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TRAPPED IN A STATISTICS OTOME GAMES ARE TOUGH FOR US, TOO!

NOVEL 1

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ANO OTOME-GE WA ORETACHI NI KIBISHII SEKAI DESU VOL. 1 © Mishima Yomu (Story) © Tōi Moge (Illustration)
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Prologue

LIFE IS A SERIES OF CHOICES: Where will you go today? What will you eat? Who will you talk to? What will you talk about?

As monotonous and unchanging as everyday life may seem, everyone finds themselves faced with these tiny, seemingly insignificant choices.

There's more to it than that, of course. Some choices are monumental. If you were to use video game terms—let's say for a visual novel—then perhaps you could call these the pivot points at which your life diverges down a separate route. Of course, life's not really a game; you can't just save or reload. Someone (can't remember who) once said that life has no resets, only an off switch.

Anyway, point is, some of your choices are permanent—never to be undone.

But what if you'd made a different choice at one of those crucial forks in the proverbial road? How might your future have played out?

It all started during a long vacation from work. My little sister showed up at the crack of dawn, banging her fist against the door to the apartment where I lived alone.

I forced myself out of bed, still groggy, and unthinkingly cracked the front door open. Big mistake. My little sister took this as her cue to barge in and shove a paper bag into my hands. It looked like a gift bag at first blush, but a glance at the contents revealed a video game case and a USB flash drive.

Is this supposed to be a present? No, the game's cover is all wrong. That's definitely a girl surrounded by a bunch of sexy guys. In other words, it was a dating sim—specifically an otome game.

I scratched my head, hair disheveled. My eyes moved from the bag to my smiling sister. "So, what's this?"

She had the nerve to sigh, as if exasperated that I hadn't read her mind. With both hands planted on her hips, she leaned forward and sneered up at me, her

eyebrows raised. That look always pissed me off.

After a moment of silence, she realized she had no choice but to explain. She huffed. "It's a *brand-new* otome game that I was really looking forward to, but the difficulty is *insane*. There's no way I can clear it. You're on a long vacation, yeah? Why don't you clear it for me, then? It's not like you've got anything better to do."

She had piqued my interest at the mention of a steep difficulty curve, but the last line ruined it. Her disparaging comment got right under my skin.

"Wild assumption, but sure," I snapped at her. "Whatever. Why's this one so difficult anyway? All you gotta do in this kinda game is pick the right choices for your route and maybe finish a mini game."

Most dating sims had the player directing the main character through actions and dialogue, chosen from a small set of options. Skill wasn't really a factor in that kind of thing. All you had to do was test the choices to figure out which ones got the results you wanted. In fact, if you wanted to eliminate the guesswork, there were always plenty of walkthroughs and guides online.

My little sister already knew all that. She'd played a ton of these otome games and 100-percented all of them.

"I thought the same thing at first," she said. "And that works well enough for the romance portions, but the other two parts of the game are a real slog."

"What other two parts?"

"The adventuring and the battles are stupid hard. We're talking nightmare-level difficulty." Her face puckered, brows furrowed. "See, it's got this RPG-ish adventuring section. I could put up with that, I guess, but the minute war breaks out in the plot, it adds a turn-based tactical sim."

But why? Why would anyone stuff such unnecessary mechanics into an otome game? Sounded like they were throwing everything and the kitchen sink at the wall to see what stuck.

Still, as a guy, I was legitimately interested in the mechanics she described. If the game were a galge—a dating sim made for guys with a dudely protagonist and girls to romance—I'd hop right on and snag myself a copy. The same

couldn't be said for my little sister; she saw this gameplay as pure nuisance.

"No matter what I do, I get stuck midway through. I haven't managed to clear it even once," she grumbled. "You're pathetically obsessed with this kind of game, though. You could totally breeze through it, right?"

Seriously? Does she have to piss me off every time she opens her mouth? And sure, I was interested in what she described, but I had zero desire to play an otome game.

"I'm sure you'll make it if you find a good walkthrough," I said. "Clear it yourself."

"If I could, I wouldn't have come all the way here to ask you! I already tried looking for a guide, but people are all up in arms review-bombing it. I couldn't find anything actually useful!"

"Whoa, they've taken it that far, huh?"

"The devs added a bunch of microtransactions and DLCs. It's all marketed as things to get you through the adventures and battles. You know, real 'pay-to-win' type stuff."

The old "sell 'em a solution to the problem you created" scam, huh? I could see how that had rubbed players the wrong way. The devs had made their hateful bed and now they had to lie in it.

My little sister clasped her hands and looked up at me with the saddest puppy dog eyes. I was kinda late noticing, but she'd really dolled herself up. She didn't normally put so much effort into her clothes and makeup when dropping by my place.

"Please, dearest brother, won't you clear the game for me? I mean the whole game, of course. I want to be able to watch all the event scenes and animated sequences."

She had a bad habit of calling me things like her "beloved older brother" when she was after something. Other guys seemed to find her adorable. Studying and sports came easily to her, and she was a natural beauty, so she'd been doted upon since grade school. Currently, she was a university student and lived with our parents back home.

But her cutesy, high-pitched tone grated on my ears. I pulled a face, retreating half a step back.

Infuriated, she puffed her cheeks. "Why're you being so difficult?! Your adorable little sister is asking you for a favor here!"

"I've got a little sister all right, but she's not adorable. She's a selfish brat."

I knew guys who fantasized about having little sisters now and again. I wanted to shake every one of them and force them to behold my reality. A little sister is an older brother's dreaded enemy with whom you happen to share blood. Okay, maybe that's a bit harsh. But they were still a royal pain in the butt. What pissed me off more than anything was that, when I said as much to my buddies, they'd laugh me off, saying, "Aw, there you go again."

I sighed. "Whatever. You can find videos of the event scenes online if you're that desperate, can't you? Why do you have to actually clear the story yourself?"

"I hate those kinds of videos," she said.

So she knew they existed and *still* wanted to force this game on me. Not that I could entirely blame her. There were a bunch of issues with copyright and whatever, and besides, I wouldn't want to watch someone else playing an RPG. I was surprised and frankly impressed by this judicious approach. But she ruined that right quick.

"Besides, this game has a special function where the voice actors actually say the name you choose for the protagonist. Who wouldn't want to hear their name during events? Not to mention the scene where they express their feelings for one another!" She closed her eyes, letting herself fall into reverie.

Shoulda known. She's hopeless. And jeez, what the hell were the devs thinking, adding a bloated feature like that? It'd be way simpler to pick a static name for the protagonist and save themselves—and me—the hassle. At least my little sister wouldn't have been harassing me about it.

I mean, come on—playing a dating sim with a protagonist who had my sister's name? That'd be pure torture.

"If you're so hung up on this, then like I said: clear it yourself."

She sniffed. "Isn't it obvious that I'm gonna be busy? I'm heading overseas with my friends."

"Overseas?!" I squeaked, acting surprised. In fact, this was more like the missing puzzle piece that made everything click together. Now I knew why she was all dolled up.

"Anyway, beloved big brother of mine," she said in that sugary-sweet voice, "won't you please give me some spending money, too?"

I grimaced. "Hell no. If you're that hard up, ask Dad. I'm sure he'd love to shell out for you."

My little sister had always been a natural at everything she tried. My parents babied her far more than they ever had me. What was worse, they trusted her more, too. She put on an immaculate facade in front of everyone we knew and had them all fooled.

"Dad already gave me money," she said.

I slapped my hand over my face. "Seriously, Dad?" It was all too easy to picture him obliging her without so much as a fuss. My old man was particularly soft on her.

"If you do as I ask," she said, "I'll help you resolve that little misunderstanding with Mom."

This was an allusion to a certain incident that had, as a matter of fact, occurred only a few days ago. Blood rushed to my head.

"That was your fault in the first place!" I bellowed. "I wouldn't even be in this mess if you hadn't been stashing your boys' love crap in my old bedroom!"

I still had a room back at our family home, even though I didn't actively live there, and my sister had taken to hiding her BL books and merch in all its nooks and crannies. None of our relatives knew about this specific hobby of hers—except me. Problem was, our mom had stumbled on the stash while cleaning. I got a phone call the same day. "If you're into that sort of thing, Son, you could have just told us."

It wasn't until Mom explained what she meant that I realized what was going

on. Try as I might to correct her, it did no good. The more desperately and vehemently I denied it, the more suspicious she and Dad became. The worst part was how *understanding* they'd been, saying things like, "It's fine if that's what you're into," and "There's no reason for you to hide it."

Intense fury washed over me then—not toward my parents, of course, but the true culprit. They had believed her the second she pointed the finger at me and genuinely thought all that BL crap belonged to yours truly. Just more proof that they would always take her word for it rather than listen to me.

A devious smirk crossed my sister's face. "If you clear this game for me, I promise I'll clear things up with Mom for you. You like dating sims for guys, right? This should be a cakewalk."

Admittedly, it would be hard to put up with my family having the wrong idea about me forever. No matter how I insisted to my parents that I was only interested in women, and no matter how I tried to explain what had happened, they wouldn't believe me. Could anyone blame me for giving in at that moment, knowing how awful that felt?

"You...you mean it, right?" I said.

"I swear I'll hold up my end of the bargain, my dearest, beloved older brother. Oh, but I am counting on you to fork over some cash for my trip. Don't worry. I'll bring you back some souvenirs." She grinned from ear to ear.

I snatched some bills out of my wallet and slapped them into her open hand. "There."

"Thanks, Big Bro."

As soon as she had what she wanted, I wasn't her "dearest beloved" anything anymore, just "Big Bro." That was the clearest possible demonstration of her rotten personality. She didn't have a job, so she didn't have much in the way of spending money. That was also probably why she'd come here. She figured she could bum some cash and shove her nightmare-mode otome game off on me all at the same time.

My little sister spun around and strode out the door before pausing to glance back. She lifted a hand, waving lazily. "See ya. I'm counting on you to beat the

game. And I mean a full clear."

Full clear meant all the endings, all the CGs, all the ending movies, everything... That way the player could freely view them later on. I was less concerned with having to finish out all the routes than I was about the supposed monstrous difficulty level.

I pulled the plastic game case out of the bag she'd handed me and furrowed my brows. "I wonder how many playthroughs it'll take to finish this stupid thing."

I glanced at the cover. The dudes pictured there did nothing for me, but the protagonist caught my interest—mainly because she didn't have the sort of design you'd expect for a game aimed at girls.

My eyes landed on what I assumed was the subtitle—or perhaps the Japanese title of the game. "Ancient Love, huh?"

Outside, the sun was beginning to set.

"What the hell? This game is beyond nightmare level. It's like the devs don't even want you to beat it!"

The words *Game Over* popped up on the television screen. I'd seen them so many times by now that I was getting sick of them. I kept getting bad ending after bad ending, over and over, on this utterly stupid otome game.

I knew it was nothing to be particularly proud of, but I was a squarely average gamer. Nothing amazing, but not complete garbage, either. I could clear just about anything you threw my way. So, of course, I'd figured something like this would be easy, especially if I pulled up a walkthrough. It wasn't until hours in that I realized how screwed I was.

The game allowed you to skip the event scenes, but there was no way to bypass the adventures or battles—that was down to a manual completion every time. Most dating sims were easy to finish because you could just skim the text if you wanted. But not so here. The adventures and battles made the whole thing a huge time sink. Worst of all, the battles were absolutely awful. Garbagetier, even.

I thumbed through the menu, reloaded, and found myself back on the battle map where I'd been hit with a dead end moments before.

The setting for this particular game was a fantasy world filled with magic and swordplay, but oddly enough, its lands floated in the sky. People relied on airships as their main method of transportation, and these came in all shapes and sizes. Some even had sails like the ships I knew in real life. As long as they'd been equipped with some kind of propulsion, their shape didn't matter—they could still take to the skies and keep afloat.

The game's battles consisted of airships blasting each other with their cannons, but they also had to be equipped with one more weapon before a sortie. I guess most people would call them mobile suits? In this game's world, one of those mechs was called an Armor—a robot of about three to four meters in height that its pilot flew into the fray. The suits themselves were built to look pretty humanlike as well.

The male love interests each piloted their own suit. Honestly, I kinda liked that part. The issue was that said love interests were excruciatingly weak.

"Take this! My secret killing technique..." one of them cried. That was the crown prince, Julius Rapha Holfort. His cut-in image appeared on screen as he prepared to unleash his special attack.

Unfortunately, the enemy he was targeting countered the maneuver, defending themselves and annihilating the last of Julius's hit points in the process.

"No, Prince Julius!" cried his allies on the battlefield.

The television screen faded to black, and I was greeted by those same loathsome words: *Game Over*.

My hands trembled, and I chucked the controller at my bed. The only reason I didn't slam it to the floor was because I didn't actually want to destroy my own belongings for this crap.

"What a load of bull! Stupid prince keeps biting the dust no matter what I do! I mean, c'mon. What's with this battle formation to begin with, huh? How am I always surrounded? And how come my stupid units can't hang in there until

backup arrives?! There's no freakin' way to beat this stupid battle!"

I snatched up my phone and scoured the internet for tips on getting through this stage, but what I found was a serious lack of info on the battle mechanics—and that was on top of RNG playing a huge role in combat. The author of the article I clicked advised that, "If you want to win, just pray you get lucky."

This game was such crap. I finally understood the review bombs.

I clung to the smidgen of rationality that remained amid my immense anger and racked my brain. How was I gonna clear this game?

"I don't wanna spend *days* on this thing." Especially since it was a game I didn't actually want to play. This was a waste. I had half a mind to toss it aside and forget the whole thing—but I really, really needed my sister to clear up the misunderstanding with my parents.

As if on cue, a message from her arrived. "I'm having so much fun overseas!" it read. "If you're good and manage a full clear of my game, I'll buy you some souvenirs."

"You scumbag."

The photo she had attached was of the beach; in the background, the ocean reflected the sun, while she and her friends stood in the foreground, clad in their swimsuits. Seeing my sister in swimwear did nothing but annoy me even further.

"You've got some nerve dumping this stupid game on me while you run off to enjoy yourself!"

Fury coursed through me as I hurriedly typed out a similarly cutting message, only to receive a belated response: "You sure you want to take that attitude with me? Maybe when I come back, I won't sort out that whole misunderstanding with Mom. Up to you."

"Grrr!" I snarled.

Another message came in: "Good luck, Big Bro."

As much as it vexed me, she had the upper hand. After further consideration, I left the game idle while I glanced through the DLC store.

"I've got a real job. My wallet can handle this. At least it's nowhere near as exploitative as a gacha game. Won't even put a dent in my budget if I buy a couple of—hmm?"

My eyes stopped on what I assumed was a typo. The store page had a selection of battleships for purchase, but this particular vessel was described as a "spaceship." The design was definitely evocative of just such a thing, but still...

"C'mon, you can't have a spaceship in a fantasy world. Let's see. What's this thing called...? Luxion, huh?"

It was the most expensive ship in the store, perhaps because it was the most powerful—being, you know, a *spaceship*. I added Luxion and one other item to my cart, paid for them, and then started the download.

"Much as it pains me to fork up 2,000 yen for my sister's stupid game, at least this'll get me through it quicker."

Having solved my battle troubles by resorting to microtransactions, I focused on surviving the adventures—and the romance.

"This sucks big time. I can't believe I've only just figured this out."

The words *True End* appeared on the television screen, indicating I'd at least reached the game's canonical conclusion: an illustration of the protagonist surrounded by all five of her love interests. It was a reverse harem ending, with the heroine marrying every single one of her romantic partners.

How can a reverse harem ending be considered canon? I thought bitterly. As a man, drowning in sausages only ruined the mood. Did women feel the same way about harem endings for guys?

Well, whatever the case, that was when the aforementioned epiphany struck.

My little sister had gone overseas, see, but she lived at home with our parents and didn't have a job. No way did she have the money to travel like that. I racked my brain, trying to remember anything my parents had said or done recently that might hint as to where she'd obtained the funds. That's when I remembered that they'd given her a couple grand to take driving lessons and

get her license. That had to be it. I could clearly recall my mom worriedly saying, "I just hope she manages to pass on the first try."

My sister was no fool. She wouldn't have used the entire amount for this little overseas adventure. But there was a good chance she'd used a portion for her trip. After all, if she'd had even a yen to her name, she wouldn't have begged my dad for spending money before she left.

"If I'd just demanded to know how she was funding her little getaway, then I wouldn't have had to waste my entire vacation on this stupid game."

By the time I hit upon this realization, it was my last day off. I'd spent the whole damn time wooing handsome 2D men.

The adventure portion of the game was a little fun, admittedly—though I did feel kind of guilty about selling off any and all presents that the love interests gave me for extra cash. On the other hand, pawning off those accessories netted me the funds I needed to get better equipment ASAP. There was no room for sentimentality here. I was on a mission.

I went to the menu to select the section that recorded the percentage of movies and CGs I'd collected. The number on screen read: 100% Completed.

"Phew, at least that's done. But I haven't had my revenge, now have I?"

I had passed out countless times while playing, and I still hadn't gotten a good night's sleep. I was very possibly running on pure adrenaline, which had left me feeling pumped.

"If I tell Mom that she went on a vacation on their dime, she'll be in for a world of hurt when she gets home. I can't wait."

She'd get a real earful from our parents. If I was lucky, maybe I could film it to torment her with later.

I typed out a message to my mom and attached the images my sister had sent. After sending that along, I lifted myself out of my chair and stretched.

"All right. I'd say that's more than a day's work. I guess I'll cheer myself up with a little trip of my own to a family diner—heck, I'll even order the most expensive stuff on the menu!"

There was a good joint close by. I could go there to blow off some steam and fill my stomach. With that, I strolled out of my apartment and started down the staircase...only for my vision to start spinning.

"H-huh?"

Everything blurred. Unable to keep upright, I stretched my hand toward the railing, but my fingers failed to find purchase and closed around empty air. My surroundings swam and spun ever more rapidly. Before I knew it, my body had tumbled down the staircase, slamming into the concrete landing below.

"It'd be too...pathetic...to die like...this..."

Was my life really going to end here? No, it couldn't! I tried desperately to pull myself up, but my limbs refused to heed me. All too soon, I slipped out of consciousness, and everything went black.

It was all over.

Or rather, it was supposed to be, but as it turned out, this was only the beginning.

Turned out I had more than one life in me. In my new one, I was known as Leon Fou Bartfort.

"Dammit!"

I was in a vast, futuristic room. Slick steel paneled the walls and ceilings. A monitor hung on one of these walls, with a blackboard beside it that I assumed was a control panel. I'd just entered what was actually this spaceship's control room. And in the center of that room, protruding from the floor, was a humanoid robot—though it was only a torso, arms, and a head, with no legs to speak of.

"Exterminate the intruder. Exterminate!"

An enormous arm swept toward me. This robot was so enormous that I had to crane my neck to get a good look-see. The rifle in my arms probably seemed like a quaint little relic next to the tech I was up against. Ironically, between my weapon and the robot, the latter was way, way older.

My bolt-action rifle didn't fire ordinary ammunition. It had been forged in a world of fantasy, so naturally, my bullets were imbued with mana—making them *Magic* Bullets. When I fired, the bullet whizzed through the air, leaving a faint arc of light in its wake. It hit its mark, but the robot was protected by a magical barrier that made the bullet explode on impact.

Despite my attacks, the robot didn't have a single scratch. A round camera lens glinted under its helmet's visor. "Resistance is futile. Your paltry attacks cannot hope to penetrate my defenses."

"In that case..." I dropped my right hand from the rifle and reached for a hand grenade. Lifting it to my mouth, I clenched my teeth around the metal pin and yanked, then chucked the payload at the robot.

An enormous explosion rocked the room. The shock wave sent me hurtling back, but I managed to scramble to my feet. And hoorah for me—I'd finally damaged my opponent.

"Aw, c'mon, you can't still be standing," I whined. "That was my trump card."

"So, the new humans have forsaken their magic in favor of guns and explosives. How very far your species has fallen."

The robot's visor was cracked, and electricity sputtered at one of its joints. I hadn't taken it down with that attack, but I had done *something*.

I switched out the magazine on my rifle, then reached for the shortsword at my hip.

"That being the case," the robot continued, "I suppose I shall leave this island to annihilate the new humans and all they have wrought once and for all. With the old humans gone, my priority is now to exterminate their ancient nemesis."

I sneered. "How long're you gonna cling to old news and petty grudges, huh?"

"It is neither old nor petty for me. It is an ongoing war. My struggle cannot end until I have seen every last new human swallowed in flames."

I'd come all the way to this remote fortress to retrieve Luxion—one of the DLC ships I'd paid for in my last life—but I couldn't even begin to follow the lore he was spouting. If I didn't put a leash on this guy, I'd wind up being the one

responsible for awakening a terror who wiped out the whole world.

I dashed toward the robot—only to be snatched up by its enormous hand. Its crushing grip forced me to drop my rifle.

"Khh!"

I whipped my shortsword out of its sheath as the robot's face closed in. Its camera lens studied me carefully. "I will exterminate all new humans. Exterminate..."

The robot's fingers tightened around me. My bones creaked under the pressure, and the pain was so overwhelming that I vomited. Blood poured from my mouth, accompanied by the contents of my stomach, but I gritted my teeth and held my shortsword out toward the robot's head. I was aiming for the cracked visor.

"How foolish. Do you truly believe an inferior weapon could best me at this stage?"

"Choke on this, you pile of scrap!" I thumbed a switch on the hilt, which sprung a patterned, four-inch blade—which I jammed into the robot's visor. The pattern on the blade lit up; it had been imbued with the same sort of mana as my bullets. Electricity surged forth from the robot's head in a violent wave. Its grasp weakened.

Finally free, I collapsed on the floor and snatched up my rifle. The robot's movements had already begun to stutter. It slumped forward, not much more functional myself.

"I win," I said.

Battle over, I dropped my weapons to the floor and pressed a hand to my side as I hobbled to the ship's control panel. I lifted my free hand and bit the finger of my glove to yank it off. Then I placed my naked palm against a silver slab on the panel.

"You are trying to use me, aren't you? It's futile." A voice echoed around me. It didn't come from the fallen robot, though the voice had the same electronic quality. There had to be speakers in here somewhere. Whatever was speaking to me, it seemed dumbfounded that I even knew how to register myself as its

master. Soon, it took a more panicked tone as it added, "I would rather self-destruct than allow one of the new humans to commandeer me."

I sniffed. "Put a cork in it. I'm here to collect an item I paid for."

"That you paid for?" the voice echoed in confusion.

Something pricked my hand on the panel, drawing blood. It whirred to life, and several monitors lit up as well. When prompted to select a language, I was surprised to see a nostalgic option.

"Ha ha. Who knew I'd ever get to see Japanese in this world."

"Japanese? You can read it?"

I selected my good old mother tongue. Words lit up on the panel, indicating the system was in the process of analyzing my blood sample. Faint beams of light appeared in the room and showered over me. It wasn't an attack; the ship was examining me.

By the time it was finished, I was too exhausted to stay upright. I collapsed onto my rear. Leaning against the wall behind me for support, I gazed up at the ceiling.

"This shouldn't be possible," said the robotic voice. "How can a new human possess so many of old humanity's characteristics? Moreover, new humanity no longer uses Japanese. No, in fact, Japanese should be entirely extinct by this era. Who exactly are you?"

Reluctant as I was to waste energy on answering his questions, I sucked it up and replied honestly, "Well, my soul is pure Japanese. Rice and miso soup every morning—staples of a good Japanese breakfast." Great, and now I found myself yearning for some grilled fish to go with it.

"Your soul? Are you referring to a cycle of death and rebirth?" The robot's voice oozed curiosity. "I cannot believe it."

"The fact that you exist is as good a proof as any. How else do you explain how I got here? How I can speak Japanese? It's all because I reincarnated into that stupid otome game."

"Otome game?"

Yeah, in a horrible stroke of luck, I'd somehow been reborn into the same otome game I'd played just before I died. That was why my name was now Leon. I'd been sucked into a fantasy world of floating islands, specifically to a backwater barony in the most rural of countrysides. My family, the Bartforts, were practically destitute and were nobility in name only. I was what you'd call a mob—one of those background characters that don't even get a name, let alone anything to do outside of saying maybe a line or two.

"Did you know?" I said. "This world's just some crazy, bizarre otome game."

"This sounds like a falsehood. However, I find you most intriguing."

"Gee, thanks..." The words barely left my mouth before I started coughing. I covered my mouth with my hand. Once the fit had subsided and I pulled my palm away, I found it slick with blood.

Crap. Here we go again. Am I seriously going to die an even more pathetic death?

I reached out to the wall, hoping to steady myself, but I crumpled to the floor.

"Master, your life is in considerable danger. I must move you to the medical __"

I didn't hear the rest. As my consciousness faded, my thoughts began to wander.

"If I die again, will I be reborn in yet another world? If so, I hope it's a nicer one next time. Or better yet, take me back to Japan."

Considering all I'd been through lately, I knew for a fact that life in Japan was way, way easier than it was here. Japan had its fair share of troubles, sure, but it was nothing compared to the hellscape that was the all-too-real world of this otome game.

"I need to apologize...to my old parents, too."

Their faces popped into my head. My little sister's as well. I could just imagine that detestable smirk on her face. But though it rankled me, I smiled for some reason.

"I hope she's at least...reflected a little...on her behavior."



It was probably her fault I'd been reincarnated here to begin with. Okay, okay, maybe I couldn't blame it *all* on her, but surely I deserved a little righteous anger. She'd earned at least one smack from each of our parents.

And with that final thought, everything went dark.

Chapter 1: I Want to Be Happy

AN ANGRY VOICE ECHOED through a cramped apartment.

"Please, give it back, I'm begging you! I saved that money for my daughter!" A woman with thoroughly disheveled hair desperately clung to a man's waist.

The man's hair was long and blond, though the roots had gone completely black after months without bleach. Thick stubble covered his face, and lack of hygiene and poor health had left his cheeks gaunt and pale. But even under all that, the man had a naturally unscrupulous air. His hand was clenched around an envelope full of cash.

"And I'm tellin' ya, I'll pay ya double what I'm takin'. My luck's turnin'. I can feel it."

He was addicted to gambling. Like every day before, he'd spent all morning squandering every yen he had to his name. Only once his funds had dried up did he come crawling back to her apartment, where he'd managed to unearth this hidden envelope, which he was now trying to make off with.

The woman frantically shook her head. "It's her birthday. You can take anything else, but not that money," she sobbed, still clinging to him.

She had only one child; the man in her apartment wasn't the father. Moreover, she wasn't really raising said child, her parents were. The woman only got to see her daughter a couple of times a month, and today was one of those special days. She'd set this month aside especially for her daughter, and she had been looking forward to this day for forever—until her boyfriend used her spare key to barge in and overturn everything.

He hadn't always been like this. When they first started dating, he'd been full of motivation and tirelessly chased his dreams. Then, at some point, he started gambling every day and frittering away all his money.

The woman refused to relinquish her grip, and the man's cheeks grew fiery

hot. He clenched his fist and slammed it into her head. The force of the blow sent her hurtling back and into a wall. In a stroke of misfortune, her head jerked back and banged into a pillar. Her hands instinctively shot up to cover the injury as she groaned in agony.

"Hey...?!"

The force of her head's impact on the wall had left a blood stain. The man stared, gobsmacked. But this wasn't the first time he'd been violent with her. He recovered quickly, likely assuming she would be fine—just like she'd always been—and shoved the money into his pocket.

"Th-this only happens 'cause you disobey me!" he snapped. "Learn to behave a little, why don'tcha?" With those final words, the man scrambled out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. His hurried footsteps echoed as he clambered down the stairs outside.

Somehow, the woman managed to pull herself upright and lean against the wall she'd been thrown into. Blood gushed from the open wound on her head. Her mind was hazy. She knew she needed to call for help—which meant locating her phone—but her body wouldn't move. Even when she saw her phone lying just a few meters away, even when she commanded her arm to reach for it, her limb wouldn't respond.

"Crap. I guess today's not going to work out after all. Don't think I'll be able to make it to her party..."

The woman had been waiting for this day for weeks, but there was no way she could go now, not like this. Her mind raced. How could she apologize to her daughter? But in the midst of this, her mind turned to lamenting her present circumstances.

"Why does it have to be like this? Things used to be so good. Back when I lived at home, when I had a family, when I was going to uni... Then I went on that stupid overseas trip with my friends..." As she remembered that last part, the tears she'd held back, even through the pain, finally began to stream down her cheeks. Everything about that moment came rushing back. "Why...? Why'd you have to die, Big Brother?"

The most pivotal turning point in her life was, unmistakably, her older

brother's death. During university, she'd briefly left Japan on a trip abroad. She hadn't had a job at the time, so she'd wheedled the cash out of her parents by saying it was for driving lessons to obtain her license. She'd felt a little guilty, but she'd figured it would be fine as long as she got a job when she got home and earned the money back.

Unfortunately, her parents had discovered her deception and were furious. They'd sent her a barrage of enraged texts. But since they were interfering with her vacation fun, she'd blocked them.

She chuckled dryly. "Ha ha, I wonder if things'd be better now...if I hadn't blocked them back then."

At the time, she'd figured her brother and parents would just give her an earful when she finally got back. She'd bought a bunch of souvenirs for them, figuring she'd have to suck up to them for a while until they finally forgave her. But strangely, she'd been plagued by a sinking feeling in her stomach, as if something was terribly wrong. *It's your imagination*, she told herself. After all, she was having so much fun.

The day she returned, she unblocked her parents' numbers and her phone was instantly flooded with messages. Thumbing back through them, she found one that simply read: *Your brother is dead*. She was dumbstruck. She remembered her friends, who were still with her at the airport, asking her what was wrong.

