distant and removed as stars in the night sky.

Olivia recognized that they were trying to be nice to her. Unfortunately, the closer they got, the more the other girls at the school resented her *for* it. It had become a vicious cycle.

"What am I supposed to do? What am I..."

It'd be much easier if she could just be honest and admit to Julius and the other boys that they were a burden, but she wasn't in any position to. It was the kingdom's crown prince she'd be chastising—the next king. She wasn't just worried about herself. If she offended him, there was no telling what might happen to her family back home.

Olivia pulled herself upright and hurriedly wiped her tears away. She set about gathering her things and getting ready. If she didn't clean up properly, Julius would notice she'd been crying and worry about her. If she told him that the other girls were harassing her, things might improve, but there was a good reason she couldn't.

When Olivia stepped out of her room, two girls were already hovering outside, waiting for her. Their muscular beastman servants stood behind them. Olivia froze, and her eyes widened quickly, which seemed to amuse the girls. They snickered.

"You commoner girls are so talented at sucking up. I'm almost jealous."

"I wonder just what you did to win Prince Julius's favor."

Olivia dropped her gaze to the floor, unable to respond.

One girl approached, leaning in to whisper in her ear. "Your hometown's on a floating island on Holfort's outskirts, right? Out in the middle of nowhere?"

"Huh? Um...er..." Flustered, Olivia struggled to respond.

"We looked into it. I thought it'd be a good idea to inform you. You know—just so you're aware that we know *exactly* where you come from."

Why would they want to know that? Olivia didn't have to wonder long.

"You'd better not go tattling to the prince," the other girl said. "We already warned you, but this way, you understand how serious we are. If you rat on us, we'll wipe your whole hometown off the map."

Olivia digested their words, her imagination conjuring the most horrifying vision of what they threatened. She kept her eyes on the floor and nodded to show she understood, trembling. Satisfied, the girls again snickered as they turned to leave, taking their servants with them.

Nobles possessed more than mere status. The main difference between them and commoners was military might. That was true in any world, but especially in this one. Airships here were armed with cannons, and all armies—private or otherwise—had enormous mobile suits known as Armors at their disposal. In contrast, commoners had only farming tools and hunting guns. They'd be no match for a real army.

The ruling class of nobles was unopposable—a lesson Olivia had learned since enrollment. The local magistrates appointed to remote areas, such as the one where she'd lived, changed frequently—usually every few years. Thus, Olivia had thought rarely of the aristocracy while she lived in her village. That had

changed once she came to the academy and the capital. She'd seen the might of Holfort's military firsthand. Now, the nobility terrified her.

"If I don't suck it up, they'll kill everyone," she muttered. "My entire village."

She clenched the fabric of her skirt tightly, trying desperately to hold back a fresh wave of tears.



As the end of summer break loomed, Carla Fou Wayne—a member of the general class—was spending her time in the Offrey household, unable to return to her own.

Carla's most notable feature was her navy-blue hair. She presently wore a frilly shirt coupled with a long, flowing skirt. Carla was always careful to keep her attire modest without appearing cheap. As a retainer of House Offrey, and part of Stephanie Fou Offrey's entourage, she'd been warned never to dress in a way that reflected badly upon them.

Carla and Stephanie strolled down a corridor of the Offreys' opulent mansion. Stephanie was a few steps ahead, of course, while Carla followed behind. She'd been in a rotten mood since dawn.

"I can't believe my sorry excuse for a big brother showed his repulsive face at breakfast this morning," Stephanie ranted. "He *never* wakes up before lunch. Why did he have to break routine and ruin the whole morning today of all days?"

Stephanie was referring to her brother Ricky Fou Offrey, who was the heir to her father's title. Despite being siblings, Stephanie and Ricky's relationship was extremely strained. In fact, Stephanie loathed him with every fiber of her being.

Ricky wore his hair in an unflattering bowl cut and was extremely obese. He was already over thirty. The siblings' significant age gap was because Ricky was a product of the earl's first marriage, while Stephanie was the daughter of the earl's second wife.

This difference in parentage was part of the reason for the siblings' discord, but the bigger problem was Ricky's personality. He was subservient and well-mannered to those with more power or status, but when it came to those weaker or less privileged—especially the poor—he was condescending and mocking.

Ricky relished bullying the weak. He'd caused numerous problems during his time at the academy. However, his father had simply swept all the mayhem he stirred up under the rug by paying off the right people. To make matters worse,

after graduation, Ricky hunkered down at their father's estate. He refused to work or be productive, leading to his increasingly portly figure.

In short, Ricky was ugly both inside and out. Even Carla thought he deserved all Stephanie's scorn and disdain. Since he was the heir to the house her family served, though, she had to watch herself. She would agree with Stephanie, but she had to choose her words carefully.

"Master Ricky certainly is a handful," she replied. In her head, she added, Not that you're any better.

Stephanie was as despicable as her brother. During their first term, she'd enlisted air pirates in an attempt to drive Marie out of the academy. That memory was fresh in Carla's mind, and it was part of what made her so afraid of Stephanie. She couldn't oppose her, which was why she had no choice but to spend her break here rather than with her family.

Why am I the only one who has to stay, though? All the other girls got to go back home. It's unfair.

Stephanie always came up with some excuse to keep Carla close. Carla's parents had rejoiced over that in their letters. What an honor that the young miss has taken such a liking to you, they wrote.

Ignorant of Carla's true feelings, Stephanie continued grumbling. "I wish he'd just kick the bucket. Father would have no trouble replacing him."

The Offrey family presently consisted of only four people—the earl, his second wife, Ricky, and Stephanie—but Stephanie's words hinted that her father had illegitimate sons who could take Ricky's position if necessary.

Cold beads of sweat trickled down Carla's brow. *Don't spill that kind of private information in front of me!*

Stephanie likely felt more relaxed since returning home, which in turn further loosened her already loose tongue—so much so that she was sharing her family's more intimate secrets.

Carla tried not to think too much about why Stephanie was doing so. She didn't exactly have the wherewithal to waste on such idle thoughts. Also, she simply didn't have much interest in Stephanie as a person.

Stephanie, meanwhile, grew increasingly irate. "He's over thirty and can't find himself a bride. It's shameful to have him loafing around here at home. He's an embarrassment to the entire family." She shot a look over her shoulder. "You agree, don't you, Carla?"

As a mere retainer, Carla wasn't in a position to criticize the heir of the house she served that harshly. "I wouldn't quite go that far," she began, only to notice Stephanie's face quickly contort in rage. "N-no, I mean—I completely agree!"

"Of course you do. He embarrasses me as well. It infuriates me when people describe us as siblings. Life would be better if he'd just marry already."

Stephanie's perspective was justified, but her household faced exceptional circumstances that made such a marriage more difficult. Ricky's personality itself was an enormous obstacle, but the bigger problem was that the Offreys were what high society considered "upstarts" — new money.

The Offreys had been largely ruined by the time a merchant had targeted them and essentially taken the entire house over. That had allowed the merchant to ascend from common stock to proper nobility, but the rest of the aristocracy detested them for resorting to such methods. No one would willingly allow their daughter to marry into the Offrey clan. Not that someone in Carla's position could point that out even if she wanted to.

"If only Master Ricky were a bit more put-together, perhaps he could find a bride," she said instead, hoping that would placate Stephanie and end this talk.

"Our house's unique circumstances also prevent his easily marrying another aristocrat," Stephanie added, voicing what Carla had hesitated to say. "But I agree. I can't count how many times I've wished he'd get his head on straight. It's humiliating just being around him." Vexed, she chewed her thumbnail.

Carla averted her eyes. Seriously? Don't talk about these things in front of me! I don't know how to react!

While she struggled to determine how best to respond, Stephanie's face lit up. A wicked smile stole across her lips as she whipped around to face Carla. "Marriage! That's it! Don't we know a house that's *desperate* for money? That would do *anything* for wealth? You *have* to agree, this is a brilliant idea."

Carla instantly realized what Stephanie was leading up to. After all, she'd been the one to investigate the very family Stephanie meant.

"They're shouldering colossal debt," she reminded Stephanie.

Stephanie smiled, pleased that Carla had followed her train of thought so easily. "No matter," she replied. "If they'd marry their daughter to Ricky, it would *so* relieve Father. He might not be pleased at having to pay off all that debt, but I'll convince him. That family may be rotten and twisted, but they're still nobles. We'll find ways to make use of them."

What exactly did Stephanie plan to do once this marriage was finalized? Carla could already tell it was nothing good. Her forehead and palms grew clammy again. "If that's your plan, who exactly do you want Ricky to marry? Let me guess..."

Before she could finish, Stephanie grinned broadly. "Obviously I mean her. She and my loathsome brother would be a match made in heaven. And I think I'd get back at Bartfort while I was at it."

Things just got more complicated, Carla thought miserably. She didn't know how right she was.

At that point, the very topic of their conversation waltzed down the hallway toward them. Spotting the two, he came up to them, staring down his nose at his younger half sister.

"Stephanie," Ricky drawled. "Dragging around your little pleb pet again, huh? You love acting chummy with paupers, don't you?"

As he addressed her, Stephanie initially huffed and turned away, but his words hit a nerve. She glowered at him. "What I do with my time is none of your business."

Ricky's mouth creased with amusement. "Oh, I'm shaking," he said, pantomiming a shiver. "With such a twisted, ugly personality, you'll never make any *real* friends."

"Oh, shut up already, you worthless nincompoop!"

Carla kept her gaze on the ground, waiting a few steps behind Stephanie and

praying this bickering would end quickly.						

Chapter 3: Second Term

As soon as second term began, the lives of us insignificant background characters turned hectic. A few school events were planned for this term, including the annual festival and a trip. Right now, we were focused on the more immediate of those two events: the festival.

Men in this world, unlike those in Japan, were eternally on the back foot. If a guy acted like he was too cool for school events and skipped participating, female students immediately assumed he lacked motivation and gave him the cold shoulder from then on. That basically put a guy at an even greater disadvantage finding a bride. The safest route was to participate and at least try to look like you were doing your best.

My peer group—a collective of sons from poor baronies—had been discussing working together to do something for the festival. In fact, we were gathering today to talk about that very topic. For reasons beyond my comprehension, though, the other guys were busy prostrating themselves in front of Marie. Their faces were deadly serious.

"Lady Marie, please give us another chance! One more group date, please! Set up another meeting with those girls from last time!"

The men sprawled on the floor abandoned all shame and pride as they pleaded for her assistance. They included second and third years, but I also spotted my best friends, Daniel and Raymond. The grave desperation on their faces was off-putting enough, but their pitiful crawling across the floor in front of Marie was even more disturbing.

"Guys, what are you doing?" I said. "Even *upperclassmen* are stooping this low?"

Despite my exasperation with their antics, they were intensely genuine.

Among the upperclassmen, I was closest to Lucle. "Remember how she set up

a group date for us in first term?" he asked, glancing up at me. His eyes were usually narrow, like barely perceptible lines.

"Yeah, I remember. How'd that go?"

"Well, we got so caught up in bickering with one another that we never had the chance to get to know the girls." Lucle let out a silly giggle, sticking his tongue out as if trying to lighten the mood. There was nothing cute about the reason for their collective failure, though.

What had these numbskulls been doing, fighting over girls? The whole reason we'd formed this group was to share information and support each other so we could *avoid* that.

To be fair, the girls Marie brought to that group date were certainly ideal brides. One had been chronically lazy; another preferred the company of books to people, avoiding the latter almost entirely; a third was an artist with little regard for society. Men in Japan would've considered such types undesirable, but in this world, they were the pinnacle of every man's dreams. That stark contrast further illustrated the cultural divide between my last world and this one.

A total of seven girls had gone on that group date, including Marie. Unfortunately, as Lucle explained, all the guys had wanted the first chance to talk to them, so fighting broke out. They'd spent so much time arguing that none had a substantial enough conversation with any girl to warrant further contact.

Lucle bowed low, forehead pressed to the floor. "Anyway, that's why we beg you to give us another chance, Lady Marie—please!"

Marie sat primly in her chair. She heaved an annoyed sigh, but I saw right through her act. She *loved* having all these men prostrated before her.

She's as insufferable as ever, I thought.

"I don't know if I should," she purred. "What happens if you start fighting again? You'll ruin the mood, and my efforts will have been for naught."

Lucle kept his forehead to the floor. "We won't make the same mistake again!" he reassured her. "We'll duel beforehand to settle who can go first!"

Marie flinched. "Oh, uh...you will?" She hadn't expected their solution to be so extreme. She cleared her throat. "Ahem... Well, I guess I could help you... But you surely don't expect such a favor for free, do you?"

She crossed her arms and legs, smiling leisurely at the boys. I kind of wanted to sit her down and teach her the meaning of humility.

"Of course not," Lucle assured her. It sounded like the boys had anticipated this. "We'll do everything in our power to repay you for your help. Please, set us up with those wonderful girls again!"

"I don't know," Marie replied in a singsong voice.

For guys like us, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the girls she'd introduced us to were goddesses. No—maybe that was too exaggerated. Still, there was no denying that they were incredible catches, so top-tier that the guys were willing to duel for a chance to get together with them.

It didn't matter if some of those girls skipped class, or even the school festival. And none of us cared if they wanted to laze their days away doing nothing because they considered the alternative too much work. Even if all they cared about was their hobbies, and they had so little interest in others that they couldn't even bother to remember names, that was cool. Other girls were so horrible that these traits were more negligible quirks than legitimate flaws.

Since Marie was the one who knew so many quirky girls, she could—and did—demand compensation for access to them, as if it were her right.

"Well, if you're *that* insistent, I expect flan from the cafeteria at lunch every day of the week."

The guys lifted their heads in unison, mouths agape. "What?!"

The academy was specifically for Holfort's nobility. It went without saying that the cafeteria's flan was luxurious, gourmet stuff. It was immensely popular with the students. A single cup would've fetched a thousand yen back in Japan.

I should also mention that the cafeteria's basic meal was free for everyone, but if you wanted a special order or something off the side menu, there was a separate charge.

"You're just acting as a matchmaker, and for that, you want cafeteria flan? Every day? That's a pretty rich demand," I said with an accusing look.

"B-but I want to eat it." Marie's face fell as she started second-guessing herself. "Okay, fine. I get it! Just three times a week."

The guys' eyes widened. "Th-three times a week?!" they squeaked.

Flustered, Marie amended that demand, too. "Once! Once a week, then!" She assumed they were shocked because she was still requesting too much.

Digesting her request, the guys formed a circle and whispered among themselves.

"She keeps lowering her demands. What does this mean?! Are we really talking about *flan* right now?"

"Idiot. It's got to be some kind of code. That's the only explanation. It's too cheap otherwise."

"Yeah, that has to be it. In fact, I'm pretty sure I read in a book somewhere that people sometimes refer to stacks of cash as 'chocolate bars.'"

"So what does 'flan' mean in this context?"

"Hell if I know! But there's no doubt in my mind that it must cost an arm and a leg. Remember, she's offering to introduce us to the best women out there."

They didn't bother keeping their voices down, and judging by their reactions, they completely disagreed with me. To them, flan was ridiculously cheap. It was like they'd expected Marie to demand brand-name handbags and designer clothing, only for her to ask for a treat from the local convenience store. It made them uneasy.

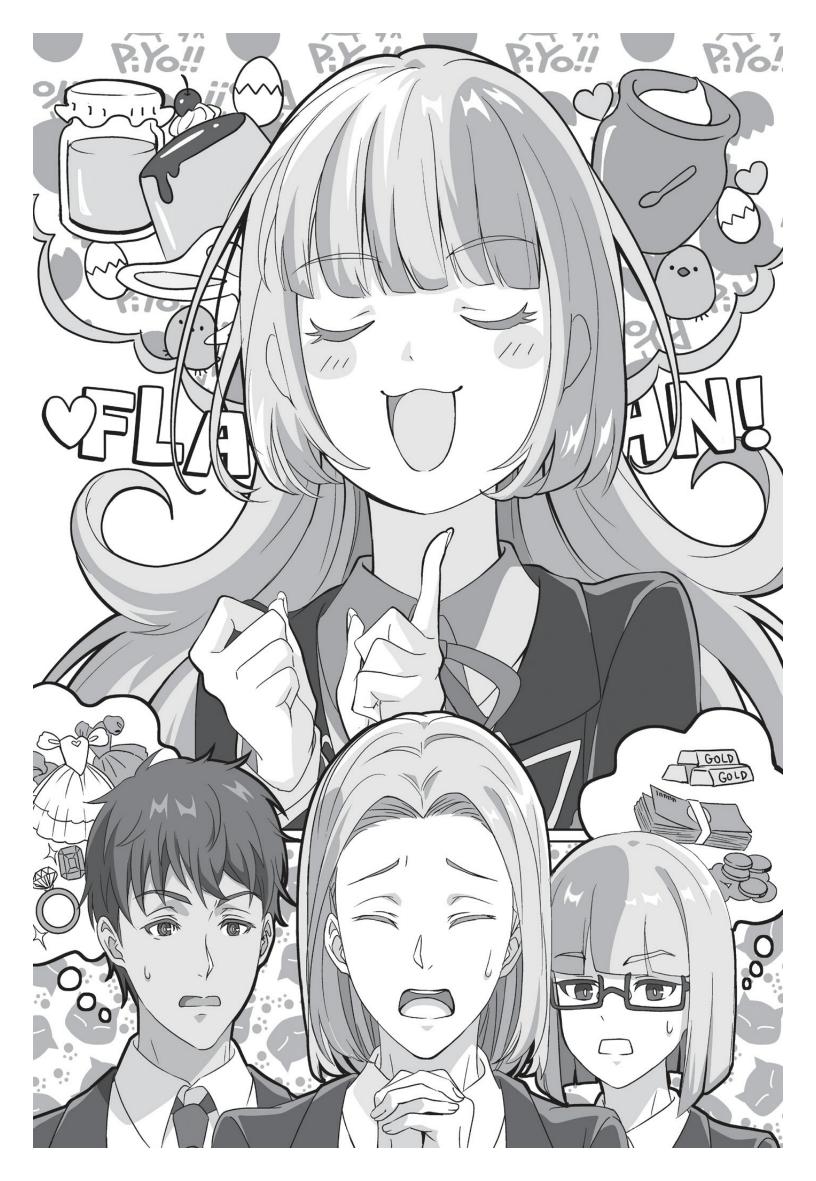
Their reaction was a good clue to how much money they normally invested in female classmates. It made me realize how pathetic the male students were, myself included.

Lucle straightened and glanced over his shoulder at Marie. He wore a nervous smile. They hadn't puzzled out the meaning of her request on their own, so he was shouldering the embarrassment of asking outright.

"Lady Marie, I apologize for my ignorance, but 'flan' is code for something,

isn't it? Could you possibly be more specific as to what you want? We'd greatly appreciate it."

All emotion had drained from Marie's face at this point, but hearing this question made her redden with anger, brows knitting. "What do you mean 'code word'?! Do you guys seriously think I'd ask for something that wild? I gave you my demand totally straight: I want flan from the cafeteria every day. There's no hidden meaning beyond what I literally asked for!"



"No way!" The guys gasped in disbelief. "Y-you seriously mean all you want is flan? That's it?!"

Marie winced. She probably pitied them. Beside her, I kept my mouth shut and watched the scene play out. Daniel and Raymond raced over to me, tears in their eyes.

"Leon," said Daniel, "Miss Marie is the best woman in the world! I envy you!"

"You said it," Raymond agreed with a nod. "Only a goddess would agree to connect us with those girls again for the tiny price of one flan per day!"

Not long ago, these two had warned me to stay away from Marie. Now here they were, treating her like an avatar of the divine. Although they only cared about their own interests, I frankly understood where they were coming from. However...

"Let me get one thing clear," I said. "Marie and I aren't in a relationship."

My friends gave me skeptical looks.

Why did everyone in my circle have the wrong idea about Marie and me? It was like the world had decided on the relationship *for* me.

After break, the number of students bustling through the corridors increased substantially. Their voices were louder than usual, presumably due to the residual excitement of summer break. Friends had tons to tell each other. Of course, some of the topics they discussed were cruder and more vulgar than others.

"Get this—I heard something interesting from a guy who stayed here over the summer," one male student declared eagerly, anxious to share the latest gossip with his buddies. "He said Prince Julius and his friends went out of their way to invite the scholarship student out, even during break!"

This immediately piqued his friends' interest. Like everyone else at the school, they wanted to hear any developments surrounding the prince or the academy's other notable noble heirs.

"Is that commoner really that charming?"

"I'm more curious about what's going on with Angelica. She's supposed to be his fiancée, right?"

"Maybe he's fed up with her. That party at the end of last term was a total mess."

This was such a hot topic among the students that the conversation absorbed them all fully—so much so, they didn't even notice that one of the subjects of their gossip was listening nearby.

"I believe I heard someone speak my name. If you have something to say to me, I'm all ears."

Whispers quieted into silence, and suffocating tension flooded the corridor. The boys happily chatting about the latest school rumors turned their gazes toward the woman who'd abruptly interrupted. The blood drained from their faces.

"Um, er...it's not what it..." the boy who'd raised the topic stammered. Body trembling like a leaf, he tried to come up with some excuse. He began with his back turned, but as he twisted around, he found himself staring down a whole pack of girls: Angelica Rapha Redgrave and her many followers.

Angelica stood at the front. Her blonde hair was braided and gathered in a bun at the back of her head. Her ruby eyes, which conveyed her forceful will, - narrowed menacingly.

The boy cringed, shivering uncontrollably. All traces of his earlier pomposity had vanished.

Angelica gave him an icy stare, folding her arms beneath her voluptuous breasts. "What's the matter? I believe you mentioned something about someone being fed up with someone else. Go on. Let's hear the rest."

"Uh, I, uh..."

The boy retreated a step, intimidated. Taking that as the signal to flee, his fellows left him behind. Realizing he'd been abandoned, he spun on his heel as if to run from Angelica as well.

One of Angelica's followers seized his collar, holding him in place. Several

members of her entourage were trained in martial arts. The academy put male students through intense training in that subject as well, but the boy knew better than to fight back; that would hamper his chances of ever finding a bride. He feared the repercussions too much to risk it.

"No running," the follower snapped. "Answer Lady Angelica's question. Quickly."

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean anything by it!" he cried.

The follower dragged him back to Angelica and forced him to the ground, then held him there.

Angelica stared down at him with ice-cold eyes. "Where did your bravado go? I'd love for you to inform me who, exactly, is 'fed up' with me. Then you can tell me who started these rumors to begin with. You will explain what I want to know, won't you?" Her voice was like a frozen dagger.

The quivering boy nodded vigorously, showing his eagerness to cooperate.

Special rooms at the academy were set aside for male students to host girls at tea parties. In one of those rooms, Angelica found herself sitting with two other students. Julius was one; the other was Jilk Fia Marmoria.

Jilk had long, flowing emerald hair and a gentle air; he was a tall young man with beautiful features. The son of a court viscount, he'd been raised alongside Julius from a young age, sharing the prince's wet nurse. It was no exaggeration to call him Julius's closest retainer.

Jilk was preparing a cup of tea for Angelica, though not without taking a dig at her. "Please, Miss Angelica, contain yourself. It's none of your concern how His Highness spent his summer break."

Angelica shot him a spiteful look as he handed her the steaming cup. "I am His Highness's fiancée," she reminded him. "Of course it concerns me if His Highness is losing his head over another girl."

It's impossible to read him, she thought. And this tea has an odd aroma. She decided against imbibing any, instead focusing her gaze on Julius, who sat

opposite her. He wasn't touching his teacup, either; his fingers were interlaced in front of his mouth.

"Are you implying I don't even deserve a chance to relax?" he asked accusingly. "Thanks to your father, I had a particularly busy summer break."

"Father did all that for your own good, Your Highness," she said.

"I'm not so sure about that."

After catching wind of the rumors floating around the academy, Vince Redgrave—Angelica's father and Julius's future father-in-law—had seen fit to drag the young prince to numerous high-society functions over the summer. Alas, whether it had been for his sake or not, Julius hadn't appreciated it.

"I can't even count how many times your father warned me not to 'mess around too much.' It's shameful enough that you're blabbering about academy business off campus, but it's even worse that you enlisted your father's assistance."

There was an unspoken rule at the academy—a silent consensus—that anyone who tattled to a professor or parent was a coward. Several students *did* leverage family influence and power, but everyone else saw them as losers. Julius was no exception to the younger generation's stance; he found Angelica's behavior boorish.

"I-I didn't speak a word about the situation to him!" Angelica protested, voice rising, desperate to convince the prince that she'd had no hand in her father's actions. All she'd reported to Vince was that her relationship with Julius had grown difficult. Her father had, of his own accord, attempted to patch the rift by spending time with Julius.

Julius looked wholly unconvinced. To him, the details didn't matter, since the result had been the same. "Don't involve yourself where Olivia is concerned," he warned. "You won't get away with doing anything to her. While I'm at it, let me remind you—whatever I do is *my* choice, not yours."

His chair legs screeched against the floor as he stood abruptly. Angelica lowered her gaze to her lap, where her fingers curled into tight fists.

When Angelica left the room, she found her entourage bickering with someone outside.

"As I already informed you, Lady Angelica is busy!"

"She can't afford even a moment to speak with me? She seems to take the Roseblades too lightly."

The lady standing before them covered her mouth with a folding fan. Long golden ringlets fell around her shoulders, and she had a striking air that made her stand out from her peers. She was an upperclassman—a third year—though Angelica had known her since before they entered the academy.

Angelica motioned her followers to back off. "Deirdre," she said in acknowledgment. "What business do you have with me?"

Deirdre Fou Roseblade was the most powerful and influential student in third year. In fact, she was something of a mediator for her classmates. As she stood before Angelica now, her gaze was hard and unflinching.

"In case you haven't heard, Stephanie from House Offrey has been throwing her weight around here," said Deirdre. "I'm happy to offer assistance if she's proven too much for you to handle."

Angelica pulled a face, annoyed. She knew Deirdre's "offer" came with strings attached. "Don't bring the feud between your families onto campus. If there are issues between first-years, I'll resolve them. I have no need of your assistance."

Deirdre snapped her folding fan shut, revealing her face to Angelica. She smiled thinly. "That's unfortunate. I hoped to put Stephanie in her place."

"Do you have a bone to pick personally?"

"Not at all. In fact, anytime that girl sees me, she turns tail and runs. So spineless."

There was considerable bad blood between the Roseblades and Offreys. The former took great pride in their status as Holfortian nobility, reigning over an entire earldom. The way the Offreys had slithered into the aristocracy, despite being mere merchants, displeased the Roseblades greatly. Numerous quarrels between the houses, and even a few skirmishes, had turned them into bitter

enemies.

Angelica rested a hand on her hip and sighed.

In the past, mutual enmity between houses had led countless students to challenge one another to duels. The academy enacted rules to prevent that, prohibiting students from bringing such outside grudges into the school. But that didn't eliminate the issue. Some students still couldn't fully separate their lives there from their lives back home, so the academy's peace was precarious, teetering on the edge.

Angelica's face hardened. "If you have no personal issues with her, don't you dare cause me unnecessary trouble. Should you refuse to heed this warning, I'll show you no mercy."

"Very well, Angelica," Deirdre grinned. "That commanding expression of yours never fails to send chills down my spine."

She seemed undaunted by Angelica's threat; Deirdre was an earl's daughter herself. Moreover, the Roseblades were allied with Angelica's family, so it was no surprise she wasn't cowed.

Sliding her fan open, Deirdre covered her mouth once more. "As someone older and more experienced, I caution you to be careful of that girl."

"Oh? Do you know something I don't?" Angelica demanded.

Deirdre's eyelids lowered; slight creases in her cheeks suggested she was smirking. She spun around and waltzed off, never answering Angelica's question.

"Lady Angelica, what should we do?" asked one of Angelica's followers.

Angelica waved her hand dismissively. "No need to interfere just yet. Deirdre wouldn't be foolish enough to stir the pot. Stephanie, if anyone, is likelier to cause issues."

Knowing what she did about Stephanie Offrey, Angelica worried the girl might do something reckless. She sighed; it was one problem after another.

"Honestly," she grumbled, "why must these things keep cropping up?"

Once we finished our school festival meeting and returned to the classroom, Daniel and Raymond laughed together.

"I can't believe what idiots we were, assuming 'flan' was code for something else," Daniel said.

Raymond readjusted his glasses, index finger pushing them up the bridge of his nose. "We were so desperate that we couldn't think straight. Anyway, we're sure lucky to be in Miss Marie's grade. I can't even begin to express how grateful I am to her for introducing us to those girls. We'd never have met them otherwise, since they never leave their dorm."

He had a good point. Without Marie, we wouldn't have had a chance with them. We all appreciated her for that.