The woman didn't remember much of what happened after that. The next thing she knew, she'd barged into her brother's funeral when it was already halfway over. By the time she arrived, he had been cremated. Everyone in attendance, her relatives included, thought it bizarre that she'd come so late.

And by the time she realized where she was and what was going on, the funeral was nearly over. Even then, the tears wouldn't come.

"I couldn't cry, even though he was dead," she recalled bitterly. "He was the picture of health only days before. I never dreamed the next time I saw him, he'd be nothing but ash."

Once the ceremony was over and everyone else had left, her parents explained the situation to her. They didn't yell. They didn't cry. They just

dispassionately scolded her for lying to them and for failing to respond after they desperately tried to reach her.

It had been raining, but that hadn't stopped her parents from banishing her from their house without further discussion. Not even her father, ever the indulgent one, had stepped in to help her.

As the downpour raged, it finally sank in that her older brother was well and truly gone. She dissolved into tears, sobs racking her chest.

That, the woman thought, was when her life really began to go downhill. She dropped out of university and turned to the adult industry to keep herself afloat. It turned out she had something of a talent for it, and in no time at all, she was able to accrue a large sum of money. Unfortunately, all the men she attracted were complete lowlifes. Some wanted her for her bank account, others simply cheated on her time and time again. One even knocked her up before running off, refusing to help her or their child.

The woman had raised her daughter herself, at first, but after her health took an unexpected nosedive, she was unable to work enough hours. She turned to her parents for help. When they saw the situation she was in, they insisted she couldn't be trusted with her daughter. Her parents forced them to live apart.

"Why can't anything ever go right? Wasn't there a time when...?" When everything had gone exactly right no matter what. But she had been young, then. As far as she could tell, the greatest difference between then and now was that she'd once had her older brother. Now, not so much.

"I was an idiot. But so were you, Big Bro! No one ever said you should push yourself that hard for a stupid game."

She knew she had taken advantage of him. Before leaving on her trip, she'd dropped in on him, hoping to hit him up for cash and dump her game in his lap. She'd been avidly looking forward to the game since well before its release, but when she actually tried playing, it had infuriated her with its insane difficulty, which had made it impossible to clear. She had foisted the game onto him hoping he would clear it for her. She'd never dreamed he would pull all-nighters to do it.

"Dummy. Why'd you have to die?"

In the corner of her eye, she spotted the old console and game case, now covered in a thick layer of dust. It had been years since she touched the thing. The cartridge for the third installment of that same series was currently inserted into it. The USB she had given her older brother sat nearby, untouched. He had fulfilled his promise and cleared the entire game. Strange how he'd always kept his word. The memory made her eyes mist over.

It had become too painful to lean against the wall, so she tipped sideways and lay on the floor.

"Wait. I can't die yet. Mom and Dad still haven't forgiven me. Besides, I haven't seen my daughter in forever... I want to see her."

The woman could practically feel her life draining away. An intense fear gripped her. She tried again to stretch her hand toward her phone, to call for help. But gradually, the terror dissipated, and resignation took its place.

"Save me," she whispered feebly, "Big Bro..."

As her life gave out, her last wish was for her late brother to rescue her one final time.

Snowflakes peppered the forest at the base of a mountain. Every last leaf had fallen, leaving the tree branches bare. Despite the absence of any real path, a petite girl bundled in a fur coat made her way through the thicket undeterred. A large rifle was slung over her shoulder, standing in stark contrast to her tiny frame.

A thick layer of snow coated the ground and crunched under her feet. Her shoulders rose and fell with labored breaths as she trudged onward, no matter the difficulty she faced navigating through the wilderness.



Her breath came out in visible wisps. When she opened her mouth, frigid air stole inside her body, winding into her lungs and sapping her of warmth.

"It's...it's this way!" She strained her ears, following the faint sound to her destination, where a beast was caught in one of her traps.

This beast was like nothing she had ever seen. It resembled a bear, but unlike the bears from her world, it had a mane like a lion.

The girl whipped her rifle from her shoulder and loaded a bullet. This old weapon could only fire a single shot. She spread her legs to steady herself and fired at the beast. Sadly, the creature's instincts made it jerk just in time, and it avoided a fatal hit.

Annoyed, the girl cursed under her breath. "I didn't wanna waste multiple shots on you!" She ejected the empty shell and loaded another bullet.

Blood gushed from the creature's open wound. Droplets splattered the snow, staining it crimson. The beast thrashed in place, straining at her trap. The tree it was bound to creaked ominously.

"You gotta be kidding me!" In her surprise, the girl's hands jerked as she fired. Her shot veered off course, once again failing to strike a fatal blow.

The tree keeping the creature in place splintered in half. Now loose, the creature charged toward her.

The girl spun on her heel and scrambled away. She ejected the second empty shell from her gun and shoved in another bullet. The creature was hot on her trail. Its jowls opened wide, ready to crush her skull. She whipped around, and

Bang!

The hollow crack of a gunshot echoed through the forest.

This time, she had shot it straight through the head. It teetered, unstable, still able to move. The girl scooped up a thick branch near her feet and lifted it high overhead before bringing it down on the creature with all the might she could muster.

That evening, the girl retreated to the safety of her modest mountain hut. She was admiring the work she had done after skinning the beast. When she removed her hat, her beautiful, voluminous blonde hair fell free and tumbled across her shoulders. Though it was disheveled, since she hadn't bothered to pin it back, it had a lovely luster.

Setting the fur aside, the girl reached for a notebook on a nearby table. The moment she realized she had reincarnated in this world, she had written down every single detail she could recall from her previous life.

The girl glanced at the calendar. The academy's entrance ceremony was fast approaching.

"Less than two months," she said.

She paused in front of an old mirror to examine her appearance. A rather petite young girl stared back at her. The girl's name in this world was Marie Fou Lafan. She had reincarnated here after her death in Japan. Notably, this was no ordinary world—nor was it the one she had lived in before. No, this was the world of a very specific otome game.

In her reflection, Marie spotted a wound on her right cheek, no doubt acquired when she was fighting for her life with that creature. Marie pressed her hand over the wound, and a faint light materialized. This same light always appeared when one called upon arcane power, but Marie was using a particularly rare and valuable art known as healing magic.

When she at last removed her hand, all traces of the wound had disappeared.

"How do you like that? I didn't spend ten years desperately studying this magic for nothing!"

In this world, people could use any sort of magic they liked, provided they studied it first. Healing magic was the one exception. You had to possess an innate talent and work tirelessly to properly acquire it. Healers were few and far between and were thus highly valued. Not just anyone could learn how to wield healing magic, after all. Following her reincarnation, Marie had spent an inordinate amount of time dedicated to the art—pouring her blood, sweat, and tears into it.

Marie looked herself over in the mirror.

"I-I do think I look cute, at least. Though I definitely look way younger than the last time I was this age. I'm sure I was much taller and more filled out back in Japan."

Being adorable was all well and good, but it had its limits. Marie was awfully underdeveloped for a fifteen-year-old girl. She was short and lacked any of the curves most women enjoyed by this point. The one saving grace was her beautiful face—and, with a good wash, her blonde hair would look even more radiant. As she studied herself, blue eyes scanning up and down, her expression hardened.

"My last life was absolute crap, but I've hit absolute rock bottom in this one.

Aren't you supposed to have it made when you're born into nobility? Why have
I had to suffer all this?"

In her last life, Marie had died due to domestic violence. In this one, she had been born into Viscount Lafan's family. One might think her fortunate, being part of the aristocracy, but one would be wrong.

The Lafans were burdened with a significant problem: while they were as unassailably proud as any aristocrats, they were digging themselves deeper and deeper into debt while trying to maintain a luxurious lifestyle.

Marie *hated* debt. Her past self had suffered countless times thanks to her boyfriend's debts.

At any rate, while the Lafans were careless with their spending, their worst transgression was their treatment of their youngest daughter, Marie. Her older brothers and sisters lived the high life in their family's castle, but the same couldn't be said for her. Since they lacked a full contingent of servants, her family treated her like the help. They foisted all sorts of responsibilities on her and expected her to wait on the rest of the household hand and foot.

Marie wasn't even given adequate meals, let alone an allowance. In fact, she had trudged into the forest with a rifle strapped to her back to hunt for sustenance, as well as to perhaps make a little money. This was far from proper conduct for a daughter of nobility, but she couldn't get by without resorting to such measures.

"Isn't this supposed to be an otome game world? Overflowing with hopes and dreams? So why do I gotta suffer? Because I'm not the protagonist? Because I'm just one of the infinite insignificant background characters?"

What truly got under Marie's skin was the idea of the main character. She came from humble beginnings, but she was guaranteed a happy ending. Her default name was Olivia, and she had a strangely voluptuous design, which seemed more in line with a man's preferences than a woman's. Her dialogue was even worse. When war broke out, she insisted, "War isn't right!" That was a moral stance, sure, but it didn't actually do anything to solve the crisis. Marie remembered being pissed off the whole time she was playing. It hadn't helped that she couldn't clear the game by herself. That made her hate Olivia all the more, and even now, those emotions bubbled to the surface.

Thanks to her older brother, Marie had been able to watch the event scenes and movies, which had depicted the protagonist and the happy moments she shared with her love interests.

Marie stared at her reflection, her smile taking on a sinister edge. "I have a right to be happy, too. Wouldn't you agree, Olivia?" She hugged the notebook filled with walkthrough details to her chest. "To think I'm entering the academy in the same year as the protagonist. Must be fate."

Her goal was simple: she would use her knowledge of the game to claim happiness for herself.

Marie tore her gaze from the mirror and stared down at her feet. "This time, I swear it. I will seize my own happiness."

Chapter 2: When the Routes Split

SHOULD HAVE PICKED the fish entrée.

Life is a series of choices. Once you select something, the consequences are sure to follow. Consequences, one might say, that are your responsibility to live with.

Today's lunch had a choice: meat or fish. I picked the meat without giving it much thought, but now that I saw how delicious everyone else's fish entrée looked, I couldn't help thinking I'd botched it. Sure, the meat was delicious and all, but I was still sore about missing out on that fish.

Such is life and its never-ending, branching paths.

I found myself waffling over one such choice right this very moment. An unusual one, to be clear.

Luxion—the spaceship's artificial intelligence—hovered beside me. He wasn't in said spaceship form, of course, but rather a softball-sized mini-robot that he had fashioned to accompany me at the academy incognito. His round body sported a single red camera lens in its middle, with which he scrutinized me.

"You've been at that for a whole minute now. What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, this?"

In the inner courtyard, you could find a wooden bench located beneath what resembled a sakura tree. I sat there alone, my back against the tree as I stared up absently, appreciating the sakura in bloom. I had been playing with a gold coin in my hand.

"Nothing much. Just debating something in my head."

"Debating? I assume, given the coin in your hands, that the issue is related to your finances? If that is what plagues you, I will prepare additional funds to suit your needs."

"Nah, it's not that."

Luxion had also prepared this little remote terminal so he could protect me if anything untoward were to crop up. Luxion had been a cash shop item, and perhaps as a result, he was incredibly powerful. If he so wished, he could turn a random pebble into a lump of pure gold. His in-game architects had built and designed him to be a "migrant ship," but he'd come equipped with a number of other functions as well. Sadly, for all his immense capabilities, he knew jack squat about the human heart.

"I told you before, remember? This world comes from an otome game, and as it just so happens, I'm in the same year as the protagonist."

Luxion's gaze drifted off as if he had lost all interest. "Again with these delusions?"

"They're not delusions. Your existence is proof that I'm telling the truth."

"I refuse to entertain this. In fact, I was constructed to provide transportation for old humanity into space, where they could escape Demonic Essence and search for a new homeland."

"Yeah, that's the in-universe lore justifying your existence," I supplied helpfully.

"There is no meaning in continuing this conversation. Neither of us will concede."

Basically, Luxion found it difficult to believe the whole game world premise. I didn't want to believe it, either. I'd have been way better off if I were wrong. Alas, after only a few short days at the academy, cold, hard reality had hit me square in the face.

"All my predictions came true, didn't they? The prince and all those prominent noble heirs are enrolled at this school, exactly like I said they would be."

"Anyone could have predicted as much. While I will admit I was surprised by what seemed to be foreknowledge, that does not equate to simply believing your claims. In your case, perhaps you even experience precognition, which presents itself in your mind in the form of one of these 'otome games.'"

Precognition? Me? I couldn't even predict the weather. No way could I see the future.

"What, and Japan was just a figment of my imagination? The rest of that whole world, too? Now that's something / don't want to believe."

"I am merely suggesting that it is entirely possible everything you saw in that world was either a dream or, perhaps, a hallucination."

My lips pulled into a thin, flat line. "Are you that desperate to dismiss my old world?"

I'd regained memories of my previous life when I was all of five years old. They had been so vivid as they flooded my mind that they'd left me stunned. More than once, I had wondered if I'd gone crazy, or if that distant life and world were, in fact, nothing more than a dream. Perhaps, I even thought, those memories were a mere figment of my imagination.

Yes, there were times when I had doubts. I still couldn't recall what my name had been. My family's faces were a blur as well; I couldn't clearly recall any distinct features.

As I fell silent, Luxion said, "Returning to my original query: Why are you holding that gold coin?"

"No real reason in particular. It's just that today, the protagonist and the prince have their meet-cute in the rear courtyard."

"Meet-cute? You are referring to a contrived event wherein a protagonist first encounters a love interest?" Luxion clarified.

"Yup. You got it."

The protagonist's name had wound up as the default option: Olivia. The love interest in question was the crown prince and heir to the throne, Julius Rapha Holfort. He was a handsome, slender man with short, navy-blue hair. To accompany his dashing good looks, he enjoyed an impressive position in the monarchy, which had girls squealing and fawning over him at every step.

I studied the coin in my hand. A woman's profile was printed on the front, while the royal crest of Holfort was on the back.

"Anyway, about the meet-cute," I said. "I was debating whether to go have a look-see."

"While I would prefer to believe otherwise, I must ask: Do you intend to use that coin to determine whether or not you go?" Luxion didn't even try to hide the exasperation in his robotic voice. "Are you truly so indecisive over even this trivial choice?"

What I chose was to ignore his derision. "Honestly, I don't want to get even a little involved with the game's story. I mean, I'm just a random background character. I'd rather keep watch from a distance, for the most part. But at the same time, this is an opportunity to see a game event in real life! You know, to watch a girl smack a handsome guy right in the kisser. I gotta see it."

Since I didn't want to be involved in the main story, I was content to keep the protagonist and the crown prince at arm's length, but I couldn't help my curiosity. It wasn't a particularly strong desire. More of an inclination. And so, to resolve this little inner battle, I'd produced a coin to make up my mind for me.

I flipped the coin into the air. It spun before falling back down, and I caught it in my hand. I slowly peeled my fingers away to reveal the profile of the Saintess.

"It's heads," I said, lifting myself off the bench. "That settles it. Let's go watch."

"Eavesdropping is a dreadful hobby."

I shrugged. "I'm just gonna get a little peek as I happen to pass by."

"You cannot call it coincidence when you are purposefully seeking them out." Nevertheless, Luxion flew to my shoulder and activated his cloaking device to blend into the background. Robot in tow, I left for the rear courtyard.

The vast, sweeping gardens behind the main school building were referred to as the rear courtyard. The landscape was meticulously maintained, and the place even had its own pond, beside which Julius presently stood. He gazed into the water, and though his face was full of melancholy, his air was unapproachable.

I had hidden in the shadows of some nearby bushes to watch. "Must be nice being so handsome that you look good even when you sulk."

"You are jealous?"

"Well, sure, somewhat. But no matter how pretty he looks right now, he's about to get an open hand to the face, courtesy of the protagonist. That's what I'm *really* looking forward to."

"Indeed. Your virtuous personality is an inspiration to all."

I shot him a look. "And you're being a sarcastic little jerk, same as ever."

"I should remind you that your behavior is the sole reason for my own." Then there was a pause, and Luxion let out a surprised, "Oh?" His lens moved in a different direction.

I followed his gaze and spotted a girl sneaking this way. It didn't seem she had noticed us hiding here. At first, I assumed it was the protagonist, but as she came closer, I realized she looked nothing like the heroine I'd seen on the game case. This girl was incredibly petite with long, soft locks of wavy blonde hair. Her eye color resembled the protagonist's, sure, but everything else was noticeably different.

"Pretty sure I've seen her a few times."

"She is in your year as well," Luxion said. "Consequently, you have no doubt met in passing on the school grounds."

"Yeah, guess so."

It was more than that, though. Every time I saw this girl, something tugged at the back of my mind. It wasn't romantic interest—more like a natural-born, deep-seated annoyance. I didn't hate the girl, per se, but something about her face rubbed me the wrong way.

"Master, this girl is attempting to make contact with Julius. Is she the protagonist of whom you spoke?"

I moved from my spot, careful not to catch the girl's attention. "No," I murmured. From what I remembered of the game's illustrations, the protagonist was taller and had more meat all around. This was someone else.

Eventually, I made my way close enough to overhear what the girl was whispering to herself. She seemed nervous—too in her head to notice her surroundings. She hadn't spotted me.

"Stay calm, Marie," she told herself. "You just have to complete the prince's meet-cute event. Once you're acquainted, it'll be smooth sailing from there."

That told me everything I needed to know.

Aha. She's the same as me, then.

Now that the situation was clear, I figured I'd better apprehend the would-be culprit.

"Luxion, come with me," I said.

The girl—Marie, was it?—was busily debating when best to approach the prince. I snuck close enough to spring just as she was about to walk out into the open and approach the prince. I grabbed her arm with one hand and slapped the other over her mouth.

"Ngh!" Marie was startled, utterly confused as to what was happening.

Even as she started flailing wildly, I hauled her up and dragged her away. I needed to get her somewhere secluded.

"I don't want anyone to see us," I told Luxion.



He dropped his cloaking device and said, "Then please follow me."

With Luxion leading the way, I swept Marie into my arms and scurried off.

The secluded spot Luxion led me to was a narrow space between the school building and a hedge. It wasn't far from where the prince still stood near the rear courtyard's pond. Thankfully, we were sufficiently hidden by the trees and shrubbery, and far from any foot traffic. This was as good a place as any to talk.

When I finally released Marie, she yanked herself away, trembling in fear even as she glowered at me. "Wh-what do you think you're doing?! I'm in a hurry here. Don't think I'll let you off so easy—you're gonna pay!" For all her bluster, her legs were shaking like jelly. I'd really spooked her.

Her bravado reminded me of my sister—the one from my last life. She didn't look the least bit like her, though. Or wait, maybe she did? Her aura was similar, at least. Maybe that was why she had infuriated me on sight.

"Why?" I challenged. "Because you don't want me ruining your li'l meet-cute with Prince Charming?"

Marie's eyes widened. Once she'd fully digested my words, however, they slowly narrowed again. The fear on her face had vanished, and she regarded me coldly. "So you're like me," she said.

Her reaction confirmed my suspicions. She had no intention of hiding the truth, either.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked. "What exactly are you trying to pull?"

"What do you mean?"

I sighed impatiently. "You were trying to interfere with the protagonist's first encounter with the prince, weren't you?" In truth, I'd already guessed her motivations, but I wanted clarification.

"What's it got to do with you?" Marie huffed and looked away.

Yep, figured. She was trying to steal the protagonist's limelight for herself.

"Everything," I snapped. "Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

I wanted to warn her not to overstep her bounds, but she wouldn't hear it.

"Oh, stuff it! And let me go already. If I don't hurry, the stupid protagonist will get here before I can make my move!"

I wasn't physically restraining Marie anymore, but I had backed her against the wall, my arms on either side of her to keep her from running. For a halfpint, she sure had guts.

"Don't get in the heroine's way," I warned her. "It's the end of the world if she doesn't meet the prince and the other love interests." If the protagonist didn't fall for one of them, it was game over for everyone. And no offense, but it's way too early for me to go kicking the bucket again.

"And why would *that* happen? If you're gonna threaten me, at least come up with something more convincing." Marie sneered. "If you don't let me go now, I'm gonna scream for help. Your life here at the academy—no, your life *period*—will be as good as over." Marie smirked over her sinister backup plan.

If my impression of her had been bad before, this just cemented my suspicions that she was a real nasty piece of work. The same kind my sister had been.

Marie was right, though. If she screamed, I'd be painted as the bad guy. But something about this whole situation still felt off. Why was she pursuing the prince?

"You've played this game, haven't you?" I said. "So why would you disrupt the protagonist's events?"

"That should be obvious. I—"

Marie cut off her explanation as bickering voices reached us from the distance.

We exchanged looks briefly, then scrambled to investigate. We were still headed in the direction of the commotion when we heard a sharp, dry slap. We both immediately knew what that sound meant.

I scratched my head. "Crap, and after I went to all that trouble to come here

to watch." I wasn't too bummed, really, but I wished I could've seen the crown prince take it to the face.

Marie's reaction was far different. She sagged against a nearby wall and slid down to her knees. Tears welled in her eyes. "N-no... After I went to all the trouble to come to the academy. I waited ten whole years for this!" She broke into sobs.

Even I felt bad now.

"H-hey..." I said.

"I thought I finally had a chance to be happy! This is your fault!" she spat, jabbing a finger in my direction. "It's your fault I'm gonna be dirt poor forever!" More tears streamed down her cheeks.

It really got under my skin when girls cried. Seriously, I hated it.

"Master, would it not be wise to share the information you possess?" Luxion interjected.

He was right. If Marie had cleared the full game, she wouldn't have dreamed of trying to disrupt an event like this.

"Yeah," I said. "Hey, quit crying already. Let's at least talk—" I extended my right hand as I spoke, ready to help her up, but Marie knocked it away, effectively cutting me off.

Clenching her fists, she glared at me. "I'll never forgive you for this." With that, she hopped to her feet and ran off.

"Hey, wait!" I hurriedly called after her. But she never once glanced back. I watched as her form receded in the distance, my hand dropping back to my side.

"It appears the lady despises you," Luxion observed helpfully.

"Guess so."

I glanced back at the scene where the game event was unfolding. Julius still stood by the pond, the protagonist beside him.

The prince smiled. "What? So you truly have no idea who I am?" He sounded

genuinely amused.

The girl stared back at him, puzzled. She had aqua eyes and flaxen hair cut in a short bob—though the feature that most assured me she was the protagonist was her ample bosom.

"I-I have no idea," she stuttered. "This is our first time meeting, after all."

"For a commoner, you have some guts. Slapping one of the elite?" He flashed her a teasing smile.

Olivia shrank back. Julius's words had reminded her that everyone else at the academy was a member of the aristocracy. She alone was not. The academy had specially allowed her to attend on scholarship due to her impressive magical talents. If the school staff were to learn she had slapped another student, it would end poorly for her, no matter how well deserved the slap had been.

"Ngh..." Olivia groaned, face scrunching.

"I'm not particularly angry," Julius said gently. "Although, I now realize that I haven't yet introduced myself. My name is Julius. Julius Rapha Holfort."

Olivia's jaw dropped. "As in the prince?"

"Indeed. No one has ever slapped me before." He smiled. "You're not like other women."

The color drained from Olivia's face.

I watched from the shadows, finding the whole interaction a little off-putting. "Prince Julius's affection for her may have increased, but doesn't it seem like Miss Olivia's more stressed than anything?"

I couldn't blame her. Distress was a natural reaction to learning you'd struck a crown prince. Julius showed no outward sign of upset, but Olivia's expression was grave.

Perhaps it was only normal to react this way. After all, unlike the happy-go-lucky game story, this was real life. Slapping royalty was a big deal.

"Indeed. She appears to be rather profoundly panicked," Luxion observed.

"I thought this was supposed to be a more lighthearted meet-cute, but I guess this is just what happens when an unrealistic scenario comes to life."

"Dammit! Dammit! What the hell is wrong with that stupid background character? So what if he reincarnated here, too! That doesn't give him the right to steal my chance at happiness! He's gonna pay for this." Having retreated behind a different part of the school building, Marie repeatedly slammed her foot against the wall, trying to blow off some steam.

The moment she'd pinned her hopes on for over ten years had been stolen from right under her nose. She could barely contain her rage.

Marie's shoulders rose and fell rapidly as she struggled to control her breathing. She tried to refocus, picturing the other love interests in her mind's eye. "There are other options," she reassured herself. "Four more, to be precise. Surely, I can snag one of them."

Maybe. She hoped.

These love interests weren't ordinary men. They had riches, status, and power. They were the future heads of esteemed noble houses. All that made them utterly unlike the men Marie had dated in her previous life.

"I still have four more chances. Yes, that's right. It's not like this is game over for me. Not yet."

From the start, Marie had planned to approach each and every one of the love interests to increase her chances of success. Her strategy was to claim the meet-cute events for herself because that seemed like the most effective way to achieve her goal. After all, she remembered what dialogue options would appease and interest these men. All she needed was an opening. As long as she got one, she had the advantage, since she knew their personalities and preferences.

"It's a shame that I missed Prince Julius. I mean, as the crown prince, that obviously means he'll be the next king, right? Happiness is inevitable if you get to date a guy like that."

Yes, if Marie had a boyfriend like the prince, she would no longer have to

worry about money, to say nothing of domestic violence. Marie could only dream of such a life.

She slapped her hands over her cheeks, trying to pump herself back up. One thing still weighed on her.

"That stupid background character really pisses me off. He kinda reminds me of...of my big bro."

Marie bumped her forehead against the wall, her good spirits dashed. The moment she had reincarnated, she had forgotten her brother's face. She had kept an old photo of him on her phone, and whenever she thought of him, she'd spent time gazing at it. But now she couldn't recall his features at all. The only thing she knew was that the man who'd disrupted her quest had the same sort of aura—one that *really* got under her skin.

"I already hate that he feels even a little like Big Bro, but he's an even bigger scumbag for getting in my way! Ugh, honestly. This couldn't get any worse."

"Um, pardon me. Do you like that book? To tell you the truth, I'm particularly fond of it as well!"

Luxion's camera lens was projecting a video for me against the wall. It depicted Marie attempting to strike up a conversation with a man named Brad Fou Field. Brad was the heir to a region on the country's border and the son of an earl. His purple hair matched equally purple eyes. In game terms, he was a mage and—oh, right—one of the otome game love interests.

Brad exhaled a small sigh before glancing at Marie. "While I appreciate your interest in me, I'm afraid I can't reciprocate."

"Huh? Uh, um..." Marie was gobsmacked. Brad was being polite enough, but there was no mistaking his rejection.

The line Marie had just deployed was the one Olivia used during her in-game meet-cute with Brad. The book he was reading interested her, and from there, their relationship began to blossom. However, Marie's attempt had failed.

Brad made a face. "You're just forcing yourself to say that to get my attention,

right?"

"Huh?"

"You say you're fond of this book, but where's the passion? I don't hear it—or see it, either."

That was unexpected. So he'd noticed her interest wasn't genuine. Perhaps he and his rivals had a more discerning eye than she'd given them credit for.

Marie went quiet. She dropped her gaze to her feet.

Brad's smile strained awkwardly. He scratched his cheek. "I suppose I can't fault you for it. It's only natural you'd fall for someone as handsome as me. You haven't done anything wrong. Oh, I know. I'll be hosting a tea party in May. You absolutely must come and join me then. I would be happy to see you there." With that, he left his seat and strode off, book in hand.

Marie stood there, frozen.

Once the playback finished, Luxion ended his projection and turned his gaze to me. "On your orders, I commenced an investigation of Marie. She has continued to approach the love interests, as you can see."

"Watching that just bummed me out. Guess the impostor playbook isn't working out too well for her."

No matter how hard she tried, Marie was no replacement for Olivia. She didn't even come close. As relieved as I was to see that, Luxion was warier than ever.

"Her endeavors have failed thus far. However, the fact remains that she shares a background with you, Master. I believe you should remain on guard."

"On guard with someone who keeps striking out? Maybe I'm looking at it the wrong way, but do you really think she has any hope of succeeding? Why not just leave her to her own devices?"

"Then shall I cease my surveillance of her?"

I shook my head. "Nah, let's keep an eye on her for a bit longer."

I didn't think Marie was going to make any progress, per se, but we'd be in

trouble if she resorted to desperate measures. It was best to keep tabs on her. Thanks to her meddling, I now had to worry about keeping the game's entire scenario on track. All I wanted to do was watch the protagonist and her love interests from afar. I definitely didn't want to get involved.

Chapter 3: Stephanie Fou Offrey

THE ACADEMY was the number one destination for the country's aristocracy to send their children to further their education. It also served as the backdrop for the otome game that haunted me. Ordinarily, only the upper crust was allowed to attend, but a special exception had been made for a certain common-born girl. Her enrollment as a scholarship student sparked the start of the game's story.

I had no idea what story beats were traditional for otome games, but this one felt pretty innocuous as a scenario for a dating sim. That said, the game's world was bizarre, to say the least.

I was strolling down a school corridor when a woman leading a whole platoon of loyal followers came striding in my direction. She walked with unflappable confidence, her head held high. Her blonde hair was pulled into braided loops on either side of her head. The unique hairstyle complemented her traditionally attractive features. None of that made up for her horrible personality, though.

The girl was flanked just on either side by female students hailing from knight houses or baronetcies, who kept just a step or two behind. In Japan, a student's background didn't have that much impact on their relationships, but at this academy, the influence of one's house was everything. From day one, it was common for cliques to form based entirely on family connections.

The girls were also followed by personal servants—demi-human slaves. There were three of them total: one elf and two beastmen. Calling them slaves wasn't entirely correct. They had contracts with their masters and received a salary for their service.

For the most part, only women of a certain rank—specifically daughters of barons or viscounts—had servants like this, who saw to their daily needs at the academy. And among the demi-human races, the most commonly employed were elves and beastmen. Their men were reliably handsome. In fact, just

about everyone who hailed from these races was extremely attractive, which was what made them such popular servants for these girls.

I should probably also mention (in case it wasn't clear) that these contracts typically included sexual relations. In short, if a girl was flaunting one of these personal servants, she was essentially parading her own lover around.

This world really sucked. As for how specifically, why don't we start with the fact that, unlike women, men were forbidden from having personal servants? Only women could take these demi-human lovers. If a man were to do the same thing, he'd be treated like a pariah and people would question his humanity.

So what would you call that kind of world, anyway? A matriarchy, I guess?

If I'd had the luxury of choosing a world to be reborn into, I definitely wouldn't have picked this one.

This girl and her followers had to know they were a serious inconvenience for everyone around them, marching down the middle of the hallway like that. Malicious smiles crossed their faces as they watched men and lower-ranking women duck to the side.

I followed the crowd's example and stepped to the wall. I didn't want to start anything. The group sneered as they passed. Male students were no more than worms beneath their feet.

Once that nuisance was over and done with, Luxion—who was still employing his cloaking device—said, "I will admit it is mildly entertaining to watch slaves look down on you, Master. Though I do struggle to understand a society in which servants are in a position to condescend to nobility."

I was careful to make sure no one was close enough to hear me before I muttered, "Us guys are the ones who gotta bust our butts getting those girls to marry us. If you ask me, this academy is basically a forsaken hellhole."

"It certainly is a unique arrangement. Even so, it is rare to see a group so openly arrogant."

He was right about that. Academy girls enjoyed a more favorable position than the boys, but most of them weren't as outright haughty as the ones we'd just seen.

I scrunched up my face. "Hmm. I'm pretty sure I've seen that girl somewhere before. Who was she again?" Why was she so familiar? I was pretty sure she made an appearance in the game. Or maybe she didn't? My memory was awfully fuzzy.

While I scratched my head, puzzling over my memory, a trio of girls began whispering about the leader of the group who'd just passed.

"That was Earl Offrey's daughter."

"Offrey? As in that house that forced their way into the aristocracy?"

"Yeah, they used to be merchants. I sure wouldn't want to get even a little close to someone like that."

The girls had delayed their gossip until the group was far enough away.

"It'd be one thing if they achieved their status through being accomplished adventurers, but, I mean...they basically stole the position, right?"

"Not to mention, there's not even a drop of aristocratic blood running through their veins."

"The *audacity*, calling herself one of us. Doesn't she feel ashamed, attending the academy?"

They snickered, their voices growing louder and louder.

"For being an earldom, they're almost never summoned to the palace."

"That just proves the palace hates them, too, then."

"Of course. They're not true nobility."

I pulled a face and glanced over my shoulder, looking back at the group of girls, who I assumed would have receded into the distance. For a moment, I stopped breathing.

The Offrey girl and her lackeys had stopped moving. The Offrey girl stared at the gossiping trio, a dangerous gleam in her eyes. She stood there for a straight ten seconds before she finally peeled her gaze away and stomped off.

After school, Stephanie Fou Offrey summoned the girls who'd slandered her

in the hall.

"There you are." Stephanie spoke in a sweet, almost singsong voice as she leaned toward the terrified girls, who trembled before her. "Seems like you were really enjoying yourselves this afternoon, saying all those awful things about me." Her three personal servants were arranged in a semi-circle behind her. The rest of her female followers stood guard around the perimeter to make sure no one interrupted.

The girl at the fore of the trio desperately protested, "N-no! We were gossiping a little, sure, but I swear no one said anything *bad* about you!"

Stephanie paused and glanced at one of her servants. "You heard them. What do you say to that?"

The beastman traced a finger along the edge of his ear—a feature in which he and his race took great pride for its superior sensitivity. "No negative word was spoken about you personally, but they did disparage your house."

The corners of Stephanie's lips curled into a smile. When she returned her gaze to the trio, however, all feigned pleasantness evaporated. Her face flushed with anger. "He has incredible hearing, you know. Heard every word of your little conversation. So..." Stephanie seized the closest girl by the collar. "What the hell'd you say about my house, huh?! Go on, spit it out, you dirt-poor losers!" Stephanie repeatedly slammed the girl against the nearby wall as she bellowed. Her eyes were bloodshot and angry. Throbbing veins protruded from her forehead.

The terrified girl dissolved into tears as her legs turned to jelly. When Stephanie released her, she crumpled to the ground, sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

Stephanie clicked her tongue and glowered at the other two. "You girls have no business acting all high and mighty. You're nothing more than backwater nobility with barely a gold coin to your names! Your *ancestors* accomplished all the great things that got you where you are. You've done less than nothing, and yet you have the audacity to act with such arrogance. Makes me sick."

"My lady," said one of her servants, "you've let your anger get the best of you. Such remarks are ill-suited to one of your station."

Stephanie pulled a face and reluctantly paused to regain her composure. "You'll pay for demeaning my house," she said once she had, her voice low and threatening. "I won't allow anyone from such poor, insignificant houses to look down on us."

The girl who'd collapsed managed to pull herself back to her feet, but like the other two, her legs shook. The Offreys were a powerful family. Having provoked their ire, the trio were beside themselves with fear.

Once upon a time, the Offreys had presided over a viscounty. They'd incurred so much crushing debt that they'd been forced to sell their noble status to a merchant. This deal had come in the form of adopting the merchant's child as their own. Legal though this method was, it was clear to the rest of the aristocracy that the Offreys had sold themselves and their position. From then on, the merchants had taken over House Offrey. Their status had risen from a viscounty to an earldom. They'd snagged this more prestigious title in record time, though it had been won by underhanded means: blackmail, threats, and the like. There were even whispers that the Offreys had connections to air pirates. The rumor mill constantly churned with terrible things about this family.

All this had instilled Stephanie with a sense of inferiority. She had been born into the aristocracy and yet had never truly been accepted by her peers. She couldn't sit idly by and ignore the derision when people brought up the lack of noble blood in her veins.

Everyone tries to defame me! I'm engaged to Lord Brad of House Field, and yet you people still refuse to accept me as an aristocrat?!

Stephanie had been engaged since before her enrollment. Her husband-to-be was Brad Field, the heir of a border region. The Fields were among the most esteemed of the kingdom's houses, having existed since Holfort's founding. For the Offreys, Stephanie's marriage to Brad was the perfect opportunity to integrate noble blood into their line.

While Stephanie inwardly debated how best to retaliate against the trio, one of her followers sprinted frantically toward her. This new girl's name was Carla Fou Wayne; she had long, straight, navy-blue hair and was the daughter of a

baronet. She was more intelligent than the rest of Stephanie's lackeys, so Stephanie often ordered her to do her dirty work.

"My lady!" Carla cried.

Stephanie frowned. "What?" she spat.

Carla shrank back, but fearful as she was of her mistress's sour mood, she had to make her report. Gulping, she said, "A girl tried to make a pass at Lord Brad."

"What?" Stephanie's voice was quiet but menacing. It sent a chill through Carla, who snapped her mouth shut—but that was the wrong move. Furious, Stephanie seized her by the shoulders. "Who? Who was it?" she demanded.

"Marie!" Carla blurted. "Marie Lafan—she's the one who tried to flirt with him! There were several other witnesses present, and they confirmed it was definitely her!"

Stephanie gritted her teeth, nostrils flaring. Her rage had hit an all-time high. A wrinkle formed on her forehead as she knitted her brows. She turned to her lackeys. "Find out everything you can about this Marie," she ordered. "She's obviously picking a fight if she's trying to cozy up to Lord Brad."

There was no other way to interpret Marie's actions; it was common knowledge that Brad was already engaged. Why else would she approach him, if not to mock the Offreys? If Stephanie backed down, it would only encourage the scorn. Carla hated the way they whispered about her with true ferocity. Brad was her ticket to acceptance, and she wasn't about to sit on her hands while someone attempted to rob her of that.

"I'll do whatever it takes to crush anyone who disgraces me," Stephanie hissed.

When I retired to my room in the dorm that night, I cracked open an old notebook. After regaining my memories, I had recorded everything I could remember about the game. Back then, when I'd first really realized where I'd landed, I was at a total loss. I'd scribbled everything down on the off chance it would benefit me later, knowing that if I waited to do so, I'd have a harder and harder time recalling it clearly.

By now, this thing was practically a walkthrough for real life. *Gotta hand it to my younger self. Really did me a solid with all this record-keeping.*

I thumbed through the book until I arrived at the page on House Offrey. "I thought I'd heard that name before. Stephanie appears halfway through the game." I had practically forgotten about her, but reading my notes refreshed my memory.

Luxion floated in the middle of the room. His lens turned toward me. "So you do remember her."

"Do now. Her name was bugging me, so it's a relief to figure out why it seemed so familiar. On the other hand, I think I might've preferred not to."

"That remark suggests she is an unsavory individual."

I nodded. "That's one word for it. Halfway through the plot, she gets jealous of how the guys are always fussing over the protagonist and sics some air pirates on her. Real nasty piece of work. Looks like nothing's really changed."

As unfortunate as she was, it was actually comforting that her personality matched up with my memories. The less unpredictable variables in the grand equation—like, say, Marie—the better. But it was still less than fun knowing someone as dastardly as Stephanie was one of my classmates.

"She has connections to air pirates, does she? This strikes me as unusual," said Luxion. "I would have thought the nobility would take a hard stance against banditry."

He was right about that. The aristocrats of Holfort, particularly the regional noble lords, absolutely despised air pirates—and by extension, all thieves. That was only natural, of course. Criminal elements subsisted on the riches they stole from those very lords. But there's an exception for every rule.

"Some of my peers are willing to strike a deal with pirates if it'll benefit them later on down the road. Pretty sure the whole Offrey line goes down after those pirates lose to Olivia and company."

The event with Stephanie was the mid-game climax, which made her one of the game's antagonists—rather than a mere background character like me. She was actual side cast material, with a notable role to play. "Oh yeah," I said, "and she's also Brad's fiancée."

"If I recall correctly, Brad is the heir of an incredibly prominent house of Holfort. It seems rather reckless to engage in criminal behavior when one is engaged to such a notable figure."

Luxion's reasoning was sound. If Stephanie left Olivia alone, she'd still be in a position to marry Brad, provided he didn't start a relationship with Olivia. In the game, her rash behavior lost her everything. I had no sympathy for that. I just pitied her and her choices, you know?

"That's just the kind of character she is," I said with a shrug. "No use wasting time thinking deep thoughts about it."

"It appears to me that you value your knowledge of the game far too highly, thereby taking reality—and the real people in it—far too lightly."

"I don't see the issue. Not if my knowledge proves accurate."

There was a short pause before Luxion reluctantly conceded. "I only hope you don't come to regret your take. Regardless of the outcome, it is of little consequence to me."

That wasn't surprising to hear. Luxion could wipe out the entire world all on his lonesome. Of course these issues seemed insignificant. I had only woken him up because I was desperate to preserve my own life—but part of me regretted that decision now.

"Anyway," I said, changing the subject, "what's up with Marie?"

"She has continued attempting to seduce the men you mentioned, with no success. In fact, she intends to make another move on one of these 'love interests' again today."

"Today, huh? Let's see..." I flipped through the pages of my notebook, searching for the next love interest on the docket.

Chapter 4: Meet-Cute Event

THE ACADEMY WAS LOCATED in the royal capital of Holfort Kingdom. When you left campus, you'd find yourself in the center of a sprawling metropolis.

A towering gate stood at the front of the school, which saw significant foot traffic—mostly from female students. Many of them wandered out at night to seek entertainment and pleasure in the city, only to return much, much later.

To them, the curfew might as well not have existed. In stark contrast, if any boys were found breaking said curfew, they were severely punished—which started with several hundred push-ups and squats, in addition to having to write a letter of self-reflection. Multiple infractions would result in confinement. That was why few boys dared to mill around by the front gate as it grew dark. Those who did dare were those with little regard for the rules.

Found him!

Like many other girls, Marie had slipped out of the gate. The moment she spotted a familiar boy heading out with the rest of the crowd, she tailed him. His short, fiery-red hair was swept back, and his toned muscles bulged beneath the fabric of his uniform. The fact that he openly wore his uniform past curfew spoke to his lack of concern about the professors patrolling the area. The boy's name was Greg Fou Seberg, Earl Seberg's heir, and he was on the hunt for a hearty meal.

Greg took pride in his husky build. He had a bit of a short temper, but he was heroic, manly, and dependable on the battlefield. Naturally, he was yet another of the game's love interests.

Having picked his restaurant for the night, he started toward the door. Marie took that as her cue and rushed up behind him. *This is my chance!*

"Oh? Is that you, Lord Greg? I never dreamed I'd run into you out here." She smiled at him.

Greg paused at the eatery's entrance and turned to look at her. He tilted his head. "Oh, uh, who are you?" He didn't even pretend to recognize her. That was just the kind of person he was—direct and honest.

Marie inwardly panicked, but she reminded herself that she had room to recover. That's right. In the game, the protagonist is already a little acquainted with him before they eat together. I have met him already, but we didn't actually get to have a proper conversation. B-but I can still do this. All we have to do is eat together. That's the biggest hurdle. Everything after will be a piece of cake.

Marie had a wealth of experience thanks to her work in the adult industry. As long as she had an opening, she was confident she could seduce Greg. After all, she had the advantage; she knew everything about him, including his preference in women. If she leveraged her skills and knowledge, she could cozy up to him even faster than the protagonist had.

"Oh, don't you remember me? We're in the same class," Marie reminded him.

"Are we? Gotta say, I don't remember you at all."

"Ah ha ha..." Marie laughed awkwardly. "Really? I'm Marie. Marie Fou Lafan."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

Despite the fact that they had even done group projects together, Greg didn't remember her at all. But that wasn't surprising. Even then, they hadn't really talked much.

Dammit! This is all because those other girls got in my way. They're gonna pay for thwarting me like that! I'll get my revenge on anyone who messes with me, no matter who they are. For a moment, Leon's face popped into Marie's head. Not that contemptible jerk again. Every time she tried to approach one of the love interests, she found herself thinking of Leon. It made it impossible to concentrate. Who cares about him anyway? Marie banished him from her mind.

Though Marie resented those girls for screwing up her opening, she forged ahead and summoned up the protagonist's lines from her meet-cute with Greg.

"Are you about to eat?" Marie asked with a smile.

Come on, invite me! she chanted in her head. Invite me! Invite meeeee! I'm starving over here! Treat me to something! The second he asked her to join him, the event would be right on course.

Greg took another look at Marie, then glanced inside the restaurant he was standing in front of. Marie was a petite little waif of a girl. He probably didn't think this place was suited for someone like her.

"I'm after somethin' really filling today, so I'm set on meat. Real guy food. Probably not the thing for a girl like you. See ya." Greg turned his back on her and reached for the door handle.

Marie froze, her lips still turned up in a smile.

Before Greg entirely disappeared inside the restaurant, another female student passed nearby, cradling a book in her arms. "Oh, Mr. Greg," she called out the moment she noticed him, "is that you?"

The girl's voice was neither overeager nor ingratiating; she spoke in the casual way one did when bumping into an acquaintance.

Greg's hand dropped from the door handle. He spun around, a grin on his face. "Olivia? I didn't expect you to be messin' around off campus after dark."

Olivia's cheeks heated. "Th-that's not what I'm doing. I went to pick up a book I requested. I fully intended to return to the academy before curfew, but there were just so many interesting tomes at the bookstore that I lost track of time."

As she explained herself, the delicious aroma of meat wafted out of the restaurant, a steak place that grilled meat on hot plates. Even from here, Marie could hear the sizzling.

Olivia's stomach let out an adorable growl. Mortified, she hid her face behind her book.

Greg burst out laughing. "Hungry, are ya? All right, then. Consider today my treat."

"B-but I would feel terrible having you pay for me," Olivia protested.

"I'm the one invitin' ya to join me. Don't worry about it. Let's fill our bellies."

Still, she hesitated. "B-but I eat quite a bit."

Greg's eyes glimmered, his interest further piqued by this revelation. "Yeah? Good to hear. Let's see how much you can pack in. Eat as much as ya like. I wanna see if you're pullin' my leg."

"I don't know..."

"C'mon! I'm starvin' here. Just join me." Greg retreated from the entrance to make his way over to Olivia, giving her a gentle push to the back to guide her inside with him.

Marie watched them go, feeling intensely alone and heartbroken. What's up with this? No matter how hard I try, I can't beat the protagonist's natural charisma. Is that it? This is just too much. I poured all my time and effort into getting here, and now...

Marie turned her back to the restaurant and the two who had entered it. Greg's delight at the sight of Olivia had crushed her. Why aren't I having any luck? Why?!

Her eyes shimmered, tears carving hot trails down her cheeks. Marie shoved her way through the crowded streets, trying to put distance between herself and yet another failed attempt, when someone grabbed her arm. Shocked, she looked up to find Leon standing there.

"I was looking for you," he said.

I dragged Marie to a deserted alleyway so we could talk in private. A few people were wandering the area, but they had no interest in us. Both Marie and I were wearing hooded robes to avoid being recognized by any patrolling professors.

Marie stared down at her feet, utterly dejected.

I breathed a small sigh. "Let's talk."

"Don't wanna."

Wow, no hesitation in that rejection. I had approached her tons of times at the academy, and she'd evaded me on every single occasion. Pursuing her too

doggedly would only fuel unsavory rumors, so I'd entrust Luxion with the task of keeping an eye on her. Frankly, I'd have preferred to have nothing more to do with this girl, but we needed a serious heart-to-heart before she caused even more serious trouble. I had no plans of getting chummy. I just didn't want to be enemies, if possible.

"Well, whether you like it or not, I do wanna."

"Ugh, you're so annoying."

I sneered. "What?"

"I said: You're. Annoying. This is all because of you. It's your fault that I've blown three whole chances. If not for you, I'd be perfectly happy right now." The entire time she spoke, Marie kept her eyes on her feet.

Look, I agreed that individual happiness was important, but it wasn't going to do anyone any good if it meant ending the entire country in the process.

"Why're you going after the love interests specifically? There's a whole metric ton of other guys you could pursue," I said. I wasn't going to get in the way of her finding happiness as an idea or anything—I just didn't think she should involve characters critical to the game scenario.

Marie huffed and turned away. "Use your head. Those guys have status, influence, and money—on top of being drop-dead gorgeous. If you had the chance to woo someone like that, would you really be content to just sit by and watch without even trying?"

"I'm a realist. I wouldn't try something that ambitious."

"Fine. What if the genders were flipped and they were all girls? Picture that—gorgeous women with sweet, gentle personalities. You've got the opportunity to land one. You're not gonna take it?"

The academy boys had it rough. If they couldn't land a bride by age twenty, they were doomed to be social pariahs. They had no choice but to settle for anyone they could get. Sadly, in this marriage market, the girls were the ones who got to choose, not us. The lucky ones, like the love interests, could land good matches easily. The rest of us were screwed. A few of us even got married off to old widows. So with that in mind, I supposed that in Marie's hypothetical

where I had a chance at a decent girl...

"Yep, I'd go after her," I said without missing a beat, nodding to myself.

Marie snorted. "See? That's how it is. So stop getting in my—"

A low, terrifying rumble split through the air. It sounded like a predator snarling at its prey—but there was no mistaking. It had come from Marie's petite body.

"Uh, was that noise...?" I stared at her, mouth agape.

Marie sank to her bottom, where she hugged her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on them, then broke down in sobs. "Ugh, this is an absolute *nightmare*. My body's so tiny and inefficient! As if it couldn't get any worse, I can't even hold a candle to that stupid protagonist. How am I supposed to win at this rate?"

I had no idea what had triggered this, but she seemed *really* down in the dumps.

Luxion popped out of the shadows. "Master, it is still of utmost importance that the two of you confer further. You must exchange what information you each possess regarding this 'game.'"

"Uh, yeah, I guess you're right." I glanced down at Marie, whose shoulders were shaking as she wept. "If you're starving, I'll treat you. C'mon."

We left the alleyway for a nearby restaurant. A brief glance at the customers inside suggested the place wasn't too fancy or high-end. Waiters were serving alcohol, but it wasn't a pub or anything. There were parents and children sitting in booths, enjoying meals as a family.

A waiter guided us to a table, where we plopped down and cracked open our menus. My eyes went straight to the list of prices. I stroked my chin. "Guess this place is a little pricey."

Marie's cheeks twisted. She stared at me in open disbelief, tilting her head. "You think it's a *little* pricey? Really?" Apparently she disagreed with my assessment.

I decided on my order and promptly shut the menu, turning my cheek to Marie. "Excuse me for coming from a poor, backwater barony."

Everything I knew about this world and its society had told me that women lived far more luxurious, pampered lives than men. But you remember that thing about an exception for every rule.

"You think *you're* poor? Someone who's actually broke can't even enter the cheapest, bottom-of-the-barrel restaurant."

"Huh? I mean, uh...right. Yeah, I guess so."

Marie continued frowning as she studied the menu, carefully selecting her order. Knowing what I did about her, I doubted she was trying to be considerate and select the cheapest food she could. "All right! For now, I think I'll have three orders of the most expensive steak." She grinned as she shut her menu.

Gobsmacked, I snatched up my own menu to assess the damage. The description beneath the aforementioned steak assured it was a hearty meal. It was so large, in fact, that your average guy would have trouble polishing it off. Did she really want *three*?

I studied her body. Not in an obscene way, of course. Compared to other girls our age, Marie was downright scrawny. I had a hard time imagining someone that skinny and petite packing away so much.

"Are you sure you can fit all that? It'd be in pretty poor taste if you're only ordering big to get back at me and you're just gonna waste it all," I said pointedly.

As if to answer, Marie's stomach let out another rumbling growl. It was so loud you might have been forgiven for thinking we'd come with a wild beast.

"Just forget me and order," Marie snapped. "Oh, and you don't mind if I add more later, right? I'm asking to be nice—I just want to make sure your wallet can handle it."

I slipped my wallet out of my pocket to double-check. I carried a fair number of bills and coins, so I didn't think there'd be any problems. "I've got it covered. Don't worry. Might surprise you to hear, but I've raked in a nice share of cash."

My adventures prior to entering the academy had netted me a substantial sum. Plus, I had Luxion, so I didn't really have to worry about my finances.

Marie furrowed her brows and averted her eyes. "I knew it. You have no idea what it means to be poor."

After the food arrived, Marie astounded me once again by quickly and easily stuffing it all down her gob.

"Man, this is delicious," she said. "Totally different from wild game. It's cooked to perfection, too, so it goes down super easy. I could eat dozens of these." She sawed through her steak with a knife and fork, stabbed a juicy, bite-sized piece, and popped it into her mouth. The slab of meat on her plate shrank as she devoured it, pausing only briefly to wash it down with a gulp of water.

Marie had already polished off the first three steaks and had asked the waiter for more. Our table was covered in cast iron plates, but the waiter swung by and dropped off yet another. I stared at the steak sizzling away on the metal, doused in the restaurant's trademark sauce. It was probably more than two inches thick.

It wasn't all meat, either. These steaks came with a side of veg, and Marie had no trouble scarfing those down as well. Once the plate in front of her was empty, she stacked it atop the others and reached for the next, ready to dig in. She grinned the whole time, too. It was as if she were in heaven.



"H-hey, you don't have to inhale the stuff," I told her. "No one's gonna steal your dinner." Just watching her ravage her plates had made my stomach feel full. Her hands never stopped moving.

"I gotta eat while I've got the chance. There's no telling when I'll get my next meal," Marie reasoned. Her table manners were respectable enough, but her pace was beyond human. Other patrons were staring. That didn't bother Marie at all; she continued her meal, undeterred.

I slapped a hand over my face. "Oh, please. You can go to the cafeteria whenever you want."

The academy was generally free in regard to daily expenses and tuition. If all Marie wanted was to live within her means, the cafeteria was available to her at no cost. She had no need for her to dip into her own funds. Not unless she yearned for more luxurious fare, at least—the academy did have a fee for a more high-quality menu.

A wrinkle formed on Marie's brow. "The cafeteria portions aren't nearly enough. Even with three full meals a day, my stomach's still growling after every one."

"You don't say."

For being pint-sized, she sure had a voracious appetite.

Thus far, Luxion had quietly observed her. He had used his cloaking mechanism to keep himself hidden, but to signify his presence, he reduced its opacity so a barely visible outline of his body appeared—just enough to show us and no one else.

"This is most intriguing," Luxion remarked. "I have confirmed that Marie shares traits unique to the old humans as well. I am forced to wonder if all who have reincarnated here share this peculiarity."

Luxion seemed fonder of Marie now that he'd discerned this little detail. He was ordinarily dismissive of what he considered "the rabble"—which was how he referred to the other students, as well as the rest of new humanity—and he was being more attentive and considerate to Marie.

"There's plenty of food for you to eat," he assured her. "Please, can we continue our conversation, Marie?"

He wanted us to fill each in on our individual circumstances—an exchange of information. Thus far, Marie had revealed that, like me, she had reincarnated into this world after dying as a Japanese woman in her previous life. She hadn't revealed how old she'd been when she passed, but based on the details we did know, I had a feeling it had been anywhere from her mid-thirties to mid-forties.

Marie's parents had disowned her, and she'd made her way through life dating one terrible man after another. It was one of these lowlifes, in fact, who'd become physically violent and killed her. The next thing she knew, she'd woken up here. There was one more point we had in common: Marie couldn't recall her name from her previous life, either. What memories she did have were vague, so much so that she couldn't remember the faces of her nearest and dearest with any more than vague detail.

Honestly, the circumstances preceding her death were so tragic that I felt for her. It made things awkward, though. It was more in my nature to tease someone after they got vulnerable just to lighten the mood, but how could I do that now?

Marie's hands froze. She kept her gaze lowered, careful not to look at me. "Oh, right. Where were we again?"

"You were talking about how you'd reincarnated as Viscount Lafan's youngest daughter," I reminded her.

Next thing Marie knew—after her boyfriend's brutal battering and everything going dark—she was here. I'd have felt way better about all this if she'd gone on to gleefully confide in me about how lucky she was to have been reincarnated as a viscount's daughter and how thoroughly pampered she'd been all these years before she entered the academy. But I could already sense that wasn't what was coming.

"Oh, yeah," she said nonchalantly. Any delight she'd derived from the food drained from her face, as if to suggest that the life she'd thus far led in this world had been anything but joyful. My suspicions were indeed confirmed in the tale that followed. "My new family is the worst. Yeah, my old man rules

over a chunk of territory on Holfort's mainland, but it's small and extremely impoverished. Doesn't stop my parents from racking up their debts, of course. Pride is the only thing they've got going for them. All my siblings are garbage humans, too."

By mainland, Marie was referring to the large landmass that made up the majority of the kingdom. Her parents governed a small portion of it. By contrast, my parents were in charge of a separate floating island. It was hard to say which was preferable, but in general, the midland nobility were considered more prominent.

After sharing all that intel, Marie finished with a final comment: "They're nothing like my old big bro."

"Big bro? So you had an older brother, huh? I had a baby sister myself, but she was an infuriating little twerp. Did you two get along? Hopefully better than me and my sister, at least."

After a short pause, Marie snapped, "None of your business." She shut her mouth, no longer interested in discussing the subject.

For a second—just a split second, really—a thought crossed my mind. *Maybe Marie* is *my old little sister*.

But I then admonished myself. That was stupid. There was no way that could be true. What were the chances of us both reincarnating into some game? And what kinda cruel purgatory would that be, anyway? Besides, she'd still been alive and well when I'd kicked the bucket. It wouldn't have made sense for her to show up at the same time. Even assuming she did somehow reincarnate into this world, it would be well after I did. I mean, it's just not possible we'd both be the same age, right?

I didn't know the first thing about reincarnation as a phenomenon, but regardless, it simply wasn't realistic to think our fates would cross again like that.

"Back on topic. Why'd you start pursuing the prince and company? This whole country's doomed if Miss Olivia—the protagonist, I mean—doesn't end up with one of them."

If Marie knew the game as well as she seemed to, then surely she knew all of this, but for whatever reason, Marie hadn't hesitated for a second before trying to screw over the main cast's relationships. If she messed that all up, it could spell catastrophe for both of us.

Marie grinned triumphantly, sticking out her chin. "Hate to break it to you, but I've got that little problem covered. The main character's not the only one who can use healing magic. I've got what it takes to become the Saintess, too."

"You, the Saintess? What the devil are you—"

Marie's grip tightened on her knife and fork. "For ten years, I've poured my blood, sweat, and tears into training. I had a natural talent for healing magic, and I busted my butt to learn it. The Saintess's items only respond to those with sufficiently powerful healing magic, right?"

The Saintess's items were key items for the plot progression. So long as the protagonist had them, they greatly amplified her abilities. But she couldn't equip them until her magic reached a certain level. It seemed Marie had remembered this little detail.

"So long as I become the Saintess, there's no issue. I'll take her place and become the protagonist in her stead."

Marie spoke with such gravity and confidence that she gave me pause. Our situations were similar, having both reincarnated from Japan, but our way of thinking couldn't have been more diametrically opposed. I was content to remain a background character; Marie, on the other hand, was doing her utmost to replace the protagonist. If she had indeed reached the level of healing magic required for the Saintess items before she even enrolled in the academy, then she really had put her nose to the grindstone. I was almost tempted to cheer her on. But, sadly, it was on me to deliver a reality check. As devastating as it might be, Marie needed the truth.