Still, that didn't stop me from complaining. "I wish she'd introduce *me* to one of those girls. Anytime I ask, she gets all grumpy."

Daniel and Raymond glowered at me, the joy suddenly sapped from their faces. Those aren't the kind of looks you give a friend, guys.

"This has bothered me for a while now, so I'm going to ask outright," said Daniel. "Leon, are you an idiot?"

"You really need to do some introspection. Take a good look at yourself, Leon," Raymond agreed. "If you don't, you'd better watch your back at night."

They were treating me just like the other guys had when I complained that Marie wasn't lending me a hand.

"Do you guys seriously think Marie and I are dating or something?" I just knew that had to be the reason.

Daniel sighed, exasperated. "It'd make less sense if you weren't. You took her back to your family home and spent summer break together, didn't you? You're as good as engaged."

Raymond crossed his arms and nodded vigorously. "You may not have officially announced it, but you're practically promised to each other. Even though it's not written in stone, we're honestly still envious that you made it that far with a girl. El's the one I've got my heart set on, though, so it's fine that

you've got Marie."

Daniel glared daggers at him. "Hold it right there, Raymond. You're serious about *El*? You know she's the one I'm going for."

Tension filled the room.

"Daniel, friendship is nothing in the face of love," Raymond retorted. "El's the one who'll make the choice, right?"

Daniel seized his collar, hauling him into the air. "You're serious about going after my El!"

"She likes to hole up and read! I'm way better suited to her!"

I stared as their friendship crumbled over a woman. You guys are so obnoxious. Disgusted as I was, I kept watching.

That was when Marie strolled into the classroom with a leaflet in her hands. She waved it in the air as she chirped, "Hey, get this! You guys know the festival is coming up, but did you hear about the competitions on the third day? There'll be prize money for anyone who places!" Her eyes lit up, her joy almost palpable. Granted, that joy was a product of greed. I knew she was after the prize money; Marie never could defy her true nature.

"So? You gonna compete?" I asked.

She tilted her head at me. "I can't. Competitors are chosen for skill and house standing. And women won't be allowed to participate in many competitions."

How predictable. Of course it was all on the men. Why? Because these were fierce competitions; it was already a given that the participants would be male. A bigger reason, though, was probably that men were the ones who needed to bride hunt. The festival's day-three competitions would provide us an opportunity to prove ourselves—a chance to advertise what a catch we were to the girls.

In the otome game, this had been a central event in which all the love interests got to strut their stuff. *Couldn't the protagonist participate, too?* I was pretty sure she could. That had depended how high certain stats were, though, so it was impossible to predict whether it would happen. Either way, I had no

intention of getting involved.

Marie unfolded the leaflet on the table in front of me. "Actually, I was hoping to ask whether you'd participate, Leon." The page below me included information on an air-bike race, the most popular event at the festival.

"Race an air bike? No way," I replied.

"Why not?! That event has the most prize money! Show a little more ambition, why don't you?!"

My refusal wasn't something that ambition alone would solve. "Air-bike racing is *incredibly* popular. Guys fight tooth and nail just to qualify. It's not simply a matter of who gets better grades—it's more than that. As a girl, you should relate, given how complicated female hierarchies can get."

The peer circles here weren't like Japanese high school cliques. There was a legitimate caste system in Holfort, especially among the elite. When the academy chose event participants, they would take into account not only individual ability but family standing. Skill alone wouldn't cut it.

Marie leaned in and whispered in my ear. "Come on. You'd get in if you used Luxion, right?"

"You don't understand him at all."

I could already picture Luxion's response. "Money? I can produce as much as you require myself. Why waste time on a competition?"

"I have reviewed the requirements," Luxion cut in, somehow ensuring that only Marie and I heard him. "You wish to know whether I could arrange your participation and subsequent victory, correct? I could initiate such a plan by ensuring promising competitors were in no condition to compete. Other serious competitors could meet with unfortunate accidents on the day of the race. That would help guarantee Master's victory."

Well, damn. His plan surpassed what I'd imagined, actually. What the hell does he mean by "unfortunate accidents"?!

Luxion's response showed Marie that I was right; involving him would be dangerous. Her shoulders slumped. "Aw. I thought this would be a perfect

opportunity to earn extra cash," she said forlornly.

"You seriously thought I'd split my winnings after I raced? Are you stupid?"

"I was going to support you!" she protested. "Anyway, can't you help me out? Please? I'm in a real tight spot this month."

"You're kidding. I already gave you an allowance."

When second term started, I'd pitied her so much that I'd offered her spending money. It was quite a substantial amount; I had a hard time believing she'd blown through it.

Marie intertwined her fingers in her lap. She hesitated at first, as if this was difficult to explain, but eventually confessed, "I'd like more cash on hand—you know, in case of an emergency. I'll be fine here at school, but what do you think'll happen when I graduate? Loan sharks will come for me."

"You're not serious, are you?"

"Marie's family is shouldering substantial debt," Luxion explained, having analyzed her words. "The loan sharks will presumably expect her to assist in paying it off, since she'll be better positioned to do so."

I shook my head. "It's not like *Marie* racked up all that debt." That was maybe naive of me, but the situation was so horrible that I figured she'd be better off just turning them away.

"In fact, it is entirely possible that a portion of that debt was incurred under her name," Luxion said. "She may have been listed as a joint guarantor without her knowledge."

Blood drained from Marie's face. "Oh no." Her voice was a horrified whisper. "Not that. Not a joint guarantor..."

Her circumstances were so awful, I was left speechless. Tears had sprung to her eyes at the mere mention of a "joint guarantor," which provoked Daniel and Raymond to glare at me, wrongly thinking I'd made her weep.

"Come on, turn off the waterworks, okay?" I said, desperate to placate her so I didn't look like the bad guy. "Oh, I know! I'll bet on third-day events and rake in dough that way."

That suggestion would've sounded ridiculous coming from anyone else, but I had Luxion on my side, so I could make guaranteed bets easily.

Marie's tears dried instantly, and her expression went rigid. "You can't," she snapped.

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"Huh?"

"I hate gambling! You'd better not even try it. Got that?"

"Uh, yeah."
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Personally, I thought life itself was a gamble, but there was no point arguing that with her. Better to keep quiet and let her have her way.

Marie held her head in her hands and groaned. "I guess my only choice is to earn money the old-fashioned way during the festival! I've got to come up with something that'll make bank..."

She truly was indomitable.

Chapter 4: An Enjoyable Festival

The Academy Festival would go on for three days. For the first two, students ran stalls and programs similar to those at a Japanese cultural festival. The third day was more like a sports festival with various competitions. On the first two days, nonstudents were welcome to attend as guests, but they needed a special invitation to attend on the third.

Students participated in the festival in small groups rather than classes. It was a rough time for anyone who spent life at school isolated and lacked friends to work with.

In my case, though, I had Daniel, Raymond, and Marie. The four of us were running a stall together. Today, with the festival just on the horizon, we arrived at the spot where our stall would operate and busied ourselves setting everything up.

"This sucks. I really wanted to do a café," I grumbled.

Marie gave me a blank, unimpressed look. "We're doing something else because *everybody's* doing cafés, remember? Daniel and Raymond are taking this seriously and shopping for supplies, so quit complaining and get to work."

Daniel and Raymond were desperate to earn brownie points with Marie. No matter what she said, they agreed with her and happily carried out whatever errands she sent them on. Their subservience and willingness to prioritize Marie's opinion had prevented us from running the café I'd wanted.

Marie and I were the only ones around, so Luxion weakened his cloaking device and made himself faintly visible. "Master, you should recognize when to give up. After all, you wanted to run a café out of selfish personal desire, not for the sake of profit."

Oof. Bull's eye. Luxion was absolutely right; I'd suggested a café for my own reasons, and it wouldn't have bothered me if we ended in the red. I was rich

enough as it was.

Marie glared at me through narrowed eyes. "Ignoring profit margins is business sacrilege. Are you even serious about earning money?" Her curled lip communicated genuine disgust.

"I'd argue it's weird that you're trying so hard to make ends meet via a school festival stall," I barked back before pausing. "Huh?"

A female student had caught my eye as we worked.

Olivia snuck glances at her surroundings as she walked, careful not to get in anyone's way. She hugged thick tomes to her chest, suggesting she'd just come from the library. The way her eyes darted about made her seem frightened for whatever reason.

While I stared, Marie paused and watched her, too. "Olivia's lost weight," she remarked.

"Has she?" I tilted my head, unable to tell.

"Olivia!" Greg hollered as he rushed over to her. "So this is where you were. Hey, if you're not helping with anything here, want to come have a bite with me?"

"Huh?" For a split second, Olivia's face contorted with anguish, but that was gone just as quickly. "Oh, sure." She set off with him.

I second-guessed what I *thought* I'd seen. If Olivia was willing to go eat with him, surely nothing was wrong.

"Glad things are going so smoothly between our protagonist and her love interests," I said. "Now, how about we wrap this up?"

As I busied myself resuming our preparations, I noticed Marie's grim expression.

"Did something about that bother you?" I asked, concerned. "You're not going to tell me you're jealous after all, are you?"

"You're so simpleminded. Must be nice being you."

"What?"

She jerked her chin. "Look around."

I did. Glancing nearby, I noticed most students had trained their eyes on Olivia and Greg's receding figures. Straining my ears, I picked up their whispers, too.

"Not only is the prince obsessed with her, so is House Seberg's heir."

"What is she, some kind of enchantress?"

"Why're they so obsessed with her? What's she got that I don't?"

Olivia had earned the ire of all those watching.

I let out a muted sigh. "Well, going by the game, things *should* gradually quiet down. But..." I trailed off, slight concern in my voice.

"I only hope things are that simple," Marie said skeptically.

This issue was complex. To be honest, even I didn't see an easy way to resolve it. Daniel and Raymond returned from shopping around then, so Marie and I dropped the topic.

Finally, the day of the festival was upon us.

"Come check us out, please! Get yourself some cheap treats!" Marie belted in her capacity as our stall's hawker, trying to reel in customers.

We were selling doughnuts. Well, to be precise, we'd gone with doughnut holes rather than full doughnuts, skewering them and popping them in paper cups for easy consumption. Marie had also come up with the idea of coating them with a ridiculous amount of colorful chocolate sprinkles. We knew regular doughnuts wouldn't be enough to tempt customers.

"Personally, I wouldn't want to eat these," I said with a wrinkled nose as I oversaw the deep-frying process.

Daniel and Raymond worked beside me, decorating the doughnut holes with toppings and scooping them into cups for customers.

"Less whining, more working," Daniel instructed.

Raymond nodded. "You heard him. Marie needs our profits for her daily expenses."

They acted like they were helping because they sympathized, but they had an obvious ulterior motive—wanting Marie to introduce them to those girls she knew. That made their "charity" work hard to respect.

I pursed my lips and focused on the doughnut holes. There fortunately weren't many left over. Marie was doing an admirable job of luring customers, so the doughnut holes sold in no time. Of course, that meant I was frying nonstop.

"Marie's not half bad at this," I said.

At times she was a bit aggressive, at others persuasive, and failing all else, tears worked pretty well to coax people into a purchase. She employed every strategy in the book to keep sales coming. I was genuinely impressed.

"Shouldn't you learn from her example, Master?" Luxion asked, hidden by his cloaking device. I don't know how, but he kept his voice so low that only I could hear him. Daniel and Raymond were oblivious.

"I'm too rich to work," I whispered back.

"A despicable statement if ever there was one."

"Despicable or not, I quite like myself the way I am. In fact, I love that I'm so true to myself."

Luxion ignored my narcissism. "Please remove the doughnut holes from the oil."

"Yeah, yeah." I did as he asked. Predictably, they were perfectly golden brown on either side. At least my task was easy; all I had to do was follow his instructions.

"Master, the second hole from the right does not meet our sales standards. It is far too small. Please measure the doughnut holes properly before frying them."

On the other hand, Luxion was a real nag. "You're too nitpicky. Who cares if some are small? I'll just set those aside and eat them during my break."

Outside the stall, Marie's voice echoed. "Come one, come all! Colorful doughnut holes for sale!"

At last, our lunch break came. I collected the doughnut holes Luxion deemed unfit for sale and retreated from our stall to a deserted corner, where I parked on a nearby bench. I was lucky to have found a place with no stalls; that meant little foot traffic, so it was a perfect spot to eat lunch.

I'd invited Marie to join me, but our doughnut holes had proven more popular than any of us predicted. We could barely meet demand, and Marie decided to skip lunch to keep selling. She'd even said she was so thrilled, she couldn't stop smiling. Her stellar work ethic impressed me, honestly, but I didn't want to replicate it.

"I made so many freakin' doughnut holes that I kind of hate looking at them."

"You're the one who swore you would dispose of any that failed to meet our standards, though. Remember?" Luxion said. "Since they are *your* mistakes, it is your responsibility to ensure they don't go to waste."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Be honest. You hate me, don't you?"

"I neither hate nor like you."

"Why the ambiguity? For an AI, you sure aren't very straightforward."

I tossed a doughnut hole in my mouth. Luxion had provided the recipe to which I faithfully adhered, so they had turned out better than you'd normally expect at a school festival.

"These aren't half bad."

"Of course not. I assisted in making them," Luxion said proudly.

As I swallowed the first doughnut hole and bit into a second, a girl walked toward me. She was lost in thought, eyes focused on the ground. When she was practically right in front of me, she stopped all of a sudden, arms folded over her abdomen. Her stomach grumbled adorably in protest—likely due to the doughnut holes' sweet aroma wafting her way.

Blood rushed to the girl's cheeks. She jerked her head around to look at me. "D-did you hear that?"

Being the gentleman I was, I ordinarily would've pretended I hadn't, but her

intense panic threw me off. Before I knew what I was doing, I nodded. "Uh, yeah, I did." Realizing my mistake, I quickly shook my head. "Er, I mean—no, I didn't." It was a bit late to deny it.

The girl—Angelica—blushed brightly. "I-I have been terribly busy, so I didn't have the opportunity to eat lunch," she rushed to explain. "A-and I...I usually have more people with me, but today, I..."

I had no idea what she was trying to say, but I at least understood that she was hungry. She kept stealing peeks at the doughnut holes I held. Angelica looked domineering at first glance, so this unexpected vulnerability struck me as pretty cute.

As tension drained out of me, I held out the cup of doughnut holes. "Want some?"

She hesitated. "A-are you certain?" "Yep."

"My apologies for imposing. I will be sure to reimburse you later." She only carried cash in substantial sums, so if she'd actually purchased the doughnut holes now, she would've needed change I couldn't give her immediately.

I appreciated her promise, but I couldn't take her money. "Don't worry about it. These are defective anyway."

When I said that, Angelica had just pressed a doughnut hole to her lips. Her eyes widened. "Defective?" She was obviously worried.

"Oh—either too big or too small to fit our stall's standards. That's all. We have a real nag helping out, and he won't let me sell any that aren't perfect."

"They taste perfectly delicious to me. In fact, I prefer the smaller ones. They're crispier."

"Glad to hear it."

Angelica sat next to me on the bench, savoring each bite of the doughnut holes.

She gave off a very different impression when she wasn't surrounded by her followers. She was friendlier, more relaxed. Most of the time, she had an

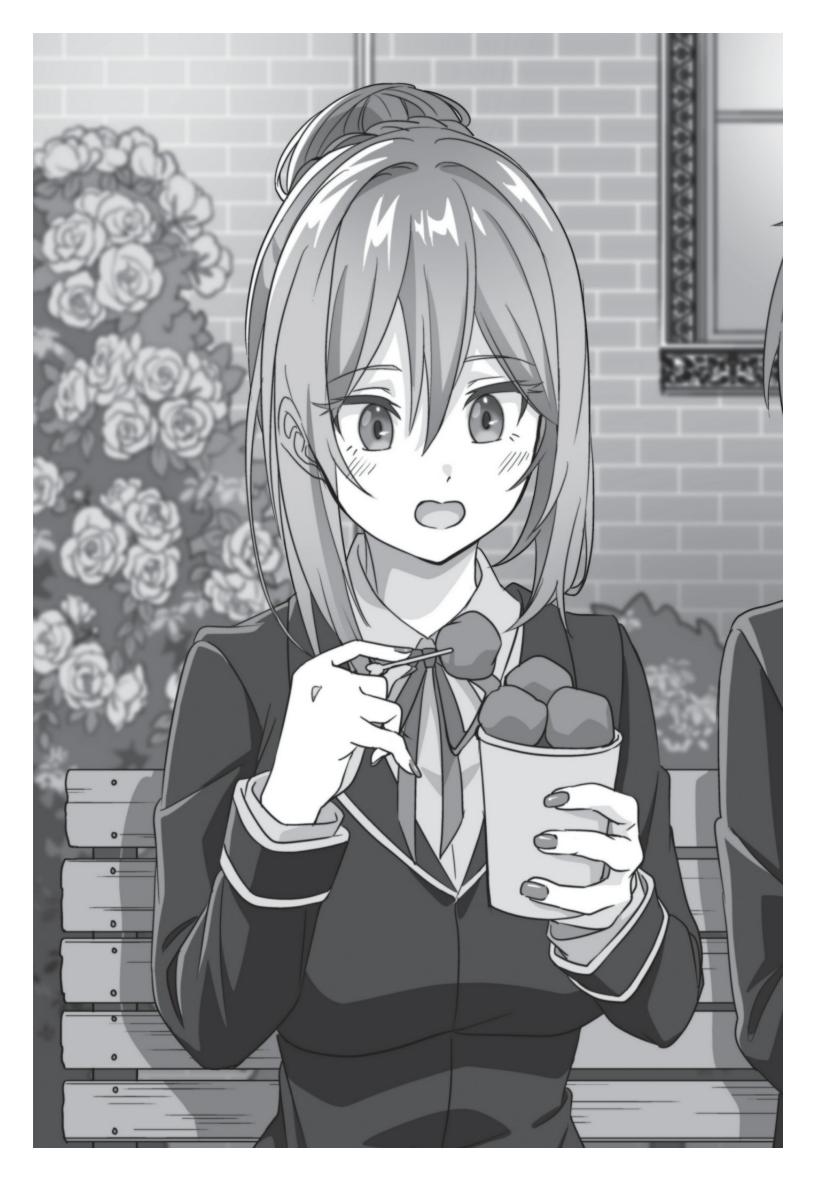
unapproachable aura, but not today.

"My entourage would never let me eat a treat like this," she confided. "It's so novel."

It was hard to believe she was the villainess of the otome game I was trapped within when she was here eating doughnut holes at my side. Nothing about her seemed evil, at least not at a glance.

Marie had said something about that before—that the game's protagonist was far more evil, since she stole another girl's husband. Not that Marie was in any place to judge; she'd attempted to commit that very same sin herself.

When Angelica consumed the last doughnut hole, her face fell.



"Something wrong?" I asked. "Did they get worse?"

She smiled at me. "No. I enjoyed them immensely. But I never imagined I'd get the chance to speak with you like this, Lord Bartfort."

I blinked. "Huh? You know who I am?" Why would she? Cold beads of sweat trickled down my back.

Angelica grinned mischievously. "You're already a successful adventurer, and you apprehended those pirates lurking in the capital. You should be more aware of your fame."

"Oh, uh, all that." I fumbled to explain. "It was mostly coincidence. Or I guess you could say I acted on impulse."

"Whether it was by fortunate coincidence or not, what you did was impressive. You should hold your head higher." Angelica patted her lap. "Well, I must be going. Allow me to extend proper thanks for this some other time." She giggled as she rose to her feet, seeming in good spirits as she left.

"Am I really that famous?" I wondered aloud.

"You are. Given everything you have accomplished, I am exasperated that you did not realize that sooner," Luxion said.

I let his grumbling filter in one ear and out the other. Still bemused, I scratched my head and stood, heading back to the stall. If I didn't return soon, Marie would likely give me an earful.

After parting with Leon, Angelica felt much lighter. He wasn't as bad as I feared. If that was any indication of his character, perhaps His Highness should have Bartfort at his side.

She'd bumped into Leon by happenstance, and he had far exceeded her initial impressions.

I should introduce him to His Highness soon, she decided. His Highness is so eager to enjoy his time here at school that he will surely welcome the opportunity to make another friend. Angelica had made her mind up to meet the prince halfway in hopes of improving their relationship.

Her mind wandered back to the delicious doughnut holes. I've enjoyed similar treats numerous times, but for some reason, those doughnut holes were even tastier. I wonder if I'll get the chance to try them again. She couldn't forget the joy she'd experienced eating them.

There'd been problem after problem recently, leaving Angelica with a perpetual headache, but her brief encounter with Leon had been something of a reprieve. She'd forgotten all about her troubles.

I told him I would repay him. Perhaps I should send sweets. Or would something else be better? As she inwardly debated an appropriate gift, she smiled without realizing it.

That was, until the person she least wanted to see crossed her path. The other girl was walking past, head lowered, and hadn't even noticed Angelica.

The smile vanished from Angelica's face. As the girl—Olivia—was about to brush by, she snapped, "It seems His Highness took quite a liking to you, scholarship student."

"Huh?" Olivia jerked her head up, stunned. As she registered Angelica, the blood drained from her face. Her mouth flapped wordlessly, as if she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to speak.

Angelica's brow furrowed. "You've evidently grown close to Jilk and the prince's other friends as well. You know, their fiancées are concerned that they're a little too obsessed with you."

"No, it's not what you... I mean, um...!" Panicked, Olivia tried to protest her innocence.

To Angelica, her excuses fell flat. She hated even looking at Olivia. It irked her further that she'd been in such a cheery mood seconds earlier, only for that to be ruined as this girl showed up.

"I warned you, but you ignored me," she said to Olivia. "Don't forget that."

What could she possibly be thinking, attempting to seduce His Highness when he's set to inherit the throne someday? Even if they could be together, she'd only be invited to the palace as a concubine. Then all that would await her is a power struggle. She's a commoner. If she keeps this up, how can she hope to live

a peaceful life?

Having said all that needed to be said, Angelica left.

Angelica's words were like knives that cut deep, leaving Olivia in shock.

"I-I... What should I...?" she stammered.

Only recently had she truly understood that a duke's daughter ranked significantly higher than other young noblewomen. She had difficulty grasping the more intricate details of the noble hierarchy and its conventions, given that she interacted little with the other girls at school. And whenever she brought up Angelica, Julius and the boys were cagey.

"If I ask Prince Julius or his friends what to do, I'll only further infuriate Miss Angelica. So what am I to do? If I'm not careful, people back home will be in danger."

The other girls had warned her about that time and again. She could hear their voices now, like phantoms in her mind. If she angered Angelica, the duke could mobilize his entire army, enveloping her village in a sea of flames.

"No! it's too terrifying!" she cried, envisioning it. "Someone—anyone—please help me!"

Chapter 5: The Truth of This World

The second day of the festival came to an end. While the male students cleaned up outside, Marie retreated to a classroom to count the cash she'd collected.

"I shouldn't be surprised to turn such a profit at a school full of rich kids. Even inflating the prices didn't stop people from snapping those doughnut holes up like crazy."

Converting the price to her old world's currency, she'd essentially sold each cup of doughnut holes for a thousand yen. There were only five per cup. And she'd charged several hundred yen more on top of that if customers wanted toppings on their doughnut holes. As a customer in Japan, Marie would never have bought something so overpriced, but the academy students were all rich enough to afford it. Sales had soared despite Marie's unfair pricing, lining her pockets.

She flipped through the paper bills cheerfully.

"With all this, I won't have to worry about living expenses." She sat up straight. "Oh, but I better keep it hidden—otherwise, those loan sharks will come snatch it away." Marie tucked the wad of cash carefully into her pocket.

No sooner did she hide her money than a schoolgirl strode in, flanked by several demi-human servants and surrounded by a gaggle of followers. The girl's hair was braided and tied into rings on either side of her head; it hung over her shoulders. Meanwhile, her face was caked in a thick layer of makeup, and cloying perfume hung in the air around her.

This was one person Marie desperately didn't want to run into: Stephanie Fou Offrey.

"You're Viscount Lafan's daughter Marie, right?" Stephanie said.

Marie was stunned. She knew of Stephanie, of course, but she hadn't expected the girl to go out of her way to come see her.

"Yeah, I am," she said, sounding a little stilted. "Did you want something?"

"Hardly the proper attitude with which to address your better. Or do you claim you've never heard of House Offrey?"



"No, you're Stephanie, right? You're famous enough that I know your name, at least."

What're you doing here, sticking your nose in my business?! If you're upset that I went after Brad, he already rejected me anyway. You were behind those air pirates before, but why come here now? Unless...you're sending me a warning?

However long Marie thought, she couldn't puzzle out what Stephanie was doing here.

In the face of her confusion, Stephanie grinned. "You mean you haven't heard? Our houses are about to join in holy matrimony—thanks to your marriage to my older brother."

"Huh?" Marie blurted. She couldn't digest this sudden development.

Moreover, her parents hadn't said a thing about that. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I've never heard about any marriage."

"Your input wasn't needed," Stephanie said. She'd only come to relay the facts, not indulge Marie's protestations. "Your family assured me they'd strongarm you into marrying him. I dropped by because I've noticed you seem to hang around a bunch of dirt-poor lowlifes. Try to refrain from consorting with those types in the future. I'd hate for your inappropriate behavior to damage *my* reputation."

Marie could easily guess who Stephanie was referring to. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. You're evidently friendly with those backwater barons—and you're close with that upstart Bartfort, aren't you? Such associations will only shame our family name, so cease them." Then Stephanie added, "You're to marry my older brother soon enough. Too bad for you that you'll have to give up your beloved Bartfort." She sneered.

She'd seriously misunderstood if she thought Marie and Leon were together, but she seemed uninterested in getting the facts straight. Marie could guess what was running through her mind. *She likes watching people suffer.*

Stephanie's attitude and way of speaking both indicated she was the type

who asserted her dominance purely for the thrill. She was as rotten to the core as Marie had always suspected.

Marie huffed and turned away. "Leon and I aren't in that sort of relationship."

Stephanie snorted with laughter. "I hope that's true. Regardless, I've given you fair warning, so watch yourself from now on. Oh, and while I hate to be the bearer of bad news, we'll be moving this wedding along as quickly as possible."

"H-how come?"

Weddings were usually postponed until after graduation. Students got engaged before then, but they didn't actually marry until they left the academy. That was the typical trajectory, at least; if Marie married early, it wouldn't be the one she followed.

Pleased to see how off-balance she'd thrown Marie, Stephanie leaned in close. "I should also let you in on something—my older brother's a real slime. Which makes him perfect for you. And don't get the wrong idea—you may be marrying into our household, but that doesn't mean you'll live high on the hog. We only need you for your ability to produce an heir. That's it."

Cackling, Stephanie turned and left, her crowd of followers and servants in tow. Only once she was gone did reality finally sink in for Marie.

That's it, she thought. My second life is as good as over.

The third day of the festival arrived. While other students got caught up in the exciting competitions, Marie and I retreated to a deserted area outside the event venue. There, she filled me in on her family's circumstances.

"You're marrying the heir of House Offrey?!" I shouted in disbelief.

I'd accounted for the possibility that Stephanie would approach Marie, but I'd never dreamed it would be to inform her of a union between their houses.

Students' wild hollers spilled from the venue, reaching our ears. Under different circumstances, they might've amped up the atmosphere, but to me they were pretty much nails on a chalkboard.

Marie smiled helplessly. "I know, huh? Who'd guess their heir would

recognize my charms? I'm a real temptress, aren't I?" She was trying to joke about it, but one look revealed that she was teetering on a knife's edge.

"Can't you refuse?"

"You should know better than that," she replied. "Maybe you forget sometimes, but I'm still nobility, even as dirt poor as I am."

Yes—however impoverished, a noble was a noble. Arranged marriage was no rare occurrence among the upper crust. Those marriages were less about the couple involved and more about forging contracts between families.

Although love superficially seemed free to blossom here at the academy, there were actually severe restrictions on who could marry who. Even if you found someone you liked here, the next criteria were their status and assets. Marriage would invariably concern both families.

For an otome game, the developers had really integrated gritty, unpleasant aspects of reality into this world's lore. Two people marrying purely for love was rare here. More often than not, personal feelings didn't factor into the equation. The arrangements were purely political.

Not long ago, I'd nearly been forced to marry someone myself. Refusing the offer took great effort on my family's part, but we'd managed. Marie's circumstances differed markedly from mine, though. Both families—hers as well—had already agreed to the union.

"But we're talking about the Offrey heir," I reminded her, although I wasn't sure why I was trying so hard to convince her to protest. "I bet he's a totally selfish jerk."

"I'm sure you're right. Even Stephanie said he's a slime."