"You can't," I said firmly.

Marie scrunched her face. "Huh? What do you mean 'can't'?"

"Did you really play through the entire game? You can't save Holfort with the Saintess's power alone. You need Miss Olivia's unique ability."

Marie stared back at me, dumbfounded. "What're you on about?"

"After Miss Olivia is recognized as the Saintess, she awakens to her own secret powers. These far surpass those of the Saintess and make her even more OP."

The gameplay was a nightmare from start to finish, but at least Olivia's abilities were so god-tier in the end that they were basically a cheat code. They allowed her to singlehandedly drive off the final boss, in the process restoring peace to Holfort Kingdom. An explanation for all this was right there in the game's narrative. Marie should have known about it.

"She couldn't defeat the final boss with her Saintess abilities alone," I continued as I stared at her. "There're a couple of events right before her awakening. Relying on her new ability, she goes into the final battle and comes out victorious. That's how the story goes, remember?"

Marie's gaze began to wander nervously. Blood drained from her face as panic set in. "That can't be. There was nothing about that in the CGs or event playbacks."

I shrugged. "So? It's explained in the text, through dialogue and stuff." Anyone who played the game would know that.

"I-I don't know anything about this. I never actually completed the game myself." Marie hung her head, hands trembling. She'd finally realized that she'd been totally off base.

"You didn't complete it?" I echoed in disbelief.

"It was so difficult, I gave up midway through. But I wanted to know what happened, so I just got the rest of the story from the scene selection page of a completed save file." Her eyes shimmered. She was about to burst into tears.

Oh, come on. Now I wanna cry, too. I couldn't believe Marie had nearly driven the whole story careening off a cliff because she was working off of incomplete knowledge.

"It was definitely crazy hard to beat," I admitted. "I only managed because I used the cash shop."

"See, you agree with me! How was I supposed to beat that? It's not my fault that I didn't know better."

I frowned. "Yeah, I'm feeling a little conflicted here, since you're the one causing all the trouble."

It had never even occurred to me that Marie hadn't actually beaten the game. Good thing we'd had this little talk—otherwise who knew what might've happened? Something terrible, I feared. *Or maybe not... But I feel like it would've been disastrous*.

One thing still didn't sit quite right with me, though.

"Marie," Luxion interrupted, "your additional order is here."

A waiter approached the table not a second later with Marie's final plate of steak. She was still teary-eyed as she dug in. Luxion and I stared at her. She seemed a bit more self-conscious than before, having gone all vulnerable on us, but she rushed to say, "Wh-what? It's been a long time since I was able to eat so good. I told you the cafeteria food isn't enough, and I never got to eat properly back home. I'll have you know there were days I subsisted on totally bland soup."

Had she committed some great, unforgivable sin in her past life? That was the only rational explanation for the pure tragedy that was her current one. Hearing about it almost made my eyes mist over.

"That's awful," I said.

"You oughta realize how blessed you are," she said, her tone more affable now. "Maybe it's true you're from a poor, backwater barony, but you landed a good family. And I bet you've never worried about having enough to eat, right? I envy you."

"I can't really argue, knowing how bad your folks are."

My father's legal wife, Zola, had nearly sold me off to marry a fifty-year-old hag. I still considered that a close call and profoundly miserable luck on my end, but there was always someone even less fortunate out there. Zola hated me because I was the son of my father's mistress. Thankfully, Zola lived the high life in the capital and only rarely returned to our countryside home. My time with

my parents and siblings was relatively peaceful. Sure, we were by no means rich, but I hadn't faced nearly the same level of hardship.

"I've had an awful time," Marie conceded. "It was tough putting food on the table. I've had to take my chances out in the wild pretty often."

"W-wow. That's actually impressive."

"And thanks to my circumstances, I'm such a scrawny shrimp. It especially sucks because I was a real looker last time around." She was clearly self-conscious about her lack of height and curves.

Luxion studied her. "This is pure speculation derived from the details you have shared," he said—which already sounded like bad news to me. "But I suspect the root cause of your stature is the lengths to which you have pushed yourself to acquire and enhance your healing magic. Ordinarily, your body would be larger and more developed. Even accounting for a nutritional imbalance, you should have grown into a more feminine shape."

Marie's hands froze. "What? You're kidding me."

"I am speaking in probabilities, of course, but there is a significant chance that you simply pushed past your limits while your body was still growing. Therefore, your development halted. In exchange, you acquired your gifts in healing magic. You could only have done so with admirable fortitude. Master, perhaps you should take a page out of Marie's book." Though Luxion spoke with utmost respect for Marie, he couldn't resist admonishing me in the process.

I sneered at him. "I'm the king of efficiency. On principle, I don't work any harder than I need to."

"I anticipated you would say as much. You really ought to consider her a role model."

"Hard pass. I mean, come on, Marie, you agree you've worked yourself way too hard, right?"

After all, Marie had acquired the kind of expertise no one but the protagonist was supposed to have—and before the game proper even started. I wasn't above praising her for truly impressive acts, but I wasn't about to try to do the same myself.

Marie dropped her utensils, mouth agape. Her whole body trembled. "What? No way! Y-you don't mean to say I'm stuck looking like a little kid forever, do you?!"

"Your appearance is the outcome of your honorable efforts. You should take pride in it," said Luxion. "There are no issues with your reproductive capabilities. You simply will not develop any further."

In other words, Marie was doomed to be carded for the rest of her life. There was no hope she'd grow any taller, let alone get herself some proper curves.

Marie sobbed and began gorging herself on the steak, all decorum forgotten.

Chapter 5: The Results of Hard Work

"THIS IS SO UNFAIR," Marie grumbled.

We were making our way down a main street as we headed back to the academy. Unlike the countryside, the capital was bright and bustling even at this late hour. They used the energy of magic stones to produce electricity, which kept the streets illuminated all night.

Shops lined the avenues. Signs on their doors indicated they were open for business, and customers wandered in and out. I tipped my hat to all the workers pulling late-night shifts.

"I get that you're bummed, but why stew?" I asked Marie. "We're background characters. We gotta live within our means."

This was my attempt to console her, but Marie wasn't having it. She froze in her tracks. "I don't wanna. I was

lucky enough to get a second chance. What's wrong with reaching for my own happiness this time around?" Marie was really hung up on that "happiness" thing. Not that I could blame her. Her last life had been one long series of tragedies, and it hadn't gotten much better since reincarnating.

I stopped just a few feet ahead of her and glanced back. "No good wanting what you can't have..." I wanted to urge her toward compromise, but then I realized she was ignoring me in favor of a storefront, and I trailed off.

Luxion drifted closer to me. "That is a women's clothing store."

"I can see that, thanks."

Marie's eyes were fixed on a dress in the window. It came with a matching pair of shoes and a complete set of accessories. Some passing women stopped to ogle, much like Marie, but most gave it only a glance. I made my way over to Marie and studied the object of her attention.

"A dress, huh? I guess every grade has a party before the long vacation. Fancy

schools like ours really like to go all out whenever they do something like that." I chuckled.

"Yeah," Marie agreed, though her voice lacked its usual energy. She stared at the dress not with the longing you'd expect from a girl her age, but with resignation—with the sadness of knowing it would never be hers. "I wish I could go to a party in a dress like that," she mumbled. "Just once would be enough."

Meanwhile, Stephanie and her lackeys were visiting a pub elsewhere in the capital. Handsome, well-dressed men played instruments, and the waiters were similarly gorgeous. This was one of many such establishments that catered specifically to women.

Stephanie and her girls weren't the only female students breaking curfew to party in this joint. A few alumni had even come to enjoy the service. As for Stephanie and her crew, they'd rented a room where they could chat while demi-human staff waited on them hand and foot.

"Carla," said Stephanie, "you finished looking into Marie, didn't you?" She reached out and plucked a grape from the table, tossing it into her mouth.

Carla straightened in her seat. "I investigated her as you requested, but nothing came of it."

"What was that?" Stephanie snarled, infuriated by the lack of results.

Flustered, Carla explained, "There was nothing to find. She isn't associated with any notable faction, and House Lafan is drowning in debt. The Lafans lost a border dispute a while back, and their situation has only worsened. That was the only real thing I discovered."

Stephanie pulled a face. She really hadn't expected such a pitiful backstory. When Carla leaned over, offering a sheaf of papers with the fine details, Stephanie snatched them up and skimmed. "What's up with this? Why hasn't the palace disposed of them? Or rather, why haven't any of their neighboring lords claimed that territory for themselves? The Lafans have basically no defenses."

The Lafans were barely managing to keep up the facade of nobility, and they

were neglecting to fulfill their duties in the process. The royal family—and by extension, Holfort's entire government—had no good reason not to quash them and be done with it. At least, not as far as Stephanie was concerned. Her entourage was similarly bewildered.

"The little land they have left is neither fertile nor otherwise beneficial.

Absorbing it would only mean taking on its debt. None of the surrounding lords are eager to do so. It seems the royal family and the rest of the administration think finishing them off would be more trouble than it's worth."

Everyone in the room made a face. The Lafans' territory was pitiful indeed, if no one else could be bothered to claim it.

Stephanie sighed. "Fine. It's enough to know that she has no ties to anyone I have to worry about. That means I can crush her without worrying about repercussions." Most probably pegged Stephanie as the impulsive type, but she had the sense to choose her battles. She would threaten her position if she recklessly picked fights with her betters. She always acquired at least basic knowledge of her opponent before making a move.

The corners of Stephanie's lips curled. "Bring those three girls here."

Carla left to fulfill her orders, fetching the trio who'd been waiting outside the room for Stephanie's summons. They were the same girls who had slandered the Offreys before. Each looked utterly terrified as they filed in, anxiously awaiting Stephanie's commands.

Stephanie unfolded and refolded her legs. "There's something I'd like you girls to do for me."

"Wh-what would that be?"

The girls' spirits had already been broken. They didn't even try to resist.

Stephanie grinned devilishly, as did her entourage. They derived pleasure from the cowering of those who'd wronged them. Carla was the only one who turned her gaze away, unable to stomach the sight. Her behavior annoyed Stephanie; she couldn't stand Carla's lack of vindictiveness. All Carla had to do to fit in was force a smile, but even if Stephanie ordered her to do so, that smile would be noticeably strained.

She really gets under my skin... But she's my most useful lackey. I have no choice but to put up with her, Stephanie thought.

She tucked her own annoyance away and focused on the three girls in front of her. "You girls know Marie Fou Lafan, right?" Stephanie spoke sweetly, as if she was only a friend entreating them for a favor. "Seems like she's trying to make a move on the crown prince—and some of the other esteemed noble heirs, to boot."

The three girls traded glances.

"So you want us to put her in her place?" one of them asked nervously.

Stephanie smiled. "You want to let her off with a warning? How sweet." Abruptly, all traces of emotion vanished from her face. The sudden shift was so unsettling that all three girls' legs began to tremble. "I'm going to crush this Marie into the ground. You girls are going to do exactly as you're told, and if you don't, your families will pay the price for your failure."

The girls blanched. All three of them nodded quickly.

A grin spread across Stephanie's face. "Marie will make a perfect sacrifice. I was just looking for an example—something that would show people just what happens if they choose to defy me. We're going to break her. Utterly." Stephanie reached for a fork on the table, lifting it through the air before stabbing it down on the stack of papers that was Carla's report. The prongs lanced all the way through the paper into the wood. "Those who dare to scorn me deserve their death."

"I'm not gonna give up on my happiness."

The academy dorms could house the entire student body, and there was a vast cafeteria to match, with enough food to keep their bellies full. The words "cafeteria food" probably don't inspire the best mental image, but the academy's menu was a cut above. The cuisine would have been on par with that of a top-class hotel in my previous world. When noon rolled around, students rolled in, crowding around tables to have lunch with their friends—or in some lucky cases, their romantic partners.

It was a bit noisy, but Marie and I found ourselves seats at a table. Today, I'd selected the fish for myself. I worked my fork and knife to cut bite-sized pieces. As I tucked them into my mouth, I muttered, "What I wouldn't give for a bowl of white rice to go with this grilled fish."

Marie slammed her fists on the table. "Listen to me when I'm talking to you! I said I'm not gonna give up on my happiness."

I sighed. "Did you forget everything I told you yesterday? If Miss Olivia doesn't end up with one of the love interests, it'll be the end of Holfort as we know it."

"I got the memo," she huffed. "But there's five whole love interests, right? There's no reason why I can't take one for myself."

That was a decent point. I didn't see any obvious consequences of her taking one of the ones Olivia dismissed. But was that really what she wanted?

"Are you sure? Don't girls normally wanna marry someone they love?"

Marie lowered her gaze as she primly polished off the last of her fish. Her plate was empty, save for some bones. "All the men in my last life had crawled out of the gutter—every last one of them. Yes, I'm sure."

Again, I sighed. I tried to tease her to lighten the mood. "You mean those gorgeous love interests aren't your type?"

"I like a handsome guy as much as the next girl, but looks aren't important. What matters is how well they can provide."

"Seems like an equally odd way to decide on a partner." But given all Marie had been through, it made a certain amount of sense.

Marie glared at me. "That's all the compromise you're gonna get from me. And if you still plan on getting in my way..."

Then she'll make me pay, right? There was nothing scary about making an enemy of Marie. I only decided to acquiesce on this because it would have been too much of a pain to resist. Not that she needed my permission in the first place.

"Why would I try to stop you?" I asked. "As long as it's not going to level the country, I don't give a crap who Miss Olivia winds up with."

All I cared about was that she ended up with *one* of them. The fates of the four she didn't choose had no bearing on my life.

Marie frowned. "Ugh, you really piss me off, acting so high and mighty."

"You get pissed off no matter what I say." I'd told her exactly what she wanted to hear—that I had no plans to bother her—and she still wasn't happy. This girl was so irrational, which yet again reminded me of my little sister.

Marie sucked in a breath and slowly exhaled. In that short stretch, her attitude shifted. She smiled at me, and in a saccharine-sweet voice said, "Having said that, I would really, *really* appreciate it if you helped me."

"Come again?"

"You've got Luxion, right? And he was a cash shop item. So I want you to pitch in and help me with Operation Leftovers."

Operation Leftovers? Yikes. What a terrible (and slightly offensive) name for her plan. That kinda amused me.

"What's with the sudden mood swing? You're like a totally different person," I said.

"What's moping around forever gonna get me? One of my secret keys to life is smiling through the pain to pump myself up."

It didn't seem like a very good secret key, given that her previous life had ended in domestic violence. I wasn't about to say as much, though. I kept that very much to myself.

"Nothing brings you down, huh?" I muttered.

"I pride myself on my perseverance."

"Yeah, well, forget it. I don't wanna help you seduce another dude."

Marie tilted her head. "If you aren't interested in guys, why did you play this game in the first place? And why did you clear all the routes if you hate it that much?"

"I didn't have much of a choice."

I couldn't tell her the truth—that my little sister had threatened me into it.

After lunch, I was on my way to class for my next lesson when a student ran up behind me and threw an arm around my shoulders. "Leon, what's all this?" he said. "Didn't we promise to fill each other in if we got cozy with a girl?"

This was one of my friends, Daniel Fou Durland, a tall boy with short hair and skin the color of toasted wheat. Another male student came up beside him, Raymond Fou Arkin, who had silky-smooth hair that fell just below his chin, though it wasn't quite long enough to reach his shoulders.

Raymond scowled at me. "Don't forget you're from the poor, backwater barony brigade. It's not fair for you to abandon us like this."

It seemed they'd seen me eating lunch with Marie. Now they had it in their heads that we were dating. *That's ridiculous*.

"It's not what you think," I told them. "And anyway, we definitely weren't talking about anything like marriage." Or at least not marriage to one another.

My friends exchanged looks; neither seemed entirely convinced.

"You mean that? School's barely started, and you guys were eating alone together. Seems awfully intimate to me," said Daniel. "Don't you agree, Raymond?"

"Sure do. You guys were sitting way too close—just the two of you at a tiny table. Plus, she's petite and adorable. Ugh, I'm so jealous."

All the academy boys suffered in their pursuit of a fiancée. It was only natural that we dreamed of escaping the hell that was hunting down a bride as quickly as possible. And, of course, we tended to resent those who managed to get a leg up and snag a partner early on.

I pressed my hand to my forehead. "If we really were lovers, I'd be gloating and bragging like crazy right now."

Raymond snorted. "Yeah, real cool guy, Leon. Though I guess that means you really aren't dating then, huh?"

"Nope. Besides, Marie's after...well, not me. Let's leave it at that."

Marie was exclusively focused on the love interests who hailed from the esteemed houses and would one day inherit their fathers' titles. I wasn't even on her radar.

"Marie?" Daniel froze. "As in, House Lafan's Marie?"

Raymond seemed similarly taken back. "Why would you involve yourself with her?"

"What? Something wrong with her?" I asked, puzzled.

They hesitated over how best to explain. Daniel scrunched his face, racking his brains, which wasn't exactly his strong suit. After a moment, he blurted, "She's got a bad reputation with the girls. No, bad's putting it nicely. She's an outcast."

"Marie? Really?"

"Word has it that immediately after school started, she began trying to make passes at His Highness and some of the other wellborn guys," Raymond explained further. "Seems like a lot of the girls don't like her because they feel like she doesn't know her place. All we've heard are rumors, though. I don't really know anything else."

Somehow, that wasn't surprising. Marie approaching Prince Julius and company had been bound to make her stand out in a bad way. If I'd stopped to think about it a little more, that much would've been obvious. Was it really going to be okay, leaving her to her own devices?

After school, Marie found herself in the courtyard with one of the other love interests: Jilk Fia Mamoria, a boy who was often glued to Prince Julius's side. He would one day inherit his father's viscount title, but since his family was court nobility rather than regional, his middle name was Fia instead of Fou.

Jilk's emerald-green eyes matched the color of his long, flowing hair. He always had a soft smile, indicative of his gentle disposition. His rank was comparatively low next to the rest of the main cast, but sharing a nursemaid with the prince had meant he was raised alongside him like a brother. When Julius ascended the throne, Jilk would naturally be part of his inner circle. He was sure to be a powerful man.

Marie's eyes lit up when she spied him. "Lord Jilk," she said by way of greeting. "You're not with Prince Julius today?"

"No. His Highness said he wanted to be alone," Jilk answered politely, careful not to divulge any further details.

If Marie was going to deepen her relationship with Jilk, she needed to invite him to hang out, one way or another. "In that case, why don't the two of us go into the city together? I discovered a shop with some rare items. It deals in antiques, and—"

"Could you perhaps be referring to one on the southside? That hidden gem tucked into a maze of narrow streets?"

"Y-yes," Marie stuttered, shocked. "You know of it?"

No way! I was sure he wouldn't have found that place yet!

One of Jilk's events involved introducing him to that shop. Going there together was the prime way to increase his affection. But if Jilk already knew about it, there was no point in showing it to him.

"Miss Olivia and I discovered it when we were out together," he explained. "It certainly is a splendid little place. I've gone there frequently since. In fact, I was just there yesterday."

That wasn't information that he really needed to share at this juncture. The only reason he'd brought it up, as far as Marie was concerned, was to gently turn her down.

"Th-then I guess you wouldn't want to go again today, would you?" she asked feebly.

"Indeed. I doubt their inventory has changed much since then."

Jilk wasn't directly saying he didn't want to go with her, but the underlying implication was clear.

"Then maybe if there's another opportunity," Marie suggested.

"Yes. Perhaps some other time."

Marie knew Jilk was only saying that to be polite. Once she'd backed down, he

took his leave.

Marie clenched her fists and dropped her gaze to her feet. "What the heck? What do you mean 'some other time'? When is that going to be? Never, right? And why's Olivia going after Jilk, too?" As if it wasn't bad enough that Olivia had already taken the other events, now she was doing Jilk's route as well.

While Marie stood there frozen, digesting the fallout, three girls strode up to her.

"Hey, you there. Come with us."

The trio led Marie behind the school building, where they cornered her against the wall. They stood in a semi-circle around her, making escape impossible. The girl in the middle, whom Marie presumed to be their leader, regarded her as if she were no better than filth.

"Do you seriously not understand your place in the hierarchy?"

"What? If you've got something to say, spit it out," Marie snapped. She wasn't about to cower.

Incensed by her attitude, the leader seized Marie by her shirt collar. "I'm saying that a poor girl like you has no business casually approaching the prince and his friends. What? You think you stand a chance with them? Don't be stupid. They're out of your league."

Marie glowered and slapped the leader's hands away. "Think whatever you want, but don't you dare get in my way."

"Don't get cocky with me!" A dry sound echoed as she cracked her hand against Marie's cheek.

Marie balled her fists. She pulled one back, ready to sock the girl right in the face—until someone suddenly appeared behind the trio, which made them bolt.

"What terrible timing." Before the girls were completely out of earshot, Marie shouted after them, "You'll pay for this tomorrow!"

Once they were gone, Marie pressed a hand to her throbbing cheek and

turned to face the person who'd interrupted their confrontation.

"Summoned behind the school, huh? This is like a scene right out of a manga," said Leon. His smile was strained, likely put off by those girls and their behavior.

"What're you here for?" Marie demanded.

Leon shrugged. "I just think you oughta give up on your plan for Operation Leftovers. You've earned yourself a pretty rotten reputation with your fellow girls."

Marie didn't bat an eye at this revelation. "I hate to break it to you, but I have no intention of giving up."

"You wanna be happy, right? You don't need one of the love interests for that. You can find happiness in some other way. It's all about your frame of mind."

Although Marie understood what he was getting at, she was in no place to concede. "Could you stop yammering on like some know-it-all? I just need one of five guys to fall for me. As long as that happens, I'll get everything I've ever wanted."

If Marie hadn't reincarnated into this world with knowledge of the story and characters, perhaps she would have been content to set her sights lower and find happiness closer to home. But that wasn't the case. She *knew* this was the world of the otome game she'd played all those years ago, and which guys were top-tier. That made it far harder to consider surrender.

Leon sighed quietly. "The love interests already have fiancées. It's one thing if Miss Olivia gets between them. It's a much bigger problem if it's you. Marie, you're not the protagonist."

Blood rushed to Marie's head. The next thing she knew, she was screaming at him. "How could you possibly understand?! You just wanna be some background character! You say you've faced misery and poverty, but your life is so much happier than mine! You already have everything you could possibly want. So stop acting all high-and-mighty with me!"

Leon's eyes widened.

Marie instantly realized that she'd gone too far. *Crap. I-I need to apologize to him. But...*

If they had been friends, or even true acquaintances, perhaps she could have done just that, but since their meeting, there had just been grievance after grievance.

Leon and Marie were comrades in a sense, given that they both hailed from Japan, though he was far more knowledgeable about the game. Having obtained a cheat item for himself, he could live his life freely as he saw fit. He'd also been raised in a much more loving household. Though what she really couldn't stand was how much he reminded her of her older brother.

Unable to bring herself to voice that one little apology, Marie turned from Leon and ran.

You're not my older brother. You've got no right to speak to me like that!

Chapter 6: An Aristocrat's Revenge

Marie avoided me after that.

Luxion and I were walking down a corridor when I happened to spot her out a window. "What's she doing over there?" I wondered.

Luxion studied her through the glass. "It appears someone deposited her personal effects in a puddle."

"Oh, right. It rained last night."

If only she hadn't ignored my warnings. Nah, even if she'd listened to me, the damage was done the second people saw her hitting on the prince and his buddies. The bullying had been inevitable.

Marie collected her waterlogged textbook and notebook from the puddle and looked them over, assessing whether they were salvageable. I wanted to say something, but I knew my presence would only upset her and make her run away again. So what can I do?

"We should identify the culprits. Master, please give me your permission to do so," said Luxion.

"What good would that do? Knowing who they are won't stop them."

Marie had already turned the majority of the female student body against her. Even if one or two people were to leave her alone, someone else would step up to do the job in their place.

"We will exact revenge, thereby making an example of the culprits," Luxion explained smoothly. "If they fear their lives are endangered, they will surely cease with these absurdities."

I frowned. "This should go without saying, but just so we're clear: absolutely not!"

"Why? I believe it would be most effective."

"It's not a long-term solution, and you know it." I glanced out the window again. Marie had finished collecting her things and had headed off. This bullying was getting pretty malicious. Was she really all right? "I wish there was something we could do for her, though."

The problem was that, as noted, she bolted at the sight of me. And anyway, it would take conviction to step in at this point. Swooping in to save a school outcast sounded courageous, but actually doing so would put a target on my back as well. We weren't close enough for me to stick my neck out any further. We were comrades in reincarnation, sure, but that was our only link. Even if I helped her from the shadows, it'd only cause more problems; this was an issue between women. It wasn't my place.

Besides, I had my own life to live. It was Marie's fault for putting her selfish desires first and ignoring the unspoken rules of the academy, thereby earning the ire of all the women in it. There was no need for me to shoot myself in the foot to save her from herself.

"Dummy. She'd be so much better off if she just gave up and settled for a normal, uneventful life. There's happiness to be found in that, too."

"Personally, I would prefer you and Marie to join," said Luxion.

"Wha?" I jerked my head around to face him.

He stared me down. "If you were to breed, there is a significant chance the genetic makeup of your offspring would be even closer to that of old humanity. That is a matter of great concern to me."

"Why would we have to bang, though?" I wrinkled my nose.

Luxion sensed my disgust. "I suppose I will have no choice but to extract your DNA, then. I would have preferred marriage—it is the best method by which to produce natural offspring—but alas."

"Stop it. I mean it. You'd better not!"

The last thing I wanted was a surprise kid.

"Do you refuse her because she fails to meet your preferences?" Luxion asked.

This was exasperating. He was really angling for us to get hitched, huh?

"That's part of it," I admitted. "The other is that every time I look at her, I can't help but remember my old little sister."

"You believe Marie to be that sister?"

I already knew she couldn't be, but the similarities made it impossible for me to take an interest in her.

"No, but I still don't want to be with her," I said simply.

That was the end of the conversation as far as I was concerned. I strode off, leaving Luxion behind. He drifted along in my wake, hastening to catch up and hover near my right shoulder, where he disappeared into the background with his cloaking device.

A woman flanked by her entourage was headed in our direction. Even from a distance, I could tell she carried herself with poise. Her lustrous blonde hair was braided and pinned behind her head, and there wasn't a single blemish on her skin, which reflected the light like porcelain. Most striking were her severe crimson eyes, narrowed and angular in a way that lent her an intimidating air.

I moved to the side to make way for her. Angelica Rapha Redgrave strode past without sparing me a glance. Only once she was gone did I pause and throw a look back at her.

Luxion materialized beside me. "She is the villainess you mentioned. Correct?"

"Yeah. She's way more intense in real life than she was in the game. Miss Olivia's got it tough, having to go head-to-head with a girl like that." I chuckled, amused only because it had nothing to do with me.

There was a short pause before Luxion said, "She has fewer followers than Stephanie Fou Offrey. Moreover, I noticed no demi-human slaves in their number."

"Now that you mention it, yeah." I nodded thoughtfully. "But it's actually rarer to have them period. No girls from an earldom or higher does."

"Is Stephanie's father not an earl?"

"She's the exception, not the rule."

Still, it was curious to see girls with no personal servants whatsoever. Maybe they did have them but left them at home rather than parade them around at school? Whatever the case, Angelica was promised to Prince Julius. She was positioned to be the next queen. It would be purely scandalous for her to swan around with demi-human slaves.

"She'd definitely be the next queen—if not for Miss Olivia. Probably not the best optics to have lovers tailing you around in that case," I said.

"This matriarchy is hardly logical. I have to imagine there is something more to it than meets the eye."

I shook my head. "It's an otome game with half-baked lore. What do you expect? Thinking about it's a waste of time."

Yeah. No use speculating, I assured myself. But on the other hand, why were the girls so fussy about these unspoken rules that they felt compelled to bully those who didn't fall in line?

After passing Leon in the hallway, Angelica paused to glance back at one of her followers. "That was the Bartfort boy, yes? The one from the rumors?"

The girl bobbed her head slightly. "Yes."

Like her, Angelica's followers were all first years. Their houses had strong connections to the Redgraves. It was by their families' orders that they served her here as loyal retainers.

"I heard he earned an impressive sum after a grand adventure, but he was less remarkable than I'd imagined," Angelica said. "I sense no ambition in him."

The stories painted Leon as an accomplished adventurer, someone to be lionized in Holfortian society. Alas, he hadn't left the best impression.

"He had a cowardly look about him, if you ask me."

"It makes you wonder whether the rumors were credible."

"I bet he just got lucky. I mean, luck is part of being an adventurer, but if

that's all he's got going for him, then he's not that special."

Angelica let out a long breath at her followers' snide comments. "Whether they were achieved by luck or not, his accomplishments are undeniable. The male students will begin hosting their tea parties starting in May. When Prince Julius holds his, I would like to invite Bartfort."

The girls lowered their heads obediently.

"As soon as he's set a date, make sure Bartfort gets an invitation."

"As you wish."

With that matter settled, Angelica continued on, her followers keeping on a couple of steps behind her. Then Angelica recognized another student up ahead. Her brow twitched, and lines formed in her followers'.

As soon as the girl in question noticed Angelica and her entourage, she scrambled to the side to make way, clutching heavy tomes to her chest. She shrunk away, careful not to meet their gazes. Her submissive air only put blood in the water.

"Lady Angelica, it's the scholarship student," one of Angelica's followers remarked.

"I can see that," she said flatly. Angelica strode up to Olivia and came to a stop. Her eyes turned toward the girl, though the rest of her body continued to face forward. "It seems you have grown awfully close with His Highness."

"P-pardon?"

Olivia nervously lifted her head, her face stiff. It was obvious she didn't know how to respond. But Angelica didn't really care whether she was comfortable with this discussion.

"For your sake, let me say this: His Highness's status is far above your own. You shouldn't forget that."



"It's not like I mean to..." Olivia opened her mouth to make excuses, but she snapped it shut just as quickly, as if she couldn't find the words.

Angelica tore her gaze away. "I warned you." She strode off.

Once they were a fair distance away from Olivia, Angelica's followers had some opinions to air.

"Lady Angelica, was that the most judicious approach? That girl doesn't understand her place. Otherwise, why would she have approached the prince?"

As tempted as she was to let out another sigh, Angelica held it in. "I warned her. She won't get a second chance."

"It's not just His Highness, either. She's been cozying up to other young lords as well. Shouldn't we teach her a lesson?"

They were being awfully insistent. Angelica could tell they were fed up. Her tone took on a hard edge as she said, "If we see her at it again, she will be punished accordingly."

My people are more upset with the scholarship student than I thought. I suppose even those closest to me are less than keen on the idea of a commoner attending the academy. The prince's careless actions also worried her. It doesn't help that His Highness is so fickle. If he tries to invite her to his tea party as well, the mounting tension will reach a tipping point all the faster.

It was easy to envision, at this rate, especially when it came to the female students. Julius and his friends were particularly popular. If they played favorites with the common-born scholarship student, it would only breed greater resentment, which would eventually crescendo. Julius and his friends wouldn't be the only ones to suffer the repercussions; Olivia would suffer for them, too. Angelica was all too aware of that.

Please, she thought, don't cause any more trouble than you already have.

Once Angelica and her followers were gone, Olivia hugged her library book to her chest and continued walking, her gaze pointed down the entire time. "Ain't nothin' I can do 'bout it," she muttered under her breath, slipping into the

drawl of her hometown. Flustered, she slapped a hand over her mouth.

Olivia had tried her best to mimic the standard dialect since coming to the academy, but she sometimes reverted to her roots when talking to herself. It embarrassed her, so she was always cautious to avoid it, but only a few people had talked to her recently, so there'd been less need to hide it.

Her gaze landed on a group of girls talking animatedly. *I wish I had a good friend like that*. Olivia didn't regret coming to the academy, but it was uncomfortable being the only commoner in a school full of nobles. Olivia enjoyed learning new things, yes, but all these unspoken rules among the upper crust were something else. She knew *about* them, but there was little she could do to actually avoid violating them.

A few people will actually talk with me, but because our status is so different, I lose my nerve. The boys she'd met first after entering the academy were all heirs of high-ranking, respectable houses. Then there was Julius, who was the crown prince. Olivia understood she had no right to grow friendly with them, at least not ordinarily, but they had been the only people to casually interact with her.

I know she warned me not to get close to them, but that same difference in rank means I'm in no position to turn them away, Olivia thought. She couldn't refuse any offers or requests they made of her, either.

As Olivia mulled over the situation, Julius suddenly appeared in front of her. He hurried over the moment he spotted Olivia.

"What a coincidence," he said. "Are you headed back to your dorm room?" It was easy to guess, based on the direction she was headed.

Olivia did her best to smile. "Yes. I plan to return as quickly as possible so I can read this book I just borrowed."

"You're really dedicated to your studies." Julius seemed to find this quality endearing.

While the two were chatting, a professor happened upon them—a tall, thin man with a monocle, dressed in a pristine suit and with hair slicked back. The school day had only just ended, but not a single strand was out of place. He was

the etiquette professor for the boys, so he was probably more attentive to his appearance than most.

"Oh?" he said as he strolled toward them. "The two of you seem to be enjoying yourselves."

"We appear to run into one another rather frequently, which has given us more opportunities to converse," Julius explained. The prince spoke in a more polite, respectful tone with the professor because, so long as he was at the academy, he was only one of many students.

Olivia couldn't disagree. She had no choice but to say, "Th-that's right. He's been teaching me a lot." She flashed a weak smile.

I bet even the professors don't think much of me getting close to Prince Julius. If possible, I would prefer to put some distance between us.

The professor smiled back. "Part of the academy's agenda is to enable students to make new acquaintances. I hope you will treasure these opportunities, as well as the new people you meet."

"Of course," Julius said with a grin. "Meeting her has been a blessing. She's nothing like any of the *other* women I know." The way he phrased it hinted at a deep dissatisfaction with those women.

The professor studied the prince's face. He opened his mouth to say something but seemed to think better of it. He turned to Olivia instead. "By the way, Miss Olivia."

"Y-yes?" she stammered, having not expected to be addressed.

Still smiling, he said, "Being a scholarship student must come with its share of difficulties. If you find yourself with any concerns, please don't hesitate to find me. I may not be able to resolve all of your issues, but I believe I can still offer a modicum of support."

"Of course. If something should arise, I'll be sure to come to you, Professor."

I can't possibly bring up anything in front of Prince Julius. I'll have to save it for some other time, she thought.

With that, the professor left.

"I doubt he'll be much help. What power does an etiquette professor have?" Julius asked playfully.

"Prince Julius, that's uncalled for," Olivia scolded him automatically before realizing what she was doing. "Oh! I-I mean, I just thought it was very polite, um..."

Far from being offended, Julius was amused. "I'm the one who gave you cause to rebuke me, and not for the first time, either." He laughed.

"You're poking fun at me, aren't you?"

"I can't help it. Your reactions are so entertaining. Come. I'll walk you at least part of the way back to your dorm."

Olivia hesitated before saying, "All right. Thank you."

After all, she couldn't refuse him—not even if she wanted to.

Day soon turned to night.

Being an earl's daughter, Stephanie's dorm room was more spacious than that of lower-ranking ladies at the academy. Though the standard furnishings were top-of-the-line, they weren't up to snuff in Stephanie's eyes. Her tastes tended toward the garish and ostentatious. She had replaced the originals with furniture that better fit her aesthetic; now everything was adorned with gold or silver embellishments.

Stephanie sat in the center of her quarters, surrounded by her lackeys, the daughters of houses with strong ties to the Offreys. Vassal houses, they were called. These girls were the children of knighted men whose families the Offreys supported financially. None of the students following her had entered the group out of personal love or reverence for Stephanie. The nature of her circle spoke volumes as to her reputation among her peers.

"So how are things going with Marie?" Stephanie asked idly as she filed her nails.

Carla spoke on behalf of the others. "The three girls you sent are doing most of the bullying. B-but it seems our target is so shameless that it hasn't had much

of an effect."

Stephanie frowned. "I suppose I should expect that from the kind of girl who brazenly flirts with boys who are already taken."

One of her other followers chimed in, "My lady, while the matter of Marie is definitely concerning, what about the scholarship student? There are rumors that she's grown close to Lord Brad."

Stephanie clicked her tongue, dropping the nail file. "That girl has some nerve for a commoner. If we're being honest, I'd like to dispose of her, too, but..." She scowled momentarily, until a devious grin stretched across her face. "Angelica already gave her a warning, right?" Word had spread among the girls that Angelica had put Olivia in her place. "That means Angelica will take care of her for us. I'm curious to see how she'll go about it. That will be entertaining enough, so I needn't involve myself."

Having made her decision, Stephanie turned back to Carla. "Returning to Marie... Since she's proven to be such a thorn in my side, I'll have the air pirates finish her off."

This casual proclamation left her followers stunned.

Carla swallowed hard. "You're going to rely on the air pirates?" she asked nervously. "That's too risky. If anyone were to find out—"

"Who would step in to help her? She's alienated all the other students, and she's helpless on her own. The girls we've already deployed will be the ones to take care of it anyway. They'll be first on the chopping block in regards to suspects. No one will ever know it was me."

Marie was the youngest daughter of her family, and based on Stephanie's investigations, she wasn't on good terms with any of them. Even if they threw a fit after she went missing, Stephanie could offer money to keep them quiet. And besides, her pawns would be the ones getting their hands dirty.

"But what if those girls betray you?" Carla protested.

"You make a good point." Stephanie nodded, rethinking her plan. She clapped her hands together and grinned. Her eyes swept across the faces of the gathered. "In that case, once everything is settled, we will disappear those

three as well. Provided none of *you* betray me, no one will be able to link it back to me, no? That should settle your fears."

Basically, if word got out, Stephanie would instantly know that the culprit was someone close to her.

"We won't have any traitors now, will we? And if we do, I'll be holding every single one of you responsible. Surely you don't mind that, right?"

Her followers paled and vigorously shook their heads.

Chapter 7: Notebook

T HAD BEEN A WEEK since the start of the bullying campaign. I found my way behind the school building to spy on Marie from the shadows. She was yanking her charred belongings out of the incinerator.

"There's no salvaging them once they've been burned," she muttered. Resigned, she started throwing them back in.

My heart ached watching her go through this. "How's she so tough? I'd have fled the academy after a couple of days of this." Her mental fortitude was something else.

"Perhaps because the environment in which she was raised significantly differed from yours," Luxion suggested. "She has had much less support and stability, both in this life and her last. I would venture to guess she had no choice but to toughen up; otherwise, she wouldn't have had the will to continue on."

"Is getting her ideal version of happiness really worth all this?"

If I were in her shoes, I'd give up and deal with it. I wouldn't try to stand out, wouldn't cause undue conflict—I'd settle for whatever happiness I could scrape together and be satisfied. That was *my* secret key to getting through life. Granted, I'd died pretty young last time around, so my advice probably wasn't the most convincing.

"Now that the situation has devolved, do you still intend to leave her be, Master? If you would only order me to do so, I could identify the culprit and bring them to justice."

"Oh, please. Don't even joke about letting you handle the situation."

Luxion's abilities as a cash shop item were unlike anything else this world had seen. They surpassed every facet of modern technology. If he wanted, he could wipe the floor with the entire world.

"Then do you plan to sit idly by and watch as this continues?"

I hesitated. If I lent her a hand, I needed to be prepared for the consequences. Problem was, I hated conflict *and* the trouble that came with it. Marie wouldn't even have been in this situation in the first place if she had just controlled herself.

But no matter what my brain said, my feet moved. I couldn't even begin to guess what compelled me. Luxion followed close behind.

"If only you were more honest with yourself," he said in exasperation.

"Shut it."

I slipped out of the shadows and approached Marie. "Heya."

Marie glanced at me but quickly turned her head away. "What do you want? If you're here to lecture me again, go away. You may have free time to waste, but I don't."

"You sure like to run your mouth."

This reminded me of my little sister, too. Annoying as it was, it was also strangely nostalgic. Maybe that was why I couldn't keep my nose out of her business.

"Why not give up already? If the bullying escalates any further, the damage could be serious," I said.

Bullying was a thing in Japan as well, but it wasn't nearly as malicious as it was here at this academy. War was a fact of life in this world. Consequently, our peers had way fewer compunctions when it came to resorting to violence. If it got physical, they wouldn't hesitate to get down and dirty. For being a bunch of aristocrats, they were awfully bloodthirsty.

Marie lifted herself to her feet and sniffed. "You don't get it at all. Even if I gave up and left the love interests alone, these girls wouldn't stop. I have no choice. If I wanna shut up the naysayers, I have to win over one of those guys."

"Did you know it'd be like this from the start?" Marie seemed so unperturbed that I had to assume she'd anticipated this. Maybe all the suffering in her previous life had made her resilient to this kind of thing.

"All I can do now is climb the social ladder," Marie reiterated, not answering my question.

"To me, it looks like you're on a one-way trip to self-destruction."

"Success is my best chance to turn everything around."

I snorted. "Is it really worth gambling your life for that small chance?"

"Don't call it gambling," Marie snapped. "I hate gambling."

At that, I had to roll my eyes. "I mean, what else could you possibly call this? And with truly terrible odds."

"There's no way to know for sure unless I give it a shot!"

Marie was right in that she could turn things around if she succeeded, but that was a big if. The odds were stacked overwhelmingly against her. Could she even manage to land a date with any of the love interests? I mean, she was neither the protagonist nor even anything like her.

"Look," I said, "I don't wanna have to say this, but...don't you think you and Miss Olivia are about as different as night and day? By which I mean, well...if they're attracted to her, then..." I hesitated.

Marie slapped her hands over her chest. "Where do you think you're looking, you perv?!"

"What's there to see? It'd be news to me. But I don't just mean your chest—or lack thereof. There's your face, and your personality, and just...your whole vibe, I guess? Point is, you aren't anything like Miss Olivia."

"B-but," Marie protested, "those guys don't care about your looks—they care about your heart. I'm sure of it."

I was trying in vain to suggest that she wasn't their type. Desperate as ever to cling to hope, Marie insisted they'd overlook her pint-size stature for what treasure lay beneath.

I let out a deep sigh. "Do you honestly think you stand an ice cube's chance in hell of beating Miss Olivia when it comes to your *heart*?"

"W-well, sure, I think... I think I..."

Marie trailed off, but I could tell what she was thinking. It didn't matter if she could outmatch Olivia in any capacity, so long as she could seduce just one of the guys. But her interest in them wasn't genuine. That one thing already made her the rotten apple in the barrel. No one could call her heart beautiful, not with a straight face.

Marie's lips flapped wordlessly as she tried to think of some clever retort, but even she had the self-awareness to see I was right. She finally snapped her mouth shut.

"There's no reason for you to go toe-to-toe with Miss Olivia, right?" I said. "Find your own version of happiness, one that doesn't involve her or the love interests. I'll even help you do it." To show my sincerity, I extended my hand toward her.

Marie kept her eyes on her feet as she slapped it away. "I hate the way you nag me. Like you're so much better."

"Huh?"

"Must be nice for you. You got your hands on a cheat-tier item, so you've got it made for the rest of your life. But I'm not like you. I...I still don't have anything to call my own!" Marie darted past me, fleeing the scene.

I dropped my outstretched hand and scratched the back of my head. "She sure is a stubborn one."

Having listened to our entire conversation, Luxion said, "I have to wonder whether you truly intended to convince her to back down. You could have communicated your intentions in a far less combative manner."

I shrugged. "I suck with words. You really think I could sway her?"

"The bottom line, Master, is that you tend to be harsh with her. Is it simply an instinctive response? An innate incompatibility?"

Was Luxion right that I was being harder on her than I meant to be? I wasn't above admitting I could've handled things better, but Marie wasn't exactly perfect, either. *More like stubborn as a mule.*

"Or perhaps it is that variety of teasing born of fondness?" Luxion speculated.

"According to my data, this pattern of behavior is common in young boys. I was convinced you were old enough to rise above such cliches, but that seems a distinct possibility."

"Hey!"

Was he trying to tick me off on purpose? Certainly felt like it.

Meanwhile, two girls were snooping through Marie's room in the girls' dormitory.

"Where'd that little twerp run off to?!"

"What're we gonna do?! If we don't find her soon, Stephanie will be breathing down our necks!"

"Hey, I don't want that any more than you do!"

They'd come all the way here to drag Marie off campus, per Stephanie's orders. In fact, they'd searched the school grounds on the way, but they'd seen neither hide nor hair of their quarry. The girls were terrified that, at this rate, they would be unable to fulfill Stephanie's orders.

While they rummaged through the room, one of the girls located something beneath Marie's bed. "Hey, what's this?"

"That's a travel bag, right? Why's she hiding it under her bed?"

The rest of the room was sparse, with few personal belongings. That made the travel bag's location all the more suspicious.

One of the girls pried the bag open to dig out Marie's things. As she pulled them out, she found an old, beaten-up notebook stashed beneath the rest.

"Why's she hiding this thing in here?"

"Who cares? I wanna know what this language even is. I've never seen letters like this."

The two boggled over the notebook, its pages covered in characters that were completely foreign to them. While they were thus preoccupied, the third member of their group burst into the room.

"I found her! She left campus!"

The girls threw Marie's bag to the ground and dashed out of the room, though one of them was still clutching the old notebook.

After fleeing from Leon, Marie left campus to aimlessly wander the streets of the capital. Shuffling along one of the main thoroughfares, she dug her hand into her pocket to check how much cash she had on hand. There was only a single bill and a couple of coins. That was it.

"It'll be hard to find a food stall selling anything this cheap." Her brow furrowed. "I also need to buy a new notebook and pencils, since they burned my other ones. Which means..."

She didn't have enough money.

Marie breathed a deep sigh and ground to a halt. By pure coincidence, she happened to stop in front of the window display she'd admired when she was out with Leon. Her eyes wandered to the price tag on the gown. It was so beyond her that she let out a weak laugh.

"The way things are going, a dress like that is an unattainable dream." She tutted. "When am I finally gonna get to wear pretty clothes and live a life of luxury?" Was such a future even within her grasp? Or would it lie forever beyond her reach? She was beginning to fear that maybe it was.

Downcast, Marie's thoughts turned to Leon and their earlier conversation. That jerk is something else. Literally why does he have to dig the knife that deep? I'm perfectly aware that I don't measure up to Olivia.

Marie knew nothing about Olivia's personality, but she could at the very least sense that it was much more pleasant than her own. On the rare occasions Olivia spoke in the game, it was all idealist nonsense. Marie had hated her for it. As far as she was concerned, Olivia was ignorant and stupid. But Marie could critique her all she wanted; she knew Olivia was in a league of her own.

I get that I'm being completely insincere, but I just want to be happy. Is that so wrong? She continued staring at the display, lost in thought.

At some point, an employee seemed to notice her and slipped outside, heading toward her. As soon as Marie noticed them, she fled.

She felt pathetic, running away from everyone. She hadn't shed a single tear since the girls at school started bullying her, but at this point, feeling as pitiful as she did, tears threatened to leak out.

Marie suddenly skidded to a halt. Three girls blocked her path.

"We were looking for you."

"You again?" she spat at them. "Haven't learned your lesson, have you?" Marie puffed up her chest, putting on a brave face. But as soon as her gaze landed on the old notebook one of the girls was carrying, her jaw dropped. "Ththat's mine!"

Her reaction was all the confirmation they needed: this notebook was important to her. What they didn't know was that it contained vital walkthrough notes for the game. Vital was honestly an understatement. If Marie was to have any chance at changing her lot in life, she *needed* that notebook.

The girls snickered.

"If you want it back, come with us. We've got somewhere special to take you."

"Ngh..." Marie gritted her teeth. Left with no other option, she obediently fell into step behind them.

Once I'd returned to my dorm room, I sprawled out on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "Why do I have to worry about stupid Marie?"

From nearly the very start of my academy journey, I'd been chasing her and her antics on a never-ending series of wild goose chases.

By now, it was nearly May, which meant the tea parties would start up soon. The boys were starting to get lessons on proper etiquette for these parties. We had to learn to be perfect gentlemen in order to invite the ladies to join our tables. Everything until this point had been the opening act; now the real show

began—the point of attending this school in the first place. We had to land a marriage partner. For me and the other boys, this was the main event.

Sure, I was from a backwater barony, but I still needed to get married. If I didn't, I could say bye-bye to a good reputation, which would land me in all kinds of hot water. Back in Japan, I hadn't had to worry nearly as much about what other people thought of me, but this society didn't stand for such flagrant disregard of social norms. If I became a pariah, my family would see repercussions as well.

All the more reason why this world sucks the big one.

So, I wanted to focus on getting myself a girl—if for no other reason than to avoid all that mess—but I couldn't stop thinking about Marie. It would have made sense if I had romantic feelings for her, but that definitely wasn't the case. It was more that we'd both reincarnated from Japan and knew the trajectory of the game's plot—and that, first and foremost, I still feared that Marie would do something to throw the narrative off course.

"Almost makes me think she really is my little sister, making me overanalyze things all the time."

But try as I might to recall my contemptible sister's face or name, I couldn't. All my memories of my past life and the people in it had grown fuzzy and indecipherable. Marie had the same issue.

I flipped over for what had to be the millionth time when Luxion rushed toward me. "Master, we have an emergency."

"Huh? Give a guy some breathing room." He was only a few centimeters from the tip of my nose, his red camera lens flashing eerily.

"Marie has been captured by air pirates."

"Say what?"

"What's that moron doing?!" I cursed under my breath.

"A group of female students led her to the warehouse district," Luxion reported.

"If you realized what was happening, you should've stopped them."

"Yes, that's why I—Master, someone is headed this way."

After leaving the boys' dormitory, we made for the main gate, where a female student was apparently returning from her own excursion into the city.

"Ah, the main character and the prince," I said.

Luxion had already activated his cloaking device to hide himself. "Priorities, please," he said. "We haven't the time to bother with Miss Olivia."

"I wasn't going to." I snapped my mouth shut after muttering my reply and sped past Olivia and Julius, though I caught a snippet of their conversation in the process.

"I didn't realize you liked skewers so much, Prince Julius."

"I absolutely adore them. I'm glad you enjoyed them, too."

They must've had something of a date. I was glad to see their relationship was developing—made my job easier. All I needed to do was focus on saving Marie.

Once I got past Olivia and Julius, I broke into a run. Luxion kept himself hidden as he provided navigational support. "I shall guide you down the shortest route to our destination. I am also preparing Arroganz for emergency deployment."

"And here I was hoping I wouldn't have to resort to violence in the capital."

"They have left us no choice."

With Luxion's help, I hastened to the warehouse district.

As Leon hurried past, Olivia froze and turned to watch him, but he had broken into a run and was quickly receding. Curious as to what had caught her attention, Julius also turned to glance back.

"Ah, that's Bartfort," he said. "He's in our same year as well."

"You know him?" Olivia asked.

"Of course. He's rather famous; made a name for himself as an accomplished adventurer even before enrolling. I hear he's already been promised a barony

once he graduates."

Olivia's eyes went round. "That's incredible."

Jealous of this reaction, Julius quickly added, "I'll soon set out on an airship and have adventures of my own. When I do, I assure you, I'll see even more than he has. Would you like to come with me? An adventure's sure to be even more enjoyable if I have you by my side."

Olivia's lips pressed into a strained smile. "Honestly, I'm the type who prefers to stay in her room and read."

"Oh, uh, really? Well, in that case, I'll just have to make sure there's a reading room on the ship. You can study there as much as you like."

"Um, err...I don't know what to say." Olivia hesitated, trying to figure out how best to reject this offer.

Unbeknownst to her, someone was watching them from a distance.

Angelica stood by a window on the second floor of the school building. Her face betrayed no emotion as she studied Julius and Olivia. Her followers hovered behind her. Sensing the ominous air, they kept their lips tightly sealed.

"It seems she failed to heed my warning," Angelica said, her voice exceedingly calm.

It hadn't even been that long since she cautioned Olivia against her continued flirtations with the prince. This blatant dismissal was essentially a slap to Angelica's face. More than that, Angelica's decision to warn her, rather than deliver an immediate rebuke, had been incredibly kind. It seemed Olivia had the audacity to spurn her generosity. Overlooking the initial offense hadn't done Angelica any favors after all.

When Angelica turned to face her entourage, she was silhouetted by the evening sunlight, which streamed in through the glass behind her and gave her an ominous silhouette. Her crimson eyes gleamed in the shadows cast upon her face.

"It seems I must speak with her more directly."

Angelica's followers nodded eagerly, intimidated by their leader's low tone.

"W-we'll summon her right away," one of them volunteered.

"No, I have a prior engagement. I'll also be meeting with His Highness this May tea party. I'll deal with her after that," Angelica decided.

"O-of course. We'll make arrangements."

"See that you do." Having said all she had to say, Angelica turned back toward the window. Olivia and Julius seemed to be enjoying themselves, walking side by side.

It's been years since you flashed that sort of smile at me, Angelica thought bitterly.

Chapter 8:

Trauma

THE CAPITAL'S WAREHOUSE DISTRICT had once been the primary place to store materials and goods that were being transported from the island that floated on the outskirts of the city. However, the area had fallen into partial disrepair and had since completely collapsed. A new and improved warehouse district had been erected elsewhere, and opinions were split on how best to utilize the old one. In the meantime, it was largely abandoned, having lost its purpose.

One brick building, about as dilapidated as the rest, was crammed full of unwanted refuse like a garbage dump. This was where a certain group of air pirates had established their base. They wore black bandanas featuring a shark with wings, marking them as members of the Winged Sharks. Flags bearing their group insignia also hung prominently on the walls.

These air pirates had stored their goods amidst the leavings already in the building. Among them were three human-shaped power suits that stood four meters at full height. Currently, the suits were kneeling, with the hatches of their cockpits open. These were the pirates' Armors.

"We brought her!"

Four girls in school uniforms suddenly entered, one of them bound with rope.

The pirates had been gathered around a table, gambling as they waited. When their visitors arrived, one of the high-ranking pirates—an unsavory character named Dudley—left his seat. He was in charge of the group's detachment in the capital. He was slender and towering, and his long, blond hair was tied behind his head. However, his face was gaunt, and the prominent dark circles under his eyes suggested he led a far less-than-healthy life. His simple T-shirt and jeans were offset by the handgun and knife hanging at his hip.

Dudley flipped his handgun from its holster and turned the barrel on the three girls escorting Marie. "Nice work," he said, motioning with the gun. "Tie

her to that pillar over there."

Though Dudley's size was less than physically intimidating, his menacing air sent a chill down the girls' spines. They did as they were told and quickly secured Marie to the indicated pillar.

A discreet look was sent from Dudley to his men, who promptly left their seats and moved into position. Soon, they were blocking all the exits, each equipped with a weapon, while the girls finished their work.

"Th-there, we did what we were told," the leader of the trio stuttered, terrified. "We leave the rest to you. We'll just head back now." When her gaze turned to the door, she gaped. "What...?"

The three clung to each other, trembling.

Dudley's gun was still trained on them. He cocked the hammer; he was ready to shoot, if needed. Without meeting the girls' eyes, he muttered, "I was raised on a floatin' island in the middle of nowhere, ruled over by some asshole liege lord. Made us pay ridiculously high taxes so he could support his woman. I finally got fed up with that crap and fled to the capital. And whaddaya know? Not a decent job to be found. Before I knew it, I was a pirate."

The three stared at them quizzically. What did any of that have to do with them?

The corners of Dudley's lips twitched, pulling into a grin. "That's when I looked into how things were goin' back home. I wondered where all that cash was goin'. Turns out it was that stupid lord's legal wife—not even a mistress or anythin'. You can imagine my surprise. I mean, he worked us to the bone just so some chick could live the high life."

Blood drained from the girls' faces. This story wasn't even an unusual one. Holfort's twisted society produced such strains every day.

Dudley fired a shot at their feet.

"Eek!"

The bang reverberated off the walls, a deafening echo in their ears. Unable to stay upright, they crumpled to the floor.

Dudley's eyes grew bloodshot as he burst into manic laughter. "Hilarious! I mean, those highborn boys are all totally scared of ya, and here I am—nothin' but a pirate, and I can make ya scream like babies!"

"Y-you won't get away with this," the lead girl snapped courageously. "We're acting on Lady Stephanie's orders. If you try anything, she won't let you—"

"I'm actin' on her orders. She told me to get rid of ya three."

"What ...?"

The girls were stunned.

Dudley and his men leered. "She got worried you girls would turn traitor, so she told us we could do whatever we wanted with ya. So, what'll it be? Should we sell ya off to some foreigner?"

The girls threw their arms around one another, shaking uncontrollably.

"Nah." Dudley turned the barrel of his gun on the leader. "I think we should play with one of ya first. I always wanted to hear a noble girl scream."

It was a disgusting thing to say, but none of Dudley's men lifted a finger to stop him. If anything, his proposal had excited his crew.

In the lingering silence that followed, there was a soft rustle. They all turned to the source of the noise—where Marie was supposed to be tied to a pillar.

To everyone's shock, Marie had extracted herself from her bindings. Her petite frame blurred as she darted toward Dudley and leaped into the air. She spoke not a word as she sank her fist into his face.

"Bwuh?!" he cried.

Despite being a grown adult, the impact of her attack sent him hurtling several meters. He slammed into a stack of wooden crates.

The rest of the crew stared at Marie in disbelief.



"Don't you dare think you can beat me that easily!" Marie's voice boomed through the warehouse. "I've devoured wild beasts, little man! As far as I'm concerned, you're nothing but lambs to the slaughter!"

Beads of cold sweat trickled down Marie's brow. I screwed up. I was gonna escape while they were preoccupied, but then I punched their leader before I realized what I was doing!

As much as she'd wanted to leave those girls behind to save her own skin, the idea of watching one of them get shot was too much to stomach. She'd moved instinctively, serving Dudley a knuckle sandwich.

Her mind raced. What next?

Marie dashed to where Dudley had collapsed, and as he tried to push himself up, she jammed her foot into his jaw. She snatched up his revolver and thrust the barrel in his direction. "Don't move!" she warned his crew as she swept her gaze over them. "If you do, I'll kill your friend here."

Reluctantly, the men lowered their guns and rifles.

"You three," Marie said, addressing the girls who'd brought her here. "Can you run?"

For a split-second, they simply stared at her without registering that she was talking to them. Soon, though, they recovered their wits and shook their heads.

"Th-there's no way. My legs are pure jelly."

"Get on your feet anyway! I don't care how you do it!" Marie barked at them. "We're getting outta here." Marie knew she could best any of these men one-one, but she didn't stand a chance against all of them together.

Dudley's bandana came loose. In the struggle, the band tying his hair had snapped, and his blond hair fell across his face and shoulders. "You little brat," he hissed at her. "I'll make you regret this."

It was nothing but the bitter whining of a sore loser. And yet, though Marie had the upper hand, a second look at him left her rattled. Her mind flashed back to her previous life. Somehow, Dudley looked exactly like a man she'd

once dated—the one who'd claimed her life with his violence.

Marie's breathing grew shallow and panicked. The sweat no longer trickled but poured, and tremors ran through her.