"She said that?" I shook my head. "All the more reason to back out. I mean, their whole house'll be destroyed. If you marry into it, you..." You won't find any happiness, I thought, not speaking the rest of the sentence.

In the game, the Offreys were antagonists. They had ties to air pirates, which they leveraged to try to kill Olivia, only for their plan to backfire. Not only would they fail to take out their target, their scheming would result in their own doom.

In game terms, they were mid-level bosses thrown in near the climax for excitement and conflict. If we wanted to keep the plot on the rails, we were better off steering clear of them. Even if that weren't a concern, the Offreys weren't people I'd want to rub elbows with personally.

Marie must've known all this, because her gaze dropped to the floor, her hands curled into tight, trembling fists. "It's not like I'm happy about this, either! I'd love to run away right now, but do you really think I'd survive out there on my own? In this cruel world?"

Her impending marriage would be a binding contract between their two families. If Marie did flee, both houses would do their utmost to hunt her down. So why not run far, far away, where they couldn't find her? That idea sounded good at first, but this society wasn't like our old one. A woman couldn't make it by herself in a far-off corner of this world.

It would be difficult for Marie to stay on the lam. The paranoia of constantly looking over her shoulder, knowing both families were hot on her tail, would wear her down body and soul.

I wanted to offer to hide her in my family home, but the Lafans and Offreys would suspect me immediately and come straight for us. In that event, I wouldn't be the only one to suffer; my family would be dragged into things, too.

"The Lafans have fallen far, but we're still aristocrats," Marie said. "It would shame the Offreys if I fled, and they'd find me eventually anyway. Besides, staying on the run would wear me down too much. I can't do it." It seemed she'd already given up. She heaved a dramatic sigh. "Man. I hoped I could at least go on the school trip."

"You won't even get to do that?"

The trip was coming up this term. If she couldn't participate, that meant her wedding to the Offrey heir would be almost immediate, and she'd soon have to withdraw from the academy.

"The Offreys want our nuptials to roll along as quickly as possible," Marie explained. "My family already agreed. I just received a letter from them ordering me to go through with the marriage."

She held out her hand, revealing a crumpled slip of paper. For a letter from home, it was awfully curt and succinct. There was no familial affection at all.

As we spoke, the crowd volume in the venue grew dramatically. Someone had impressed them. That was no concern of mine, though. All I cared about was finding a way to rescue Marie.

"Marie."

"Ah-ah." She wagged a finger at me. "You'd better not get any funny ideas about this."

It was as if she'd read my thoughts. I'd just been mulling over using Luxion to bail her out of this mess.

"I thought about telling you to rescue me," she continued. "I know that's within Luxion's capabilities. But honestly, I don't think picking a fight with the Offreys is a good idea."

"Why not?" I demanded.

"They're part of an important plotline, remember? If we interfere, it could have a domino effect. What then?"

Without realizing it, I'd clenched my fists so tightly that my knuckles were white.

If we prioritized fidelity to the game's plot, then we needed the Offreys to survive until the middle of our second year, which was also the middle of the game. Neither of us wanted to risk screwing up the story's intended trajectory.

"Then again," Marie said thoughtfully, "while we're on the subject, doesn't this marriage already break canon? I wonder if it's my punishment for meddling." She was referring to how she'd approached the game's love interests and tried to win them over. I saw in her expression that, if doing so had indeed caused her engagement, she was resolved to face the music.

"If you ask me to save you, I will."

Marie gave me a knowing look. "You say that, but you've gotta know how difficult that'd be. If you tried to squirrel me away, your family would instantly suspect you. I'm sure you'd figure it out, as long as you had Luxion on your side,

but don't you think handling the Offreys would be a real pain?"

She was right about that. There was no shortage of dark rumors about that family. Whatever evils they committed, they got away with; Holfort let them sweep it all under the rug. Someone powerful was shielding them from the repercussions of their villainy, which meant that provoking them would make enemies beyond just the Offreys.

If I helped Marie, that would be a big decision. I had to be ready for all it would entail. I stood there, unable to speak.

Marie flashed a brilliant smile at me. "I had fun."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying I had more fun here than I expected I would. The prince and the other love interests wouldn't give me the time of day, and I wasn't able to live the dream and create myself a harem of beautiful men, but...it wasn't half bad spending my days with you." Marie dropped her gaze to the floor for a second, then peered back up at me. "Well, see ya. Don't worry. Even if the Offreys ruin themselves, I'll be just fine. Not many people out there can cast healing magic, which makes me one of the precious few, remember? I'll find some way to survive."

Marie was already so resigned to this marriage, she was contemplating what would come afterward. I'd known she was made of strong stuff—that if anyone could make it through this fiasco, she could. Still, this was a far cry from the happiness she'd hoped for.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked. "You're the one who said she wanted a chance to relive her school days."

Marie's smile strained. "This is still better than a Game Over. If the protagonist and her love interest don't overcome this hurdle, we'll all be in hot water. I don't want to find out what a bad ending looks like. Not when I'll be someone *living* it."

"Still-"

Marie turned her back to me and started to walk away. "Thank you for everything, and...good luck. Not that I think you need me to worry about you,

since you have Luxion."

From behind, Marie looked even smaller than usual—shrunk in on herself, as if she was much more fragile than I'd ever acknowledged. It reminded me of my little sister from our previous world.

"Ah!" I gasped, reaching a hand toward her, but I lowered it immediately.

Marie had already made her decision. What could I do?

Chapter 6: Leon's Determination

N IGHT FELL ON THE THIRD DAY of the festival. Outside, other students still basked rowdily in the aftermath of an exciting day. Meanwhile, I sprawled on my bed in my room, still wearing my uniform.

Luxion floated nearby, the gleam of his red lens cutting through the darkness; I'd neglected to turn on the lights. Drifting closer to my face, he asked, "Are you certain you ought to leave things this way?"

I took it he was displeased with the day's events. "Leave things what way?"

"You know full well what I mean. I am inquiring as to whether you intend to permit Marie to go through with this marriage."

I didn't want to look at him anymore and turned over. "We talked about this. There's a reason I can't interfere. It'd mess up game events."

"You are a coward, Master."

My lip curled in anger as I craned my neck to glare back at him. "What?"

"If you only gave me the order, I would entirely eliminate the Offreys. Not merely them but those working alongside them. You wouldn't have to lift a finger."

What a terrifying AI—and how pathetic of me to consider agreeing, even for a moment. There was no point taking that route. Regardless of whether Luxion's suggestion resolved one issue, it would lead to many more.

"Saving her would be meaningless if the entire world got ruined after."

"Frankly, I have absolutely no interest in those 'game events' you mentioned. I never once paid those any thought."

Luxion had a soft spot for Marie, since she had numerous traits associated with old humans. If it meant saving her, he was willing to go above and beyond. His plan to simply wipe out rabble-rousers was wonderfully simple if you paid

no thought to the consequences. Alas, nothing could be that easy.

"The final boss is a real pain," I told him. "Even you couldn't defeat him. Our only choice is to have Olivia do it for us. In light of that, I'd like to avoid getting sucked into things between the Offreys and Marie. Understand?"

If we failed to beat the final boss, countless people would die. Neither Marie nor I wanted those casualties.

"I am skeptical of this enemy supposedly beyond my powers. Assuming what you say is true, could you not abandon the inhabitants of this continent?"

"No. And you know what? You're always way too extreme."

As soft as he was on Marie, Luxion was exceedingly cold toward the rest of humanity, who descended from the new humans and could use magic. No —"cold" didn't even describe it. He would be giddy to see them all destroyed; that was exactly what made him such a dangerous AI.

"Should I interpret that as meaning you will have no regrets if Marie's impending marriage occurs?"

"Shut up already," I snapped. At long last, he stopped talking. Granted, he still eyed me accusingly through that gleaming red lens.

My thoughts turned back to Marie and to how much she'd reminded me of my little sister when she turned her back on me earlier. A suspicion had gnawed at me for a while now. I just didn't have proof.

Neither of us remembered our Japanese names. That was strange. It was almost as if there were something deliberate about it—as if someone or something prevented us from recollecting those names. We were perfectly able to recall the rest of our past lives, as well as details of the game itself.

Anyway, Marie and my sister had too much in common for it to be pure coincidence. The more I thought about it, the more similar they seemed. At times, Marie inspired the same irritation my sister had. At other times, I felt pure nostalgia around her. There was something comforting about both.

I had to wonder if Marie felt the same way. How was I supposed to proceed if she did? Countless times, I'd thought, What do you want to do?

Lifting my upper body, I said, "I hate to disappoint you, Luxion, but I'm gonna have to turn your proposal down."

"That is a shame," he said, robotic voice dejected.

Smirking mischievously at him, I added, "Still, letting this marriage play out doesn't sit right with me."

"Oh? What do you intend to do?"

"Put a stop to it, naturally. Something about Marie getting hitched before me really rankles me."

Luxion moved his lens side to side in a show of exasperation. "How typical, Master, to have such twisted motivations. Even I, an artificial intelligence, must question your humanity."

"As I always tell you, I like myself just the way I am." I hopped out of bed, ready to get down to business.

Luxion flew to his usual position at my right shoulder. "Very well. What does your plan entail?"

"You might not realize it, but I'm the kind of guy who likes to remove any obstacles and make victory easier. To that end, we'll hand the palace proof that the Offreys are in bed with those air pirates. They'll take care of this for us."

"Do you possess such proof?"

I gave him a look. "I've got you, don't I?" I had every intention of relying on him to make this work.

"So this depends on my powers after all," Luxion replied, resigned. "I suppose that is preferable to your indecision earlier. That said, can you disrupt this - wedding without ruining the 'plot'?"

I rolled my eyes. "Of course not."

"Yet you intend to save Marie regardless?"

"Yeah. If the original story goes down the toilet, I've just got to step in and fix it later."

"That plan seems haphazard to me...but aligns with your usual problem-

solving strategies."

I waved off his reservations. "Enough talking, let's get moving. Find some proof I can hand over."

"That will be easy enough to accomplish. However, I am skeptical that the palace will take action."

"Less whining, more working."

After I delivered the evidence Luxion had gathered for me, several days passed. Marie made solid progress on her inevitable withdrawal from the academy—but Luxion and I didn't make any.

"This kingdom sucks," I grumbled, slumped over the desk in my room. "I went to all that trouble to gather evidence of the Offreys' crimes, and all the palace did was sweep it under the rug."

I didn't know who was responsible, but someone had prevented my evidence from having any demonstrable effect—at least, that Luxion could ascertain. Far from acting immediately, the court nobles were preoccupied with meeting to determine who'd produced the evidence in the first place. That reaffirmed my decision to submit the proof anonymously.

"I gathered and submitted the evidence," Luxion reminded me.

"Yeah, but I told you to. So I'm taking credit."

"Yet you would blame me if anything went wrong," he shot back accusingly. "Why, I couldn't be happier to have such a wonderful master."

"You're not as happy as I am to have a passive-aggressive, sarcastic AI."

This whole conversation was ridiculous. I sat up straight and sighed, trying to change gears. I'd anticipated things ending up this way.

"The air pirates we caught and turned in all killed themselves in custody, right?" I asked Luxion.

"Yes, that is the official story. Though I suspect it was someone else's handiwork."

"Seems like the Offreys have significantly more reach than I thought."

I hadn't imagined they would be easy to best, given their status as a midgame boss, but the palace's reaction came out of left field. I figured that they wouldn't rectify things, but I didn't anticipate that they would launch an investigation into who had reported the Offreys' crimes. They'd never find out it was me—Luxion hadn't left any trace of our involvement—but it spoke to how corrupt the palace was. More so than I could've anticipated.

"Furthermore, my investigation uncovered exactly what you predicted," Luxion added.

My eyes widened. "You managed that in just a few days?"

"Such a trivial accomplishment isn't worthy of surprise," he replied triumphantly. "As to the results of said investigation, the Offreys are indeed backed by a party with substantial influence in the royal palace."

I let his words sink in, mulling them over. "If we consider this from a videogame perspective, there must be an evil aristocrat involved with them. A Redgrave, maybe?"

The image of Angelica's smile during the festival flashed through my mind. She was awfully mature for a character meant to become a villainess, but that didn't indicate whether her family was decent. I'd only suggested a Redgrave as a *possible* culprit, yet the words were weirdly heavy, leaving a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Incorrect," Luxion said, much to my relief. "The one responsible is Marquess Frampton. He has significant influence within the palace, acting as leader of the court nobles while concealing the Offreys' misdeeds."

"Frampton?" The name tugged at the back of my mind.

"If you have relevant intelligence, I would prefer you share it sooner rather than later."

"I don't know if I do," I admitted, cracking open an old notebook. When I first reincarnated, I'd recorded all my knowledge about the game. That was a whole decade ago, which was why the notebook was so weathered and beaten up. It was a valuable strategy guide, but unfortunately contained no information on a

"Marquess Frampton."

"I feel like I've heard that name before, but I can't remember where," I added. "I guess he's a background character, like me?"

"The man is a *marquess*. I doubt he would be considered a 'background character,' given that he can trace his lineage to the royal family. He is an important figure at court and stands in line for the throne."

Even if this Frampton was close to the throne, his odds of ever becoming king were low. His standing amounted to little more than bragging rights. Luxion could say whatever he wanted, but the guy was a background character as far as I was concerned, albeit one with significant power.

"This really puts a wrench in things. No wonder the evidence we handed over went nowhere. If that's the situation, we might not be able to remove all obstacles before making a move." I heaved a long, heavy sigh. Odds were, I'd have to take a much bolder approach.

"If that is how you feel, why not visit one of your fellow students? A young lady by the name of Deirdre Fou Roseblade," Luxion suggested.

I lifted a brow. "Roseblade?"

"The daughter of an earl. She has more or less taken charge of the third-years. House Roseblade is bitter enemies with House Offrey, so if you take your evidence and request a meeting with her, she and the Roseblades might be willing to lend you assistance."

"I'm skeptical she'd go that far."

"As I gathered information, I noticed the court nobles were wary of House Roseblade. Some have panicked, thinking that the Roseblades documented the Offreys' crimes. They see the house as daunting adversaries."

I reached for an extra copy of the evidence he'd produced. "If this fails, you and I will have no choice but to go at this the hard way," I said with an almost imperceptible self-deprecating smile.

"Personally, I think that would be the best way to handle the situation," Luxion replied haughtily.

When I approached Miss Roseblade—or rather, Miss Deirdre—about the Offreys, she invited me to speak with her in the girls' dormitory. Given the location, her quarters were far too extravagant. They consisted of several interconnected rooms with top-quality furnishings, like an upscale apartment. If someone had told me this was actually a five-star hotel, I would've believed them.

Deirdre had no demi-human servants, instead relying on female followers to handle her needs. Most were the daughters of knight families loyal to Earl Roseblade.

Once Deirdre finished flipping through the proof I provided, her lips curled into a wicked smile, as if she were already scheming. There was something unsettling about seeing such a villainous look on a beautiful young woman's face.

"I can't take all this at face value," she said to start, "but I already had suspicions about some of it. I'm impressed that you gathered all this on your own."

"Why, thank you."

"I didn't think your skills extended to such areas. It's a bit unexpected."

I assumed that "such areas" referred to reconnaissance. She was wrong about that being a skill I had, though. Gathering intel on opponents and sharing it with their enemies wasn't out of my playbook at all. I'd only been able to do all this thanks to my handy cash-shop cheat item, Luxion.

"It's not a strength of mine," I replied. "I threw myself into putting together what I could, and I happened to succeed."

"Given what you've accomplished, it's awfully modest to brush off my compliments." Deirdre paused, letting her words hang in the air for a moment. "Now then, what is it you wish me—or rather, my family—to do for you?" Her eyes fixed on me, scrutinizing me.

I shrugged. "An acquaintance is being forced to marry the Offrey heir against her will. It's a political arrangement between their families, you see." "Oh dear. I pity her for that. Are you two close?" There was nothing remotely sympathetic in Deirdre's expression, as if her words were hollow. Perhaps she did feel pity, as a fellow woman, but such arrangements were part and parcel of being a noble. She was doubtless unsurprised.

"We're just friends," I explained. "But I don't like the situation she's landed herself in, so I'm planning to put a stop to it. My problem is a noticeable lack of manpower. Without that, seeing this through will be a bit of a hassle." That was why I wanted the Roseblades' assistance.

There was a range of reactions in Deirdre's entourage. Some of her followers were struck speechless, while others glared at me for trying to drag their mistress into such trouble. More still simply looked exasperated. But not Deirdre.

"My goodness," she said. "I see the stories of your accomplishments as an adventurer were absolutely true. Common sense, protocol, tradition—none of it seems to matter to you."

Rude. I prided myself on both having common sense and adhering to it. Not that I was going to tell her as much; that would only distract from the point of our conversation.

Deirdre offered me a full, genuine smile. No—it was more than a smile. She absolutely beamed, her cheeks flushed red with excitement.

"How wonderful! Simply because you don't like what's happening, you wish to mete out judgment. It's so ridiculous, truly." She shook her head, mirth in her eyes. "But it's to be expected of an adventurer who once conquered an entire dungeon. As a proud woman of House Roseblade, I must say I like your style."

Her followers' faces soured slightly, but her reaction didn't seem to catch any off guard. It was as if they'd predicted this outcome.

Deirdre jabbed her closed fan in my direction. "I will speak with my family on your behalf. That said, what exactly will you contribute to this, Lord Bartfort? As accomplished an adventurer as you are, you surely don't plan to watch from the sidelines as we do all the work."

I was stunned; I hadn't expected to win her support so effortlessly. My smile

took on a forced, crooked quality. "Of course not," I assured her. "The wedding venue is the Offreys' floating island. I'll lead the vanguard on the day of the event."

She nodded, pleased. "That is precisely what I had hoped to hear." As her followers busied themselves getting everything together so she could pen a letter to her family back home, Deirdre studied me, then changed the topic. "I'm envious that this girl earned such dedicated affection from you. If only I'd become acquainted with you earlier. I would have done my utmost to ensure our houses were linked."

I assumed she meant she'd have encouraged a marriage to one of the girls from a house loyal to hers. The very mention of that struck me with an idea. I wasn't the only one struggling to find a bride; my older brother, Nicks, was in the same difficult position. As much as I wanted to class myself as available so I could dispense with the nonsense of bride hunting, I owed Nicks a lot. My upcoming actions were liable to complicate his life even further in the future, which was all the more reason to pay him back in advance.

"If you're referring to a potential engagement, I would be most appreciative if you would consider a match for my older brother," I said.

"Ah, yes. He's part of the general class, as I recall."

She'd already looked into Nicks? If Deirdre was that keen on me, I wished she'd said something back when I was holding those tea parties.

Best to end this conversation before I forget myself and start grumbling.

Quickly, I explained, "He's a third-year now, and getting pretty desperate since he hasn't found a match yet."

"I see. And? What sort of person is he?"

"My perspective is probably biased, since he's family, but he's a loyal man. If you know anyone who would be a good match for him, it would mean a lot." It was mostly a casual request; I doubted anything would actually come of it.

Deirdre opened her fan, positioning it over the lower half of her face to hide her mouth. She murmured something I couldn't make out before saying more loudly, "All right, then. Once this business with the Offreys is safely behind us, you may entrust the matter of your brother's future partner to my house. You won't regret it, I promise."

"That's a relief to hear. In that case, I should be on my way. I have to see to preparations." I rose from my chair.

Deirdre smiled. "The entirety of House Roseblade will rally for your operation, so we expect to see you in action, making good on your word," she warned. *Especially since you're the one who started all this.* That part lingered unspoken in the air between us. She was letting me know I wouldn't get out of this without participating. There would be no fleeing or spectating.

I had already turned away and started toward the door, but I paused and glanced over my shoulder. "Oh, trust me. I'll do more than my fair share."

I couldn't offer much by myself; what little I could offer would be disappointing. But since I had Luxion, it was a different story. The bigger problem would be ensuring he didn't take things too far.

Chapter 7: Friends

A NEARBY FLOATING ISLAND served as the capital's harbor. It was a bustling hub, some vessels docking and others taking flight. That was where Marie found herself as she prepared to depart for the Offreys' territory.

It was easy to spot their ship among the others. Its golden fittings and decorations were exactly the flashy embellishments you'd expect from new money. It was an ostentatious sight—no, even "ostentatious" almost sounded flattering, but the ship stuck out like a sore thumb, garnering negative attention from passersby.

A number of students had gathered at the port to see Marie off.

"Rie, um... Uh, so, um..." Ellie stammered nervously. "This was really interesting, so you should read it." She handed Marie a book she was particularly fond of, a fitting present from a bookworm.

"Thanks, Ellie," Marie said. "It's great that you like books, but be careful you don't overdo it. Reading all night and then sleeping in is a bad habit."

"R-right."

Notoriously lazy Cynthia frowned and raked a hand through her mop of disheveled hair. She wrinkled her nose like she was about to rattle off a list of complaints, but instead simply said, "Take care."

"You too. Just because I'm not around doesn't mean you can go back to being sloppy. If you do, you'll infuriate the dorm staff all over again. Keep that in mind."

"I'll give it some thought," Cynthia muttered vaguely. She was less ashamed of Marie openly discussing her slovenly behavior than depressed that her friend was leaving the academy for a political marriage.

She wasn't the only one in a foul mood. Betty was covered in smears of dried paint, as usual, and her sharp gaze pierced right through Marie. "You'd make it

just fine on your own. I don't understand why you can't flee this marriage."

Maybe because she was an artist—a creative—Betty didn't care what others thought. She saw no reason Marie should accept all this.

"I'm not as strong as you think I am," Marie explained, her smile growing forced. "Anyway, Betty, I know you have a habit of focusing so much on projects that you work to the point of collapse. I worry more about you than anyone."

Tears streamed down the faces of the poor barony sons who'd come to see Marie off as well.

"I never dreamed our goddess would need to part with such abruptness, and in such a cruel fashion."

"Now who will we turn to for help?"

"This is so unfair!"

The sight of the group of men sobbing uncontrollably was pretty darn pitiful. Three girls who had previously bullied Marie pushed past them. The leader of the group was named Brita, if memory served.

"Marie!" Brita exclaimed.

Marie furrowed her brow, glancing warily at the Offrey ship behind her. "What're you girls doing here?"

Stephanie's followers had already ascended the ramp and were watching from afar. When they spotted Brita and her friends, their expressions soured noticeably. Not long ago, Brita had carried out Stephanie's bidding, relentlessly bullying Marie. That connection to Stephanie meant she and her friends also knew of the Offreys' secret ties to air pirates.

Showing up here in front of Stephanie's minions was reckless of them.

Brita's gaze wandered as she stood before Marie. "Sorry," she said stiffly, then quickly repeated, "I'm really sorry."

No one else had any idea what she was apologizing for, but Marie and I knew instantly. Brita and her two friends were eyewitnesses to Stephanie's misdeeds, but they'd kept their lips sealed, fearing repercussions. I could guess what was

running through their heads. If they'd been braver and communicated what happened to the proper authorities, Marie would never have been forced to marry unwillingly. They must've come here out of guilt to apologize.

Marie smiled and shook her head. "Don't let it bother you. I don't bear a grudge against you."

"How long are you going to keep messing around?!" Stephanie howled from the ship. "Hurry up and board!" She huffed, turned, and stomped back into the vessel with Carla close behind.

Marie gathered her bag, which contained the few belongings she'd collected in her dorm room, and stood straight. Everyone around her was crying save for me.

"She's in a mood," I said nonchalantly. "You two will be sisters-in-law soon. Think you can get along?"

At my joke, Marie shot me an exasperated look. "You really can't read the room, can you?"

"It's not like we'll never see each other again."

"Well, I guess not. Although who knows how many years it'll be." With that, Marie turned away from us. "See you again someday, okay?"

I pasted a smile on my face. "Yep. See ya!" I shouted after her.

Stephanie moved through the ship corridors with long strides. Her face was all hard edges; she was barely suppressing the anger that simmered below her skin.

"What's the matter, my lady?" Carla asked in a desperate attempt to placate her mistress. "You were in such a good mood a moment ago."

Stephanie was too lost in her own thoughts to give Carla a proper answer. At first, Marie's misery gave her such pleasure, but that was short-lived. The sight of the Lafan girl surrounded by friends had turned the taste of victory to ash in her mouth. She bit her thumbnail, muttering, "She's an impoverished viscount's daughter. What does she have that I don't?"

I wish she'd stop this emotional whiplash. Carla suppressed the urge to sigh. Anyway, what's wrong this time? Is it that Brita and her friends showed up? Stephanie said that it wouldn't matter if they went to the authorities—that she could have their statements thrown out.

Carla simply couldn't puzzle out the reason for Stephanie's mood swing. Not knowing made her restless. She was with Stephanie most of the time—more than anyone else. It was her duty to know what would sour Stephanie's mood, if only to avoid those triggers.

While Carla mulled this over, Stephanie froze and glanced back at her. All traces of irritation had vanished from her face, replaced with a smile.

"I digress," Stephanie declared. "Did you see those people she had with her? A bunch of dirt-poor lowlifes."

"Huh?" Carla blurted, startled, before regaining her senses. "Oh. Yes, they were!" She nodded quickly, emphasizing her complete agreement.

"Isn't it pitiful only to have pathetic friends like that? In her shoes, I'd be horrified."

"Y-yes, indeed." Carla smiled stiffly. Your moods turn as fast as the weather. Anyway, you won't have any reason to be horrified; you don't have a single friend.

Stephanie's family was new money, so she wasn't close to any other students. The noble daughters rejected the Offreys entirely, giving Stephanie a wide berth —or, otherwise, only saw opportunities to use her. Not even Stephanie's own entourage had any interest in actually befriending her.

"Um, my lady?" Carla said, anxious to ask about something that had been weighing on her mind.

"What?"

"Are you sure Bartfort won't be a problem? He might try to interfere, like last time. Shouldn't we prepare some sort of countermeasure?"

Stephanie was essentially stealing his girlfriend. It seemed reasonable to take steps against retaliation.

Stephanie burst into hysterical laughter, hugging herself. "You idiot! You really thought I hadn't prepared any precautions? House Offrey's private military is out in full force to defend our territory—as are the air pirates."

"Oh, are they?" Carla's shoulders relaxed. "That's a relief."

"While they're at it, they're going to eliminate Bartfort entirely. And once this is over, we'll send all the air pirates at our disposal to deal with his entire family." Even as she described mass murder, there was an undercurrent of glee in Stephanie's voice.

A chill shot down Carla's spine. That's a serious escalation!

When I returned to the academy, the other barony guys surrounded me. On their faces was a mix of emotions from hostility to unrestrained rage. I found a chair and plopped down, folding one leg over the other.

"Kind of scary, getting called out to this little storage area," I said.

Daniel stepped forward to act as the group's mouthpiece. He grabbed my shirt collar. "Leon, I thought better of you! How can you smile and act so carefree when Miss Marie's being forced to marry someone she doesn't love?!"

Ah—so that's it. They don't like my attitude.

"Would you rather see me cry about it? Their houses already agreed to this match. You think me complaining would do anything?"

"That's not the point. Your behavior at the harbor wasn't acceptable! Don't you feel even a little sorry for her?"

The others jeered, voicing their agreement.

Hidden by his cloaking device, Luxion spoke so that only I could hear him. "Master, please begin the operation. This is the best time to launch an attack."

"Guess it is time," I muttered.

My incomprehensible words only irritated Daniel further. He arched a brow. "What do you mean? Time for wha—whoa!"

Grabbing his arm, I shoved hard enough to send him reeling to the ground.

"Sorry," I said, rising from my chair, "but I've got business to see to. I'll be taking off now."

Raymond quickly launched himself in front of me, blocking my path to the door. "Where do you think you're running off to at a time like this?!"

"The 'time like this' is the whole point," I said, as if that explained anything. "If I don't prep soon, I won't be able to pick Marie up."

"Come again?"

The boys were dumbstruck, and I had no choice but to elaborate. It was fine if my plan leaked, though; the enemy would have little time to react anyway.

"I'm going to storm the Offreys' territory. They've got ties to air pirates, so I figure I can punish the pirates while I'm at it." I smirked. "See? I'm doing exactly what you guys want, so stay out of my way." I started toward the door again, only for an unexpected weight to bear down on my leg. Daniel had crawled across the floor and latched on to my ankle. "What're you doing?"

"I'll help," he said.

I tilted my head. "Why?" None of these guys had reason to stick their noses in.

"Me too!" Raymond anxiously added. "If I contact my family, I can get them to send three—no, four Armors!"

I gawked, flabbergasted. The other guys soon joined in.

"My house can send an airship! It only has a few cannons, though, since we normally just use it for transport."

"My folks can provide ammo! It'll be a bit outdated, but we could still use it, right?"