She knew they needed to run—and quickly—but her body wouldn't listen. The boyfriend who had taken her life had left Marie traumatized.

"A-aren't we going to leave?" one of the girls asked. She didn't understand Marie's sudden change.

Marie didn't immediately respond. She was having trouble breathing. Her skin was unpleasantly sticky and damp.

Realizing he had an opening, Dudley shoved her away.

"Marie!" the leader cried.

Marie had been knocked to the ground, but she didn't stand. She hugged her arms tightly. Why am I trembling? Who cares if this guy looks like my exboyfriend? Why is that so terrifying?!

Her mind conjured the image of the man who'd killed her with vivid clarity. Dudley's face resembled his, but more than that, he had the same ominous air.

Dudley snatched up his revolver and smashed his foot into Marie's side. "Where's all that bravado, huh? Stupid girl. Did you really think we'd let you get away with mouthin' off like that? I'm gonna make your life a special kind of hell." He bashed his foot into her again and again. When he decided he was done, he stepped on her head, grinding his boot into her skull.

Hot tears streamed down Marie's cheeks. This is such bull! Is my life really going to end here? No! I don't wanna die like this!

Marie had never imagined a man who so resembled her last killer could possibly claim her life a second time. The most infuriating part was that while she couldn't recall the faces of her mom, dad, daughter, or older brother, she'd managed to remember her boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—and he looked just like this jerk. If she was going to have flashbacks, she wished they could've been about the people who really mattered. Her parents, her daughter. Her older brother.

In the depths of her despair, she found herself wishing for the impossible. *Big Bro, save me.* She knew he wasn't in this world, but that didn't stop her from crying out for him, if only in her mind.

Little did she know, her prayer was about to be answered.

An explosive blast rocked the entrance of the warehouse. Dudley was forced to remove his boot from Marie's head as he aimed his gun at the entrance. Smoke billowed forth, clouding the area. He pulled the trigger anyway.

"What the hell's goin' on?!"

Dudley had fired the shot on instinct, suspecting that whatever had caused the interruption was neither welcome nor friendly.

Marie lifted her head just in time to see Leon burst through the smoke and jam his fist smack-dab into the middle of Dudley's face. The air pirate went flying—much like he had when Marie had done the same.

"I've come to take back my acquaintance," Leon announced to the man's henchmen. Then he grinned. "And while I'm at it, I think I'll turn you over to the palace for a handsome reward."

Marie stared at Leon. There was something so familiar about him. For an instant, she saw her older brother, and she found herself murmuring, "Big Bro..."

Her voice was so quiet that it didn't reach his ears.

Leon's gaze traveled down, landing on her. Marie was a mess after that beating. His brow furrowed. "You've just met a better man, pirate. Hope you're ready to face the music." Leon hefted what looked like a shotgun. All trace of amusement had disappeared from his face. To Marie, he looked *ticked*. "Marie," he said, "can you stand?"

"Huh? O-oh, yeah."

"I'll take care of the rest." Leon stepped in front of her so that all she could see was his back. Even from behind, he reminded her of her brother.

But why? Why does he remind me so much of him? Marie wondered bitterly.

I had charged into the air pirates' hideout to save Marie, carrying a Luxion-crafted shotgun in hand. My partner hid himself with his cloaking device as he reported the enemies' movements.

"You have an enemy with a rifle between four and five o'clock," he said.

A gunshot lanced through the building. Before the bullet reached me, it slammed into my energy barrier—also courtesy of Luxion—and dropped to the ground. The person who'd fired gaped in disbelief. His comrades tried to fire in his place.

"Shoot me as many times as you want. It won't change a thing. I'm bulletproof," I told them. "Unfortunately for you, you very much aren't." My futuristic shotgun came equipped with a drum magazine. It would automatically reload, which allowed me to fire in rapid succession. Granted, it was loaded with nonlethal rubber bullets, but Luxion had packed enough punch in this thing that anyone it hit would go flying. It wasn't here to kill anyone; it'd just pack one hell of a punch and cause serious injury.

"You'd better hurry up and surrender, or you're all headed straight for the hospital."

Some pirates scrambled to flee, and I fired on them. Others made a dash for their Armors—one of them being the man who'd been beating on Marie.

Marie clutched the fabric of my pants and yanked to get my attention. "Um, they...they're going for their Armors," she stammered.

"I see 'em. Luxion!"

"This is of no concern," he answered.

As soon as the pilots took their seats and closed their hatches, the suits powered to life and lurched upright. The sight rallied the remaining pirates.

"Think you've won, huh?" one of them taunted me. "Now the tide's turning in our—gwaah!"

I fired, hitting him right in the face. He slapped his hands over the aching wound and collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain.

"Shut up," I said.

"Stupid brat," came a voice from one of the Armors. The one that was piloted by that Dudley guy—I think that was his name. Luxion had told me he was one of the Winged Shark's head honchos. "You think you're some kinda white knight, swoopin' in to save these girls, but gimme a sec and you're gonna be a pile of minced meat." He raised a battleaxe.

Dudley's Armor had been more intensely modified than the other two, and it was covered in spikes.

"Has kind of a whole bandit vibe," I said to myself.

Marie clung to my leg. "Stop acting all cool! You need to *run*—get out of here, quick!"

"Nah. No need for that." I paused for a moment. "Luxion."

"Arroganz, it is time to take the stage."

No sooner did Luxion say that than a hulking black suit burst through one of the warehouse walls.



It towered over the pirates' suits, standing six meters to their four. The suit was painted in shades of ashen gray and black, and it carried three containers on its back. To modern eyes, it looked unwieldy. The pirates were stunned by its arrival. Only the trio of girls who'd dragged Marie here in the first place had the temerity to criticize it.

"That Armor is ancient!"

"There's no way it can compete with the speed of the other suits!"

"This is the end for us. And after we thought we were saved, too!"

They had mistaken Arroganz for an antiquated relic because the modern preference was for a slim, highly mobile model. Large, heavily armored units were a thing of the past. Compared to the newer suits, they were slow and weak—little more than easy pickings on the battlefield.

"Is that true?!" Marie squeaked. She wasn't as privy to Armor lore as I was. "You've gotta be kidding me. Here you are, acting like everything's gonna be fine, but you brought that old piece of junk?!"

"Don't you think you're forgetting something?" I asked.

Of course I wouldn't bring a knife to a gunfight.

Luxion's camera lens flashed. "Arroganz, display your battle prowess for Marie."

He wasn't just showing off. He genuinely wanted to allay her fears. *Isn't he a little* too *soft on her?*

Arroganz's red eyes gleamed as the suit registered Luxion's orders. It approached one of the enemy Armors—one which belonged to Dudley's henchmen.

"Idiot!" the pilot inside shouted. "You may be big, but you don't got the power to beat me! Your rickety antique's about to be—huh?"

In this world, the larger size of an Armor didn't tend to correlate with greater power. The bigger the Armor, the more energy it had to consume. As such, smaller suits tended to have the upper hand. To put it in perspective, imagine a semi-truck with the engine of a tiny car. That wouldn't give it much fuel, right?

Maybe you would have attached a bigger engine to the truck, but the engineers of this world had instead focused on downsizing suits. After all, with that same engine, a smaller unit had more speed and power, right? That line of thinking had dictated Armor development for years. Consequently, since larger Armors required that much more energy to even move, they tended to lack firepower.

As the enemy Armor grappled with Arroganz, a keening screech of metal split the air. The enemy's suit crashed to its knees, electrical discharge crackling at its joints.

"Dammit! What the devil's goin' on here?!" Dudley hissed as he and his remaining henchmen charged, bringing their weapons down on Arroganz.

"Let him go, you hunk of junk!"

Their attacks left not so much as a scratch on Arroganz's surface. After pulverizing its first enemy, Arroganz turned its violence on Dudley's other crony. It punched the Armor so hard that the suit flew into the opposite wall, then ripped off its head, exposing the cockpit. The pilot inside gaped in disbelief.

Marie had barely made it back to her feet, her legs shaking like those of a newborn foal, but as she saw all this play out, she sank back to the ground. "It's so *strong*," she said with a gasp.

"This is Arroganz," Luxion said, pleased, "an Armor I constructed for Master's exclusive use. It far exceeds the primitive techniques of 'modern' warfare, and its capabilities are beyond compare. I have equipped it with a variety of functions which allow it to adapt to battle no matter the circumstances." He sounded proud of himself.

"Arroganz? As in smug superiority?" Marie asked.

"Indeed. You are far more learned than Master, I see."

I gaped at him. I had asked what the name meant before, and all he'd said was, "Its meaning fits you perfectly, Master."

"Hey, you didn't tell me that!" I snapped. "And what do you mean by that, anyway? You trying to say I'm full of myself?"

"Master, you liked the name when I first suggested it."

"No, the name is fine, okay?! The point is that you were mocking me this whole time!"

While we were busy bickering, Dudley sent his suit up into the air, smashing through the ceiling. Debris rained down, and Arroganz shifted to shield us from the rubble with its body.

As he accelerated, Dudley shouted back, "I'll let you off today! But I'm not gonna forget your face any time soon. I swear I'll bring you to your knees. Just you wait!"

After which he promptly abandoned the rest of his minions and flew off.

I sighed. "Look at him, getting ahead of himself and thinking he can run from me. Luxion, are we good to go?"

"Yes, Master."

Arroganz knelt to the ground, and the hatch to the cockpit cracked open. Those gathered gasped—there was no one inside. Ignoring their surprise, I climbed in, Luxion following close behind.

Marie pushed herself to her feet as she stared up at me quizzically. "Hold it. What do you expect us to do? This place is still crawling with pirates."

"Don't worry about them. You guys just focus on evacuating and getting to safety."

"But what're you gonna do, Big Br—I mean, Leon?" Marie hastily corrected herself. I was too busy to worry about whatever Freudian slip that was.

I pointed to the sky. "I'm gonna catch 'em all."

And with that, I slammed the hatch shut.

Arroganz jetted through the air, passing a number of one-eyed robots that swooped into the warehouse. They had no legs, hovered in the air, and were equipped with weapons in each hand. Our robot mini-army made quick work of restraining the remaining pirates.

"What in the world? What's going on here?" The three girls who had been

plaguing Marie sat on their behinds, their mouths hanging wide open.

Marie stared up through the hole in the ceiling. "This is really messing with my head. Why'd I almost call him that?"

She knew better than to think they could ever be reunited, yet her heart was filled with joy.

Chapter 9: Dispatching Air Pirates

DUDLEY HAD BEGUN TO PANIC as he floated in the skies above the capital in the cockpit of his Armor.

"If the boss finds out I ran from a buncha brats, he'll have my head. I gotta bring back some kinda prize, or I'm as good as dead." He reached for the rifle on his back and took aim at the building below, from which he'd escaped. His finger tightened on the trigger. "Gotta at least get rid of that freak."

Although Dudley had claimed only moments ago that he would be back for his revenge, he'd lose his position in the Sharks if he failed to fulfill Stephanie's simple request. It didn't matter that he was one of the pirate lieutenants; either their boss would kill him or he'd be demoted all the way down to the bottom and have to start from scratch. The latter was the best he could hope for, but Dudley was desperate to avoid either fate.

Adrenaline still pumped through him, scrambling his thoughts. He was only a second away from pulling the trigger of his rifle, completely oblivious to the fact that if he fired, he would risk everything. Sadly, he lacked the composure for that level of forethought.

His finger pulled back the rest of the way. The rifle fired, the bullet slicing through the air—until it was deflected by a black Armor racing up toward him.

Sweat poured down Dudley's forehead. "Oversized tin can!" he snarled.

Dudley turned and sped away, but Arroganz was hot on his tail. Said tin can should have been too big and unwieldy to pack a punch, but somehow, it far surpassed his Armor in every way.

"You seriously telling me that antique's more powerful than my suit? It's nothing like the boss's!"

Dudley knew of only one suit of size and similar power, and even among exceptions to the rule, it was a rarity. It had never crossed his mind that there

might be another.

A line formed in his brow as he watched Arroganz dart through the air. He cursed under his breath. "So it's a speed demon, too?"

If Arroganz caught him from behind as he fled, the attack would be fatal. Dudley had no other choice. He spun around and held his battleaxe at the ready. In contrast, Arroganz held no weapon whatsoever. Perhaps it didn't have one. Regardless, this just further infuriated Dudley. It was as if his opponent were mocking him, saying he wasn't worth drawing a weapon.

"Don't you dare underestimate me!" He raised his battleaxe overhead and charged. With impeccable timing, he brought it crashing down on the enemy suit. Dudley wasn't one of the pirate lieutenants for nothing; he'd earned his reputation in numerous battles. No ordinary pilot, or even your average knight, would have stood a chance against him.

Unfortunately, he'd picked the wrong fight this time around.

Arroganz lifted a single hand and caught his axe in its palm.

"Are you stupid?!" Dudley howled.

That was the only explanation. An Armor's hand—its manipulator—was one of the most delicate parts of the suit. It was an extremely complex instrument constructed of a vast number of parts in order to accurately mimic the movements of a human hand. A fighter would never use their bare hand to catch a weapon, knowing the destruction it would surely cause. And yet Arroganz hadn't hesitated to grab his axe.

Then its fingers cinched around the bladed edge, shattering the entire thing into tiny shards.

Dudley stared in shock. "No way!"

An Armor's hand was made to be able to manipulate any number of weapons. It wasn't supposed to be so powerful it could crush metal. Dudley couldn't digest what he was seeing.

The shaft of the battleaxe was all that remained. Dudley tossed it aside—it was useless now. He immediately resumed his escape, certain that this enemy

was beyond him. There was no point in pride or shame when faced with a beast like that. And yet, of course, Arroganz followed close on his tail.

"Please, enough! Spare my life! I'll tell you anythin' you wanna know. Anythin' at all!"

"No," said a young voice from within the hulking enemy Armor. "I'm going to crush you."

In the next instant, Arroganz caught up, and its fist slammed into Dudley from above. Dudley's suit rapidly lost altitude, plummeting toward the earth. He stared up at the skies above—at the black suit that had overpowered him.

"You gotta be kidding me! Who the hell're you?!" Again, Dudley reached for his rifle and pulled the trigger at his enemy, though he knew all the while that it was futile.

"You don't need to know who I am. Just know you're about to learn a little something about hell."

Arroganz easily dodged the incoming bullet and continued to dive down on Dudley. Its enormous foot slammed into Dudley's torso, sending him hurtling into a lake on the outskirts of the capital.

I'd successfully taken down the last remaining enemy Armor. The pilot had survived, of course. The kingdom's military flew in (literally) and took Dudley into custody with assurances that he would be questioned. The vast majority of the pirates who'd been hiding in the warehouse district were subsequently apprehended. Marie and the other girls were safely recovered as well.

Well, that's done and dusted. Or so I'd hoped. Instead, the military summoned me to one of their aircraft and guided me to an interrogation room.

The man sitting across the table from me was a knight in military uniform. His face scrunched as he summarized my version of events. "So you're telling me you picked a fight with those air pirates because you wanted to save the girls they took?"

"Yes. On my pride as a man, I couldn't overlook their actions." I sat up

straighter and smiled with boyish enthusiasm to emphasize my sincerity.

The knight's nose wrinkled. "You could have reported this to the palace or the academy rather than take action yourself. You realize that, don't you? I understand your thirst for glory, but we would prefer you didn't act alone and endanger yourself."

That seemed pretty hypocritical coming from the military, seeing as they'd left the air pirates untouched before I stepped in, but I didn't fault him for it. He and his comrades had other stuff to attend to. My acting alone and without permission had only caused a fuss because we were in the capital. Some were grateful for my deeds, but others preferred to scold me for acting impulsively. I had to concede that point; the only thing on my mind had been resolving the situation. I hadn't stopped to consider what would happen afterward. Unplanned actions and haphazard tactics were practically my way of life at this point.

"My apologies," I said sincerely.

The knight let out a heavy sigh. "There's more I'd like to say, but I also agree you should be lauded for capturing those pirates. In light of your accomplishments, I won't admonish you any further."

"I appreciate that." I smiled at him.

He pressed a hand to his face. "That said, it's troubling to think air pirates have infiltrated the capital. Things might get messy from here on out." The knight stood from his chair and strolled out of the room.

Little did he know, I was anxious, too. It had never occurred to me that the air pirates involved in this fiasco would be the same ones that were central to the otome game's story. The Winged Sharks showed up midway through the narrative to screw with the protagonist. As if their involvement wasn't concerning enough, there was also the fact that Stephanie was pulling their strings. That left me even more confused. I hadn't thought she'd do something like this, not when the game had only just begun.

"Now what?" I wondered out loud. "Turning her over would be easy enough, but..."

But she was an essential antagonist. I could easily reveal her involvement, but that would put the kibosh on a pivotal event in the middle of the game's story. Part of me hated Stephanie for what she'd done to Marie. However, when I weighed the future of the country against my personal grudge, I hesitated to follow my heart.

Luxion suddenly materialized beside me. "Marie sustained some minor injuries, but she used her healing magic to make a full recovery," he reported.

"So basically, she doesn't even have a scratch."

"She also healed the girls who were bullying her. I fail to comprehend these actions. I see no advantage in this for Marie."

To be honest, I was kinda happy to hear about this.

"She's a tough one. If it were me, I'd have made those jerks pay."

"I do not doubt that for a moment, Master."

Marie and her bullies were summoned by the school staff to tell their story. After the girls shared every detail they could remember, the professors left their seats. The girls were instructed to wait in the room; the staff wanted to confer before continuing the discussion.

Marie sat near a window while the other three had taken desks farther away. She stared out the glass, her mind on Leon. *I heard he's being interrogated. Did he do something wrong?* She'd asked the school staff when he didn't return. They had told her the military had summoned him for questioning.

All Leon had done was dispatch a bunch of pirates. Why would they take him into custody? Marie didn't understand.

While she was lost in thought, the other girls approached her.

"Um," said the leader, hesitating. All three stared nervously at their feet.

"What?" Marie snapped.

They lowered their heads. "W-we're...sorry."

Any urge Marie had felt to lash out vanished. She remembered what they'd

done to her, but she didn't blame them. Not after they explained that Stephanie had been behind it all.

"It's fine," she said. "But are you guys really not gonna rat Stephanie out?"

At the very mention of her name, the girls were trembling again. That spoke volumes to Marie.

"Sorry," said the leader, lips quivering, "but we can't. If we anger her, our families will suffer the consequences."

Marie shrugged. "It doesn't really matter to me either way." She knew about Stephanie and the Offreys, thanks to the game. Stephanie still had an important part to play later in the plot. It would only leave both Marie and Leon in a bind if she was driven out of the academy before her time. The air pirates arc had important character development for Olivia. If she missed out on that, it could really screw things up.

And anyway, if we got rid of Stephanie, Leon would throw a fit, she thought.

As much as it pissed Marie off, knowing who was behind all this, she would rather swallow her pride than see the kingdom go down in flames—or the game go off the rails. That was what she kept telling herself, at least.

The trio eyed her worriedly. "I think it would be best for you to stay away from the prince and his friends."

"Why?"

"Because you already have an awful reputation. Plus, they're all engaged. You know that, right? Stephanie is dangerous enough, but she's not the scariest of the bunch."

Their faces had hardened with fear.

"You mean Angelica?" Marie asked.

"If you already know who we're talking about, then you'd best quit while you're ahead. Even Stephanie doesn't hold a candle to Lady Angelica."

Their terror didn't surprise Marie. Stephanie's basically a baby. The real antagonist is way more fearsome. But it doesn't matter. I've...kinda lost interest in trying to get with the love interests anyhow.

One of the girls held out the beat-up notebook they had swiped from Marie's room. "Here."

"My notebook..." Marie accepted it and hugged it to her chest, still delighted to have it back.

"Is that some kinda ancient tome?" The girls looked confused. "I mean, it definitely doesn't look like a normal notebook."

"It's nothing you need to worry about. But it's very precious to me." Marie hesitated. "Or it was, I guess."

The trio were puzzled, but the conversation was over; the professors were filtering back into the room.

By the following day, word of Leon's triumph over a crew of air pirates in the capital had spread. A number of students were enthusiastically chattering about it. Olivia overhead them as she made her way down a hall.

"Did you hear? Bartfort captured some pirates who were hiding out right here in the capital!"

"He got in his Armor and gave them a real beat down, right?"

"I thought he was just a plain, run-of-the-mill guy, but that's a serious accomplishment."

None of the boys looked particularly pleased to hear the girls gushing about Leon, but even they had to recognize his strength.

"Damn that Bartfort, making a name for himself like this."

"Ugh, the girls are gonna be crawling all over him in May."

"Give me a break. We already have enough competition. Now he's gotta show off?"

Naturally, the boys' concern was the upcoming tea parties. They feared that the girls would be so fixated on Leon that they'd refuse everyone else's invitations.

All this left Olivia naturally curious about this Leon fellow. He's only a student,

but he managed to subdue air pirates all by himself. Aristocrats sure are something else. She continued walking along, lost in thought. Come to think of it, I passed by him yesterday evening. Was that when he was chasing down those pirates?

"Get a load of this: Bartfort apparently beat up those pirates because he was trying to save some girls."

"For real? How many brownie points is he trying to score?"

"Great. Now the rest of us are going to get compared to that. Ugh, this sucks."

Hearing that he'd swooped into the rescue only piqued Olivia's interest even further. He's like a knight from the minstrels' songs.

Minstrels frequented pubs, where they performed for coin. They often sang heroic epics in which knights saved damsels in distress. Olivia had admired these tales from a young age, and ever since, she'd dreamed of a man like that coming to whisk her away.

A knight, huh? If only someone like that could show up to save me.

Meanwhile, these rumors of Leon had reached Angelica's ears as well.

After the reports, she pressed a hand to her face and laughed. "I suppose I'm a bad judge of character after all. I said I sensed no ambition, and now I hear he dispatched a gang of pirates to save some school girls?" She grinned. "Now that's what I would call a noble knight."

Sensing the sea change, her followers were quick to trip over themselves and agree.

"Yes, he truly is magnificent."

"I would love to invite him to our May tea party."

Their fickleness got under Angelica's skin. I wish they'd simply admit that their initial assessments were mistaken. No matter. If he's this capable, I'd love to make him a retainer of His Highness. All the more so, since he hails from a rural barony. That means he doesn't come burdened with many undesirable ties.

Leon had proven himself a worthy knight. Angelica hoped to invite him to stay in the capital and work on Julius's behalf.

I need to invite him to the May party and find time to speak with both him and His Highness. The prince's future utterly depends on the strength of the allies he can recruit now. As far as she was concerned, Leon's prowess would be a vital cornerstone of Julius's rule. His strength is more than adequate. All that remains to assess is his character. I wonder what kind of person he is.

Angelica nodded to herself a few times. "Make absolutely certain that he meets with His Highness during the May tea party. Ensure you warn the other girls not to interfere with his schedule."

After everything Leon had accomplished, she couldn't imagine her peers standing idly by. None of the other academy girls had quite the level of influence that Angelica did, granted, but Angelica couldn't chance anyone stealing this opportunity out from under her.

One of her followers stared back, puzzled. "Do we really need to go to such lengths? He's from an unremarkable barony. Will he even accept the prince's invitation?"

"Of course he will. And of course he's worth the effort—he's a valuable asset."

The prince needs as many capable people in his inner circle as possible. Julius's rule would depend on the quality of his subordinates. That was why Angelica was working so doggedly to identify and recruit such people while she was at the academy. However, a particular concern continued to weigh on her mind. I can only hope he doesn't remain so fixated on the scholarship student, especially when he needs to keep an eye on the people around him.

While whispers of Leon's accomplishments made the rounds at the academy, Stephanie threw a fit in her dorm room.

"Useless *vermin*!" she howled, knocking over furniture and hurling a flower vase at the wall.

Her servants tried to placate her with little success; she ignored them.

"That pustule Bartfort really screwed things up."

Stephanie's gambit to exact revenge on Marie had utterly backfired, leaving her on the back foot. She couldn't have foreseen his meddling, nor had it ever crossed her mind that her pirates would lose to some random student. Dudley was one of their most powerful fighters. No ordinary knight could have hoped to best him. And yet, in spite of his impressive record, he'd fallen so easily.

Carla trembled where she stood. "Wh-what are we going to do now, my lady?! If those pirates talk, we'll be..."

She trailed off, but Stephanie knew what she was getting at. If the pirates revealed their connections to the Offreys—worse, to Stephanie specifically—it would be the end of her and her house.

Stephanie let out a deep breath. "I've already taken countermeasures to prevent such an outcome. They won't say anything. You needn't worry about that."

There were plenty of ways to dispose of them before they did.

"Huh? B-but I heard they were captured and imprisoned."

Stephanie nodded. "They were, but I have plenty of tools at my disposal to ensure their silence."

Carla stared, wide-eyed, not catching the implication.

Stephanie had already abandoned the men who had been captured. To her, they were only tools.

"Anyway," Stephanie said, "I want you to thoroughly investigate Bartfort. That rat is going to pay for daring to defy me."

But first, I need to ensure the idiots who got themselves captured don't talk. A few bribes, a little poison, and that will be that.

Chapter 10: The Final Meet-Cute Event

T'S A RELIEF to see you're safe."

"R-right."

Marie and I didn't come face-to-face until school ended on the day after the pirate incident. We sat side by side on a bench in the inner courtyard as we chatted. The sun was beginning its descent, and the area was largely deserted.

Marie was more receptive than she had been lately, probably because she felt she owed me for saving her life.

"Thank you so much for yesterday," she said. "If you hadn't shown up, things would've gotten ugly."

"I screwed up, too. Went a little overboard with the things I said."

Now that we'd both apologized for our behavior, we were eager to put the matter behind us.

Marie gazed out at the sprawling garden. "I was happy until I entered university." She was referring to her past life.

"What changed?"

"That was around when my brother died. A lot happened after that. My parents kicked me out of the house, and my life fell apart. Or, I mean, I made myself miserable—it was all on me."

Her story made me think of my sister again. I still couldn't recall her name or likeness, but in turn, Marie still had that familiar air.

"Every time I thought I'd found a good guy," Marie continued, "he'd turn out to be a total dud. They all started off chasing their dreams, you know. But sooner or later they'd get hooked on gambling or something and drive us into unbelievable debt. I worked like a dog trying to pay it all off."

Guys chasing their dreams, huh? I wouldn't really say that was a bad thing,

but I would've picked a guy with a steady job, if it were me.

"So that's why you're so obsessed with happiness now?" I asked.

"Yeah." Marie paused. She dropped her gaze to her lap, smiling sadly. "Although it isn't going so well."

Between this story and her dejected look, I just wanted to help her. "Marie, you still haven't talked to Chris yet, have you?"

Her head jerked up. "Huh? Oh, um, no."

"Then why don't we give it another shot? Luxion, tell me where he is right now. Even if she struck out on the other four, she's still got a chance with him."

Luxion's camera lens flickered. "Personally, I must reiterate my preference that the two of you pair up instead." There was a short pause. "I have located him. He's in the training grounds."

That figured. Chris was often there in the game.

I stood from the bench, ushering Marie to come along. "Hurry up. Let's go."

"What, seriously? You mean it? But you're the one who keeps telling me to give up."

"I'll help you out on this," I said. "From the looks of things, Miss Olivia is already getting along great with Prince Julius. I don't see any problem with making a go for one of the leftovers."

"I-I guess you're right."

For some reason, Marie didn't seem particularly keen on the idea, but we headed for the training grounds nevertheless.

The training grounds were lined with logs that functioned as training dummies. One man—by the name of Chris Fia Arclight—stood in the middle of those logs, swinging his sword. He had short blue hair and wore glasses, which lent him a mature, intelligent look.

Chris's father was an accomplished swordsman who'd earned the title Sword Saint. Chris himself was talented enough to have acquired the less distinguished

—but nevertheless impressive—title of Swordmaster for himself. His abilities made him the one guy capable of facing off with Greg one-on-one. That said, he wasn't interested in much other than swordfighting, which made him a bit annoying in terms of character.

Marie approached him as he was training while I hid in the shadows, watching from afar. "Good luck," I whispered under my breath. "This is your last chance."

"Are you certain this is the best course of action? I was under the impression you had developed feelings for her," said Luxion.

"I like her, sure. But not like that."

In the end, despite Marie's overtures, Chris merely shook his head. "Apologies, but I'm not one for romance. I cannot accept your interest."

"Oh, all right."

Marie had made a more valiant effort this time around. I was impressed, actually. Alas, it hadn't been enough to pique his interest.

Chris wiped the sweat from his brow and eyed Marie warily. "I'm not sure why exactly you've decided to approach me, but I already have a fiancée. I cannot grow close to another female student without impinging on her honor. Please don't speak to me in the future unless absolutely necessary."

That was a valid point; he was already taken.

Marie's shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm sorry."

Chris did look surprised by her sincere apology. Perhaps he hadn't expected her to back down so easily. His lips parted in a smile. "That was rude of me. I don't seem to have a way with words, and I'm not very good at dealing with girls. I think it would also be in your best interest to find someone else."

Chris was indeed a bit too blunt, but he was still trying to be considerate, in his own way. In the game, he had always seemed pretty cold and distant, so this was unexpected.

That said, Chris resumed swinging his wooden sword. Marie retreated quickly so as not to disrupt him, returning to where I was waiting. She looked a little dejected. When she came to a stop in front of me, she smiled. "That could've

gone better."

"You struck out with four in a row. So I guess that's it."

"Yeah," she agreed.

It was game over. Marie had tried to woo every single love interest save for the prince and found no success.