"I'll talk to my family, too, and have them lend us knights! They're old and retired, but they'll be at least some help, don't you think?"

I shook my head. At this point, I'd started to worry that the group would be less help than hindrance. "You guys would really go that far just so Marie can help you meet girls?"

Daniel climbed to his feet to join Raymond in blocking my way out. "I won't lie and say that's not part of it, but how can we stand by and do nothing after you told us the Offreys are in cahoots with air pirates? Pirates are the mortal enemies of borderland nobles! And don't forget Miss Marie was one of the only girls to treat us like human beings. Of course we want to save her."

His words hinted at the darkness lurking within the academy. Female students rarely acknowledged us boys from impoverished, low-ranking houses as the aristocrats we were. Amid their condescension, Marie's kindness was a small ray of hope. The barony boys' offers of support weren't entirely selfless, but their desire to help was earnest.

I scratched my head, avoiding their probing gazes. As heartening as I found their eager offers of assistance, they flustered me in equal measure. After an awkward pause, I blurted, "If you're late, I'll leave without you."

The boys turned to one another and let out hearty battle cries. "Let's go!"

"Those boys will not have a positive impact on the outcome of this operation. If anything, their participation may lead to needless casualties," Luxion warned, following at my shoulder as I strode down a corridor.

All he does is grumble and complain. "After hearing that other aristocrats are in cahoots with the enemy, I can't blame them for wanting to take action," I retorted. "Air pirates are a huge headache for border nobles."

The pirates were a real pain in the ass. Whenever they attacked, it turned into an all-out battle. They usually targeted merchant ships transporting goods between far-flung territories, so quite a few deliveries didn't reach their destination. I could go on and on about the issues they caused, but I think that gets the point across. Every border noble wanted them gone, so it was infuriating to think that the Offreys had betrayed the rest of us by cozying up to them.

"You're throwing more resources into this than necessary. I cannot comprehend such irrational inefficiency."

I snorted. "Think we'd be in this mess to begin with if people were capable of

being rational?"

"That is a surprisingly intelligent response on your part, Master. Nonetheless, I cannot concede your point, as I do not view new humanity as 'people' at all. It troubles me that you would lump them in the same category as old humanity. Might you amend your statement and state that new humanity specifically is incapable of rationality? Then I could share the sentiment."

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"No."

"You are being inflexible."

"So are you."
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As we bickered, I finally tracked down the people I was searching for—Brita and her two friends.

"Hey, do you three have a moment?" I asked, smiling.

The girls didn't even try to hide the disgust on their faces. I suspected that they, like Daniel and the other guys, disapproved of my attitude at the harbor.

"What do you want?"

"I have a favor to ask."

Chapter 8: Stephanie and Carla

O NCE MARIE HAD BEEN brought to Offrey territory, she was promptly locked in a room of their castle. Maids were always posted at the door, presumably keeping watch to ensure she didn't escape.

"This place isn't as bad as I thought it'd be! It's way more luxurious than my dorm room, and they even feed me. Incredible."

Marie hadn't expected such comfortable accommodations. The interior was impressive, as if the Offreys were flaunting their wealth. Even the furnishings were top of the line, as far as she could tell. Aside from the window bars that stopped her from escaping, it was an ideal space.

A round table stood in the middle of the room, set with lunch dishes the maids had brought. Marie hadn't missed a meal since she arrived. Once she finished feasting, she dabbed her mouth with a napkin and smiled.

"They told me I'd have a boring life, locked away in this room. But frankly, this is luxury as far as I'm concerned. They feed me well, and I've got servants to do all the chores—I don't have to help out. Could this actually be exactly what I always wanted?"

Stephanie probably thought her family was treating Marie coldheartedly, but what the Offreys considered the bare minimum was actually comfort Marie had only ever dreamed of.

"I can't believe how filthy rich these people are."

Although Marie was enjoying her environment far more than she'd expected, sudden loneliness overwhelmed her when she finished her meal. Maybe she was still hungry? That thought crossed her mind for a fleeting moment, but she already knew the real reason: It had been a long time since she'd eaten lunch alone like this.

Not long after enrolling at the academy, she'd met Leon, and her days

became livelier than ever before. They always had lunch together.

"It's lonely being all by yourself. I should've realized sooner."

This was the life Marie had hoped for—in a way, at least—but the delicious meals and luxurious furnishings did nothing to relieve her isolation.

She gazed downward. "If this is what it'll be like, I'd have been better off staying at the academy, regardless of the chaos that would've entailed."

Still, all she had to do was grin and bear this for the next year. As long as the plot played out correctly, the Offreys would be destroyed.

There was only one thing she was particularly apprehensive about. She hadn't brought it up with Leon. There was a chance that, married to the Offrey heir, Marie might get pulled into the family's downfall. She would technically be Ricky's wife, whatever the circumstances of their union, so she would be on the wrong side of the conflict.

When Olivia and her chosen love interest arrived to take down Stephanie's family, responsibility for their crimes could conceivably fall on Marie's shoulders, too. There was no way to know whether she could escape that or if she'd be caught in the undertow.

Regardless, she had no intention of going down without a fight or paying for sins she hadn't committed. She'd prepare for her escape as the time neared.

Marie sat up straight. "If I were the protagonist, someone would probably swoop in to rescue me. Sadly, I'm a random background character, just like Leon, so *that's* not in the cards. This world's been so incredibly unfair to me!"

Her death in her old world hadn't been pleasant, either, but since reincarnating, her life had been a series of hardships that no viscount's daughter should've endured. Enrolling in the academy and snatching up a love interest had been her only conceivable out; none of those boys had given her the time of day, though. In the wake of all that, she'd thought she finally found a little piece of happiness despite the odds, only for it to be snatched away. And now, here she was.

"Maybe I should've told Leon to save me after all... No, I couldn't. Messing with the plot could spell the end of the whole kingdom."

Marie bitterly recalled all the Game Overs she'd found while playing the game. Things were better this way. Or so she told herself.

"Hm? That's odd. My after-dinner coffee should be here by now," Marie murmured—though she'd realized it only after shaking those negative emotions and focusing on the present. That was one of her strengths: compartmentalizing and shifting her attention from one thing to another.

At that point, the door burst open without any knock or forewarning. An irritable Stephanie marched in, Carla shadowing her.

"Not only do you devour every meal we provide, you even ask for seconds. Aren't you the least bit depressed?" Stephanie demanded.

Marie shrugged. "My parents taught me never to waste food."

"Waste?" Stephanie huffed in disbelief. "You're consuming *more* than your fair share!"

"Your cooks went to all the trouble of making these meals. I'd be doing them a disservice if I failed to show appreciation. Don't you think it's proper etiquette to clean your plate?"

Stephanie sneered. "I don't buy your excuses for a minute. You can keep them to yourself!"

The dishes the Offreys provided Marie were those prepared for their servants, rather than the sumptuous meals served to actual members of the household. As far as Marie was concerned, however, they were still delicious. She didn't feel the least bit spurned by her hosts.

Stephanie was so vexed by Marie's impudence that her expression twisted. She'd hoped to instill fear in her captive—to dash Marie's hopes to the point that she couldn't eat a single bite she was served.

"You really know how to piss me off." Stephanie shook her head, trying to regain her composure. "No matter. Having to marry Ricky will be punishment enough."

Marie was simultaneously taken aback and disgusted. I mean, I guess she has a point, in a way. You can have an unlucky marriage. But isn't it a little much to

call marrying her brother "punishment"? Fair enough, though—the groom being Ricky does feel like punishment. Is it karma for my actions in my last life? Maybe, if it was karma, it would explain her suffering.

"This is just what you get for messing with another girl's fiancé," said Stephanie. "Lord Brad would never so much as look at a woman like you. Still, you must be penalized for even making the attempt, mustn't you?" She snickered.

Seriously? That's your motive?! I mean, sure, I shouldn't have done that, but you really know how to hold a grudge. Nevertheless, that reason did make more sense than karmic retribution for misdeeds in her previous life.

Pity overwhelmed Marie as she stared at Stephanie, thinking of the miserable end that awaited the girl. "Um...I'm sorry?" she said, expression tinged with reluctant sympathy.

"It's a bit late for an apology now. Do you really think I'd forgive you? And what's with that weird look on your face? It gives me the creeps." Stephanie couldn't understand Marie's pity, and it unnerved her.

"My lady," Carla interrupted, "it's about time."

"You don't have to tell me! I already know!"

"M-my apologies." Carla retreated a step and lowered her head.

That little interaction was all Marie needed to puzzle out the dynamic of their relationship. For a split second, there'd been a glimmer of loathing in Carla's eyes. I guess she's just as human as anyone else, even if she's one of Stephanie's followers.

Stephanie hadn't seemed to notice it at all. Quite the opposite, in fact; there was something about the way she looked at Carla and treated her. On the surface, her words and actions were callous, but that was all bluster; Marie saw straight through it.

Hold up. Is Stephanie actually...? Marie didn't finish the thought, but she had a nagging feeling she was right. She'd spent enough time working in adult circles to catch on to these sorts of things.

"Keep up the bravado while you can," Stephanie told Marie. "Your little lover will meet a tragic end himself soon enough. When that happens, I'll be sure to fill you in on all the details."

Marie's eyes widened at the mention of Leon. Amused, Stephanie smirked at her and stamped out of the room. The door slammed shut behind her.

Marie shakily exhaled. "If you mess with him, my efforts to bear this will be for nothing. What now?"

She couldn't shake the feeling that the plot was headed straight for disaster, all of its own volition.

"Oh, Stephanie, you pitiful girl," she murmured.

On the day of Marie's wedding, the Winged Sharks pirate fleet took formation in the skies above the Offreys' castle. They deployed all eight of the vessels at their disposal; the largest, captained by their leader, was over two hundred meters long.

The pirate captain was a giant of a man with rippling muscles and an eyepatch over his left eye. His skin was dark as tanned leather, lending him an even more traditionally piratical appearance.

The captain's shipboard quarters were furnished with the most expensive of his crew's loot. A chest in one corner sat cracked open, revealing a wealth of gold and silver items piled haphazardly inside.

A beautiful young woman approached the captain, carrying a liquor bottle. She looked starkly out of place on this ship. Setting a glass down beside the captain, she filled it quickly with amber liquid.

"The Offreys are so helpless, asking us to guard them 'just in case,'" she said.

The captain reached for the glass, grinning. "Managing their gains and losses is more important to them than their pride. They paid us a ridiculous amount in advance, so we'll play our part as they asked—at least until after the wedding."

The woman crossed her arms under her breasts. "Do you really think anyone will disrupt it?"

The captain drained his glass. "Who knows? Someone managed to take down Dudley while he hid out in the capital, and he was one of our best men. Word has it the Offreys' young miss stole the culprit's girlfriend and dragged her here."

Forcing Marie to marry Ricky was Stephanie's way of exacting revenge.

The woman furrowed her brow. "If he took out Dudley, he must be awfully skilled."

"Doesn't matter. He'll be no match for me. I've got my ace in the hole."

"I know, I know. No one out there could defeat you."

The captain was wrapping his meaty arms around her when a subordinate's panicked voice echoed through one of the ship's speaking tubes.

"We've got trouble, Captain!"

The captain growled in displeasure, but he released the woman and stalked off to the bridge.

"What idiot is picking a fight with us?"

When the captain reached the bridge, enemy warships had already lined up, blocking his crew's path forward. There were five vessels total. One was a splendid piece of craftsmanship, but the other models were far older. The enemy vessels flew flags with crests, which indicated that they were owned by aristocrats. Sadly for them, they lacked the manpower to oppose a pirate fleet as infamous as the Winged Sharks.

"Only a handful of ships, and they think they can hold their own against us? Must be a bunch of reckless young nobles hungry to make a name for themselves," the captain scoffed with an exasperated shake of his head.

The weary first mate slid up beside him. "Nah, that ain't it, Cap'n. Take a good look at the crest on the fancy ship's flag. That's House Bartfort. The Offreys warned us about them."

The captain narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing the flag fluttering furiously in the wind. His first mate was right. That was definitely the Bartfort crest.

A fresh wave of murderous rage swept over him as he recalled that a certain Bartfort was responsible for disposing of one of his top men. His mouth twisted into a sneer. "Wonder if the bastard who did Dudley in is on that ship?" he muttered.

Beside him, his long-suffering first mate scratched his head calmly. "Ain't confirmed it yet. Still, safe to assume he came to reclaim his girlfriend, right? I figure he's probably aboard. But couldn't he scrape together a finer force than that?" Under his breath, he added, "Not much profit to be made off that puny contingent they've got." He was like a predator eyeing the prey in front of him.

The captain was no different. "Suppose the best we can do is capture the Bartfort warship and pawn it. Looks like it'll fetch a high price." He licked his lips.

The first mate shrugged. "Plannin' to take your Armor out there and board 'em?"

"Of course. I don't give a rat's ass that they felled Dudley, but no one humiliates the Winged Sharks and survives. I'm gonna take down the Bartfort brat personally."

There was a twinge of exasperation in the first mate's expression, but he nonetheless issued orders on the captain's behalf. "Cap'n's headin' out. You all better get your asses in gear!"

Eight Armors lined the deck of the Bartfort warship, one with enough extra ornamentation to quickly convey that it belonged to the fleet leader. Nicks was piloting that suit in what would be his first-ever battle.

"How many Armors do those pirates have?!" His nose wrinkled. Fury simmered within him, mixed with anxiety about the conflict to come.

He was flanked by knights he'd known since he was a boy. As impressive as "knight" sounded, though, they were all from the countryside like him. None even looked the part of the strapping warrior, and they were all far too casual and easygoing.

"Don't charge out too far ahead of us, all right, Young Master?"

"Yeah. We'd like you not to pull the reckless kinds of stunts your little brother always does."

"If you keep close, it'll be easier to cover you."

The middle-aged men's scruffy faces grinned idiotically at the coming battle.

Nicks was at his wits' end with them. "Quit calling me 'Young Master,' would you? Get off your butts and let's go!"

Will these guys really be any good out there?! Nicks was close with all these men, of course. Yet their slovenly appearance lent little assurance that they would do well on a battlefield.

Nicks climbed into his Armor and yanked the hatch shut, closing himself off from the sight of those familiar faces. Safely seated in his cramped cockpit, he paused to draw in a long breath. Tension tingled under his skin as he guided his suit into the skies.

Other Armors from ally ships joined them, but all were older models. They were so battered and damaged that their patchwork repairs jumped out at you. That spoke to the poverty of Nicks's comrades, making him feel that much guiltier for involving them.

In stark contrast, Luxion had personally prepared the suits Nicks and his knights piloted; they all looked brand new. Nicks had no idea how Luxion procured the suits, but they were incredible. What made him nervous was their lack of numbers. They only had eight of those Armors.

"Leon, I question your decision to drag your friends and family into this," Nicks mumbled. "I'm not sure we'll hold our own against an infamous band of pirates."

As he sat in his own Armor, observing the enemy, the pirate captain practically tasted victory.

"Only eight," he muttered to himself. "Those models look nice, but their allies will be little more than baggage on the field. Guess I'll start by taking out their best!"

The captain's suit was significantly larger than the ones around him. An Armor as massive as his would ordinarily be slowed by its weight; that was standard for this world's technology. Yet though the captain's Armor was a behemoth, it was nimble. It was also powerful enough to twirl a massive longsword easily in one hand while carrying a rifle in the other. It had been outfitted with extra plating in the form of jagged, spiky ornamentation, as was the captain's preference. From the look of it, anyone could guess it was a pirate's Armor.

While his subordinates charged forward, launching themselves into the fray, the captain set his sights on the decorated Armor he assumed was their enemy's leader.

"You must be this little armada's commanding officer, huh? Good. Best to take off the snake's head first!" shouted the captain.

As he charged, he fired at the decorated Armor. Once he was in range, he heaved his longsword over his head.

"Your luck ended when you came here to face me."

As the sword plunged down, his lips curled into a maniacal grin. He could already picture the blade cleaving right through the enemy Armor's plating.

Yet before steel met steel, a voice echoed overhead. "Take off the snake's head first, huh? I can get behind that."

"What?" Inside his cockpit, the captain's head snapped up. His Armor followed the movement, and an Armor of black and ashen gray—even larger than his own—quickly appeared before him.

This Armor's design was decidedly different from the sleek one currently so popular worldwide. It was massive, with thick plating; it was also equipped with a backpack consisting of three separate chambers, which only increased its already unwieldy size. What shocked the captain most was that, despite its unfathomable weight, the suit was also terribly swift.

"Gah!" the captain grunted. He hurriedly fell back, trying to put distance between them.

The enemy Armor whizzed through the air in front of him, plummeting downward. When the captain craned his neck to follow the movement, the

black suit had already changed course, swiftly looping around behind him.

"That isn't the Black Knight, is it?! No, no. It can't be," he told himself. "That old man wouldn't turn up at a skirmish like this."

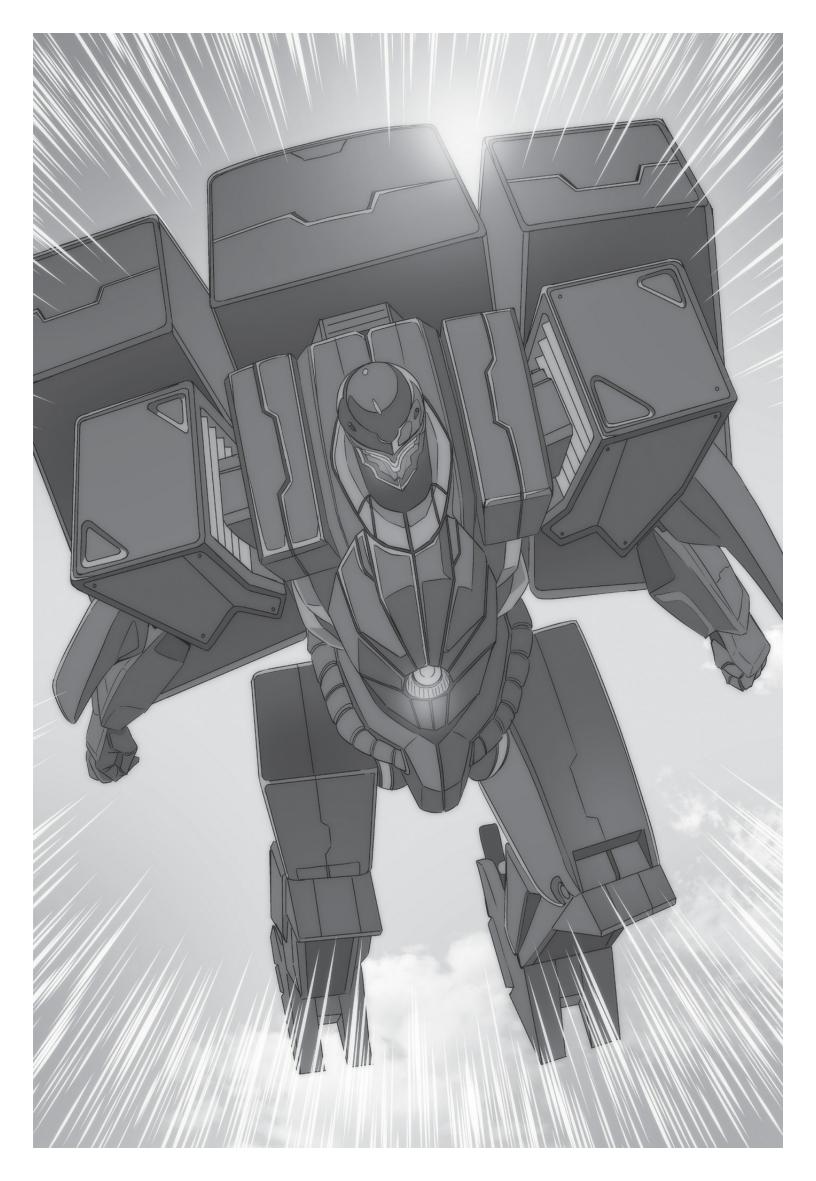
He never wanted to face the Black Knight if he could help it. That man was a frightening figure. Pirates and other knights alike quaked at the thought of him. As the captain's head cooled, however, he deduced the black suit's true identity easily enough.

This was Arroganz, the Armor that had taken out Dudley. Its pilot was none other than Leon Fou Bartfort.

"You've got some nerve, acting as if you're the Black Knight himself! I hope you don't think you've got a chance in hell against me, kid!" The adrenaline pumping through the captain's veins made his voice resound; spit flew from his mouth.

A box he'd brought into the cockpit with him began to radiate light, and his suit's steel plating creaked and groaned. Extra energy flowed into its magic power reactor, lending him even more power.

He accelerated faster, pursuing Arroganz. "You bastard! I'm going to crush you myself!"



The captain aimed his gun at the fleeing Armor. Mana flowed from the box in the cockpit, concentrating itself in his rifle barrel, and a magic circle manifested in the air. Using earth magic, the captain conjured hundreds of thousands of impossibly sharp stones. The moment he pulled the trigger, they launched, traveling as fast as any bullet.

This secret technique had allowed him to rise to his prominent position within the Winged Sharks.

"You're going be riddled with holes after this!"

Arroganz couldn't dodge every shot, so some of the stones found their mark, slamming into its outer plating. One, two—and, by the end, dozens more. Even after that barrage, however, its exterior looked none the worse for wear.

The captain's furor abruptly subsided, giving way to fear. "Why won't you go down? Why?!"

Arroganz barreled toward him. "Sorry," said Leon. "My partner specially crafted this suit for me." As he neared, his left arm shot out.

The captain swung his longsword erratically. "What do you mean, 'specially crafted,' huh?! My Armor's special, too!"

He poured all his power into his attack, but as he gripped the control sticks, he encountered resistance he'd never felt before. Although the steel of his sword should've cut right through Arroganz's plating, it barely left a scratch before the blade shattered into a thousand pieces.

The captain froze, speechless. His eyes followed the scattering silver shards as they fell in what seemed like slow motion.

"You're gonna return the little trinket that makes you so 'special,'" Leon replied. "It belongs to Miss Olivia, not you."

His hand enveloped the pirate's head—the head of his Armor, anyway—and emitted a blinding light. After that, everything went dark for the captain.

Chapter 9: The Offrey Earldom

A RROGANZ MADE ITS LANDING on the deck of the Bartfort warship. There, our allies and the Bartfort knights had already captured and bound a number of pirates.

"Nicks!" I cried the moment my hatch opened. "You okay?!"

My brother marched toward me, lips pulled into a thin, hard line. "You've got some nerve, asking that after using me as bait."

Seeing him unharmed, relief washed over me. I heaved a small sigh before retorting, "I saved you, didn't I?"

He sneered. "There you go, mouthing off again. Anyway, I assume you're setting off? We can't go anywhere ourselves for a while yet."

I surveyed our surroundings and realized our allies were busy seizing the enemy's ships. The sight surprised me, since the knights we'd brought from our territory usually seemed pretty unreliable. They'd proven themselves dependable on the battlefield, however. So far, they'd captured every single enemy pirate without even one slipping their net. My old man had assured me that these knights were battle-hardened veterans. He hadn't been kidding.

In any case, mopping up and apprehending prisoners would preoccupy them for the foreseeable future, leaving them unable to help with anything else. That was fine, though; Nicks had carried out more than his share of the plan. In fact, he'd exceeded my expectations.

"Don't worry. I've got it all worked out," I said. "And the Roseblades agreed to lend their assistance in the rest of this."

The moment I dropped that name, Nicks pulled a face. He looked somewhat relieved by this news, but also somehow concerned. "You know, of the people I'd have thought to go to for help, the Roseblades were pretty much last."

The way he said it suggested he had doubts about my choice. He and Deirdre were in the same grade, and she was quite a unique character. But maybe Nicks

also knew something about the Roseblades that I wasn't privy to.

"I feel like there's something you're not telling me about this," I said.

"I don't figure they're bad people or anything, but there're a lot of rumors circulating. Never mind me, though—you better hurry up and get out there, right?"

Shrugging, I climbed back into my cockpit and yanked the hatch closed.

Outside, Nicks waved. "Go save Marie!"

Arroganz slowly lifted from the deck, accelerating as I directed it deeper into Offrey territory.

"That cost more time than we planned," Luxion informed me. "This is why I suggested exterminating the pirates with my main ship for greater efficiency."

"Arroganz was already overkill, and you know it. Besides, I'd have a hard time sleeping at night if I let you go through with a murder spree."

"I fail to comprehend your reasoning, Master. No Holfortian law forbids us to maim or kill these enemies on the battlefield. By insisting on capturing the pirate captain alive, you merely complicated the situation. His survival was irrelevant so long as we obtained the key item in his possession."

"It's not a matter of legality," I explained. "It's a moral issue."

At his full power, I knew Luxion could wipe out the pirates in the blink of an eye, but there was no need to resort to such an extreme. A massacre wrought by overwhelming force simply wouldn't sit right with me. I wanted to avoid taking life as much as possible—at least for now. Once you crossed that moral line and let yourself kill someone, it desensitized you, and doing so again became that much easier. I wanted to avoid that pattern. Even if needing to take a man's life one day was inevitable, I didn't want to do it yet.

"Luxion, doesn't the thought of a murder spree bother you even a little?"

"Murder means killing people, but to me, new humans are not people."

Translation: "No, it wouldn't bother me at all to wipe out hundreds of them." But personally, I didn't want my partner to resort to mass murder.

Since the Offrey heir was getting married today, the earl gave his people the day off. A city festival was held with stalls lining the central plaza, and street performers gathered to enliven the occasion.

Yet on what should've been an auspicious day of celebration, the citizens wore dubious looks. It was hard to get excited with all the soldiers in the streets, clad in armor with swords hanging at their sides, keeping an eye on everyone. The ostentatious festivities perplexed people, making it difficult for anyone to derive genuine enjoyment from the events.

"Is there really a wedding happening?"

"I saw some soldiers interrogating people, asking whether they saw anyone suspicious."

"I heard a rumor that Lord Ricky's bride had a lover back at the academy."

"He stole his bride from another man? If this lover was at the academy, it must've been a fellow noble, right?"

"The Offreys must be afraid he'll come take his beloved back, then."

"You there!" bellowed a soldier who caught wind of the murmuring. "Don't spread slander! Just enjoy the festival!"

His menacing air was shared by his comrades, making the rumormongers flinch and scurry away.

At their core, the Offreys were more merchants than aristocrats. They ruled their lands and subjects far more stringently than most fellow nobles. They levied heavier taxes, and tax collection was inflexible. Naturally, their subjects weren't very fond of them.

An explosion echoed through the city plaza. The earsplitting crack was entirely unlike the sound of bursting fireworks that usually marked the start of a festival. Civilians craned their necks, scanning the area for the source of the noise.

"Did you hear that explosion just now?"

"Was it cannon fire? No—too quiet for that."

"It was a gunshot!"

As soon as the bystanders identified the sound, they scrambled away, scattering like newly hatched spiders.

The soldiers craned their heads back. Armors piloted by knights streaked through the skies above; the enemy had shown up after all. One group of soldiers climbed a nearby lookout tower, from which they surveyed and - reported the situation to their comrades on the ground.

"It's a warship! They've got—too many to count! The enemy flag is...a rose and a sword?! It's the Roseblades!"

The blood drained from all their faces. The Roseblades were infamous enemies of the Offreys; if House Roseblade was here, the battle was sure to be as intense as it was bloody.

The infantry captain on-site gripped his rifle tightly. "Why attack us now?!"

A younger soldier thrust a finger at the sky. "Captain, look!"

Following the young soldier's finger, the captain spotted a black Armor locked in combat with Offrey suits.

"As we thought—you've come to steal back your girlfriend, haven't you, you little upstart?!" The enemy knight fired erratically at us, even though we were in the skies directly above his capital. He wasn't the only opposition I faced; a number of suits launched from the ground below and raced toward us.

"What a pain," I grumbled. "There's no end to them."

"Master," Luxion said, "there's no time to waste. Once you cut through their ranks, leave the rest to the Roseblades' men."

"Yeah. Good idea."

I'd led the charge to begin with to reduce casualties as much as possible. My comrades had accompanied me to save Marie, and if the ensuing chaotic battle injured them, I'd never hear the end of it.

"Before we go save Marie, I think Arroganz and I should have a little fun."

"There seems little 'fun' to be had, since you cannot use the majority of the equipment I prepared for you," Luxion said bitterly.

"If I whipped out firearms in the middle of a city, there's no telling how many people would die in the crossfire."

As we bickered, I steered my suit, foot pressing the acceleration pedal beneath.

The design of the humanoid suits darting through the sky was generally simple. In this world, what were called "Suspension Stones" existed. Once you connected one to a magic power reactor, all you had to do was point whatever object you were powering in your preferred direction to propel it forward, modulating the energy input to control your acceleration through the air.

In my old world, engineers had to concern themselves with aerodynamic shapes when designing stuff like jets, but this world was way more straightforward. Suits were human-shaped primarily to simplify their controls. You needed magic to pilot a suit, and maneuvering that suit was much easier if its form was humanlike—something you were familiar with. Suits could also deploy a force field to reduce wind pressure as needed.

In the beginning, this world's technology had made flexible, lightweight full-body armor suits easiest to pilot. However, as techniques developed over time, those suits grew to become the enormous Armors employed today.

Luxion interrupted my thoughts. "I will, however, be more willing to help you reduce casualties if it increases Marie's chance of survival."

"You should've said that to begin with."

With no weapons whatsoever, I charged the enemy, using my bare hands to crush an Armor's head and tear it off. Once I ripped off the cockpit hatch on the suit's chest, the pilot was in full view. His face morphed into a look of sheer terror. I gave his Armor a gentle kick, letting it plummet to the ground.

A barrage of bullets pelted Arroganz, but my suit remained perfectly unscathed. Seemingly frustrated by how impervious my Armor was to its attacks, another knight's suit approached with sword and shield in hand. Its plating was all white with extravagant golden embellishments.

"I hope you have no illusions about making it out alive after attacking us," the pilot said as he slashed at me. "You may be allied with the Roseblades, but the entire kingdom is on our side!"

He was implying we were criminals for launching an attack on them. I burst out laughing at his delusional protest.

Arroganz threw its arms open wide, then slung them around the enemy in a crushing embrace. The air split with the sound of cracking metal. The panicked knight pulled an emergency lever and popped the cockpit hatch, leaping out to escape. I lowered myself and the empty Armor to the city plaza below and finished crushing the husk into a lump of scrap. As for the pilot, he'd managed to land in the plaza fountain, apparently uninjured.

"Do you really think I'd make such a fatal mistake?" I asked, turning to him. "I've got rock-solid proof that you guys are in bed with the air pirates. The Roseblades are taking action in the capital as we speak. His Majesty knows all about your many crimes." The sort of maniacal smile only a villain would wear spread across my face.

The knight who'd fallen into the fountain gritted his teeth, glowering at me.

"Enemy Armors approaching," Luxion warned.

"Get my battle-axe and staff."

"As you command."

Luxion ejected the requested items from the container on my back. I took one in each hand and combined them into a halberd, then swung it through the air at the incoming Armor, cleaving straight through its limbs. Without legs or arms, the Armor lost its balance and smashed to the ground, rolling several feet.

I held the halberd in one hand and raised the other to beckon the next guys close—really goading them. "Come get me, you useless weaklings!"

Several infuriated Armors streaked toward me in a futile attempt to take me down.

"Master," Luxion said, his tone oddly exasperated for an artificial being, "such

behavior is unbecoming."

It was a parade of destruction. My halberd tore through arms, legs, and occasionally even heads. Armors fell around me, one after another. Soon enough, they were a pile of steel husks.

"Since you guys picked a fight with me, let me fill you in on a little secret—I'm the kind of guy who always arranges victory *before* going into battle!"

Once I'd taken down about seven Armors, Luxion noted, "If you were always so methodical, it would be much easier cleaning up after you. It is terribly disappointing that you only take things seriously at times like these."

Was this AI *incapable* of conversation unless it was nagging me? I was beginning to think the answer was yes.

Chapter 10: Disrupting the Wedding Ceremony

M EANWHILE, in the wedding hall, Marie finished reflecting on all that had brought her to this point. A single thought sprouted in her head, unbidden: *Save me, Big Bro.*

She was basically praying for salvation to her brother from her last life. He hadn't been the kind of amazing sibling she could outright brag about; still, whenever she really needed him, he'd always swooped in to rescue her. That was one thing she could say proudly about him, at least. His biggest issue had been his tendency to go overboard. That said, if he'd found her in this kind of situation, he would've helped her, wouldn't he?

Even though it was a moot point, Marie couldn't help thinking about it. It made her feel strange, though, wishing for aid from someone who couldn't possibly exist in this world.

Here I am, in my second life, and I'm still leaning on my big brother for everything. I feel so...stupid. Especially since it's all my fault he died.

Marie had backed him into a corner. But even after he was gone, there'd been so much she'd wanted to say to him. Like, "I know I asked the impossible, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine you'd push yourself so hard! I mean, you're supposedly an adult, right? You should know how to take proper care of yourself, dummy!"

Even thinking back on it now, that really was a pitiful death. What an idiot. If he's an idiot, though, what does that make me for wanting his help?

A wave of self-loathing overwhelmed her; she dropped her gaze to the floor, and her eyes shimmered. No one else would know, since the veil hid her face, but tears drew wet trails down her cheeks, falling one after another.

Marie knew her brother wasn't in this world, yet the words left her lips anyway: "Save me, Big Bro."

It was a ghost of a whisper, so quiet that neither Ricky nor the presiding priestess heard. That was also partly due to the uproar outside, however. They couldn't pay attention to Marie's muttering, especially not when a fully armored knight burst into the temple, raced to Earl Offrey's side, and dropped to one knee.

Earl Offrey looked supremely annoyed by this interruption, but the knight wasn't dissuaded by his lord's mood. He hastily gave his report. As he did, the nervous murmurs in the venue swelled to a crescendo. The priestess barely managed to announce the ceremony's temporary postponement before the double doors leading into the wedding hall flew open.

"I object to this wedding!" boomed a voice Marie had longed to hear. It came from a familiar figure in the doorway.

Everyone's attention turned to the entrance, where a young man had brute-forced his way right into the hall—a climax straight out of a television drama. Marie stared in disbelief through her veil's translucent fabric. Her tears further obscured her vision, yet the man's silhouette looked exactly like that of her brother in her previous world.

"Big Bro?" Marie whispered. She fumbled with her veil, ripping it off her face before scrubbing her tears away with the back of her hand. Her eyes fixed on the interloper until his figure resolved, not into the brother she thought she'd seen but Leon. "Oh, it's you."



Her stomach knotted with embarrassment. Even if her veil and tears made him harder to identify, she didn't understand how she could've mistaken Leon for her brother.

"Wh-what're you doing here?!" she cried in a shrill voice, flustered by her mistake.

What she'd thought was the climax of a melodrama turned out to be far less romantic. Once she got a good look, she realized Leon was wearing a most unflattering suit—the sort pilots wore aboard their Armor in battle. Furthermore, he carried an assault rifle. Its futuristic design convinced her that Luxion had created it.

When she glanced behind Leon, she spotted a legion of fully decked-out knights and soldiers, a rose-and-sword crest emblazoned on their shields and cloaks. Marie instantly recognized the troops as a fellow aristocrat's private army. They all carried rifles, too—unsettling.

She couldn't expect this to unfold like a romance film, in which a swoon-worthy hero would gallantly swoop in, grab her hand, and make a hasty run for it. In fact, for reasons beyond her comprehension, Leon was *smirking*. This definitely wasn't ending the way she'd always pictured in her dreams.

"Sorry, but we'll need to cancel this whole wedding thing. Basically, there's no good reason for it anymore."

Both the Offreys and Lafans were indignant about the interruption and the armed soldiers Leon had brought with him.

"You have some nerve, interrupting a ceremony like this!"

"Where are the guards? And the rest of the garrison?!"

"Someone remove this trash immediately!"

Despite the fuss from the crowd demanding he be ejected, Leon remained undaunted. He produced several papers he'd likely prepared well beforehand for this eventuality, holding them up for all to see. The royal family's official seal was emblazoned on the outermost page.

"Don't move!" Leon bellowed. "The palace gave me permission for this. You

can protest all you like, but it's a little too late. In case that's not clear enough, let me spell it out: The palace endorses *our* cause here." The flimsy pieces of parchment Leon had brought were his pretext for everything he'd just done.

The revelation of the palace's backing stunned the Offreys and Lafans. Confused, they glanced at one another. Ricky remained standing next to Marie; a furrow creased his brow.

"The palace?" he spat. "I don't believe that for a second!"

Leon shrugged emphatically. "You really think forged documents could get me this far? I only rode in with a whole battalion of knights and soldiers because I had the crown's go-ahead."

"Impossible! You claim His Majesty turned his back on us simply because we took your girlfriend?!" Earl Offrey demanded, disbelief written all over his face.

Leon's eyes narrowed in annoyance. He pinned the earl with a glare. "Of course you don't buy it. It seems you've had quite an ally in court. Sure, they've swept your crimes under the rug thus far, but no one's going to save you this time."

"Ngh!" the earl grunted, recoiling. It didn't take long for his surprise to become a sinister grin, however. "Don't think you've beaten me, brat! The king's permission is irrelevant. Other aristocrats won't sit idly by while one of their own employs such violence." He was confident he could still turn the tables.

"If you're hoping to fall back on Marquess Frampton for salvation, I've got bad news. When we questioned him about his connection to you, he swore you had no ties whatsoever. He told us, 'A family who'd willingly align themselves with air pirates aren't fit to call themselves nobles. You may do whatever you like with the Offreys."

The momentary triumph in the earl's eyes vanished. His jaw had dropped at Leon's mention of Marquess Frampton. The Offreys shared a faction with the marquess, so of course the earl expected assistance. Learning that even Frampton had abandoned his house rendered him speechless. Like anyone faced with an impossible situation, he had a hard time digesting his new reality.

The other Offreys seemed similarly flabbergasted. Marie's eyes scanned the pews. They finally landed on Stephanie, who was frozen in place, staring at Leon.

"N-no, it can't be. Why is this happening?" she muttered numbly. "You're just an upstart adventurer. You couldn't do something like this."

It had never occurred to her that Leon might be capable of underhanded scheming, let alone orchestrating her entire family's downfall. Stephanie saw him as a simple adventurer who had clambered into his position through physical prowess and sheer luck. She'd dismissed him as being like any other man proud of his own strength, assuming he was incapable of clever strategizing or backroom deals. After all, would an adventurer—especially a low-ranking baron—willingly thrust themselves into the middle of the court's ongoing power struggles?

No—no one could've predicted Leon possessed such talents. Baffled, Stephanie collapsed to her knees. She immediately reached for Carla beside her, but Carla knocked her hand away.

"Carla?!" Stephanie cried. "Wh-what do you think you're doing? And after all I did to look out for you!"

"How exactly have you looked out for me, huh?! It's over. Everything's over. Stop deluding yourself and accept reality. It's your fault I'm caught up in this! If it weren't for you and your family..." As she dissolved into tears, Carla trailed off, her entire body trembling. She could envision the consequences she and her family would face. There would be no future for them among the nobles.

At the rejection of her closest follower, Stephanie's expression fell into despair. Unable to watch, Marie looked away from the two. Part of her was curious about their relationship, but she wasn't at liberty to concern herself with them right now.

All amusement and triumph had fallen from Leon's face. He hoisted his assault rifle, and the air in the wedding hall tensed, growing more oppressive. There would be no further jokes or humor.

"Earl Offrey, Viscount Lafan, I'm asking you to cooperate and come quietly," said Leon.

Viscount Lafan's eyes widened. "Why?" he said. "Why am I being apprehended? I'm not related to these people!" He said "these" with utter disdain, as if he thought the Offreys were somehow beneath him.

Leon motioned to the documents he held. "Because you and Earl Offrey were colluding in secret," he explained. "In exchange for him covering for your debt, you promised to help him where the air pirates were concerned. You two planned to make a fortune together stealing from other nobles. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can get out of the consequences."

Marie gasped, eyes darting to her father. Leon's accusation must've been true, because Viscount Lafan slid out of his chair and slumped on the floor. The other Lafans were similarly distressed, which could only mean they'd known about this secret agreement, too.

"I knew you were rotten to the core, but this is low even for you," Marie said with open disgust.

Her father lifted his head. "Right," he said to himself, as if he'd suddenly identified a solution. He fixed his gaze on Leon. "You did all this because you want my daughter. Then...then I'll agree to let you marry her. All you have to do is let me and my family go! Please, I'm begging you! You want my daughter, don't you? You can do whatever you want with her!"

That was the only value Viscount Lafan saw in Marie. Since he assumed Leon's sole motivation for disrupting this affair was recovering her, she was a bargaining chip with which to buy freedom. It made Marie's blood boil with indignation.

What's wrong with him? He ruined the little bit of happiness I had, and now he's trying to use me to save his own skin?

It was even more pathetic because her father usually condescended to everyone, but when it suited him—like right now—he was willing to beg and plead.

Marie stepped forward, fist clenched. She was ready to punch his lights out. "I've had just about enough of your—huh?!"

Ricky flung an arm around her neck, his meaty flesh crushing her windpipe.

She strained to look back at him, glimpsing his bloodshot eyes as his shrill voice pierced the air. "Don't move unless you want me to kill her! So much as twitch, and I'll snap her neck!"

"Let me go!" Marie squeezed out. "Let me go right now, you thick blowhard!" She struggled, but in this position, she was at a serious disadvantage. It didn't help that Ricky was massive, and adrenaline gave him more strength than usual. She just couldn't shake him off.

The soldiers turned their gun barrels on Ricky, but none could fire while he had Marie as a shield. As he held her hostage, he tried to bargain with Leon.

"You went to a lot of effort to rescue this pipsqueak. I appreciate that. I've got no interest in her to begin with, so if you want her, I'm happy to let you have her—but only on the condition that you let me go." Ricky didn't even try to protect his family. His concern was his own well-being.

Although Leon's expression betrayed no emotion, Marie sensed his irritation. "Sorry," he said, voice low and threatening, "but I was ordered to apprehend all of you. No exceptions. I can't let you go. You're the earl's heir."

Leon spoke with reluctant calm, barely hiding his underlying anger. His tone again reminded Marie of her brother. When she blinked, she could just see him superimposed over Leon, as if they were the exact same person.

No way. Could Leon actually be...?

Before she finished the thought, Leon raised his left hand and swung it down. A thin beam of concentrated light shot through a hole in the ceiling and seared into Ricky's shoulder.

"Gah!" Ricky's face contorted as he cried out. He released Marie, his hand shooting to his shoulder wound. "Th-that hurt. S-someone help!" He sank to his knees and curled into a fetal position, sniffling.

Marie scampered away from him, rushing to her savior's side. "Leon!"

Leon lowered his rifle, a mix of exasperation and relief on his face. "You look awfully happy for someone whose wedding I just ruined. Guess you weren't as okay with it as you claimed."

Marie dropped her gaze, unable to meet his eyes. "S-sorry. Um, I..."

"Master," Luxion interrupted, dropping through the hole in the ceiling, "our operation has moved to the next phase."

Leon slung his rifle on his shoulder. "All right. Then it's about time to wrap this up. We've got other stuff to do today." Turning at the waist, he barked orders to the soldiers. "Once you round up the criminals here, get moving to the next stage!"

Interrupting the wedding hadn't been the end of this plan? Marie cocked her head. "Isn't everything over now?"

The moment Leon burst into the wedding hall had been as good as the end for the two families who arranged the ceremony—at least, as far as Marie was concerned. She wasn't sure what more Leon could do.

Leon smiled wickedly. "I cut a deal with the palace."

"What deal?"

"The Offreys' territory is confined to a floating island, right? The palace sees it as a pain to govern, so they agreed to let us take it."

The royal family ruled from the center of the mainland. Once Leon and the Roseblades wrested control of the Offrey lands from the earl's family, overseeing a separate island would be an unwanted hassle for the crown. On top of that, there was no way to ensure those tied to the Offreys were uninvolved with the air pirates; the palace would have to break with them all. That would make it even harder to find someone to take the role of regional lord.

"What—they're giving you control of this whole island?"

Leon expelled a long, drawn-out sigh. "It'd be so much easier if the palace were that generous. The Lafans have mainland territory, right? Part of the deal is to invade your domain and assume the Lafan debt, but offer the palace their territory."

Essentially, the trade would be the Lafan lands and Offrey riches in exchange for the Offreys' floating island.

"The palace's true desire is the wealth the Offreys accrued over the years," Luxion added. "I should also mention that Master's elder brother has departed for the Lafan lands and will soon wrest them from your father's remaining forces."

"My poor barony buddies are out there in full force, pitching in. They were champing at the bit to help save you. I imagine they're with my brother, excitedly taking over Lafan territory as we speak."

Marie blinked. "Um...you're basically saying they're invading my home right this moment, huh? Hold on a sec. I'm not sure how I feel about that!"

As grateful as she was that so many people had come to her rescue, she wasn't quite sure what to think of her family's domain being seized.

Chapter 11: Those of the Rose and Sword

In this Brief Domestic Conflict between noble houses, the Roseblades, Bartforts, and poor barons' sons came out victors. Neither the Offrey nor Lafan names would appear on maps drawn of Holfort in the future.

Former Viscount Lafan's region temporarily fell under direct royal jurisdiction. Eventually, the crown would dispatch a representative administrator to the area, appoint a new regional lord themselves, or maybe even sell the lands to a lord ruling over a Holfortian border region. Whatever happened was in the royal family's hands now.

The Offreys' floating island couldn't simply be abandoned as it was. Since we'd claimed victory, providing the region's new ruler was on us.

Most assumed I was the natural choice, but we couldn't ignore the efforts of our collaborators, the Roseblades. I would be a baron in the future, but the Roseblades were an established noble house presiding over an earldom; they far outranked me in terms of both status and influence. If I took all the credit and assumed the role of regional lord, there'd be all kinds of unnecessary discord between our houses, maybe even hostilities—which was why I didn't claim the position.

Finding someone else to appoint would be a safer choice. To that end, we Bartforts gathered at our home to discuss options. That might sound a little more formal than it actually was. There were only three of us: my old man, Nicks, and me. And there was no fancy meeting room or parlor. We were in my dad's office, which was more like a small study.

If we'd carried out this discussion without the Roseblades' input, there would've been issues. In fact, though, we'd already finished negotiations with them. We'd also already chosen the region's next ruler, so this was more like signing off on them, now that everything had been confirmed. As for who that next ruler would be...

"Why do I have to leave home to be a *viscount*?! No one said anything about this to me!"

It was my older brother, Nicks. He was flipping his lid, perhaps somewhat understandably indignant that we'd made the decision without his input.

"You're the only person fit for the job," Dad insisted, trying his best to persuade my brother. "Besides, think about it. You'll be a *viscount*. That'll benefit you, and you know it."

Taking up that title, Nicks would become the new lord of the region the Offreys had formerly governed. My father and I agreed that was the best course of action. I refused to take the position myself for a plethora of reasons. Dad could've inherited it instead, ruling both his current territory and the new one, and become either a viscount or earl in the process.

But there were reasons we didn't—really, couldn't—take that route. For one, Dad lacked ambition. In his words, "Even if I took over and ruled both, I've no confidence I'd do an adequate job overseeing another vast stretch of land."

The other reason was Zola and her spawn (my words, not his). As Dad put it, "I'd rather the new territory go to Nicks. If those lands end up in my name, Zola and her children will insist I hand them over."

Dad didn't trust that Zola and her eldest son, Rutart Fou Bartfort, wouldn't get greedy and demand the lands immediately. Rutart would naturally inherit them, since he was the eldest Bartfort son. Yet he was always off swanning around with Zola, never at home, and Dad preferred prioritizing the interests of a son he was closer to.

Of course, there was another option: giving Nicks the current Bartfort baronry and the title that went along with it, while Rutart took the Offrey territory and viscount title. Dad opposed that outcome strongly, though. Moreover, the Roseblades weren't in favor of it. They couldn't stomach the idea of the land they'd gone to great lengths to help us wrest from Offrey control falling into Zola's clutches. Who knew what she'd do with it?

Anyway, that was why we concluded that Nicks needed to take over as viscount. I thought it'd be good for him, and I sure as hell didn't want more status than I already had, so I was all for it.

Nicks didn't seem to appreciate what he was receiving, though.

"This doesn't make any *sense*!" he bellowed. "Me, become a viscount out of nowhere? There's no chance the palace'll accept it. And I don't know the first thing about ruling!"

Nicks was in the academy's general class, so he'd received none of the necessary education on rulership and administration. He was also a little too earnest for his own good, and he was convinced he'd be an incompetent viscount.

He had a point. Still, I wouldn't have recommended him for the position without anticipating his reluctance or understanding his lack of requisite knowledge. I shot my old man a look.

Dad hesitated, then said, "About that... Actually, someone's taken an interest in you."

"In me?" Nicks said skeptically.

Dad reached into his pocket and produced a letter. The Roseblade crest was pressed into the envelope's sealing wax. "This is a missive from House Roseblade. The earl wishes to entrust his daughter to you."

Nicks gawked. How could he not? An earl far outranked us. Marriages between houses like the Roseblades' and ours weren't *entirely* unheard of, but there was still a huge status gap. Any guy in Nicks's position would feel out of his depth marrying an earl's daughter.

Nicks snatched the letter, hands shaking as he broke the seal and unfolded the paper. His eyes ran quickly over the page. "Why would anyone have any interest in...hm?"

There was surprise, and a smidge of anticipation, in his gaze until he drank in the contents of the letter. Then, color gradually drained from his face. My dad and I surreptitiously averted our eyes. We were already aware of the letter's contents.

"'You have real guts, taking down those deplorable Offreys, so you stuck out to me,'" Nicks read aloud. "You've got to be kidding me."

That was definitely a, uh, unique way to phrase it. The edge of Nicks's lip twitched in dismay.

"I mean, I admit it's a bit eccentric," Dad said hurriedly, trying to be diplomatic, "but the fact remains that Earl Roseblade's daughter took a liking to you! It's fine to meet with her once and talk a bit, isn't it?"

Nicks shook his head vigorously. "Leon picked a fight with the Offreys in the first place!" he boomed. "He cleaned their clocks, not me! If this Roseblade girl's interested in anyone, it ought to be him!"

While the two argued, my thoughts wandered to the sender of the letter. I sighed. It wasn't Deirdre who'd written about her interest; rather, it was her older sister, who had already graduated. From what I understood, she was as idiosyncratic as Deirdre herself. I couldn't decide whether Nicks was lucky that he'd so intrigued her.

Well, either way, I'm the one who arranged this behind the scenes.

In the short few seconds I'd looked away, Nicks had seized my old man by the collar and begun to shake him. Dad felt too guilty to stop him.

"Do you have *any* idea the position you guys are putting me in when you tell me out of nowhere that I'm going to be a viscount?!" Nicks froze for a split second. "That's it. Leon! Leon can become viscount instead! *He* did all the work. This girl will be just as happy taking him for a husband."

"Leon already has Rie!" Dad snapped. "You know that!"

"I do know that! It's not like I forgot! But the point is, I can't be a viscount!" Nicks's face pinched as if he was about to dissolve into tears.

My heart ached. Not out of guilt, but because most brothers, whether they shared blood or not, would sacrifice one another if it meant climbing nearer to the top. Mine was instead a paragon of self-sacrifice, willing to forsake his chance to move up in the world and offer it to me. That compassionate quality was precisely why I wanted him to be happy.

My lips curled into a toothy grin. "I'm not cut out to serve as a viscount. All that responsibility would be a pain in the butt for me. Anyway, I knew you'd whine about us deciding things for you, so I brought along the charming lady so

eager to meet you." I raised my voice and shouted, "Ladies, please come in!"

The door to Dad's study flew open, and two women stepped inside.

Deirdre, who had accompanied her sister, entered first. "You may have taken down some famous air pirates, but you seem to lack the gravitas expected of someone wielding such power," she said disapprovingly. "I hoped you'd be more steadfast and confident. How disappointing."

Nicks tried to smile but faltered. He and Deirdre were in different classes but still in the same year, so they had at least passing knowledge of each other. "Miss Deirdre? Should I assume you're the young lady I am to marry?"

"Oh, no. You've misunderstood." Deirdre cast a look at the woman behind her. "This potential arrangement would be between you and my elder sister."

Everyone's gazes moved to Dorothea Fou Roseblade. Her blonde hair was long and straight, unlike Deirdre's. The dress she wore enhanced her slender figure and its delicious curves. Her perfectly groomed bangs hung over her forehead, and her intimidating eyes were narrowed.

At twenty years old, Dorothea was the picture of beauty, but given her looks and aura, I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd shown up with a whip in hand.

Nonetheless, I envy you, Nicks.

"Lord Nicks," said Deirdre, "this is my sister Dorothea."

"A pleasure," Dorothea said curtly.

Her gaze shifted away from Nicks. She obviously didn't have the best attitude. Still, I had to make sure these two got hitched—for my own happiness!

"You're lucky, Nicks, landing a girl this gorgeous," I said with a feigned smile, careful to rein in my very real jealousy.

"What're you grinning your head off for?" he snapped.

Dorothea's ample breasts were the only reason I wished I could be in Nicks's place. The moment I'd sensed what kind of person she was, I actually felt for him. Her personality was as intense as her beauty.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, bickering with your brother while you

ignore me," Dorothea snapped at Nicks irritably.

"Eek!" Nicks squeaked, recoiling.

Dorothea folded her arms under her breasts and lifted her chin, staring down her nose at him. "My, do you flinch so easily? If you're to be my husband, I would prefer you not shame yourself so openly in front of me. After hearing all you did to dispatch those Offrey ruffians, I looked forward to meeting you, but you fall short of the reports."

"I'm afraid I must agree." Deirdre nodded. "If Father weren't so invested in this engagement, we would already back out."

The arrangement between Nicks and Dorothea wasn't a totally done deal. I was only about eighty percent sure it would happen. That said, this whole meeting between them was essentially a formality—a prerequisite for marriage. Even if they both tried to refuse, that alone wouldn't annul the impending engagement.

Perhaps it was my own bias speaking, since I'd coordinated all this, but Earl Roseblade had seemed very much on board with it—unlike the two unwilling participants. Regarding their match, he'd said, "We *must* ensure this marriage is a success. Whatever it takes, I want Nicks to be part of our family!"

The earl had been quite insistent on that point. Before I left, he'd grabbed my hands and said, "Give Nicksie my best wishes. He'll be my son-in-law soon enough!" The determined glimmer in his eye made clear his intention to force the union. He had no intention of letting Nicks escape his clutches.

Later, I had Luxion investigate the matter. At that point, I discovered that Dorothea was a source of great stress for the earl. She had ruined numerous potential engagements, and everyone around her had begun to worry that she wouldn't wed at all if she kept it up. The earl was probably so desperate to pair her up that a status gap between himself and his future son-in-law wasn't a concern, so long as the man in question was decent.

Nicks fell silent.

"Your younger brother, Lord Leon, is an accomplished adventurer," Dorothea continued. "From what I understand, though, you've achieved nothing despite

being his senior. Are you truly related by blood? Aren't you the least bit embarrassed at how he's surpassed you? Well? Say something for yourself."

I was losing my cool with the nonsense she was spewing. Dad probably didn't like her attitude, either, but he knew he couldn't get angry with an earl's daughter.

"Actually," he said under his breath, "Nicks is more the norm for this family— Leon's the exception."

How was I an "exception"? I was obviously as average as they came. I'd happened to get my hands on a cheat item—Luxion—but that didn't make me less normal.

Nicks lifted his head, a wrinkle in his brow. "That's right," he snarled at Dorothea. His attitude had taken a hard left. "I can't even measure up to my younger brother. What of it?"

Dad gulped. This was the first time he or I had seen Nicks act so nasty with a woman. Had he lost his mind? At first I worried he had, but it only took a few seconds to catch on to what he was doing.

"Nicks, you can't seriously mean to—"

"Shut up."

I'd tried to stop him, but it was too late. He was going to act hostile and argue with Dorothea in hopes of wriggling out of this engagement. His plan was shortsighted, though. He was assuming that, even if he completely infuriated her, we could smooth things over somehow.

Don't do it, Nicks! If this falls through, I'm the one who'll catch heat!

"You're being awfully stubborn about this!" I said through gritted teeth. "Let's calm down a bit. Pissing off your potential bride's only going to make the situation worse."

"You put me in this position to begin with!" Nicks snapped at me before returning his gaze to Dorothea. He jabbed a finger at her. "You listen here, you selfish princess!"

Her jaw dropped. "S-selfish princess?!"

"Don't get the wrong idea. You're not doing me some kind of favor by marrying me. *I'm* doing *you* one! If that bothers you, run home to your daddy."

"Y-you're telling me to *leave*? No one's ever said anything like that to me," Dorothea said.

"People walk on eggshells because you're some earl's daughter, that's all."

Dorothea's brow creased. "You seem unaware of how frightening we Roseblades can be once provoked."

"The Roseblades as a *house*, maybe. But all I see standing in front of me now is a selfish young noblewoman who deluded herself into thinking her family's power and influence are actually *hers*. There's nothing 'frightening' about *you*."