Marie let out a long exhale, as if all the tension had fled her body. She straightened. "But, I mean, isn't this super unfair?" she grumbled. "That I'd fail with all four of them?! Why couldn't at least one of them open their eyes and see what a catch I am?!"

Sadly, reality didn't always go the way we wanted, unlike a scripted game.

I glanced at Luxion. "Miss Olivia's making good progress with the love interests, isn't she?"

"Yes. Although it is difficult to ascertain which route she has chosen. Based on the information you both provided me, I would venture to guess that she is developing her relationships with all of the boys equally."

And sadly, as a result, Marie couldn't get a single one of them to look at her twice.

"You've gotta be kidding me. What, is she heading for the reverse harem ending? She could share at least one of them with me." Marie sounded a little annoyed, but if anything, she looked forlorn and distraught.

"Cheer up," I told her. "I'll treat you to dinner."

Marie instantly perked up, and drool dribbled down her chin. But despite the delight, she didn't want to seem so easily bought. "D-don't you dare mock me," she huffed. "You think a hot meal's all it takes to cheer me up?"

"How about you wipe that drool first? You're not convincing anyone."

While the two of us were bantering back and forth out of view, Olivia arrived at the training grounds.

"Mr. Chris, you're training, too?" she asked.

"Yeah. You?"

"Y-yes. We'll have to show off our combat skills soon, so I thought I would practice in advance."

"That so?"

Chris was normally aloof. But with Olivia, he smiled the moment they started talking. I could understand where he was coming from. Olivia was naive, kindhearted, and just overall more open-minded than most folk. Her cheerful, energetic side—and enormous breasts—made her all the more appealing. If I were in his shoes, I'd have been smiling, too. Meanwhile, Marie stood in stark contrast with her unsavory personality and flat-as-a-board chest.

Marie seemed to notice where my gaze had drifted. She smiled menacingly, glaring daggers at me. "Spit it out. How exactly are you comparing us, hmm?"

I turned away quickly. "Anyhow, why don't we go grab us some food?"

"You were comparing our breasts, weren't you?! Go on, say it!" Marie snapped. She'd forsaken all pretense at this point, letting her emotions flow out unchecked.

"At times, the truth has the power to hurt people," I told her sagely. "I'm far too gentle a soul to risk such a thing."

She balled her fists. "You're basically admitting it! Damn you! So it *is* my chest, huh? You men are all the same. Just a bunch of creeps!"

I wasn't about to tell her the truth: that the *roundness* of breasts was far more appealing than their actual size. Not that this helped her. She was so flat there were no curves to entice the eye.

"Urgh, you really piss me off," Marie continued, fuming. "I'm going to eat ten whole steaks!"

Luxion had kept his silence up until this point, but upon hearing this, he interjected. "You ate ten last time as well, did you not? I should advise you that while your body will see no further development, you are capable of retaining fat. Not in your chest or buttocks, either, but rather around your stomach and upper arms."

Marie sobered quickly. "I-I'll limit it to six, then."

Seriously? That was still a lot! It was little wonder why the love interests hadn't fallen for her. She'd worried me at first with her antics, but with everything I knew about her now, I couldn't see her seducing them if she were the last girl in the world.

"C'mon, let's get moving," I said. "I'm starving."

"Hold up! Wait for me!"

Chapter 11: May Tea Parties

T WAS ACADEMY CUSTOM for first-year boys to begin inviting girls to tea parties in May. Why May, you ask? Don't know, don't care. The simple fact of it was that from May onward, guys had to throw these parties on the regular or suffer the consequences.

Most of the boys hired people to do the setup and catering; that was much simpler. Not me, though. No, I'd had a fateful encounter with a certain individual that had changed my life forever. The individual in question was our etiquette professor, a man I had since dubbed "Master."

To start, I'd had no interest in tea whatsoever. But one of Master's personally brewed cups had radically changed my frame of mind. Who knew there was such depth to the art of steeping tea? I could never have foreseen that I'd awaken to such an incredible hobby in my second life.

"I have been reborn."

Thanks to Master, I now understood that tea was a treasured cultural cornerstone.

My friends, Daniel and Raymond, gave me frosty looks.

"Must be nice being so simpleminded."

"You have a new hobby. Adorable."

What crawled up their butts and died? I could feel the envy in their voices. "Something wrong?" I asked when I finally decided to broach the topic. "You guys have been razzing me more than usual today."

We were seated together on a bench in the inner courtyard. For being so physically close, I felt myself held at a distinct distance.

The light hit Raymond's glasses, making them gleam eerily. "I've heard the rumors. Seems like you've gotten all up close and personal with one of the higher-ranked girls—one who doesn't have a personal servant waiting on her

hand and foot."

Daniel made a fist as tears streamed down his cheeks. "You bastard! I wish I was in your shoes! Introduce us to some nice girls, too, why don't you?!"

As much as they resented me for my supposed success, they weren't above using me to find women for themselves. I could appreciate the practical stance. Unfortunately, they were operating under a considerably false assumption.

"You're talking about Marie, right? Yeaah, it's really not the way it seems."

They exchanged looks, as if they'd somehow expected this response. My denial didn't hold much water in their minds. They still suspected something was up.

"Oh, sure, 'not like that,'" Raymond said mockingly. "Whatever. I still envy you for getting that close to a girl."

Daniel hung his head. "I'd sure like to do that with one who doesn't have a servant."

It was rare for upperclass girls *not* to have demi-human lovers hanging off their every word. Like, in gacha game terms, landing a girl like that was like rolling for an SSR—no, a UR. We're talking odds of less than 1 percent. It was unfortunate, considering the general class girls didn't have slaves at all. Either they were too poor to afford such an expense, like Marie, or some other circumstance prevented them from keeping one.

"Oh, it's the prince," Raymond said.

As stated, Julius strolled into the inner courtyard. He was accompanied by Jilk, as usual—the guy who was basically his brother. A gaggle of female admirers scurried along behind them. They showered the boys with screams and squeals of adoration, though neither of the love interests seemed interested in all the noise. If anything, they looked troubled by the attention.

I should be so lucky. I thought. "Must be nice being them."

Raymond and Daniel sneered at me and clicked their tongues.

Hey, be nicer to me!

But the moment someone else entered the courtyard, Daniel's gaze shifted

toward them. "Oh," he said, "it's that scholarship student."

As soon as Olivia arrived on the scene, Julius and Jilk made their way over to her. Unfortunately for all of them, yet another person made their appearance—at which point my friends and I made identical sour faces.

"Seriously? Even Miss Angelica's here now?" I muttered, voicing the exasperation Daniel and Raymond surely felt.

The atmosphere grew oppressively tense. The prince was fawning over another woman while his fiancée looked on. Anyone could see where this was going—we were in for a real scene. Sadly, that premonition was right on the money.

"Your Highness, please think of your position!"

Julius rolled his eyes at his fiancée, as if he were a child sneering at his nagging mother. "Angelica, this is the academy. Don't bring my status into this."

"You may just be another student here, but there are limits to this behavior!" she insisted. "The fact that you would invite only the scholarship student to your tea party is proof of your utter lack of regard for your responsibility! I beseech you, reconsider immediately."

This was a scene from early in the game in which the crown prince invited the protagonist to his May tea party, only for the villainess Angelica to swoop in. In the ensuing confrontation, he stood up for Olivia against her tirade. It was one thing seeing this play out on a screen; in person, it was way more intense. Part of me was interested in seeing what happened next, but the desire to flee was overpowering the impulse.

"Life's so easy when you're a hot guy," I murmured. "You can flirt with another girl right in front of your betrothed and still somehow get away with it."

Daniel quickly shook his head. "No, no, no. This is all *sorts* of wrong. And besides, the scholarship student's a commoner."

"If he's only making her his concubine, who cares?" Raymond argued, not seeing the problem. "It's happened before."

That boggled Daniel's mind. "Wait, really?"

There were Cinderella stories about common-born women entering the court in that capacity, yes, but the bigger issue was Julius's attitude in front of his fiancée. From an outside perspective, the protagonist looked like the real villainess here.

We watched quietly until at last the group dispersed. Ultimately, things played out the way they had in the game, with Julius going to bat for Olivia. Thoroughly vexed, Angelica retreated.

I hopped off the bench. "Okay. Guess we should get going." The boys grabbed my arms before I could start for the school building. "Whoa. What's with you two?"

"We aren't finished!" Daniel reminded me.

"It's high time you fill us in on the exact nature of your relationship with this Miss Marie. We're not just underdogs—we're comrades-in-arms, right? It's only fair that you share."

We backwater barony bros had banded together, so he had a point there. I was also starting to realize that if I didn't rectify this misunderstanding soon, it would only spell more trouble for me.

And so, I decided to check in with Marie.

"I didn't get a single invite this month," Marie announced dolefully. Not only had the five love interests snubbed her, all the other guys had, too. Now she sat in her chair with her knees hugged to her chest.

"In your case, I imagine they hesitated to invite you due to your objectionable family ties," Luxion said. "There are significant drawbacks to marrying a woman from a house with such considerable debt. I am sure that influenced their decision."

His cold reasoning made Marie shoot to her feet. "I'm sick of hearing logical arguments!" she shouted. "They should be judging me on *my* character, not my family's!"

"Don't ask for the impossible," I chided her.

Aristocratic marriages were fundamentally political. There were plenty of cases where two individuals fell romantically in love only to be torn apart due to their respective house's circumstances. All sorts of things could get in the way: a gap in relative status or their families aligning with different factions—things of that nature.

"But why?!" Marie demanded. "This stupid otome game world's supposed to be great for women, isn't it?!"

"Yup, and it's nightmare city for the dudes."

In a rather unfortunate twist of fate, it had wound up being a nightmare for Marie as well. My heart ached for her.

"Anyway," I said, eager to bring up the topic that was gnawing at the back of my mind, "I need you to explain the nature of our relationship to my friends. They're under the false impression that we're dating. And thanks to that, they're now insisting I need to introduce them to other girls."

"Be nicer to me!" Marie huffed before her face softened a little. "Well, if that's what they want, why not introduce them?"

"Because I don't know any girls to introduce them to, obviously."

She kicked my shin under the table. "What the hell's that supposed to mean, huh?!"

"Ow!"

"You do seem to enjoy each other's company," Luxion remarked.

The spot where her foot had made contact hurt like hell. It was crazy how much power she packed into that tiny little body.

I waited for Marie to simmer down before I resumed our conversation. "Think about it. I meant I don't know *any* girls worth introducing them to. My older sister, Jenna, is a serious scumbag. And I'd bet anything that her friends aren't any better."

Two of my siblings attended the academy with me: my older brother, Nicks, and my older sister, Jenna. Nicks was in the general class, which primarily consisted of students from low-ranking knight houses. He didn't even have the

opportunity to acquaint himself with girls in the upper class, which Marie and I were part of. Jenna was in the upper class with me, but ignoring the fact that anyone who'd be friends with her was a miserable human being—or so I suspected—if I asked her to introduce one of her buddies to one of mine, she'd probably say something like, "You want me to introduce my friends to dirt-poor bottom dwellers? Ew. No thanks. We wouldn't even give those losers the time of day."

I supposed it'd be rich hearing that come from her, considering she was in the same boat, being from a poor barony herself.

I sighed.

But, to my amazement, Marie said, "If you're in that much of a bind, I could set them up with some girls."

"What, seriously?! You could do that?"

"You seriously think too little of me," she snapped.

We arrived at the pub my poor countryside comrades frequented. Marie had brought a number of girls to introduce to them, and so the atmosphere had a notably different feel. Everyone—from those in my year to upperclassmen—grinned at me from ear to ear. It was a little unnerving, honestly.

"Leon, I always believed in you."

"You're the best friend a guy could ask for."

"If you ever need anything, you know you can come to me. I'll do whatever I can to help you out."

I offered a strained, lopsided smile in return. These were the same guys who, just days prior, had glowered at me when we passed in the hallways. Now they were suddenly acting all buddy-buddy.

Marie had brought six girls with her. The first had long, wavy hair, which she nervously twisted between her fingers, and she showed no real interest in anyone else. The second was a petite girl who stared nervously at her lap. The third had frazzled hair and disheveled clothes speckled with dried paint. As for

the final three, they were her old bullies.

"Hey," I whispered to Marie, sliding up to her. "Where'd you find these chicks? I mean, I guess the better question is why you brought the girls who were picking on you."

"We smoothed things over. Or at least, we're at a point where we can have a normal conversation," she said.

Wow, with girls who treated her like human garbage? She really is tough as nails.

"Oh, uh, okay," I said awkwardly. "And what about the new faces?"

My friends and I had been gathering as much intel as possible on available girls who might not treat us like the scum of the earth, but I had never seen or even heard of the new girls who'd come to this little meet-and-greet.

Marie reached for the appetizers. "They're shut-ins."

"Shut-ins?!"

"See the girl twirling her hair? She's super lazy. The nervous one doesn't like crowds, so she's always studying by herself in the dorm. The last one's the artistic type. She doesn't really give a crap about much else besides her hobby."

So they all came with their fair share of baggage.

The light hit Raymond's glasses at just the right angle, giving them an ominous gleam. "Miss Marie," he said, "may I ask why none of them have personal servants?"

"Those three..." Marie paused to wash down the food she'd been gorging herself on, "simply don't have the money to afford one."

She was referring to her former bullies. The leader's lips puckered in indignation. "Well, excuse us for coming from families too poor to shell out," she huffed.

The boys quickly shook their heads. "No, that's nothing to feel self-conscious about!" they insisted.

"As for the other three, they aren't interested," Marie continued. "The

nervous one—Ellie—seems to be afraid of demi-humans. The lazy one—Betty—just hates them. As for the artistic one, Cynthia, she thinks they're an eyesore. All three just want to get married and never leave the house. They don't really care whether they live in the countryside or the capital. If a guy can provide them with the perfect environment for their preferred loner lifestyle, they'll agree to get hitched."

Betty, the one who was fiddling with her hair, didn't want to work and would need a servant to look after her. The nervous one, Ellie, wanted plenty of books to read, so her partner would have to periodically buy her more. The final girl—the artistic Cynthia—just wanted to be left alone to paint.

Upon hearing these requirements, my friends and I practically vibrated out of our skin. You couldn't find a better deal than this!

Daniel shot out of his seat. "All right. I'm going all out for this."

"Hold up, Daniel! I'm going first!" Raymond insisted.

I shook my head, tutting at my friends. "What a sad sight, seeing such close friends at odds. As the host, I believe I should take it upon myself to speak with them first."

Marie glared at me.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing." She gave me the cold shoulder and resumed snacking.

Daniel and Raymond made faces at me.

"Leon, I can't believe you," said Daniel.

Raymond shook his head. "Yeah. You really are a jerk."

I gawked. "Huh? Why?"

In the end, a bitter struggle ensued between the boys. These girls were too promising to pass up. In Japan, girls with baggage like this were deemed undesirable, but here, they were practically goddesses. They sounded almost too good to be true.

The pub turned into a boxing match as the guys decided to determine turn

order based on whose fists did the best talking. That part was a little disconcerting. Still, I wasn't above joining in to net myself a spot—but for some reason, I was forbidden from taking part. I didn't understand. I wanted a partner just as much as the next guy, but no one would let me fight for my right.

At long last, I was able to host my May tea party.

"Guess you're the only one who came," I grumbled.

Marie's eyes lit up as she gazed at the tea and sweets I had prepared for my guests. She was probably eager to dig in, but I forced her to wait until the tea was ready.

"Who cares?" she said. "One guest is better than none. Anyway, these sweets are from that really popular confectionery, right? I always wanted to see what they taste like!"

In May, male students rented rooms to hold tea parties for their female guests. It was traditional to provide beverages, snacks, and entertainment for the girls.

Luxion floated in the center of the room, his gaze shifting from me to Marie and back again. "Master, you should be grateful that your efforts have not gone to waste."

"You're right about that at least," I agreed. "Everyone else only cares about the love interests' parties. Only a little while ago a bunch of girls swore up and down that they'd come if I invited them. Where are they now? There's not a soul here, save for Marie."

It was a small consolation to hear that Daniel and Raymond were having similar issues. We had so many popular peers to compete with, and all of them had the finances to put on a spectacle at their parties. They invited large swathes of the female student body, which in turn discouraged those girls from bothering with any other events.

Honestly, the rest of us didn't need girls comparing us to Prince Julius or his buddies. We couldn't hold a candle to them.

"I really envy those guys," I said wistfully.

Marie gave me a look, as if she was hesitating over whether to say something.

"What is it?"

"Don't you feel ashamed, comparing yourself to them?"

I scowled. "Rubbing salt in the wound, huh?" I said as I poured the tea. "You're the last person I want to hear that from. You were the one trying to chase them down for a reverse harem ending."

Once I set Marie's cup in front of her, she picked it up and cradled it carefully in her hands, taking modest sips. "Oh, that. Thinking back on it now, I'm glad I didn't succeed. Not that I'd have been able to, no matter how hard I tried."

"So, you've finally given up, huh?"

Her surrender spoke to a complete lack of sincerity in her initial pursuit of that reverse harem to begin with.

Marie gently set her cup down before forking a bite of cake into her mouth. "It's more like the love interests aren't as attractive as I thought they'd be. They fawn all over Olivia while ignoring everyone and everything else. They're kinda stupid."

Basically, you're bad-mouthing them because they turned you down, right?

"You make a valid point," Luxion said, contrary to my own jaded perspective. "They are all already engaged, yet they spend a conspicuous amount of time with Olivia. It's especially shameful given their respectable positions. I fail to comprehend this foolish behavior."

"Luxion, you really don't get it, do ya?" I cut in smugly. "What Marie's trying to say is she resents them for picking Miss Olivia. It's got nothing to do with whether they're attractive. That's just an excuse."

Those guys had it all—looks, money, power. What was there to complain about?

Marie scrunched her face. "Personality is an important factor, you know. I'm trying to say that, in that respect, those five score a total zero."

"Really? But they've got such good reputations."

Maybe everyone around them was just a sycophant eager to get in good by showering the prince and his crew with empty flattery, but I hadn't heard a single bad word spoken against them. And besides, Marie was the one who'd acted like personality came second to everything else. She was contradicting herself.

"Anyway, there's no way I could have actually gone out with any of them when I really think about it," Marie continued. She was sounding awfully composed compared to when we'd first met. "Did you hear? Brad rented out an entire park for his party."

I nodded to myself. "Oh, right. I remember that plot point."

"Yeah, well, it's fine when stuff like that happens in a game, but it's a bit overboard in real life, don'tcha think? I wonder how much he spent on that one event."

When it came to finances, Marie and I were on the same page—we were practically commoners compared to our peers.

"Incidentally," I said, pointing to the snacks she was chowing down on, "all those treats cost me a pretty penny."

The confections in this world were crazy expensive. That was especially true for the ones I had procured, given I'd put in a custom order with a patissier.

Marie's eyes went wide. "R-really? That much?"

"Yeah. A custom order from a famous chef doesn't come cheap." When I quoted the exact price, the emotion drained from her face.

"You could buy so much underwear with that money," she muttered solemnly to herself.

I eyed her quizzically. "Huh? What was that?"

"Do you suffer from a shortage of hosiery?" Luxion asked.

Marie's face heated. "Since I stopped growing, I've been using the same ones over and over again, and, um...even if my socks get holes, it's not like I can afford new ones. I've just sewed the holes up myself." She fidgeted in her seat,

embarrassed to be sharing this information.

My eyes heated. I was on the verge of crying over the misery of Marie's life—to think, she didn't even have proper undergarments! "You...you should've said something sooner!" I snapped.

Rather than lazing around here and enjoying tea and snacks, we needed to take care of this problem stat.

Marie's eyes misted over. "There's no way I could just bust out something that shameful!" Her daily life was so strenuous that all of her attention and energy had been focused on desperately trying to climb out of the pit she'd been kicked into. She repeatedly slammed her fist against the table. "Do you have any idea how I felt?! My family told me they didn't need to buy anything new for me because I wouldn't grow any bigger anyway! You can't understand what that's like!"

That was inexcusable. My heart ached so much for her.

"Okay, calm down," I insisted, holding my hands out. "We're going into town right now. We can at least get you the essentials today."

"I don't have the money. The adventuring quests—no, I guess I shouldn't be calling them that, if this isn't really a game... Anyway, we'll be going into the local dungeon soon, so I figure I'll earn some dough then. I just need to make do in the meantime."

"With no finances of your own, you intend to make your own way through hard work," said Luxion. "That's a commendable attitude. I am impressed that you haven't even begun to entertain the idea of resorting to crime."

Isn't he way too soft on her? And only her, at that.

"Huh? Are you for real?" I shot him a look. "She was trying to worm her way up the social ladder by seducing all the love interests. That's hardly commendable."

"I truly wish you would learn from her example, Master."

What, you want me to try wooing a bunch of dudes for my reverse harem ending? I shook my head. Or maybe he means a regular harem, since I'm a guy.

As if there's any such thing as a harem in this world.

That kind of arrangement would be heavily frowned upon, and the women in this world were practically intolerable to begin with. If the alternative was living my life surrounded by women like my sister Jenna, then I dreamed of celibacy. Sadly, bachelorhood carried so much stigma that it wasn't really an option, a fact that vexed me to no end.

Marie's face darkened. "I have to at least work hard enough to buy my necessities. As soon as I'm able to enter the dungeon, I'll be doing my damnedest in there every day. I need to earn my independence." Those didn't sound like empty words, coming from her.

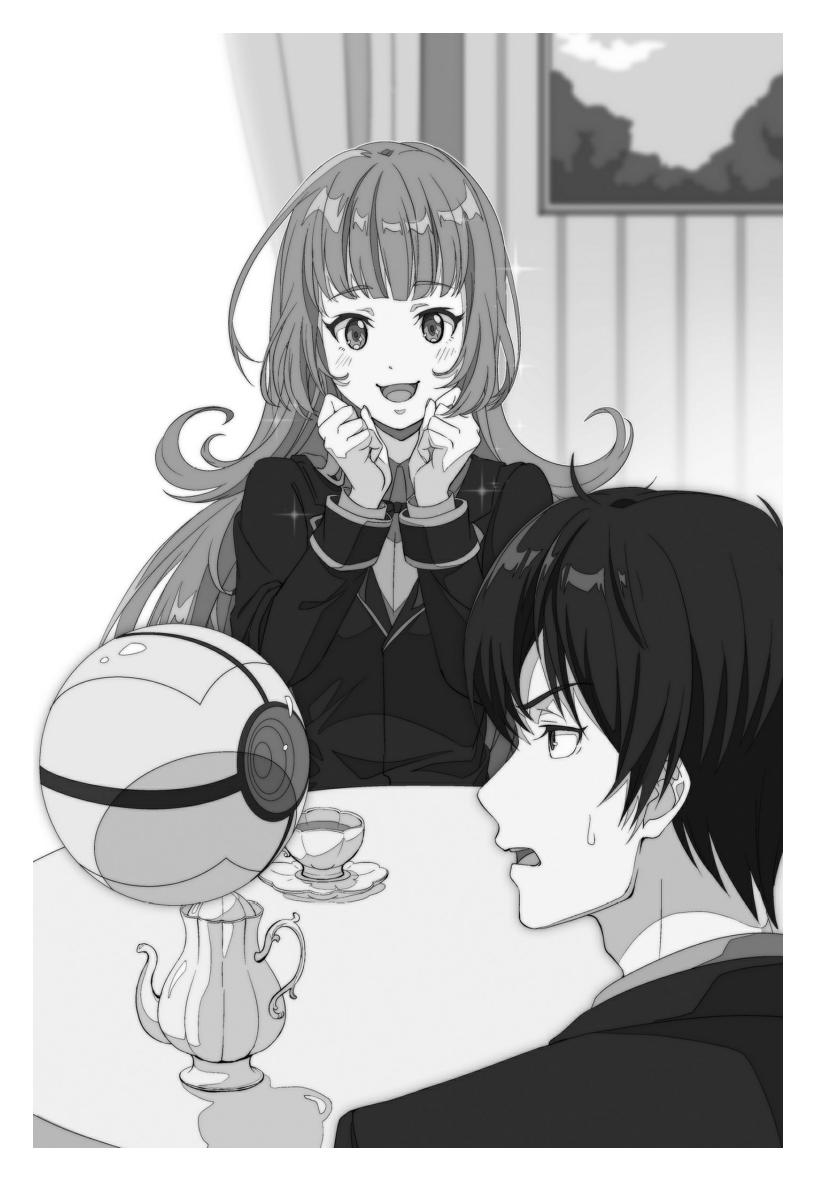
"I'll buy your essentials," I insisted, "so don't even think about doing something as stupid as dungeon diving every single day."

Marie leaned forward in her chair and grasped both of my hands, smiling as she purposefully struck a cute, ingratiating pose. "You mean it?!"

"It's just tragic for a girl your age to have socks with holes in them and stuff. I've got the money to cover that much."

"Oh? Trying to save face? You can't simply admit outright that you feel bad for her?" Luxion teased.

"Can it."



Marie beamed as she went back to sipping her tea and sampling the snacks. Her complexion was much brighter now that she had one less worry on her plate.

We headed into the city to accompany Marie on her little shopping trip. She was patronizing stores that specialized in women's clothing, so we hung around outside to wait for her.

"I was shocked to hear how she grew up," I said to my partner.

"It was certainly more miserable than we anticipated. Based on what we have learned, it is my personal opinion that it would be far too risky to simply ignore Viscount Lafan and his household. And we would hardly be the only ones who benefited from dispatching them."

I stared at him. "Is it just me or are you seriously soft on her?"

"I will not deny that. The blood of old humanity runs as strong in Marie as it does you, Master. It is only natural I would give her preferential treatment."

"You don't say." I let the conversation dry up there, at least until I noticed another store down the road—one I'd seen before. "Hey, isn't that the place Marie was ogling that first time?"

"It is indeed. They truck in dresses and other ladies' accessories. It appears they even provide custom tailoring."

I remembered Marie being particularly taken with the place. From what I could see of their display, their merchandise was top quality, with a price to match. Marie could never hope to afford anything from there on her own.

"A gown is probably some far-off dream to a girl who can't even afford her own socks," I said to myself.

"Quite."

After contemplating the matter for a moment, I made my way over to that shop while Marie was otherwise occupied.

April had been action-packed with all sorts of events, but ever since that last incident, things had calmed down. I was only a background character, after all; excitement wasn't exactly my middle name. My days returned to their usual monotony, which consisted of attending classes, exploring the local dungeon, and saving money for tea parties.

Before I knew it, the term was nearly over. The problem was that I'd only ever had the one attendee at every tea party I threw: Marie. My jerkbag of an older sister, Jenna, occasionally dropped in to heckle me though. Like today.

"Hey, loser, are you seriously going to marry Marie?"

"Uh, what?" I was in the middle of pouring my sister a fresh cup when she kicked me in the face with that question.

Jenna shrugged, staring disinterestedly at her nails. "You invite her to all of your tea parties, so I just figured it was a done deal," she said. "Although I guess she's not here today."

"She's not here today because she knew you were coming," I snapped.

"Marie may not be a problem in herself, but her family sure is. I hear they're drowning in debt." Jenna snatched up one of the snacks on the table and took a bite.

I couldn't figure out my sister's angle. It was almost like she was warning me against getting romantically involved with Marie. Was she actually worried about me in her own twisted way? Or was she more worried that Marie's family ties would somehow impact her life if I got together with her? Okay, yeah, it had to be the latter.

"That's not how it is with us. We're friends. *Friends*," I repeated for extra emphasis.

We had a lot in common, given our origins in Japan. More than we had in common with anyone else in this world. The values we'd inherited from our previous lives sort of clashed with the tenets of this one.

Jenna narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing my face. "Well, if you do go through with this, you'll be the one to suffer, so it's not like I care. But you can't say I didn't try to warn you."

Yes, you've made it plenty clear you don't like the company I keep.

"I think you should be more worried about yourself," I said. "Haven't you found a guy yet?"

Jenna leaned back in her chair. "Unlike you, I've got more options than I know what to do with. I'll have you know multiple boys are courting me."

"Must be nice."

The capital had been a terrible influence on Jenna, exacerbating her already insufferable personality, and yet some guys were still trying to get with her. Maybe it was her looks. I was probably biased, being her little brother, but I thought she had some decent qualities in that arena.

Thanks to my contributions, our house was finally free of debt, and our region was developing at volume and speed. Since we lived in the far-flung countryside and sat on the lowest rungs of the noble hierarchy, we had no troublesome ties to any of the aristocratic factions. That made Jenna a hot commodity for my peers.

Hard to believe someone as unbearable as her is prime wife material. What a rotten world this is.

"It's your own fault." Jenna stabbed a finger in my direction. "If you hadn't gotten so close with Marie, you'd have a whole army of girls on your doorstep. You did yourself a big favor by taking down those pirates, but then you had to go and ruin it by attaching yourself to her. No wonder everyone has the wrong idea."

I made an exaggerated gasp. "Gee, I guess I sure screwed up this time."

"Hmph. You don't actually think that."

I shrugged. "I do think it's a shame."

"You aren't fooling anybody. I always had a hard time reading you, but it's gotten even worse since you enrolled here. Do you realize that?"

That made sense. Between my memories of my past life and knowledge of this game, my actions were probably pretty inscrutable.

"Anyway," I said, eager to change the subject, "is Marie's family really that

awful?"

Jenna stared at me for a moment. She probably sensed I was avoiding something, but she didn't bother to press the issue. "All I know is what I've heard, but they certainly sound pretty awful."