"You're calling me selfish again?!" Her cheeks flushed with anger.

Nicks was sweating bullets even as he forced a composed smile, trying to seem as though he wasn't the least bit worried about the repercussions of angering her.

"Nicks, knock this off right now!" Dad snapped. "You'll put us at war with House Roseblade itself!" Tears welled in his eyes—despair that the cause of our doom might be unfolding before us.

None of us could have foreseen the sudden turn coming our way.

Up until this point, Deirdre had seemed gobsmacked, but she finally broke into a smile. "Sister, I'm so happy for you. Congratulations."

Huh?

Dorothea's cheeks had taken a rosy tint—anger, I suspected at first, but I was mistaken. There was a smile on her face and something uncanny about the way she licked her lips. She looked…excited?

"Yes. You're perfect," she told Nicks. "Every other man turns deferent at the sound of the Roseblade name—subservient. I've been waiting for one with backbone who would be worth whipping into shape." She hugged herself abruptly, her entire body trembling.

Nicks's jaw dropped. "Uh, what? Um...wh-why?"

Dorothea clasped her hands at her voluptuous breasts, as if in prayer.

"Actually, I in fact hoped for something more," she continued. "For us to butt heads fiercely, to temper one another. That's precisely the sort of marriage I've been looking for. I don't want an obedient partner, or a domineering one who simply commands that I obey. Both are boring—pathetic. I've finally found my ideal match!"

Sweat poured down Nicks's face as Dorothea snatched his arm up, clinging to him.

"You're *perfect*," she repeated. "I'm confident we'll build a wonderful family together."

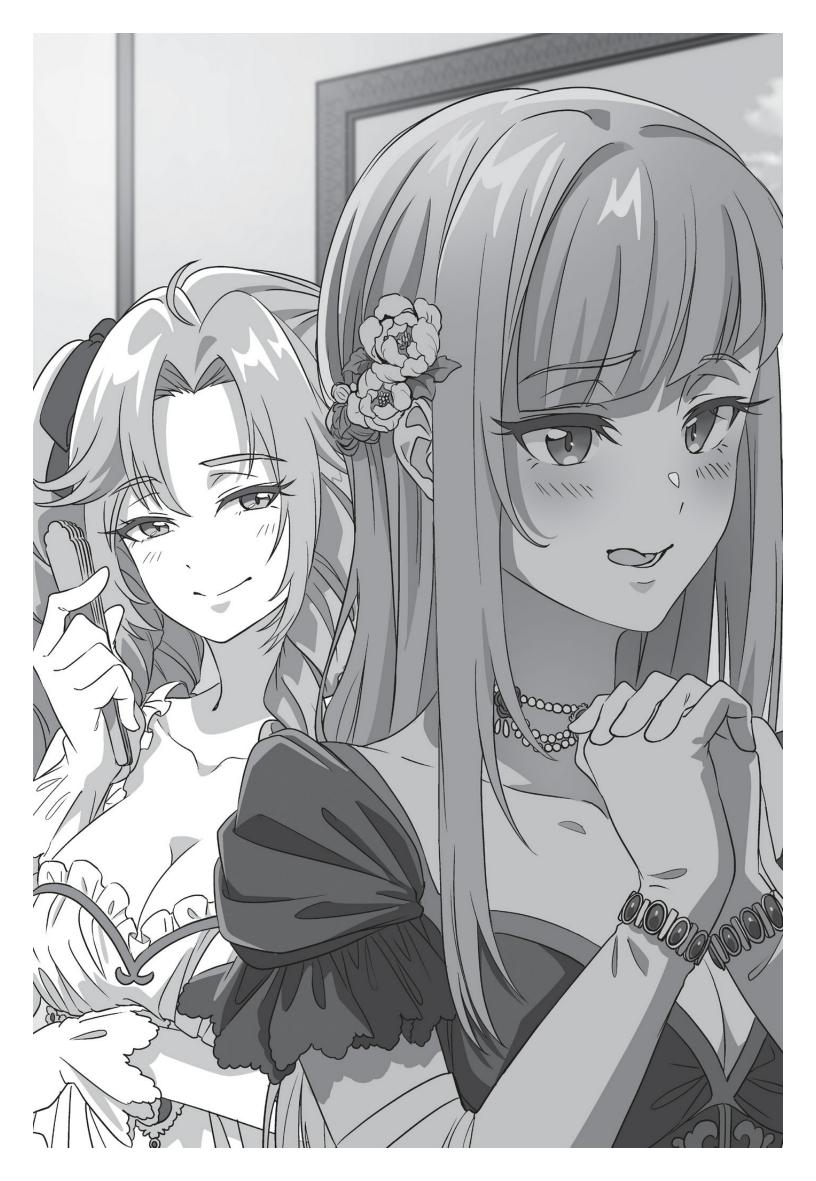
With that, she started dragging him from the room. As they disappeared through the doorway, Nicks managed to turn back, hand outstretched toward me. "H-help!"

I smiled back and waved. "I wish you two great happiness."

Dad cradled his head in his hands as he struggled to digest what he'd just witnessed and how things had unfolded. "This is for the best...isn't it? I haven't made a mistake...?"

"It's fine," I assured him, eager to assuage his anxiety. "With this, Nicks will be a viscount and regional lord."

"I can't shake the feeling I sold off my son, though. I'm sorry for him. I feel... guilty."



I was just happy that the viscounty, and the annoying duties it entailed, were Nicks's problem now. He was having trouble finding a partner, and I set him up with a filthy-rich beauty. How awesome am I? Yes, I was the paragon of kindness.

As the door clicked shut, Nicks's screams echoed down the hallway. "Leon, I'll remember this!" he sobbed. "I swear I'm going to clock you in the face one of these days, you hear?!"

Ah. He's so grateful, it's reduced him to tears. I smiled blithely.

Deirdre shrugged at me. "I can read your face like a book. You're glad to foist all this on your brother. Well, I'm a little envious of Dot regardless. I wish I could find a man with that backbone."

I hope you manage it! But stop eyeing me like you wonder whether I fit the bill.

Well, even with that out of the way, more was still required to clean this mess up fully.

Chapter 12: Stephanie's Fate

There was great uproar at the royal palace. The Offreys were facing public hearings.

They were more spectacle than anything; although the events were called "hearings," judgment had been rendered already. The Offrey house name was to be expunged from the record of noble houses. The family had lost their lands already, and their cumulative wealth had been funneled to the royal palace.

To put it unflatteringly, the palace was making an example of them. They were being condemned publicly because their ties to air pirates made them categorically unworthy of the noble status they'd once enjoyed. The palace likely hoped that would satisfy the many victims who'd suffered at the Offreys' hands.

Given the scale of the affair, countless aristocrats had flooded into the palace since the crack of dawn to watch the hearings unfold. Angelica was among the visitors. Clad in her school uniform, she strolled down a palace corridor, turning a corner to see Deirdre farther down the hall.

"Angelica," Deirdre said by way of greeting. "You were a great help in this messy business."

"You certainly made a show of it," Angelica replied as Deirdre fell into step beside her. "This affair will be all anyone talks about for a while."

Deirdre slid open her fan and pressed it over her mouth. "I greatly appreciate your getting us through to Her Majesty."

"Well, I wish you'd settled things more quietly. Justified though you were, this was all too abrupt. Have you any idea what waves it will send through the aristocracy?"

Deposing an entire aristocratic family was never a simple affair. The matter didn't just end with their demise. Once the palace had taken care of the

Offreys, anyone linked to the family would be swept up and faced with consequences as well. An inquiry would be required to assess how many of the Offreys' cohorts had been aware of the illegal goings-on and to what extent they'd been involved, if at all.

There had been no time whatsoever to prepare for this, and palace officials would burn the candle at both ends overseeing the aftermath of the Offreys' deposal.

Deirdre smiled and snapped her fan shut. "Oh, we Roseblades were in no rush. It was Lord Bartfort..." She trailed off and cleared her throat. "Ahem, it was Leon who was in such a hurry." She spoke his name with a tone of familiarity and affection.

Angelica's brows knitted. "You never mentioned anything about a potential union between your house and the Bartforts."

"They approached us about it, and we saw no reason to refuse."

It frustrated Angelica that she'd known nothing about this until it was too late. Still, she understood that she had no room to protest if the Bartforts requested the union themselves. I should've arranged a meeting between Bartfort and His Highness sooner. I suppose I ought to give up trying to win Bartfort's loyalty, now that his family will have a strong link to the Roseblades.

She'd hoped to induct Bartfort into Julius's faction, but he'd established a different allegiance, so at this point she hesitated to pursue the plan. *If only I'd known, I would've moved things along more quickly.* The missed opportunity filled her with more regret than she'd ever have expected.

The Roseblades weren't allies of the Redgraves. The houses weren't currently opposed or hostile to one another, but depending how things changed, warfare was within the realm of possibility. A Redgrave snatching Leon from the Roseblades' clutches would surely push them a step closer to such conflict. That was more than enough reason to hesitate and reconsider.

Deirdre slid her fan back open, again hiding her mouth. "My apologies, Angelica. You had your eye on him, didn't you?"

"You knew I did, so don't waste time with such a hollow question," retorted

Angelica. "At any rate, it's nearly time for the former earl's hearing. I assume you'll be in attendance?"

Deirdre's smile became that of a savage beast eager to watch its prey. "Why, of course I will."

The former Earl Offrey's hearing was probably kicking off at this very moment. Marie and I were elsewhere in the palace, though, attending someone else's hearing. Our testimony had been requested, hence our participation.

The criminal facing judgment was Stephanie. She was too inconsequential for her hearing to merit the theatrics her father's had; still, the palace couldn't let her off the hook. They'd reserved a separate chamber to carry her hearing out simultaneously with her father's, mostly because the officials were eager to wrap up the messy business with the Offreys and Lafans. Or so I pieced together —I didn't really know the specifics.

The chamber in question was set up like a meeting room. Stephanie was fully bound and positioned prominently. As Marie and I watched her, the presiding official spoke.

"We cannot overlook how you wielded your family's power and influence to commit a wealth of crimes against fellow students. Orchestrating air pirates' infiltration of the capital to serve your own ends was especially egregious."

He then read off a list of Stephanie's offenses while the gallery jeered her, hurling all kinds of verbal abuse.

"Traitor!"

"You and your family were always merchants playing at nobility. Still, you committed atrocities beyond redemption!"

"Put her head on display!"

Stephanie kept her gaze glued to the floor, shivering. She couldn't defend herself against their abuse. Her pompous, entitled attitude was nowhere to be seen, her face pale with fear. She was like an entirely different person.

The young Offrey woman could no longer turn to her family for help or

protection. She was just another academy girl. No, she wasn't even an academy student anymore. Just a regular girl, then.

Marie tugged my sleeve and whispered, "Hey, when they mentioned the air pirates in the capital, were they referring to what I think?"

"Brita and her friends admitted everything. They were eager to help if it meant repaying their debt to you," I replied.

"Really?" Marie stared at me, mouth slightly open, as if she couldn't believe it.

I didn't tell her that I'd asked them to do so as a favor. Or maybe it'd be more accurate to say I persuaded them. Either way, they'd been reluctant but ended up promising to cooperate.

After the presiding official listed off Stephanie's crimes, he said, "Your standing as an academy student notwithstanding, execution would ordinarily be the best way to deal with someone like you. However, we have elected to hand down a different sentence. From this point on, you will be divested of citizenship. You will be neither noble nor commoner—a woman lacking legal affiliation with any country. That will be the price of your many crimes."

Essentially, after her hearing, the palace would throw Stephanie out and wash their hands of her. At first, that punishment sounded quite light. Yet the way Stephanie jerked her head up, face pale, said otherwise.

"N-no. No! Let me die an aristocrat! Execute me however you like, but don't cast me out!" she wailed, tears streaking down her cheeks.

Half the gallery was too stunned to react, as if they didn't totally understand what this punishment meant. Perhaps that was a given, since most were fellow academy students who'd come to see their tormentor's fate play out.

While the kids didn't comprehend the implications, however, the adult spectators did. Some of the men smirked, knowing exactly what awaited Stephanie when she left the palace.

Marie tugged my sleeve again. "Hey, um...is that really a punishment? They're only kicking her out, right? Isn't it actually kind of risky?"

She probably feared Stephanie would retaliate against us. The girl no longer posed a threat, however. Stephanie was neither an aristocrat nor even a peasant. She had no rights. No law would prohibit any behavior from her, but on the other hand, none would protect her.

Rumors of the Offreys' many misdeeds were spreading across the kingdom, which would make Stephanie's position even more precarious. Nowhere would be safe for her anymore. Not within Holfort.

"She always looked down on us for being poor, but now, we'll be as far above her as the moon," I explained. "And once she's thrown out of the palace?

Anyone can do anything they want to her without consequences."

"Wait..." Marie's eyes widened. She finally understood what I was getting at.

Anyone with a grudge against Stephanie would have free rein to take revenge. Stephanie could run to whomever she wanted for help, but it would be pointless. The kingdom wouldn't save her. She was no one to them. Simple execution might've been a happier end.

As Stephanie wailed and screeched, the female knight beside her struck her in the back of the head. "Enough with the bawling! Shut up!"

"Ow! That hurts! Stop! Someone help!"

"'Help'? Who would help someone like you?! Haven't you seen the faces of your audience?"

The knight seized a fistful of Stephanie's hair and forced her to survey the gallery. Everyone was either glaring or sneering at her. Her fall from grace was a dramatic one: from earl's daughter to someone who didn't even possess the basic rights afforded to citizens. This was a spectacle by any measure.

The female knight smiled sadistically at Stephanie. I wondered if she had some personal grudge against the girl, though they hadn't seemed acquainted.

"Doesn't look like anyone wants to help you," the knight said.

The look on Stephanie's face was one of pure terror. "No!" she shrieked, her voice echoing through the chamber.

Her reaction bothered me less than the crude way the lady knight handled

her. I couldn't imagine a male knight being nearly as cruel and merciless.

"That's enough," said the presiding official, finally stopping the knight's viciousness. "Let us proceed to exposing your accomplices. Stephanie, you were close with other girls at the academy, correct? How many had significant connections to the air pirates affiliated with your family?"

This wasn't the appropriate venue for an interrogation. The official's question was for entertainment, and he didn't actually expect Stephanie to answer honestly. In fact, if she didn't divulge anything, it would make his life easier. The less work, the better.

Didn't they already investigate the knight families bound to the Offreys and confirm they weren't involved with the air pirates?

Even if Stephanie's entourage had such links, it would've been *through* Stephanie. Those girls had been in a tough position; they couldn't have defied her even if they wanted to. They would likely still face punishment, but it wouldn't be as heavy as Stephanie's. Probably.

"Upon investigating your entourage, we discovered that Carla Fou Wayne has the closest association with you," the presiding official went on, "and is thus likeliest to be linked with air pirates. Would you agree?"

At the mention of Carla, Stephanie's entire demeanor changed. She flinched, stared at the ground for a few moments, and then said, "Sh-she doesn't know anything about the pirates. She only ever followed my orders."

She was actually trying to shield Carla.

The presiding official's lips pulled into a wicked smile, giving me the impression his personality was just as unsavory. "Is that so? Well, according to everyone else, that was seemingly the case. Your retinue insisted that following your orders was nothing short of torture. They even lamented the humiliation of needing to suck up to the descendant of a merchant who'd scammed his way into the aristocracy. Every single one scorned you."

A fresh wave of tears fell from Stephanie's eyes. I stared at her, dumbfounded. I'd been so sure she would turn her back on her followers and sell them out. Yet Stephanie stubbornly defended Carla to the last—far from

what I'd expected.

"Enough," said Stephanie. "Don't make me repeat myself. Carla was more intelligent than the others, so I kept her by my side and made use of her. But do you really think I'd leave important matters in the care of a pawn? I never... trusted anyone else...ever." At the last, her voice broke, her body quivering. In that moment, she looked truly heartbroken.

"Why didn't Stephanie tell the truth about Carla?" I asked as we trudged down the steps into the palace dungeon.

"Carla Fou Wayne was her closest retainer, correct?" Luxion said. "Given their proximity, Carla would've had access to the most information about the Offreys. She neglected her duty to her kingdom by neglecting to report them sooner, which makes her crimes even graver than those of her peers."

"Yeah," I said. "But what reason does Stephanie have to shield Carla? I mean, after hearing that her followers trashed her, I would've thought she'd be eager to drag them down with her."

"Whether Stephanie provided testimony against Carla wouldn't have greatly affected the punishment she faced. That hearing was intended as spectacle, nothing more."

"That I agree with."

As our conversation petered out, Marie heaved an exaggerated sigh at us. "You guys really didn't pick up on it?"

"Pick up on what?" I demanded.

"Did you notice something we did not?" Luxion asked more politely.

"This is only intuition," Marie hedged, "but I think Stephanie probably just wanted friends."

"No, that can't be it." I shook my head. "Absolutely not. I mean, how did you even reach that conclusion?"

"If that was her intention, she made a fundamental error in the process of befriending them," Luxion said. Marie didn't seem the least bit surprised by our skepticism. She still bore Stephanie a grudge, but there was a twinge of empathy in her voice as she explained further. "I did say this is just intuition. At any rate, Stephanie doesn't actually have friends."

"Not surprising, with her attitude."

"I thought that at first, too," Marie continued. "But life in this world is more complicated, isn't it? Depending what house you're born into, lots of people won't even give you the time of day."

I understood what she was getting at. A merchant's family had taken over House Offrey while they were in decline; the merchant appropriated their lineage by questionable means, stealing their name and status for himself and his line. Thereafter, though the Offreys called themselves nobles, they were still just merchants using a title, as far as everyone else was concerned.

Although business acumen enabled them to climb the social ladder and claim an earldom, the things they'd done to get where they were damaged their reputation irrevocably. It was baked into the game's storyline that most aristocrats ostracized them. Marie was right; making friends would've been incredibly challenging for Stephanie.

"I understand that approaching nobles would be hard for her, knowing how she was viewed. Still, it was *only* nobles who hated her, right?" I pointed out. Surely Stephanie could've made friends outside the aristocracy.

Marie sighed at me. "What she wanted was aristocratic friends."

"Then she's a terrible person." If she thought status made someone worth befriending, she was no better than the people who looked down on her.

"I think she was partly influenced by her upbringing. She grew up in such a twisted atmosphere, it's little wonder *she* got so twisted. Don't mistake this for pity, because it's not. What she did was unconscionable. But we can't deny the cards were stacked against her."

If only Stephanie had been raised in a more upstanding household, she might not have gone down such a dark path.

"Stephanie is nonetheless fully responsible for her role in this incident," said

Luxion. "Were she a better person, her sentence would have been far lighter. I will acknowledge her environment is partly to blame, but her personality itself is part of the issue."

"Yes, but—" Marie tried to argue.

Luxion interrupted her. "If we take environment into account, the same argument could be made about you, Marie. Yet *you...*" He paused. "Well, admittedly, you have caused numerous issues. However, they were minor in comparison to Stephanie's multitude of crimes. There is absolutely no need for you to empathize with her."

"I saw it while I was there," Marie responded once Luxion said his piece. "Stephanie always kept Carla at her side. It seemed to annoy Carla; it looked like Stephanie enjoyed her company, though. She was just terrible at being a friend—so terrible that there was no way anyone she tried to befriend would realize what was happening."

"I still don't buy it," I said.

Even assuming Marie's hypothesis was true, if Stephanie had caused everyone trouble simply because she didn't know how to be friendly, she was no more than a nuisance.

Using your status or connections to strong-arm those weaker than you was harassment and abuse of power. Perpetrators had all kinds of excuses. They might even say things like:

"I did it for their own good."

"I just interact by messing with people."

"Unrealistic expectations help someone grow."

An unbiased third party would find such reasoning impossible to comprehend, but the aggressors could always rationalize their actions. They sometimes even thought they were fully justified. Whether the rest of the world agreed was a different story.

Basically, what I'm getting at is that the stuff Stephanie did was unacceptable, even if she desperately wanted noble friends.

Marie didn't seem to approve of her behavior, either. "I agree that Stephanie's rotten to the core," she said. "I'd rather never see her face again if I can help it. But I do think extenuating circumstances made things even worse. This is supposed to be a cozy, comfy otome game. Don't you think it's a little dark and grim?"

"Assuming I understand you correctly, you posit that she lacked proper communication skills and knowledge regarding how to properly form and maintain friendships, correct?" Luxion asked. "An intriguing interpretation. Stephanie's punishment was already handed down, however. It will resolve nothing to puzzle out whether nature, nurture, or a mix of both so twisted her personality."

Marie lowered her gaze. "I know you're right. Thinking about it now won't change anything. Still, I saw girls like that when I worked in the adult industry. I can't help wondering if her life would've been different if she'd realized her mistakes sooner."

Seeing Marie so dejected about this whole mess made me sigh. Why was she hung up on Stephanie? "This is all guesswork on your part, right? That's why we made the trip down here."

Once we reached the bottom of the stairs, Luxion engaged his cloaking device to hide himself. A nearby guard lifted his head as we approached, and I quickly explained the situation. He kindly guided us to the cell where Carla was being held. She sat on the floor, clothes and skin somewhat filthy. She looked haggard.

When she heard our approaching footsteps, she lifted her head. "What do you want?"

"Stephanie's hearing is over," Marie told her. A door of metal bars separated us. "She lost everything, and they're going to cast her out."

Carla seemed to understand what that meant, because she snickered, a sinister grin on her face—as if she took genuine pleasure in Stephanie's misery. "Is that right? Feels good to hear it. Being ordered around by her all the time was bad enough, and then she dragged us into this mess." She heaved a breathy sigh. "It's what she deserves. If only I could've attended. I'd love to

have seen how pathetic she looked."

We stood there quietly as she cackled. It was as if she'd given in to her own despair.

"Her losing everything is the best possible outcome," Carla continued. "She spent all this time looking down on people, deriding them. It's an ironic twist of fate for her to lose the very power that let her do that, isn't it? Now, she'll be the target of everyone else's condescension and scorn!" Her grin turned from sinister to maniacal.

"Stephanie insisted you had nothing to do with her crimes, especially those pertaining to the air pirates," Marie said. "She didn't sell any of you out."

Carla stared, open-mouthed, at Marie. She was speechless.

Only once we left her cell, and began to exit the dungeon, did we hear her mumbling behind us. "You wouldn't sell us out? After everything you put us through, you choose *now* to shield us?! Why would you do that? Keep acting arrogant and hateful!"

That news about Stephanie had really shocked Carla. She was probably also profoundly fatigued, so maybe she was confused. In a better state, she might've retorted, "Does she honestly think that'd earn my forgiveness? It's a little late."

As we trudged back to the exit, we passed the cell where Marie's father was being held.

"Marie! That's you, isn't it, Marie?!" he cried. "H-help me. Help me smooth things over with Bartfort. I'm innocent, I swear!" Fat tears rolled down his cheeks as his hands stretched through the bars toward her.

Marie's brows pinched together. She huffed and turned away from him, stomping off, but I saw from how her shoulders hunched forward that she wasn't as flippant as she tried to seem. She had no reason to feel unhappy about abandoning him and the rest of her family, though. They'd been nothing short of terrible to her and deserved the resentment she felt, although I could tell she harbored guilt over deserting them.

I scratched my head. "There's no reason for her to feel bad. She takes on way too much." I was really just thinking out loud.

However, Luxion took that as his cue to respond, manifesting despite the (former) viscount's presence. "I wholeheartedly agree. That said, I do think you two are similar in many regards. It is for that very reason that I believe you're superbly compatible."

"Hey, what're you doing, showing yourself?"

The former viscount's eyes widened. He understood instantly that he'd seen something he wasn't supposed to. "Baron Bartfort!" he pleaded. "I'll keep this secret. So please, I beseech you—find it within yourself to help me! If you don't...I'll tell everyone you keep suspicious company." He flashed a smarmy grin.

Annoyed, I pursed my lips. I didn't have to respond, though, since Luxion saw fit to do it for me.

"You are not mentally stable at present," he told Marie's father. "No one would heed your testimony; thus, your attempts at negotiation are meaningless." He turned back to me. "Now, Master, we should hurry after Marie."

"Yeah. Let's go."

I strode off with Luxion, ignoring the former viscount.

"No! Save me!" he screeched behind us. "I don't want to die yet!"

At least Stephanie had shown some dignity by protecting her followers. Marie's father was a coward to the bitter end.

Chapter 13: A Contract

S_{CHOOL HAD ENDED} for the day when Olivia found herself making her way down one of the academy halls. She flinched at every little sound, eyes sweeping her surroundings. Every time she sensed someone's presence, she stiffened. Her face had grown gaunter since she first enrolled, and she was frequently gripped by fear.

Olivia soon arrived at an enormous bulletin board that prominently displayed a map of Holfort. There was nothing particularly odd about that. Today, however, workers were taking down the map to alter it.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she approached. These workers weren't nobles, and they knew nothing about her, since they weren't associated with the school. In fact, the moment they spotted her, they assumed she was an enrolled aristocrat and offered polite smiles.

"Pardon me," Olivia said. "May I ask what it is you're doing?"

"To tell the truth, we got this task so out of the blue, we're surprised ourselves," one worker said, stepping aside so she could look more closely at the altered map.

Existing lines on the map distinguished the kingdom's regional borders. Each territory name was listed alongside the name of the family that ruled it. A worker had drawn a red line through one such family name.

Olivia's eyes widened at how the map had been revised. "Wh-why is their name crossed out?"

"The Lafans' status was revoked. Their lands have returned to the crown's control, so we need to remove their name from the map. A new map will be drawn, of course, but it'll take a while before it's done."

"Revoked, you say? All of a sudden? How come?" Olivia pressed. It was difficult for her to fathom how a whole family could simply be wiped off the

map out of nowhere.

The workers searched each other's faces as if wary of sharing what they knew. Finally, the man who'd been speaking whispered, "This is all rumor, you understand. But it seems they upset the royal family, so they were disposed of."

Blood drained from Olivia's face. That was the reason? All they did was upset the royal family, and they lost everything? That quickly?

If she hadn't already been convinced that her tormentors' threats were serious, she was now certain they *had* to be.

Oblivious to her distress, the worker continued, "It's actually not only the Lafans. We're removing the Offrey name as well. They've been deposed, too, and a different noble will inherit their title and enact the law in their territory."

"Someone else will step in?"

"There was a conflict between their house and another noble family," he explained. "It all happened so quickly, everyone's shocked. The Offreys' enemies annihilated them."

Annihilated. The word was a rock in the pit of Olivia's stomach. Living in her village, she'd never realized this kind of thing happened. Back then, she'd assumed Holfort was a peaceful country. Enrolling at the academy had relieved her of that illusion. This kingdom was anything but peaceful.

Olivia stared at her feet. "Wh-why were they, um, 'annihilated'?"

The man scratched his head. "I can't tell you for sure, but rumor has it the Offreys angered the wrong noble—someone really, terrifyingly dangerous who took out Earl Offrey and his family in a single day." He shrugged and laughed. "But like I said, that's all gossip." His expression indicated he was skeptical; he'd long since learned that rumors were often embellished.

Embellished or not, the details twisted Olivia's stomach into knots. *If even an earl's entire house can be destroyed that quickly, my village wouldn't stand a chance.*

She jammed a finger in her mouth and bit down; it was the only way to control the overwhelming fear that seized her. Her body wobbled as she

Once the hearings ended and we'd paid Carla that brief visit, we went back to the academy. Orange rays of evening sunlight spilled through the windows of our classroom. Something about the scene was really nostalgic; it reminded me of my school days in Japan, making me a little homesick.

What would've been a sentimental moment was ruined by Marie. No sooner had we returned to school than she was summoned to the headmaster's office, which issued her tons of paperwork to fill out.

Marie slammed her open palm against her desk. "It's not my fault the Lafans fell from grace!" she sobbed.

Since her entire family's lands and titles had been revoked, Marie was being stripped of her aristocratic status as well. She was fully entitled to her tears; we'd all confirmed she bore no fault in this scandal.

I should mention that, under ordinary circumstances, Marie would've been punished alongside her family—to some degree, anyway. She'd only received leniency because the Roseblades, poor barons' sons, and I all vouched for her innocence. Alas, regardless of her lack of involvement, her house's downfall meant she lost her status.

Marie would at least retain her position as a protected citizen, unlike Stephanie. Still, this meant she couldn't keep attending the academy. Olivia had enrolled as a commoner thanks to a special exception, but the school had made it clear Marie couldn't do the same.

The paperwork they'd foisted on her was for her withdrawal. She had no right to attend; the Lafans were no longer aristocrats.

"Aren't they being a little ruthless? I mean, 'You're not one of us anymore, so get out of here!' Seriously?" Marie had been very eager to attend the academy. She was having a hard time coming to terms with leaving it.

Marie and I were the only two people in the classroom, so Luxion didn't bother with his cloaking device. "No need for alarm," he said, drifting between us. "I have the utmost confidence in your intellect and abilities. I will prepare a

far more optimal learning environment for you than the academy could provide. That should resolve your concerns."

"What Marie wants is the academy lifestyle, not its learning environment," I sighed. "She wants to enjoy her youth, and you're floating here telling her you'll make her study even *more*. How's that at all reassuring?"

"Is that truly the issue at hand?" Luxion asked dubiously, gazing at Marie for confirmation.

Marie lifted her head. Her cheeks were damp with tears, and a fresh wave of new ones was on the way. She nodded. "Of course that's what I'm after. I wanted a second chance to be a teen. My last life sucked so bad by the end, I thought I could at least recapture a moment of joy. Instead..." She sniffled.

There was a long pause. "I see," Luxion said with great exasperation.

I fished a handkerchief from my pocket and handed it to Marie. "This is at least better than marrying Ricky, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. But still." Making a very unladylike noise, Marie blew her nose into the handkerchief.

Although it made me grimace, something about seeing that was a relief.

Marie reminded me of someone, and I needed to discuss something important with her—something that involved, and would affect, both of us.

"Hey," I said. "Remember I mentioned to you that I had a little sister in my last life?"

"Yeah." Marie nodded, turning her head away. Perhaps she reacted that way because she realized what I was getting at.

My little sister had been good at putting on an act in front of people to conceal her otherwise atrocious personality. In her defense, I will at least say she had more common sense than Stephanie.

"We were a family of four. My parents, my little sister, and me," I continued.

Marie nodded. "My family was the same."

We should've pieced this together sooner. We'd basically dismissed the idea, thinking it wasn't possible, and I regretted that we hadn't considered it

seriously. If we had, neither of us would've gone through so much crap.

"I knew it," I said. "I should've connected the dots as soon as you said you foisted this game on your older brother."

I hadn't outright voiced what I was getting at. Marie sensed it, though.

"Yeah. Neither of us thought it was possible. How did this happen? Especially since we died at totally different times."

Based on what she'd shared, she'd outlived me by many years. It didn't make sense that we'd reincarnate here at the same time and wind up classmates. That was a big part of why I'd dismissed the similarities as mere coincidence.

"You said it. All of this has been weird. Us getting reincarnated in an otome game world is pretty fantastical to begin with."

Marie laughed. "Yeah, you've got a point there." Despite the mirth on her face, she still looked sad.

We'd received this chance to reunite—nothing short of a miracle. It was awful that neither of us were delighted about it. Part of me wondered what would've happened if we'd never caught on, but I couldn't entertain that thought.

"You sure were a selfless little sister, you know," I teased.

"What're you talking about?"

I was mostly razzing her, but part of me also wanted her to look back and see where she'd gone wrong. Or maybe I had no ulterior motive. Maybe all I wanted was to reminisce with family. Marie was the only person in this world I could have this kind of conversation with, after all.

"You remember, don't you? How good you were at putting on a show. You won our parents over every time, so you were their favorite, and I was always in the doghouse."

"Yeah," Marie began, nodding, before doing a double take. "Wait—what?" She pulled a face. Apparently, she hadn't seen it the same way. "Just a sec. You're saying our parents trusted *me* over *you*?"

"Well, yeah, they did. You were always good at getting your way," I said with a laugh.

Marie glowered. "That doesn't sound right. My parents always trusted my brother over me."

"Huh?" Something about our experiences didn't add up.

Luxion, who'd kept silent until this point, interjected. "Judging by your conversation prior to this moment, it did seem you were siblings in your previous life. However, these discrepancies are certainly curious."

Was it just my imagination, or was he enjoying this? Whatever. I knew I was right. I'd seen my little sister in Marie so many times; they had too much in common for it to be coincidence.

"I know what you're thinking," I said to Luxion. "She has to be my sister, though!" I turned back to her. "Marie, you couldn't clear the game yourself, so you forced it on your big brother, right? That lines up perfectly with my experience."

Marie scowled, indignant. "I'll admit it was a little unfair fobbing it off on him, but I asked him to play it as a favor. I didn't *force* it on him. While we're on the subject, you keep talking like I was a monster of a little sister, but I wasn't *that* awful."

"You're kidding me."

"Of course not! Why would you think that?"

She wasn't that awful? Hold up. Self-reporting is always flawed, so it's not like I can trust that she's representing herself accurately, but... Any doubts were worth investigating further to make sure.

"Okay, fine," I said. "Tell me what your older brother was like, then."

It was a little embarrassing to ask; it was like fishing for compliments (or complaints, if I was unlucky). Marie was probably equally uncomfortable, because she grimaced at first, but her expression brightened as she spoke.

"Pretty much your run-of-the-mill, normal brother, I guess. He had a habit of going overboard, but I think he was pretty average otherwise. That's why I had such an easy time leading him around by the nose. But let me tell you something—he was *terrifying* once you pissed him off! Oh, and absolutely

oblivious when it came to romance. We're talking dumb as a post. Totally messy relationships with women."

If she'd only described him as run-of-the-mill, normal, and average, I would've fit the bill perfectly, but the rest of her description... "Going overboard" and "terrifying once you pissed him off" didn't sound like me at all. And "messy relationships"? I'd never been in any romantic squabbles in my last life.

"Was this brother you're talking about actually a real person?" I shook my head. "If you were so scared of him when he was mad, I'm surprised you had the nerve to mess with him."

"Duh, he was my brother. I provoked him, but there was a line, and I knew better than to cross it. Now that I think about it, though, he was pretty soft on me."

He doesn't sound like me at all! For one thing, my little sister had unquestionably blackmailed me into playing that game for her. But I'd never have let her manipulate me like Marie did her brother. What's more, I was most definitely not "dumb as a post."

What the hell was with that guy? He sounded like your quintessential light novel hero, but I loathed dense male protagonists. If I met someone like that, I'd want to smack them. Anyway, I'd never doted on my little sister—at least, not as far as I was concerned.

He had to be someone else, right?

"My little sister was utterly insufferable. She became a totally different person the second she stepped out the door, and she was flexible enough to handle any situation. She got away with everything because my parents believed her over me."

Marie shook her head vigorously. "She couldn't have been me, then. She sounds like the kind of girl I'd hate. Your sister was a serious piece of work."

"Yeah...yeah, she was."

By this point, we'd already confirmed we weren't related. It probably wasn't worth bringing up my sister's obsession with BL to see if that matched; Marie obviously wasn't her.

Marie struck a sexy, suggestive pose, the sort you'd see in a gravure magazine. "While we're on the topic," she added, "I was drop-dead gorgeous in my last life. Seeing me now, you might not believe it, but I was slender with perfect curves."

My little sister had been...cute enough, I guess? I wasn't sure I'd say she'd had "perfect curves." She'd been skinny, yeah, but it hadn't been worth bragging about. At least not the way Marie was.

Our stories clashed in too many ways. As we realized our mutual mistake, the atmosphere grew awkward.

"Sorry," I blurted, unable to stomach the uncomfortable silence. "I thought you were my sister, but obviously I was wrong."

"Come on, don't even joke about that! I really seemed awful enough to be her? That's pretty mean!"

"Uh, yeah. My bad. But in my defense, you thought I was your brother, right? I'm nothing like him. Not scary, and *definitely* not dense."

I was a totally normal guy, not the eccentric weirdo Marie had described.

"Well, excuse me! I thought it was possible." Her cheeks flushed. "I guess we've pretty much established we're not related, right?"

That did make sense. Fate would've been awfully twisted to reincarnate siblings side by side here. We grimaced, then broke into laughter at the whole situation.

"Man, I guess we really had it all wrong," I noted.

"You said it. Us being siblings wouldn't even make sense. It's kind of silly that we so much as entertained the idea."

"It is a great relief that you resolved this misunderstanding," Luxion threw in, sounding suspiciously cheerful. "That means we can resolve Marie's issue as well."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What issue does she have, besides being forced out of the academy?"

"She—oh, it appears a professor has arrived. I will conceal myself for now."

Luxion engaged his cloaking device and vanished only a moment before someone strolled into the classroom.

"M-Master?!" I gasped, shooting up from the desk where I'd been sitting.

My master motioned me back to my seat, but I couldn't possibly sit in his presence. "I heard you two had returned and came looking for you," he said. "It sounds like you both had a rough time during this incident."

My master was the epitome of the perfect gentleman. He was also the academy professor in charge of our etiquette classes. I admired him greatly, not least because he'd introduced me to the art of tea. I referred to him as "Master" with great affection.

"You had only to summon us, and we would've come to see you," I said.

Marie gave me a judgmental look. "You sure act different with your master than with everyone else."

I glanced back at her and tilted my head. "That should be a given. He's my master. I have to show him respect."

She rolled her eyes.

Master glanced between us before finally approaching Marie's desk, where she'd spread out her mass of documents. "Withdrawal forms?" he guessed.

Marie shrugged, a shadow falling over her face. "There's really nothing I can do about it, is there? With the Lafans' rank gone, I'm no longer a noble." She sighed. "I wish I could've stayed at least a little longer, especially with the school trip on the horizon." She looked genuinely dejected.

Aw. That kind of tugs my heartstrings. "I'll take you on a trip," I promised her. "Don't get too down about it."

"I appreciate that, but I wanted to go on the *school* trip! I was really looking forward to it."

Her obsessive insistence astonished me, but I filed it away in the back of my mind. Then I turned back to Master. I didn't want to gape at Marie and look stupid in front of him. "Anyway, Master, what brings you all the way here to see us?"

I was anxious to wrap up whatever this was so I could drag Marie out to eat. That would surely improve her mood.

Master smiled at us. "You're acting awfully coy, Mr. Leon. Why let Miss Marie suffer, thinking her time at the academy is over, when you already know exactly what you must do to ensure she can remain?"

"What?" I blurted, shocked.

Marie shot out of her chair. "You're kidding! Leon, you've been messing with me this whole time? You're heartless! Is it really that fun watching me squirm?"

"Don't twist things to make me sound bad!" I snapped, voice rising in panic. "If Master gets the wrong idea about me, I'll burst out crying!"

"Really?" Marie scoffed. "Why do you care so much what some guy thinks?"

I had no idea what she found so weird about that. I glared at her, and she glowered back.

Master raised his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. "Ahem."

We both glanced at him and muttered apologies.

"Seeing the two of you here, I realize there's no need to worry. I was indulging in a bit of nosiness, so I'll get out of your hair now and take my leave."

With that, Master excused himself. Once his footsteps faded down the hallway, Luxion dropped his cloaking device.

"Your Master seems well aware of the best means through which to resolve this issue," he told me pointedly. "What will you do?"

He was staring intently at me. Unable to stand it, I retreated back to my desk. Marie did the same, though with a big frown on her face.

"If you know how to fix this, spit it out already," she said. "It's really cold to keep me in the dark. You're just like my older brother in that way."

"Don't lump me in with that guy. Anyway, uh..." I hesitated. "I don't know how to put this."

There was in fact a way to keep Marie at the academy, and I knew it. My hang-up had been that she might be my little sister from my last life. That

would've meant this solution was off the table. Since we'd ruled it out, though, there was a way to keep her here—a way only available to me, really.

Marie glared daggers at me while Luxion fixed me with an expectant look. They'd bore a hole straight through me at this rate.

I heaved a deep sigh and threw my head back, staring at the ceiling. "Marie," I said, in the most casual voice I could, "want to get hitched?"

"Huh?!" The pouting Marie's jaw instantly dropped. Her voluminous hair seemed to fan out around her. Perhaps it was my imagination, but there seemed to be more color in her face, too, as if she was blushing. Maybe that was just the setting sun's light tricking me.

Marie's whole body quivered. "Wh-where is this coming from all of a sudden?"

"If we get engaged, you can stay at the academy," I explained.

"Se-really?!" Marie slapped a hand over her mouth, embarrassed. She was probably trying to say "seriously" and "really" at the same time, only to mash them together in excitement.

I chuckled, then explained, "Your parents were deposed, so you're former nobility. If we get engaged, though, you'll eventually be a baron's wife, right? That'd qualify you for the academy. Of course, we'd still have to pay your tuition."

"How did you know this?" Marie asked, still surprised. "Did you look into it for me?"

I shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "Well, yeah."

"Master consulted that professor he so reveres ahead of time about this whole debacle," Luxion explained—rather unnecessarily, in my opinion. "As I am certain you can imagine, the topic of how you would be treated in the aftermath arose. Master wrongly suspected you were his long-lost sister, so the original plan was to arrange an engagement between you and one of the poor barons' sons. Such a match wouldn't have been quite as ideal as one between you and Master, however, given the difficulty it would have presented."

"What do you mean by that?" Marie snuck a glance at me.

"Since your family was deposed and excised from the aristocracy, your husband-to-be's reputation will inevitably suffer." Luxion moved his lens side to side as if shaking his head. "I struggle to comprehend the values these new humans hold. Based on what I do understand, I imagine finding anyone willing to take your hand would be virtually impossible. New humans prioritize optics over a partner's qualities." Then he added, "However, one man is unconcerned with reputation." His gaze cut to me.

Marie stared at me, opening and closing her mouth as if trying to find words to express herself.

"Well, there you have it," I said, a little embarrassed after that whole drawnout spiel. "On top of that, if we get engaged, I don't have to keep hunting for a bride, right? And you get to keep attending the academy. It's a win-win for us both. I understand that it might not be what you dreamed of, but just deal with it. It's not like I entirely want it, either."

The point I was trying to make was that our engagement would be more or less a contract. We wouldn't pair up out of love but because the arrangement was mutually convenient. I guess this is a sign that I'm getting used to this world's bleakness.

Marie preferred handsome guys like the love interests over ones like me. She probably wouldn't be keen to settle for me. She wasn't exactly the partner of my dreams either, though. I hadn't told her as much, but I preferred girls with ample chests. She was about as far from that as was humanly possible.

Dorothea was more my type: slightly older and well-endowed. Dorothea's personality would've been the problem. I'd laughed at Nicks as she dragged him away, but in his shoes, I would've refused the engagement vehemently. Dorothea was gorgeous, sure, but life with her was bound to be miserable.

I kind of feel bad for Nicks now...

That aside, proposing to Marie meant giving up the busty woman I'd wished for. I swallowed my (admittedly metaphorical) tears and resigned myself.

Marie frowned at me, a wrinkle in her brow. "No." Her refusal was curt, and

she said it with strong conviction.

"What?! Why?! I get that I'm not your first choice, but you're not exactly mine, either!" I shouted.

Tears beaded in the corners of her eyes, a shudder running through her body. My anger instantly deflated, replaced by suffocating guilt.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

Marie wiped away her tears with the heels of her hands. "I want a proper marriage proposal, with the right mood and in the right place!" she barked. "Why would you ask *here*, in a classroom after school? And saying I'm 'not exactly your first choice'! I can't with you, I swear!"

"Wha—?" I pulled a face.

Luxion studied us. "Am I to understand that you are willing to accept Master's proposal so long as it meets your requirements?"

Marie glanced surreptitiously at me, nodding. "Yeah."

"It seems we more or less have accord, then. I am pleased to hear it."

I stared at them with a blank face, completely put off by this development.

"Marie, under what specific conditions do you wish Master to propose?" Luxion asked.

Her face brightened. "Let's see," she said, interlacing her fingers. "It'd be nice to do it somewhere we can see the stars. An outdoor lookoff would be lovely, but I'd be satisfied with a classy restaurant. I also want an engagement ring. I never got one in my last life."

"Is that all?"

"No, hold on! His proposal itself was terrible, too! How could you say that stuff about us not being an ideal match, Leon? I couldn't say yes to that. Try to get more in the mood! I don't care if you have to lie. I expect corny, cliché lines that make my teeth rot. At the very least, you need to tell me you'll stay and protect me forever."

After an exasperated pause, Luxion asked again, "Is that all?"

"Let's see. Aside from that..." Marie in fact had a whole laundry list of additional conditions for Luxion, who dutifully listened and clarified.

Luxion took this far more seriously than me. From the moment Marie refused, I'd been so done with her that I let her demands go in one ear and out the other. What was with her request for corny clichés, anyway? "I'll stay and protect you forever"? Mentally, Marie was way older than me, but she acted like a starry-eyed teenager.

Marie was in high spirits as she negotiated with Luxion. He let her go on at length, never interrupting. I sighed as I watched. Fortunately, they started wrapping it up.

"I have grasped your conditions," Luxion said. "I will create your engagement ring immediately. I can prepare a mithril band set with a gem in an hour. As for your requested nighttime scene, I identified several locations that meet your specifications. We can commence with the proposal in three hours."

The emotion drained from Marie's face. "Huh? Three hours? Are you serious?"

"Indeed, all your stipulations will be accommodated by then." Luxion turned back to me. "Master, I will draft your proposal speech right away. I only ask that you memorize it."

I pressed a hand to my forehead. This whole affair annoyed me. "Just make it as short as possible, would you?"

"I will do my best."

"Let's not be so flippant!" Marie said. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime event. One I'll never experience again! You need to..." She paused, searching for words. "Dedicate more *time* to it. Make sure everything's completely perfect."

We couldn't really wheelspin on this, but I understood what she was getting at. Her protests bewildered Luxion, though. "The difference between doing this now or later is negligible at best."

"The point is, a proposal you threw together in three hours will feel pretty half-hearted and flimsy," she explained. "And I'd really like Leon to come up with the speech himself."

Luxion and I traded looks.

"Asking me to come up with 'corny clichés' is a tall order. It's not really my style. I think you'd be much happier with whatever Luxion wrote," I said, perhaps a little too insistently.

Luxion moved his lens up and down, nodding. "It would be foolish to expect poetry from Master. Since you have misgivings, perhaps an extra half hour? By then, I can have fireworks readied as well. That would require only three and a half hours total. Is it acceptable?" He made this compromise sound like a big favor.

Marie vibrated with anger, fists balled. "You...you morons! Would you treat this proposal with the gravity it deserves?!"

"I guess we should tell the academy about this first, right?" I glanced at Luxion.

He returned my gaze. "That seems the best course of action. The bottom line is to enable Marie's continuing attendance. As for whether she will enjoy her youth engaged to you, Master, that I cannot predict."

"Hold it right there. Are you implying she'll be unhappy with me?"

There was a substantial pause. "No," Luxion finally said.

"You took way too long to answer that! Do you have some kind of problem with me? Huh? Is that it?"

Marie grabbed the front of my shirt, forcing my attention back to her. "Stop ignoring me!"

The atmosphere was no longer at all appropriate for planning a proposal, so we ultimately decided to see to that in the coming days.

Chapter 14: As Her Fiancé

T HAD BEEN DAYS since the hearings at the palace, and the date of Stephanie's release was approaching.

An academy student was making his way to the dungeon to visit her—her former fiancé, Brad Fou Field. His well-groomed lavender hair flowed behind him, and expensive cologne clung to his uniform. Brad was so handsome that he seemed to sparkle in the damp darkness, his appearance at odds with the dreariness of the dungeon.

Brad was heir to a prominent house; Marquess Field oversaw one of the kingdom's more important border territories. Several retainers had accompanied the young man on this visit.

When Stephanie spotted him, she seized the metal bars, bringing her face close to them. "Lord Brad?!"

Part of her didn't want him to see her covered in filth like this. At the same time, Brad was her last hope. They were no longer engaged, given the Offreys' fall, but surely if anyone could save her, it was him. Through her despair, Brad was the sole beacon of hope; she knew how reliable he tended to be.

"Lord Brad, I've realized my mistakes and repented for my crimes. Please, save me! I beg of you!" Stephanie burst into tears.

Brad gave her a sorrowful look.

A Field retainer dressed like a knight leaned forward. "Lord Brad, do not forget your father's orders," he said.

Brad nodded. "I know."

Stephanie had a sinking feeling about the meaning of that brief exchange. There was pity in Brad's eyes, too. She shook her head, trying to drive the fear from her mind, and reached for him.

"Please, Lord Brad! Save me! If you only lend me your aid, I swear I'll never make mistakes like this again. I'll spend the rest of my life abiding by your every order! You can enslave me if you wish. Please, I beg of you..."

Given the kind of life that now lay ahead of her, being his family's slave would be less painful than many alternatives. If she left the dungeon under these circumstances, all that awaited was the vengeance of those she'd wronged.

Stephanie grasped desperately at the air, willing Brad to grab her hand, but he wouldn't.

"I can't save you," he said.

"No," Stephanie whispered in despair.

"I only visited so I could bid you farewell," he continued. "As I'm sure you know, our engagement is off the table, now that your family has been stripped of all it possessed."

Stephanie's hand fell, palm smacking the floor. Her face was slick with tears and snot, a complete mess. Their engagement had meant everything to her; she'd been desperate for everyone to see her as a true aristocrat. At this point, her family wealth and status long gone, she understood how much she'd lost. But when Brad articulated it to her face, it sank in, like a dagger to the heart.

"Stephanie, tell me something. Why did you do all this?" Brad's fingers curled into tight fists at his sides. "It wasn't your fault your family collaborated with air pirates, but I can't forgive your role in this, using them to terrorize fellow students."

A fresh wave of tears trickled down Stephanie's cheeks. She smiled through them, replying, "You can't possibly understand how I feel. You're a born-and-bred aristocrat."

"You're the same," he argued. "The Offreys were nobility as well."

"No. You're a natural, hereditary nobleman. I was forever treated like an upstart merchant's daughter who didn't belong. I might've been part of high society, but no one ever treated me that way."

Brad listened quietly, not commenting.

"Other blue bloods ridiculed me in my earliest memories," Stephanie continued. "'You're not one of us, and neither is your family,' they'd say. Even fellow earls' daughters gave me the cold shoulder. Do you have any idea what that's like? How painful it is to hold rank officially yet be treated as everyone's inferior?"

Brad didn't answer.

Stephanie pulled herself to her feet. "Everything finally changed when I used my family's influence to get the upper hand over another girl. She came and apologized, and she looked pathetic sucking up to me. That was when I finally realized other people would obey me if I threw my weight around. Whenever I got back at those aristocrats who stared down their noses at me, they had to come crawling on their knees." She burst into maniacal laughter.

Brad's retainers reached for the swords at their waists, but he shot them a look that dissuaded them from arming themselves against her.

Despite her mirth, Stephanie was still crying as she demanded, "So what'd I do wrong, huh?! No one accepted me as I was! All I ever wanted was to be treated like I belonged." Her tone had grown bitter and hostile. She was finally voicing the frustrations she'd buried inside for years.

Brad's eyes were sincere as he held her gaze. "Even taking into account your unfair environment, your behavior was atrocious. You should've turned to someone for help. I wish you'd at least come to me, if no one else. If you'd only done that, things wouldn't have—"

He didn't finish the thought. Even if Stephanie had approached him for help, nothing would've changed, and he knew that. He could never have saved her from this fate.

Stephanie sneered at her former fiancé. "Don't waste your time fussing and simpering over me now," she spat. "It's too late." *Especially since you never tried to spend time with me at the academy. You only ever chased that stupid commoner,* she thought, squeezing the metal bars between them.

Unaware of the hostility growing within her, Brad replied gently, "I suppose you're right." His voice was thick with sorrow, his eyes on his feet rather than her face.

Stephanie stared at him. "Shouldn't you be glad I'm out of the picture?" She knew it was unfair to say, but she didn't care. "I bet you thought I'd be a shameful wife, given my less-than-stellar lineage."

"That's not true. You aren't your family."

"If you say so."

When she first pleaded for Brad's help, Stephanie had tried being obsequious and ladylike. Realizing he had no intention of saving her, she dropped the pretense. Nothing mattered anymore.

"With me gone, no one's left to criticize you for spending all your time with that commoner. You can play with her to your heart's content," she added. "Though I guess, in the end, she'll end up like me. Discarded when it suits you."

She said it as a joke—her attempt at dark humor. Brad was the son of a prominent lord, and she was certain he would uphold tradition and follow the unspoken rules that applied to someone of his rank, ending his relationship with Olivia once they graduated.

"I would never play with her feelings only to abandon her." The words rushed out of Brad's mouth, his cheeks coloring.

He sounded a bit too naive. His retainers gave him conflicted looks, as if wanting to express dismay, but they kept whatever complaints they had to themselves. Brad was oblivious to their disapproval.

"Hold on. You're saying you're serious about her? You're kidding me," Stephanie blurted.

Only now did she realize the gravity of her mistake. Brad and the other boys weren't treating Olivia as a disposable toy at all. The commoner girl had genuinely won Brad's heart—something Stephanie had attempted for years and failed to accomplish.

Despair washed over her.

Brad cleared his throat and turned his back to her. "Anyway, this is the end of the line for us. It's a shame, since we'd never have reached this point if you'd only realized your mistakes sooner." He started down the dimly lit hallway, his retainers close on his heels.

In his wake, Stephanie agonized over her own foolishness. He's right. I really made a terrible mistake. I never should've gotten involved with Marie and Bartfort. The person I ought to have ruined was Olivia herself.

The moment he returned to the boys' dormitory, Brad received a summons to Julius's quarters, which were the most extravagant in the entire building. Jilk was present there as well, brewing them tea.

Julius was scowling. After a beat, he fixed his gaze on Brad and said, "Sorry to call you here right after your visit to Stephanie."

"No trouble at all. I'm surprised you're paying Stephanie any attention, though," said Brad.

Julius had invited Brad as part of an investigation into the incidents involving his former fiancée. That investigation really had nothing to do with the prince's personal curiosity, though.

"It's a chore my mother gave me," Julius explained with a tight smile. "She wants me to report on these events from a student perspective."

Brad cupped his chin and nodded to himself, putting the pieces together. "You mean she wants to learn more about the academy's affairs, correct? She was born in a different country, so I suppose it's only natural she wouldn't really be certain how things work here."

"I don't think there's anything worth reporting on. Refusing her would be more trouble than it was worth, though," Julius shrugged.

Brad grinned at him. "I'm more than happy to provide any assistance you require."

"That will be helpful. I've got the gist of everything that happened; still, it's a little shocking how well Stephanie hid her misdeeds this entire time. What kind of person is she, in your opinion?"



For a moment, Brad's smile fell, though he forced it back to his lips. "It was inconceivable for a fellow aristocrat to liaise with air pirates and mobilize them for their own gain. The nobility's job is meant to be *protecting* people from those outlaws. Betraying that principle shows that Stephanie and her family never understood what being part of the aristocracy meant. If only she'd confided in me, I—no. No, I'm sure that wouldn't have made a difference."

Julius cocked his head. "You're being awfully calm and analytical."

"Of course," Brad said. "I may have been engaged to Stephanie before all this, but our relationship was never special. To the point, when I visited her, she had her own opinions on what happened."

Brad's expression was tinged with sadness as he continued his explanation.

"Stephanie was always an outcast in high society," he told Julius. "Her destructive tendencies were a product of pent-up frustration. But regardless of her circumstances, I personally think she still bears most of the responsibility for her actions." He went quiet for a moment, face turning pensive. "I can't help but wonder, if I'd spent more time with her, could things have turned out differently?" He couldn't bring himself to entirely hate her for her actions; a large part of him pitied her.

"I suppose, in a way, she was a victim of high society," Julius noted with a muted sigh. "How long will we let ourselves be bound by antiquated traditions? There is something inherently *wrong* with the kingdom as it is." He narrowed his eyes, frowning.

Jilk stepped toward him, offering the prince a steaming cup of tea. "Today's brew is my best yet."

The unappetizing scent jolted Julius out of his thoughts. He glanced back to Brad, who was more startled by the prince's critical assessment of Holfort than the eerie liquid Jilk poured him.

Julius shook his head, smiling. "I don't mean to come across as lambasting our country. I simply have doubts about the traditions we uphold. I don't approve of outdated rules and values."

Brad relaxed in his chair, relieved that the prince wasn't expressing radical

ideas. "I understand where you're coming from. I'm not on board with some entrenched customs, either."

The tension that had momentarily filled the room eased.

Responsibility for this mess lies partly with all us nobles for failing to welcome the Offreys into the fold, Julius reflected. And that was entirely due to old ways we've upheld since antiquity. The kingdom needs to change.

The Offrey incident certainly gave him cause to doubt Holfortian society's present structure. He was increasingly resentful of the old ways.

At times like this, I wish I could consult Olivia. She's so pure and honest about her opinions, it always surprises me. I've never met anyone like her before. Julius longed to have her weigh in.

Angelica and Deirdre, the leaders of the first-years and third-years, were visiting the palace dungeon together. They'd come for the same reason: to meet with Stephanie.

As a representative of her peers, Angelica had a duty to review the events that led to this whole mess. Deirdre's motives were less pure. She'd come out of pure curiosity.