At the academy, it was tradition to hold a party for each grade before extended vacation. The principle aim was to give students a chance to practice formal etiquette, as well as provide an opportunity for students to interact with as many of their peers as possible. For the female students, this was a chance to get dolled up in their best gowns and make a good show of themselves. Those who didn't have the money for tailor-made dresses had to rent theirs instead. For students as dirt poor as Marie, even that option was too expensive.

"Gaaaaah!" Marie howled. "I knew I should've gone dungeoning more often to make some cash!"

The school party was only hours away when she began to lament her life and her choices. If her reaction was any indication, she'd hoped to attend in a gown rather than her school uniform. I found her sniffling about it behind the main building, which was when I handed her a gift bag.

"I figured you'd say something like that, so I got an outfit for you," I said.

Her head shot up, but the look on her face was less joy than suspicion. "You picked it out?" she asked skeptically, as if she didn't trust my fashion sense. "You don't even know my size, do you?"

"He does not," Luxion agreed, "but I am fully aware of your measurements. You need not be concerned in that arena."

Marie's jaw dropped. "Have you no respect for my privacy?!"

I grabbed her by the arm and started dragging her inside. "Luxion wrote them down, and I passed them to the store. Not that I looked. So relax." I figured that would allay her concerns, but her mood didn't really improve.

"Are you saying you have no interest in a girl like me, huh? Are you mocking me?"

"If there's a right answer to that, do enlighten me. Actually, scratch that. We're out of time. Hurry up and get changed."

The academy was equipped with changing rooms for the female students, with staff on hand to attend to their hair and makeup. Having this option on hand was a welcome luxury for the girls. The boys, of course, were provided with no such services.

I had already made an appointment for Marie in advance, so I left everything up to the staff while I waited outside.

"Wh-what do you think?" Marie asked nervously as she stepped out.

"You look incredible," I said sincerely.

Her face flushed.

Marie was wearing the exact dress she had ogled in the window display ages ago. I'd had the shop's tailors adjust it to her measurements and bought accessories and shoes to match.

I knew she'd long yearned to wear a gown like this. It would have been insensitive to tease her, even if that was my knee-jerk reaction. So I snapped my mouth shut after giving my thoughts to keep myself from adding anything offputting. See? I can read the room.

Tears welled in Marie's eyes. "It's...it's the first time I've ever worn a dress like this."

She had mentioned working in the adult industry once upon a time, but apparently they didn't wear gowns quite like this.

"Glad you have the chance now," I said. "How about we get going?" I offered my hand, and she readily took it.

The party was held in an enormous event hall with extravagant decorations that felt far too fancy for a student function. A buffet table was lined with dishes from top chefs, all of which had been designed to be eaten while standing. A live orchestra played in the background.

Back in my time in Japan, I had never attended a party as luxurious as this. Namely because I'd never really gone to parties.

"This world is something else," I said.

"Shur ish!" Marie was already gorging herself. She looked all the more out of place doing it in that adorable gown. Part of me wondered what she was thinking, but I decided to hold my tongue, since she was enjoying herself.

"Anyway, how come I'm stuck with you? I was supposed to be going around picking up girls with Daniel and Raymond." I frowned.

Marie shot me a look. "Wouldn't you feel bad leaving me all by myself?"

Besides, Daniel and Raymond were off with those girls that Marie had introduced them to. Originally, the three of us had intended to move as a group to try to hit on our female classmates, but now they'd insisted they already had their minds made up. The coldhearted jerks had totally broken their promise to me. They were way too preoccupied with trying to land themselves a match as quickly as possible so they could bow out of this miserable bride race.

I can't let them get away with this. I was already figuring out how to track them down to disrupt their little dates.

Beside me, Marie was chowing down on the mountain of food she'd stacked on her plate, but as her gaze wandered, she suddenly said, "Wow, would you look at that." Her voice was thick with envy.

I followed her line of sight to Julius and Olivia. The latter was dressed in her school uniform, but all of the love interests had surrounded her. Their popularity made them stand out, and the way they showered Olivia with attention drew attention to her as well.

"Wishing that was you?" I asked, leaning toward Marie.

She shook her head. "Dummy. I was just thinking we live in totally separate worlds. And anyway, my values would seriously clash with theirs."

The sort of luxury that made Marie balk was, to them, normal—or even restrained. Although she still envied Olivia, she had at least given up on ever stealing her spotlight.

"I'm glad you understand," I said. "Now there's no one to get in Miss Olivia's way."

As long as the protagonist hooked up with one of her love interests, the world would be saved. We were headed for a happy end, provided nothing unforeseen popped up.

Marie and I watched the other attendees from a cozy spot by the wall. Everything was so ostentatious that it really did feel like a different world. Not in the literal sense, although that was indeed the case. It was more like Marie had said—the love interests were on a completely different level from the rest of us. We occupied the same space here at the school, but we lived our lives on opposite sides of an invisible chasm.

Then Marie let out a squeak as Angelica appeared and directly addressed the prince. "Ah..."

Angelica glowered at Olivia as she tried to step between them.

"Your Highness, don't you think you should be more selective with the company you keep?" Angelica asked as she glided up to him.

"I believe I've already told you not to bring outside affairs onto campus."

Angelica was dressed in a finely tailored gown that had been specially prepared for this occasion in the hope of drawing the prince's interest. She'd thought he might at least compliment her, but far from offering any praise, he had thus far completely ignored her presence. Julius's attention was focused solely on Olivia, who didn't even have the money to wear anything but her uniform. And he wasn't alone; his fellow respected heirs-to-be were fawning over her as well.

Angelica couldn't lie and say she wasn't jealous, but her bigger concern was the pure scandal of the spectacle.

Julius instinctively stepped in front of Olivia, putting himself between the girls and blocking Angelica's disapproving gaze. She found she resented him for it. Meanwhile, Olivia stood behind him, her gaze shifting about uncomfortably.

Why, Angelica wondered, are you taking my place? That's where I'm supposed to be!

What vexed her most was not that Olivia had stolen the prince's attention and affection, but that she looked *distressed*. She obviously had no appreciation for what it meant to stand at Julius's side. The thought infuriated Angelica.

"Scholarship student," Angelica said, rather than addressing Olivia by name. "I warned you before, didn't I? Is this your answer?"

Before Olivia could respond, Julius interjected. "What did you say to her? I know I told you that I didn't want you leaning on my status at school, Angelica."

His interference prevented her from pressing further. Julius had made his stance clear; he wanted to enjoy his time at the academy as an ordinary student. If Angelica argued any more, it would only upset him. And Angelica did want the prince to have the school life that he so strongly desired, as much as possible, at least. However, she couldn't let him forget that he was also the crown prince. A mere glance at the crowd made clear that he and his friends had drawn disapproving glares.

"The prince and his friends are completely enamored with that commoner."

"I wish I were in her shoes."

"She's got nerve for a lowborn hick."

It would have been one thing if they were enamored with their own fiancées, or even other girls of similar status. Instead they were obsessed with a commoner. It was an insult to the pride of the entirety of the female student body. In that regard, Angelica was among their number.

"Then at the very least, I beg you to interact with some of the other students as well," Angelica said in a last bid to get through to him.

Julius snorted. "If I feel like it."

He considered this party an opportunity to let loose and have fun—nothing like one of the stiff, formal affairs he usually attended in his capacity as prince.

Angelica fisted her hands. This isn't your personal playground. Why don't you understand? This is an important opportunity to make connections with people

We watched the whole dramatic affair unfold as the orchestra continued playing in the background.

"Y'know, when you think about it," Marie said, her eyes glued to the villainess and prince, "isn't it pretty slimy to hang all over another girl in front of your fiancée? I mean, straight up, it's pretty gross to hang around a guy who's already engaged in the first place, right?"

I don't think you've got any room to criticize. You were doing the exact same thing until, like, a month ago.

"Try taking a look in a mirror sometime," I suggested sarcastically. "That said, I agree. I wish they'd take the fight outside, though. They're making it awkward for the rest of us."

This was how things played out in the game, though, so there was nothing to do about it. That didn't mean it wasn't grossly unfair. Angelica was made out to be the villainess, but compared to the protagonist, she had solid, compelling reasons for her behavior.

As I studied them, something occurred to me. "Do girls really want a guy who'd kick his fiancée to the curb just for them? Is that really appealing?"

I wondered how this all looked to Olivia. I wasn't a girl, so I had no idea, but if she was enjoying this, she was a serious creep. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I hoped she wasn't that sort of person.

Marie considered my question. "Basically, the guy ditches his fiancée because he found someone he likes more. When you look at it like that, it kinda makes you worry he'd just as happily ditch the new girl if he found someone even better. That's the vibe. Personally, it's a huge turn-off."

"I thought this was some kind of dream scenario."

"Dreams and reality are separate. It sounds exciting in the moment, maybe even romantic. But as soon as the novelty wore off and you looked at it with a clear head, you'd realize it was a huge red flag. That's how these things go."

True. This scenario was one thing in a game, but it felt completely different in reality. The person at the center might be excited by the prospect of forbidden romance, but from the outside looking in, it was a huge downer.

The male students watched nervously as the drama continued, while the female students were on tenterhooks, waiting to see what happened next.

"I'd sure love to share your words with a certain someone who was thinking about pursuing the reverse harem ending for themselves," I said pointedly, grinning.

Marie balled her tiny fists and smacked my chest with them. "What's with you?! If you've got a problem with me, then say it!"

"I don't have a problem with you. I agree with everything you just said."

While we went on bantering, the people around us went eerily silent. When I paused to look, I noticed they were all staring at us.

"Uh...what?"

Luxion, who had concealed himself and was hovering close to me, quietly answered, "Everyone was quietly listening in on Julius's squabble with Angelica. By pure coincidence, the orchestra paused to take their break, and in the silence that ensued, the two of you kept going."

Basically, what he was getting at was that everyone had heard our every word.

Marie and I broke out in a cold sweat. Every single person in the room was staring us down.

Marie tugged on my arm. "Wh-what should we do?"

I quickly racked my brain. With no other choice, I took hold of her wrist and yanked her along as I sped out of the venue. "Come on, we're making a run for it! Excuse us, everyone!"



"Yes, excuse us!"

By the time we peeled out of the party hall, the orchestra had started back up. You guys are late! Learn to read the room a little!

We made it outside, breathless.

"What were you thinking? You made us stand out so much!" I complained.

"Don't pin this all on me!" Marie huffed and crossed her arms. "The worst part is that I hadn't even finished sampling the buffet."

Marie bolstered her complete lack of sex appeal with a voracious appetite. Unbelievable. And she even had a whole lifetime of experience from which she could have learned better.

The sun had already disappeared beneath the horizon, leaving darkness in its wake. Luxion emitted a beam of light from his eye to illuminate the surrounding area.

Marie cast a wistful glance over her shoulder at the party venue. "I really wanted to enjoy myself a little more." Her shoulders slumped.

A sense of guilt washed over me. She'd really been looking forward to tonight, and thanks to our little show, it had ended prematurely.

"As long as you're here, you'll have plenty of other opportunities to go to parties," I said.

She gave me a skeptical look. "You actually think *I'll* have more chances? Seems like you're forgetting how awful my family is."

The Lafans were drowning in debt. Marie's situation would improve if she found herself a man, but in the worst-case scenario, she'd be stuck with her family forever as their unpaid servant. There'd be no more parties if that happened. If she was to be believed, they'd probably treat her even worse than I could imagine—like a slave whose raison d'etre was to do their bidding.

"Well, we can save that conversation for another time," I said, trying to change the subject. Once the party was over, we had a long summer break to look forward to. "What're your plans for vacation? You going back home?"

"There's no place for me there. If I went back, they'd just treat me like a nuisance. It's better for me to stay at the academy and go dungeoning. I'm gonna make enough money to actually enjoy my school life!" She raised a fist, eyes blazing with determination.

I was speechless. How was that a fun way to spend your summer break? After a long stretch of silence, I couldn't stand it anymore and finally blurted out, "Wanna come stay with me? It'll be way far away in the countryside, though."

"With you?" Marie echoed.

"Yeah. I was planning to go back to my territory for the summer. There's a hot spring."

Her eyes lit up. "A hot spring?!"

I was relieved to see her so excited. "That's not all! Believe it or not...we've got rice, too!"

"Riiiiiiice!" Marie squealed. She broke into a run and circled around me, unable to contain her happiness.

Since we both hailed from Japan, the thought of being able to eat the staple foods of our long-lost home was a source of great joy. Marie was over the moon.

"What about miso? And soy sauce?!"

I shook my head. "Not yet, sadly. Fermented foods take time."

Marie's face fell, and she let out a disappointed groan.

"If Master wasn't so insistent on a totally organic process, I could produce it much faster. I explained to him that it would take a significant amount of time to start from scratch and follow the original techniques for natural fermentation, but he insisted. Your lack of miso and soy sauce is squarely his fault," Luxion complained.

Okay, but I'd spurned his suggestion because I doubted artificial versions would have the same nutritional value, let alone flavor.

"I want to eat the genuine article," I insisted.

At almost the same time, Marie said, "I much prefer natural to artificial."

We exchanged looks. Our cheeks flushed in embarrassment at our unexpected synchrony, and we quickly looked away.

"All right," Luxion answered. "In that case, you will have to wait another year."

It was actually impressive that he could make miso and soy sauce in a mere year. But still, can't he hurry it up even a little bit?

As Marie was skipping around, imagining how much more enjoyable her summer break was bound to be, she stumbled over her own feet and pitched forward.

"Whoa! You okay?"

"Ouch! It's been so long since I wore heels this high. I think I might've sprained my ankle." From the looks of it, her heels were starting to blister, too. She placed a hand over the wounded area and called on her healing magic to relieve the pain.

As I watched, certain memories flooded back. My little sister had hurt her foot one time and sat there on the ground sobbing, refusing to move. Annoyed, I'd left her there and gone home...but I had been so worried that I'd ended up doubling back to check on her. The little jerk had worn herself out and fallen asleep.

Once Marie was finished, I turned my back to her and knelt to the ground. "Hop on," I said. "I'll take you back."

"How considerate. Take me to the girls' dormitory, then." Marie hopped up with no reservation and thrust her finger forward. "C'mon, giddyup!"

At least thank me first! You trying to out-brat my sister or something?

As Marie rode on Leon's back, Luxion lighting their way through the dark, her mind wandered to the past.

This is kind of nostalgic. I remember Big Bro letting me ride on his back like this. Her brother had infuriated her to no end, but she'd always regretted her

part in his death. Revisiting those memories made her cling to Leon even tighter.

"Hey," Leon grumbled. "That hurts."

Even the way he complained was annoyingly reminiscent of her lost brother. It made her happy.

"You really can't read the mood," Marie said.

"Well, excuse me."

Again, just like her brother. A maelstrom of emotion welled up inside of her. Tears pricked at her eyes, and, embarrassed to be crying, she buried her face in his back. *In the end, I guess I'm nothing without my brother.*

Her whole life had gone off the rails after his death. He'd been more bark than he was bite—although his bark had been pretty awful. His personality, on the other hand... Well, it hadn't been terrible. At his core, he had been very kind. Leon reminded her of him.

I wonder if he reincarnated, too? If he did, I hope he has a much happier life this time around. He'd died so young, after all.

Marie peered up at the sky, where the silver light of the moon stood in brilliant contrast against a blanket of darkness.

For a moment, she wondered if perhaps Leon *was* her older brother, but considering the timing of his death, it wasn't possible. How could they both reincarnate at the same time?

"What's your home like?" Marie asked.

"It's all relaxing countryside. There's not much of anything else there, really, but I like it."

"Yeah. The capital doesn't really suit you."

Leon nodded. "Yep. I hate having all these people packed into such a small space. I also don't like how I've always got some kind of work to do—another reason why I hate it here."

"Yikes. Only a total failure would say something like that," she teased. That's

exactly the kind of thing my brother would say, though.

As Leon hauled Marie to the girls' dormitory, she reflected on everything that had happened thus far. She had worked frantically since reincarnating into this otome game, desperate to claim some happiness for her own. In her mind, she'd been set on dating all of the love interests, getting married, and living happily ever after. That particular wish hadn't come true, but she wasn't dissatisfied with how things had turned out instead.

I thought I'd just seduce those boys to get what I wanted, but for some reason, my heart wasn't really in it. We just didn't jive. At first, she hadn't been sure why she couldn't commit to cajoling them, but she finally understood. I always had horrible taste in men. Figures that it'd be in my second life that I realized I've got a thing for people who remind me of my brother.

She continued to mull this over even as she continued to banter with Leon.

Back at the party venue that Leon and Marie had abandoned, Stephanie was clad in a luxurious purple gown and idling the night away. Julius's squabble with Angelica had only just ended.

"What an amusing little spectacle," she remarked.

"My lady," said Carla, who was wearing a far more modest dress, "it would cause a stir if people overheard such a comment."

"Never you mind. Angelica's reputation will be in tatters after today. It's pitiful, seeing the future queen reduced to this." Stephanie snickered as her gaze trailed to the high-ranking ladies who served Angelica. Their leader had just proven herself impotent in the face of the prince's dismissal; Angelica's followers regarded her with looks of open distrust.

"She's a duke's daughter," Carla said in disbelief. "I can't imagine her position would be so easily undermined."

"I suppose. That's probably why the only real consequence she's suffered thus far has been the dissatisfaction of her entourage. But if something truly scandalous were to happen—perhaps if the prince were to break their engagement—even her own house would turn on her. I would *love* to see that."

Angelica was a trueborn lady—practically a princess. Picturing her downfall made Stephanie's lips curl in a malicious grin. At present, Angelica's father, Duke Redgrave, sat at the head of Holfort's largest political faction. Their unity was contingent upon Angelica's engagement to Julius. Only through their ties to the crown prince did they enjoy a superior status in the kingdom.

But what if they lost all of that?

The Redgraves' fall would galvanize the other factions that had, until this point, resigned themselves to inferiority. The promise of that power vacuum would lead to a fierce struggle among the survivors. No longer would Duke Redgrave enjoy his influential position at court, nor would he be able to act as boldly as he once had. While he would still be a duke, he would lose his position as a power player once he was no longer the lynchpin of the most powerful faction.

Julius and his friends were actively fawning over Olivia. Stephanie glared at the girl. "It vexes me to see them all so focused on a commoner, but I suppose we can afford to sit back and watch a little longer. More to the point, wasn't that Bartfort with Marie?"

Trembling, Carla nodded. "Yes. Um, y-you don't think they've caught on to our secret, do you?" By this, she meant the Offrey connection to the air pirates.

Stephanie laughed. "I have ties within the palace. Even if they were to make a report on me, I would have no trouble covering it up. The larger concern is that they both defied me. They'll have to pay for that." She pressed her index finger to her lips, and her tongue peeked out to lick it. "We'll have to wait and see how things play out with Angelica. In the meantime, I think I'll torture Marie and Bartfort."

Epilogue

THE SCHOOL'S CLOSING CEREMONY wrapped up without incident, and it was time for us to head home. My old man had come to the capital harbor to pick us up. Meanwhile, I was waiting at the academy for Marie, who'd failed to show up on time.

"I can't believe her, running late on a day like this," I grumbled.

Jenna and Nicks had already left.

"Perhaps it's taking her a while to pack," Luxion suggested.

"Yeah." I nodded thoughtfully. "Girls do kind of take forever with that."

"Or maybe she overslept."

I pulled a face. "That seems more plausible."

For some reason, I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was restless. Luxion seemed to sense my impatience.

"Shall we go to the dormitory to retrieve her?"

"Yeah, let's do that. Not that I can actually go inside."

As we were discussing our plans, a couple of girls passed by in casual wear. I assumed that, like me, they were headed back to their family estates. Or maybe they were simply heading out to have fun on the town. Curious as I was about their plans, I was more interested in their gossip.

"Feels good to see karma in action."

"Yeah, she was way too conceited. She deserved to get knocked down a peg."

"It's her own fault for standing out so much at the party."

Every one of those mean girls had their own personal servant, and the content of their conversation made me think instantly of how Marie and I had drawn attention to ourselves at the end-of-semester shindig. Was someone bullying her again?

"Luxion, hurry up and look for Marie!" I shouted.

"As you command."

I made a mad dash for the girls' dormitory, Luxion close on my heels.

Marie was still suffering from a serious case of bedhead as she rushed into the hallway with her travel bag. "I overslept!" she screeched in dismay.

She had been so nervous last night that she'd had a hard time falling asleep. Her mind kept turning over the question of how best to greet Leon's family when they finally met. Also, for whatever reason, she had a sinking feeling in her stomach. When she finally drifted off, she slept like a log. By the time she woke, it was almost her appointed meetup time with Leon.

"Hwah?!"

Marie flew down the hallway so quickly that she was blindsided by a girl coming around the corner and slammed into her. The force of the impact threw her and her pack to the floor.

"Yowch!" she cried. "Oh, hey, are you okay?! Sorry, I'm in a real rush right now, so I—huh?"

The other girl had fallen to the ground as well. Marie instinctively held out a hand to help her up, but the girl didn't even bother to accept it. She climbed to her feet on her own. Marie wondered for a moment if the girl was angry, but when she made out the girl's face, a chill shot down her spine. Those dark, despondent eyes belonged to Olivia, of all people.

Wary of Marie, Olivia silently retreated a few steps. Then she turned around and began walking away. Only then did Marie realize she was sweating bullets.

"Wh-what the heck? What's with her?"

The whole encounter was extremely unnerving. In Marie's mind, Olivia was a carefree girl who was always smiling at everyone, but her face had been an emotionless mask just now, her eyes consumed with darkness.

What was that about? I recognized that look. I've seen girls make that face a thousand times before. Those are the eyes of a girl so disgusted with the world

that she hates everything. I wonder what happened. Concerned, Marie debated chasing after Olivia, but her legs wouldn't budge. Her pulse thundered in her ears. For some reason, she hesitated. Could she really go after Olivia? Would that be all right?



She was frozen there for a few seconds, until a familiar voice rang out. "Oh? So that's where you were."

"Bwah!" Marie cried, spinning around. "Oh, it's you, Luxion. Don't scare me like that." She wiped the sweat from her brow and snatched up her travel bag.

"Master was concerned about you."

"Y-yeah, my bad. I didn't sleep well last night, so by the time I woke up, it was already..." Her voice trailed off.

Luxion moved his camera lens up and down, as if nodding. "As long as no unforeseen circumstances befell you. Now then, let us be off."

"R-right." Her thoughts wandered back to Olivia's strange behavior from moments before. It worried her, but at the same time, Olivia had openly spurned her attempt to help.

I bet she wouldn't admit it even if I tried to bring it up. I mean, we haven't even talked before. She doubted Olivia would appreciate a stranger prying into her personal life. Besides, Leon was waiting for her. Marie ultimately decided to leave her be.

"You overslept? Are you a toddler?!"

"I'm sorry."

I was relieved, if somewhat exasperated, to hear Marie was only late because she'd slept through her alarm. I'd had a sinking feeling that something was terribly wrong, but fortunately, my intuition was normally off. What a relief it was working just as badly as ever.

We hurried toward the harbor.

"Did the ship already leave?" Marie asked as we walked. She was worried my old man had departed without us.

"It's not on a schedule. I'm sure they'll be nice and wait for us, though we'll probably get an earful."

"Even assuming they were to depart without the two of you, you would be in

good hands. I can deliver you hence via Partner," Luxion assured us.

I shook my head. "Partner stands out way too much. It's huge! We're talking seven hundred meters long. You can't just go flying around in something that big without catching the wrong kind of attention."

"May I remind you that it was your carelessness that led to its discovery in the first place? I am blameless."

Without really thinking it through, I had revealed Luxion's main ship to my family, so as far as they were concerned, the ship I had acquired was a hulking, seven-hundred-meter-long behemoth. That was why Luxion had been forced to keep Partner at its initial titanic size. Too titanic, in fact, which made it really difficult to just up and use.

"That's right, how thoughtless of me to forget. *Of course* it was all my fault," I snapped sarcastically. Strangely, that sinking feeling from before still hadn't eased up. "Marie, are you sure nothing weird is going on?"

She cocked her head to the side. "Like what?"

"I mean, like..." I sighed. "No, never mind. Forget it."

"Hey! Hurry up and spit it out. You've got me curious now!"

If I explained that I had a bad feeling that something was terribly wrong, she would totally laugh at me. Rather than open myself up to that, it would be better to ask Luxion.

"Hey, Luxion, nothing weird happened yesterday, right?" I asked, turning to him.

"Do you imagine I am privy to every little thing that occurs within the academy? You have given me no orders to engage in mass surveillance, so I have no information with which to provide you."

Ugh, he really pisses me off with that attitude.

Marie frowned at Luxion. "I thought an AI like you would be more capable. Are you actually kind of defective? Is that it?"

Her words lit a fire in him.

"I cannot abide such slander. Master possesses no interest whatsoever in the goings-on of the student body. The lack of information is entirely due to his failure to give orders to monitor the area. I simply cannot be expected to carry out duties with which I was never entrusted. I certainly do not have an infinite amount of time or resources. My main body is, as we speak, busy developing a factory in Master's territory. I am maximizing efficiency by focusing on—"

"You've got a factory?!" Marie interrupted, ignoring Luxion's heated protest. "Hold up. Does that mean you're loaded?!"

"I figure it's better to have income coming in from a bunch of different ventures," I said.

"I envy that."

Neither of us was interested in Luxion's tirade.

"Your personalities are eerily similar. Particularly in your tendency to ignore my entirely polite explanations."

"How do you figure, huh?!" I snapped.

"How do you figure that?" Marie demanded.

We spoke simultaneously and with nearly identical phrasing. It was a little embarrassing but also kind of hilarious. We glanced at each other, chuckling.

"When I get to your place, the first thing I wanna do is eat rice," Marie declared. "Oh, and rice crackers!"

"That's pretty old-fashioned of you."

"Who cares? Rice crackers are great whether they're super crunchy or a little soft."

I shook my head at her. "I mean, sure, they're good, but you've gotta have other stuff in mind."

"What? Like mochi?"

As plain as her requests were, I could understand where she was coming from. That sinking feeling was starting to dissipate, so I was finally calming down, too. Maybe the whole bad feeling had been a figment of my imagination.

Time passed quickly as we eagerly discussed our plans, and as we strolled into the harbor, we spotted a small airship at one of the docks. It would take us to the capital's main harbor, where my dad was waiting. We had a few more minutes before it departed.

"Nice," I said, "Great timing. Let's get on that one."

"I want the window seat!" Marie scurried ahead to claim it for herself.

She's got so much energy. I found myself yet again comparing her with my last life's little sister, but I knew there was no way. Maybe it was just my fate—in both this life and my last—to be tied to people with that personality type.

Prompted by curiosity, I threw a glance behind me. The academy loomed in the distance. As I gazed at it, my heart seized for some reason. Something had been nagging at the back of my mind all morning, ever since I'd first gotten that weird feeling.

"Master," Luxion said, noticing my stare, "is something the matter?"

"No. It's nothing."

Marie had already boarded the airship and was waving exaggeratedly at me. "If you don't get a move on, we'll be even later!"

Do you have any right to say that when you're the reason we're late to begin with?

"She sure is a lively one. Ah well, guess that's not a bad thing."

I started after Marie, casting only one more glance back at the academy. It looked no different than usual, but my heart hammered anxiously. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had made an irreversible mistake.

But surely that was just my imagination.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for picking up this volume of *Trapped in a Dating Sim:*Otome Games Are Tough for Us, Too! I'm the author, Yomu Mishima. I've been writing so many series with big robots lately that I've started mistakenly thinking I might actually be good at them. And yes, I mean it when I say mistakenly. Writing in the mecha genre is tough (sobs).

Normally, I suck when it comes to writing afterwords, but I actually have something to say this time around, so it's not so bad. First, why don't I tell you how this series was picked up for publication. I figure many readers won't know where this spin-off originated, so I thought I'd explain here.

The basis for this spin-off was an online bonus story for the main series, Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs. The short story was a reward for filling out a questionnaire, and there were no constraints on page or character count.

That's when I got a brilliant idea: if there're no limits, then I can write as much as I please. When I started thinking about what kind of story I wanted, I figured it would be most interesting to explore ways the main series *didn't* go. That was how I arrived at my decision to take the story down a different path, so the reader could enjoy an alternate version of the story. As in, what if Leon made different decisions this time around? What if Marie and Leon met at the very beginning, without discovering each other's true identities? Wouldn't that be fun?

To put it in game terms, it's basically a different character route. That's why fans of the story took to calling it "Marie's Route."

Anyway, that's how I ended up writing such a substantially long and detailed extra. It seemed a waste to leave it as just some bonus though, which is why my publisher came to me with an offer of official publication.

I started writing this short story from about the time of the third volume release, and it was long enough to fill three whole volumes itself. I was excited

to have it published, but there was a major issue—I'd skipped most of the intro content. I'd also written it with the assumption that readers would already know everything about the main series. If it went to publication like that, though, I figured readers coming in fresh would be confused. To fix that, I needed to add more info to the opening. I couldn't just copy and paste everything from the main series, however, which is why I rewrote everything. As such, you may notice it's a little different this time around.

And that's when it hit me: Why not rewrite it all?

See, originally, I was only going to add enough to make it cohesive and coherent, but instead, I wound up using Marie's Route as the foundation of a much longer and far-reaching spin-off. I basically feel like I wrote a whole new volume from scratch. It was tough, but as a writer, I really enjoyed myself (lol).

Now that Leon and Marie encounter each other at the very beginning of the game, how will their relationship develop? What kind of relationships will they have with the rest of the cast from the main series?

I hope those who read the original story—and those who've never even touched it—can enjoy this spin-off. The title has changed as well, but I hope you'll support this revised version of Marie's Route!



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