"It brings me such joy to imagine her trembling in her cell, utterly terrified," said Deirdre. Her face almost shone in the dimly lit corridor, which made her seem all the more out of place in the dungeon.

Angelica gave her a look. "You're incorrigible."

"Oh? You aren't the least bit excited about that miscreant's downfall? The Offreys' actions were indefensible for fellow aristocrats."

In light of the cascade of wrongs Stephanie had committed, her punishment was well deserved. That was Deirdre's perspective, and though she didn't ask outright, she was feeling Angelica out to confirm the opinion was shared.

Angelica, however, expressed no particular interest. "All I want is to ask a few questions on my peers' behalf," she said matter-of-factly. "There was never any need for you to come along."

"Well, I couldn't help myself. I'm far too curious." Deirdre hid her mouth behind her folding fan.

Angelica let out a long breath. The dank dungeon air had dampened her mood. "You'd best not interfere with the discussion, or I will chase you off."

"My, now you're threatening me? No matter. I love this side of you." Grinning behind her fan, Deirdre followed at Angelica's heels. Angelica, meanwhile, was just about fed up with her companion.

When the two finally reached Stephanie's cell, she sat on a bed near the wall, head bowed.

"What? Did all that wailing and sobbing exhaust you? Good. It's your just deserts," Deirdre scoffed, already violating the warning Angelica had issued her.

Angelica pinned Deirdre with a cold, hard glare. "Don't speak out of turn," she ordered.

"I suppose I won't, if you insist," Deirdre said, shrugging.

Angelica ignored her and turned to Stephanie. "I got the gist of your side of the story from Brad. Still, I have to ask—why did you have air pirates torture fellow students? Do you recognize the gravity of the crimes you committed? No amount of repentance will balance the scales."

Frankly, Angelica didn't care whether Stephanie had a change of heart or instead cursed her out. All that mattered was establishing that she'd made the effort to come speak to the Offrey girl. She didn't particularly want Stephanie to repent; her punishment had already been handed down. Nothing Angelica, or anyone else, said would change that.

I only came because Her Majesty urged me to hear Stephanie out. I don't see how this will ever be useful to me. I wish I could've refused her request. If she hadn't loved and respected the queen so much, she might've done just that.

Once Angelica posed her question, a whole ten seconds passed before Stephanie finally lifted her head. Her eyes reflected no light; she was like a woman possessed by something dark and foreboding. Gone was the haughty confidence she'd always carried herself with at school.

"If I say how sorry I am for what I did, will you absolve me of my sins?"

"No," said Angelica without pausing to even think it over.

Stephanie smiled half-heartedly. "I figured as much." There was a short pause. "I'm relieved. I always looked up to you as the paragon of what every noblewoman should be."

Angie narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I admired you deeply. Everyone respects and reveres your grace and propriety. Part of me resented you profoundly for having everything I didn't, while another part longed to be just like you."

"Again, what are you talking about? Answer my question," Angie snapped.

Stephanie laughed. "Who cares whether I recognize my mistakes? Rather than answering, I'll do you one better. I'll give you a warning you'd be wise to heed."

Angelica frowned, brows lowered.

"Be careful of that commoner Olivia," Stephanie said gravely. "If you don't treat her like the threat she is, she'll steal Prince Julius right out from under you."

Furious, Angie lunged at the cell bars, gripping them so tightly her knuckles turned white. Mana flowed through her, causing the metal to creak and bend. Her crimson eyes glowed in the darkness around Stephanie's cell.

"Go on, say that again," Angie hissed. "You think that woman could do anything to me? I take it you're mocking me. I'll turn you to ash where you stand!"

Behind her, Deirdre breathed a small sigh. "You know you can't do that, Angelica. Why not excuse yourself and cool off? I have my own business with this girl."

In the safety of her cell, Stephanie wore a toothy grin, but Angelica was incandescent with rage. It took great willpower to swallow her fury and peel away. She spun, telling Deirdre, "I've finished my business here. Do as you like." Then she marched off.

Deirdre crossed her arms, exasperated. "Angelica always had a temper. She'd be the perfect future queen if she could only keep her composure. Then again, she'd frankly be a bit bland without that flaw. It balances out." She studied Stephanie.

Stephanie was still smirking, not a bit daunted by Deirdre's presence. She'd already lost everything there was to lose and had nothing more to fear at this point.

"Anyway," Deirdre continued, "how about you answer one of *my* questions now?"

Stephanie said nothing, but her grin widened even further.

"What sort of diplomatic arrangements did your family work out with Fanoss?" Deirdre inquired. "Considering how terribly the principality resents Holfort, I still find it hard to believe any bargain convinced them to lay down their arms."

The Principality of Fanoss was a neighboring country that had, up until a few years earlier, been locked in constant conflict with Holfort. Tenuous peace had been established through the now-defunct House Offrey's diplomatic efforts. The Offreys' success in talking Fanoss around was why the Fields agreed to engage Brad to Stephanie.

Fanoss had long held great animosity toward Holfort. The Offreys had been showered with praise for possessing diplomatic skill that enabled them to handle such a tough adversary. Most aristocrats, however, were still in the dark as to how they'd accomplished it. The majority assumed that the Offreys had some close personal connection to Fanoss, but Deirdre's family was always skeptical of that explanation.

"A number of people feared we'd be at a diplomatic disadvantage with Fanoss after your family's hearings and deposal, but such talk quickly died down. In fact, even Marquess Frampton, who long backed your father, withdrew his support. He's pushing for your father to be executed as quickly as possible. It's almost unnatural how quickly he turned on the Offreys."

During the former Earl Offrey's hearing, which Deirdre had attended, she'd started to suspect there was more to this story than met the eye.

"If you know something, tell me. Assuming it's useful, I promise to take you in and protect you."

Deirdre loathed Stephanie as a person. She detested how the girl regularly used her power to torment those weaker than her. Even her basic habits were so detestable that Deirdre couldn't find a single likable trait. Nonetheless, if Stephanie proved herself useful and provided meaningful intel, Deirdre was willing to offer her protection.

"Unfortunately, I don't know anything. Not about Fanoss, and not about Marquess Frampton, either," Stephanie replied with a devious snicker.

Even assuming she *didn't* know anything, she could've lied and claimed otherwise just to save herself. But she hadn't. Deirdre's intuition told her that Stephanie in fact knew more than she was letting on. However, she could also tell there was no use pressing her.

Deirdre spun to leave. "Very well. Sorry for disturbing you, then." She paused. "Before I leave," she added, "I have to say, my opinion of you has improved after this little encounter."

It was a marginal shift at best. Still, Deirdre appreciated how gracious Stephanie was acting in defeat.

Climbing the stairs, she mused, Something about this whole mess bothers me. I have a feeling Leon's hiding something from me as well. Tsk. There's quite a bit I have yet to discover beneath the surface of this.

Chapter 15: Flan

The Capital was finally settling down after the Offreys' hearings, and the long-awaited school trip was almost upon us. All students were invited to join the trip, which was conducted yearly to "help students expand their horizons."

The trip was always the source of great anticipation, and Marie and I were no exceptions to that feeling. We were sitting across from each other at a table in the academy cafeteria. Marie leaned forward in her seat, eager to discuss the trip.

"Nothing beats going on a vacation billed to the government," she declared.

I shook my head. "I already gave you money for daily expenses *and* told you I'd cover trips and stuff."

"I know that, but it's the principle! Anyhow, we'll need to pay for things out of pocket when we reach our destination, right? So we'll save the travel expenses and use *that* for sightseeing and souvenirs. I'm so happy we can enjoy this trip without going bankrupt!"

She couldn't shake her cheap instincts, which made my heart ache. We never had to worry about our finances; we had Luxion. But although Marie knew that, her eyes still lit up at the words "free" and "cheap," just as they had before. That was probably because she'd led miserable lives—yes, plural. Her last life and this one had been equally horrible, albeit in different ways.

Sometimes Marie shared details about her life. Anytime she did, I found myself devastated on her behalf. Even Luxion would respond with something like "It sounds like you went through great hardship," although he almost never expressed empathy. For *him* to show pity, Marie's life had to be really tragic.

Cloaking device engaged, Luxion floated beside me, inserting himself into our conversation. "If you are that anxious to embark on trips, I can take you on one at any time."

Despite the favoritism he showed Marie, he was completely incapable of understanding her feelings. Her expression soured. As much as she appreciated the sentiment, that wasn't what she wanted.

"It has to be a *school* trip," she explained with pointed emphasis. "The fun part is sightseeing in a big group and enjoying the experience together. Oh, man. It brings back memories of my high school trip in Japan." She let out a strangled laugh. "I think I'm gonna cry."

I grabbed a handkerchief from my pocket and held it out. "I hope you won't turn on the waterworks here. It's only going to cause trouble."

She snatched the handkerchief from me, too swept up in nostalgia to listen. "We had to be careful not to let teachers catch us during nightly patrols, but we swapped stories and talked about our love lives. There was gossip, too—like who was dating who, and who would admit their feelings to their crush during the trip."

Her mention of "admitting feelings" made me quickly avert my eyes. I focused on the tray of food in front of me. "Going for the meat option today was a good call," I said. "It's nice and tender. And flavorful. Just the way I like it."

The change of subject was painfully obvious.

There was a smile on Marie's face as she peered at me, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Hey," she said.

"Y-yeah?" I responded, refusing to meet her gaze.

She mimicked my voice. "I have feelings for you. Let's pair up," she repeated, her glare cold and unforgiving. "You really think you should use wooden lines like that on someone you want to get *engaged* to?"

I'd admitted my feelings to Marie earlier, as she wanted. But it had been so embarrassing, I wasn't able to even begin making it sound properly romantic. I just kind of threw out whatever words popped into my head.

That had been a huge mistake.

Marie was anxiously anticipating what I would come up with. When she heard me rattle off those boring lines, she exploded with anger and immediately

charged toward me, looking like a woman possessed. I instinctively ran for my life with no regard for pride or propriety.

"I-I figured, if I tried to be serious about it, you'd only cackle," I protested with a burst of awkward laughter, hoping it might diffuse the tension.

It didn't.

Marie brought her fists down on the table; the bang echoed through the cafeteria.

My back instantly straightened. "I'm sorry!" I blurted, fearful of the repercussions if I didn't apologize.



Marie sighed dramatically. "Look. I get that it's just a contract between us, and there's no actual love here. But you could at least make your feelings sound genuine." She frowned, still chagrined.

Part of me wanted to defend myself, but knowing her, that would only make the situation worse. It was better to act deferential and be done with it. "You're absolutely right."

"Like, I have to wonder if you really reincarnated here. You seem like you have no actual life experience."

"Well, I worked a regular nine-to-five in my last life. On my days off, I'd hole up at home and play video games dawn to dusk." Marie probably had way more life experience, in truth. I couldn't compete.

She sighed. "You're hopeless."

What had I done to deserve such harsh criticism? And criticism that involved my *last* life, in addition to this one? My shoulders slumped, and I hung my head. I didn't have much time to be depressed, though, because the poor barons' sons came and surrounded the table.

"Lady Marie, we brought today's flan!" Lucle, ever the doting upperclassman, presented her with dessert this time.

How was I supposed to react to this? I settled for looking away.

Marie accepted the treat eagerly. "Thank you, guys." She giggled. "How does the cafeteria make their flan taste so heavenly?"

The flan sat in an adorable miniature pot. That added flourish highlighted how much effort the chefs put into the creation. It looked every bit as delicious as Marie opined.

Marie dug in, scooping out her first bite. A smile of pure bliss broke over her face.

"She's a goddess. A real goddess."

"I can't believe she's so happy about something as simple as flan."

"Seeing how much she enjoys it brings me joy, too."

The guys encircled Marie, worshipping each tiny thing about her. Their dramatics earned stares from the rest of the student body.

I scarfed down my food, hoping to catch a quick nap before our next class started. As I swallowed the last bite, though, I noticed a familiar figure in my peripheral vision.

Olivia was fidgeting nervously, scanning the cafeteria for an empty table where she could sit down and eat. All the tables were occupied. Even where there was an empty seat, it would be hard for a commoner like her to work up the courage to sit down beside an aristocrat.

Something about her struck me as odd.

"She looks pretty helpless," I said, more to myself than my present company. None of the guys heard me anyway, since they were busy fussing over Marie.

Remaining invisible, Luxion drifted close to whisper to me. "Her physique suggests deteriorating health. Her proportions have declined since I last recorded data on her."

"You can seriously tell that much about a person at a glance?"

"Yes. Granted, a significant amount of time has passed since I last updated my data on her health. If you command me to investigate further, I can offer a more detailed analysis."

"Nice."

For a split second, illicit thoughts filled my mind. If I asked, Luxion could probably snag exact measurements for Olivia's bust, waist, and hips. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I registered Marie happily spooning mouthfuls of flan into her mouth, and the temptation disappeared. Marie looked so happy, it seemed ridiculous to entertain fantasies about Olivia right now.

"Nah," I said finally. "Don't bother. Just tell me if you notice any problems."

"Are you certain that is wise? I do not monitor her constantly. Should an emergency arise, responding quickly may be difficult."

As much as that worried me, someone else was already swooping in to help our protagonist.

"Olivia," said Prince Julius in an easy, friendly tone, "if you haven't eaten yet, why not sit with me for lunch?"

Olivia winced. The other students in the cafeteria quieted, fixing their gazes on the commoner girl and the prince. Only the muted clinking of silverware echoed. The unnatural silence produced an uncomfortable tension the prince ignored all too easily.

"If that would be all right with you," Olivia murmured, bobbing her head.

Julius's face brightened. He beamed at her. "Of course it would, since I want to eat with you! Now, where should we sit?" He surveyed the tables for an opening. Some students who'd already finished their lunches and were only lounging around and chatting quickly vacated their seats for the prince. Julius escorted Olivia over.

Jilk spotted the pair and hurried there as well. "Your Highness, it's not fair of you to sneak ahead like this," he said. His eyes moved to Olivia. "Miss Olivia, do you mind if I join you two?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

As they settled in at their table, whispers erupted around them.

"Those three sure seem close."

"What's going on with them?"

"H-hey, look."

With the worst possible timing, Angelica stepped into the cafeteria, shadowed by her usual crowd of followers. She froze, eyes trained on Prince Julius and his companions.

If the air had been tense before, it was suffocating now. That didn't last long, however; Angelica spun and guided her retinue back out. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. We'd just avoided nuclear war.

Meanwhile, Marie finished her flan. She set the empty little pot aside and stared solemnly at the prince.

"What is it?" I asked, curious.

She hesitated, then insisted, "Nothing. Maybe just my imagination."

"Yeah? Well, if you're done, let's get out of here."

I grabbed my tray and left my seat. Marie followed, hurrying along behind me.

"You want me to have a personal servant?" Olivia blurted, jaw dropping. She could hardly believe Julius and Jilk had brought the topic up as they ate lunch. "B-but I don't have that sort of money. I can't possibly afford one."

Only female students were allowed personal servants. They were essentially slaves who attended to their mistress's well-being. Demi-humans could be purchased from the local slave market, where buyers were required to sign an official employment contract. Although those demi-humans were referred to as "slaves," they had basic rights, including the ability to decline a contract if they didn't agree to the conditions and stipulations. The biggest obstacle for a buyer was the monumental expense. Only wealthy nobles' daughters could afford it.

"You seem so lonely lately," Julius said. "And that makes sense. You probably feel intimidated, surrounded by nobility. I thought it'd be best if you had someone you could confide in."

His comment sparked hope within Olivia. "Someone I could confide in," she repeated, testing the words on her tongue.

Jilk smiled and nodded. "There's a famous slave market right here in the capital. I hear a very capable elf is looking for employment there. He's rather young, but he could offer you all kinds of support here at the academy." He'd apparently used his connections to discover this.

The offer tempted Olivia, but she shook her head. "It would be nice. But, like I said, I don't have the money."

"I'll cover the cost for you," Julius assured her. "It's not that much."

"Oh...really?" Olivia's voice was stiff. To me, it's exorbitant. But he's the crown prince; I guess it probably seems like a drop in the bucket. We really are from completely different worlds.

They were separated by a gaping chasm of monumental size. Olivia had never

felt it more strongly than she did in that moment.

"All right. Please cover it, if you can," she finally agreed. It'll be worth it if it relieves some of my pain and suffering.

At this point, she was grasping for straws, and she knew it. But that was what drove her to accept Julius's offer.

After Angelica marched out of the cafeteria, her whole body trembled with barely constrained rage. Her followers were too daunted to say anything. She progressed down the corridor with long, quick strides. Anyone in her path scrambled out of her way.

Much to her annoyance, Stephanie's voice rang in her head. "Be careful of that commoner Olivia... If you don't treat her like the threat she is, she'll steal Prince Julius right out from under you."

Deep grooves formed in Angelica's forehead, and she scowled. *I can't let myself be swayed by that lowlife coward's words! His Highness is crown prince.*Even if he's infatuated with that commoner, he'll open his eyes and see sense eventually. He must. I know he'll come back to me.

The rational part of her brain dismissed the idea of Olivia stealing the prince as unrealistic, but it couldn't keep Stephanie's words from haunting her. That infuriated her.

I won't be jilted. My love for the prince could never be outshone by her—by Olivia!

Epilogue

O NE WEEKEND AFTERNOON, Marie and I finished shopping and dropped into a café. I plonked down the ridiculous number of shopping bags. My cheeks hollow with the utter exhaustion of having accompanied Marie, I took a sip of tea. The thought of lugging the bags back to the dorm made me sink into my seat.

Marie was the complete opposite. She was in high spirits, having bought everything she wanted. She dug eagerly into the cake she'd ordered, reflecting on our outing. "I feel way better about the school trip now that I have proper clothes. It's not like I could just wear my uniform the whole time, so I was worried."

When she told me that all her clothes but her uniform were worn and threadbare, I'd felt like crying on her behalf. Given her personality, I figured she'd demand brand-name, high-end clothing, but her frugal mentality kicked in. To my shock, when she tried to buy the priciest stuff, her knee-jerk negative reaction kept her from making the purchase.

Her body and soul recoiled from the thought of pouring so much money into clothing. Ironic, given that her goal was to find happiness and live the high life, which she'd essentially accomplished. What kind of curse was this? That was what it had to be—a curse.

"You sure you're okay with all these bargain buys?" I asked.

"It's not like I had any other choice! Whenever I tried to buy something else, seeing the price tag made me dizzy. Just the thought of buying brand-new clothes off the rack makes me nauseous."

Looks like she'll need some therapy even to live like a normal person. If her mindset's this bad, when will she actually enjoy her newfound wealth?

"How did you make it through summer break?" I asked.

"Oh, the break? Um..." Marie's cheeks reddened. "Your mom offered me clothes to wear. I couldn't tell her no when she was being so nice, so I borrowed

them."

I pressed a hand to my forehead. "I wish she'd said something about it."

Luxion was in a half-transparent state to prevent unnecessary attention, only allowing us to make out his vague outline. Hovering between us, he interjected, "Master, your mother is unaccustomed to the wealth your family now enjoys. She spent the majority of her life in poverty."

His words stung more than usual. "Yeah, she's suffered quite a bit, too," I agreed. "Maybe I should pick up souvenirs for the family today and send them home."

"A splendid idea. In fact, that would be a rather surprisingly productive use of time compared to how you normally spend weekends, Master."

My top lip hiked up in a sneer. "I could do without the sniping from the peanut gallery, thanks." He really knew how to get under my skin.

"Let's stop the usual bickering there," Marie said. "We should focus on the school trip! Like, I never dreamed we'd head to an island inspired by Japan. Kind of feels like fate, doesn't it?"

There was something disorienting about the prospect of visiting an island based on Japanese culture in a Europe-inspired fantasy world. But perhaps the island shouldn't have surprised us; the game devs didn't seem to have put much thought into the world and its lore. Trying to rationalize the existence of an island that clashed with the rest of the game's aesthetic was an exercise in futility.

Still, I understood why it felt like fate to Marie, since we'd both been Japanese in our previous lives. Little did she know our destination was no coincidence.

"It's not fate," I told her. "I'm the reason we're going there."

"Huh?" Marie tilted her head to the side.

"See, I bought off—er, sent gifts to the professors. And kind of hinted that I'd love to go to that island for our trip."

"Are you for real?" Marie gave me a judgmental look.

"You are downplaying your involvement, Master," Luxion interrupted,

offering a more detailed account. "Master prepared a substantial sum of money to bribe your teachers. He privately met each one and passionately expressed interest in visiting this island on the trip. The exorbitant amount he offered for the professors' cooperation uniformly delighted them, and they agreed to support his bid."

Marie stared at me blankly. "You really are a scumbag. You should've given *me* some of that money." She held out her hand expectantly.

I narrowed my eyes. "I already give you an allowance to cover your daily expenses."

"But I want gold coins! Actual gold coins! Look, I may not be able to buy luxurious jewelry or clothes, but I'd like to have gold coins. I think I could hold those without shaking like a leaf."

"Producing white-gold coins for you would be simple enough. Shall we start with a conservative amount? Say, a thousand?" Luxion offered.

White gold was imbued with mana and gave off a mystical glow. It had a similar composition to regular gold but was pure white, as its name implied. Its rarity and quality made white-gold coins the most valuable of all comparable currency. Even a single coin was worth a fortune, making it the perfect material to fulfill Marie's wish.

Alas, the mere mention of white gold had Marie's hands trembling uncontrollably. "I-I think I'll let you off the hook for today," she said, as if doing us a favor.

"A shame. If you ever change your mind, please let me know at any time. I will stock ten thousand coins in the meantime," said Luxion.

Marie shook her head, eyes dazzled. "Did...did you say ten *thousand*?! As in ten thousand *white-gold* coins?" Her mouth twitched. "Ah ha ha...ha ha ha!"

"Now look, you broke her," I told him, pointing emphatically at Marie. "This is your fault, Luxion."

"I merely offered to present her with the very thing she said she desired."

As much as I blamed him, Marie did have issues of her own.

Tucking a hand into my pocket, I produced a jewelry box containing a necklace. I set it on the table in front of Marie; she immediately shot up straight, regaining her senses at the prospect of a gift.

"What's this?" she asked eagerly.

"A present. I still don't have a green light from you on my proposal, so I figured for now, I'd give you this."

"Wait, you mean it?!" Marie snatched up the box and stole a glance at me, awaiting my permission to open it. I nodded, and she immediately cracked it open. "Aww! Wait. Huh? This is..." She pulled it out of the box, her face contorted into an inscrutable expression.

The necklace in her hands was the item I'd retrieved from the Winged Sharks' leader. It was a bit gaudy, but it was a key game item called the Saint's Necklace—a rather uninspired name.

Marie held the necklace out in front of her, scowling. "Hold on a second. Why're you giving me loot from that pirate battle? You're not trying to get me to give Olivia this on your behalf, are you? Because in case you didn't already know, she and I aren't friends—or even acquaintances!"

There she goes, jumping to conclusions without letting me explain myself. I laughed at her. "Actually, I'm giving it to you because you've seemed cursed ever since your last life. I figure keeping the Saint's key item with you ought to bring you some good luck."

I probably sounded like I was joking, but I was entirely serious—about this necklace, at least.

"I give no credence to superstitious notions such as curses, but if the item brings you relief, I feel you should hold on to it," Luxion said in a rare show of support—support he wouldn't have given if I weren't sincere. "Master's knowledge of this item has proven accurate; it indeed possesses magical properties. Keeping it in your possession should have some effect."

This holy relic possessed far stronger power than a run-of-the-mill magic item found sitting in some shop around town. Luxion had expressed great interest in it, but when I said I was giving it to Marie, he permitted it.

Marie held the necklace closer, face still twisted between displeasure and reluctant acceptance. "You're giving it to me for luck, huh? But eventually I'll need to turn it over to Olivia, won't I?"

That went without saying, unfortunately. When the time inevitably came, I would have to approach Olivia and hand it to her personally.

"Ultimately, yeah," I said. "We took down the Offreys, but as long as we give Olivia the necklace, we won't disrupt the plot too much, right? In the meantime, might as well put it to good use and hand it off to you to fight your bad luck." The necklace was supposedly a relic imbued with holy power, one that protected its bearer and warded off evil. I seriously hoped it'd help her.

"We must eventually restore it to where it belongs, but you should keep it in the meantime, Marie," said Luxion. "Especially since it appears to be reacting to you."

"Wait. Is it really? Are you saying I've got the aptitude to be a Saint?" Marie giggled bashfully.

I burst out laughing at that. I couldn't help it; it was hilarious to see how excited she was at the prospect. Olivia was the game's protagonist, so it was natural that she had the aptitude and demeanor the role required, but Marie didn't. Not with that personality. A Saint had to be pure and kind.

Marie, a Saint? Not in a million years.

"You're, uh, not the type," I said, trying to hide my mirth. "With such a twisted personality, you—uh, sorry." I muttered the apology, shifting my gaze away. My barely restrained laughter earned an intense glower from her.

Luxion gave an exasperated shake of his lens. "Master, you never learn, do you? At this point, you should be well aware that the truth always infuriates Marie. Truly, it boggles the mind how you—hm?"

Marie's hand shot out, clamping around his volleyball of a body. Her fingers dug into the metal, which creaked and groaned dangerously in her grip. Yikes. Don't tell me she's actually going to crush him into scrap metal?

"My, what a capable AI," she said facetiously. "Able to disparage Leon and mock me simultaneously. You know, Luxion, I should have a nice long chat with

you."

Luxion's lens looked to me pleadingly. "Master, I request your assistance."

I gave him a thumbs-down. "No way."

"You truly do have a despicable personality."

"You made your bed, now lie in it. You've got a lot of learning to do when it comes to the subtleties of human communication." I snickered.

"You'd better not assume you're getting out of this scot-free," Marie told me with an ominous smile.

"Wha...?"

Crap. Looks like I'm screwed, too.

It was pitch black outside, the time transitioning from the latest hour of the evening to the earliest of the morning. Marie had tucked the Saint's Necklace safely into a nearby drawer. Having kicked her blanket off during the night, she sprawled on her bed, a tendril of drool dripping down her chin as she slept soundly.

"Leon, you dummy," she muttered to herself. "Luxion, you big jerk... Zz..."

Something rattled, echoing through the room. The drawer containing the necklace opened on its own, and black mist spilled out. Approaching Marie, the formless mass took the shape of a woman. Two golden eyes gleamed where its head seemed to be. They were almond-shaped, and wide open at first, only to gradually narrow into thin slits.

Whatever this being was, it originated from the necklace.

The mist creature peered at Marie's face, its eyes closed in smiling crescents —an expression of pure joy. "Finally," it purred, "I've found you."

Even as the ominous being approached, Marie had shown no sign of waking. She flipped over in her sleep, still caught in a peaceful, happy dream.

"Tee hee hee!" the feminine figure tittered, stretching a hand toward Marie. "I'll be taking your body."

The hand pierced straight through Marie, and the rest of the mist creature's form followed quickly, invading her frame.						



Afterword

D_{ID YOU ENJOY} the second volume of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: Otome Games Are Tough For Us, Too!*? Even as the author, I, Yomu Mishima, sometimes mess up that title. It's so similar to the main series that it's ridiculously easy to get wrong. Part of me regrets not naming it something more distinct.

That said, while we're on the topic, it was me who suggested the current title to my publisher. I thought having a similar title would make this series easier for readers to pick out. If you notice me mess it up, I hope you won't judge me too harshly.

Anyway, in this afterword, I'd like to discuss Stephanie.

My personal opinion is that she turned into a rather curious character in this volume, just as she did in the original series. She didn't even have a proper name in the original; she was only referred to as "Earl Offrey's daughter," or by a similar moniker. She was essentially a nameless background character.

When the anime was produced, it became necessary to name her. She has a unique character design and, I'm sure, made a big impact on my readers.

Stephanie is the epitome of a villain. I like her, personally. It was fun to write her and easy to come up with details about her. Still, when it came to publishing this series officially, I paused to think a bit more about her character.

For instance, what drove her to pester Angelica so obsessively? In the main series, I didn't include a reason. Hopefully this spin-off helped answer that kind of question.

Another subject I'd like to tackle here is how this series works. I think that's necessary, since you've all read what happened to Stephanie in this volume. Those readers who have followed the story since it was an online extra are probably shocked by the outcome and wondering whether I really plan to end Stephanie's storyline here. The web version involved her well beyond this point, after all.

A novel series needs storylines to wrap up at the end of a volume, though. Thus, I'll keep adding to the original storylines and ending them cleanly when necessary to make this a better read for everyone. My goal is to make this version more entertaining than the one online, and I'll be doing my best in that regard. I hope you continue supporting the main series, as well as this one!



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