WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
ILLUSTRATED BY
Moge Tōi
CHARACTER DESIGNS BY
Monda
NOVEL
03
JOKER
Trapped in a Dating Sim
Otome Games are Tough for Us, Too!

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JOKER
JOKER
TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
OTOME GAMES ARE TOUGH FOR US, TOO!

OLIVIA
ANGELICA
There might have been
a world like this...

"Marie..."
At the exact same moment that I began my proposal, another round of fireworks blasted the sky.
But I wanted to believe Marie heard what I said despite the deafening explosions, since blood rushed all the way from her cheeks to her ears and she teared up.

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Trapped in a Dating Sim

Otome Games Are Tough for *Us*, Too!

NOVEL

03

WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MOGE TŌI

CHARACTER DESIGNS BY

MONDA

Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Alyssa Niioka
ADAPTATION: Kayce Teo
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Imogen Vale
EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Prologue

THE SUN'S RAYS GREW SHORT as the shadows elongated. By the time school was over, darkness began to descend. As the hour grew late and the temperature dropped, I found myself in a tearoom on the second floor of the main school building.

"Maybe it's about time I get a space heater in here. Or, if we could get a room with a fireplace, I could find some firewood to keep us warm," I said as I busied myself with making a fresh pot of tea, my back turned to the woman I had invited to join me.

"I wonder about you sometimes. This is hardly cold enough to complain about," Marie shot back. "I can put up with this just fine."

Her full name was Marie Fou Lafan. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, and was in the same year as me at the academy. She was also my betrothed. Although she had attractive features, her most notable quality was perhaps her petite, slender build. Her diet had improved—become more nutritious, specifically—which gave her skin and hair a healthier sheen. While her long, voluminous blonde locks had always been eye-catching, their new luster heightened her looks. Her small stature gave the impression that she was younger than she really was. Those who didn't know her would probably think she looked as adorable and fragile as a porcelain doll.

Her personality was the polar opposite of her looks. Like me, Marie had reincarnated into this otome game, retaining memories of her past life. We'd originally been players of the game we now found ourselves stuck in. In other words, basically, Marie's appearance was incredibly deceptive. She was no adorable, fragile doll.

"This isn't a competition," I said with an annoyed sigh, carrying the tea tray over.

Marie gratefully picked up her cup and blew on the rippling liquid within, then cautiously took a sip. "Ah. This really warms the body."

“Now I get it. You were just too proud to admit that you’re as cold as I am.” The boorish way she held her cup and guzzled her tea as soon as it cooled enough was unbecoming of an aristocrat, but I didn’t blame her.

This tea party was really a pretense for our true goal. We were meeting to discuss the future; we needed to talk about what would now happen in the game. And we had to do so privately, so we couldn’t have this conversation in a classroom and risk someone overhearing it.

This tea room was the perfect meeting spot for the three of us. The third member of our little group wasn’t exactly a person. Rather, it was my AI partner, Luxion. His mobile unit was about the size and shape of a globe, and was made of metal with a single red lens at its center. His real body was a spaceship over seven hundred meters long. Given that unwieldy size, he typically accompanied me and provided support in his mobile form. The enormous spaceship would only get in the way, and it had more power and functionality than I needed on a daily basis anyway.

“Master, Marie, our time is limited,” Luxion interjected. “May we dispense with trivialities and move to the main topic?”

Marie finally set her cup down. “You want to ask what I think we should do now, right? I’ve got a few ideas.” She smiled proudly, as if she’d given this serious thought. That was a rare action for her, but she might be striving to show due consideration for this world’s future.

“Okay, let’s hear them. You seem awfully confident,” I said.

She snickered gleefully. “I’ve taken everything into account.” Leaping out of her chair and throwing her arms wide, she continued, “Our school trip will go to a Japan-inspired island! Word has it that it’s summer there, and apparently they also have a festival! So I’m definitely going to have a yukata ready for the occasion.”

Luxion and I traded blank looks. “I should’ve known. You didn’t think about this at all.” I shook my head.

As if doing likewise, Luxion “shook” his lens from side to side—his best way of signifying exasperation. “She has let excitement over the upcoming trip cloud her brain.”

Marie puffed her cheeks, glowering at us both. “This will be the biggest event of our academic lives! It’s precisely what *you* should be thinking about!”

She was right about one thing. A school trip *had* been the highlight of a person’s academic career in our previous lives. However, things were a little different at this academy.

“You can hardly blame me for not being that excited when it’s a yearly trip that students from every year go on,” I pointed out.

In Japan, school trips were only for second-year students, so in your three years of high school, you only went on one. That uniqueness made the trip special. It was the exact opposite here. The trips were annual, and everyone was invited. To me, that cheapened the experience.

Marie disagreed with me. “There are three different destinations, though!” she insisted. “So each year, after we’re broken into groups, we get to go somewhere different. It’s not like it’s the same trip every time.”

“Who cares if the destination’s different?” I shrugged. “Wherever you go, you still do the same crap.”

“It’s hardly the same in a completely different place! Get a little excited, would you?!”

The teachers did choose different destinations each year to help broaden the students’ horizons with varied experiences. That was also why they split us students into mixed groups from different years. It was supposed to give us a chance to meet and mingle with students we didn’t usually interact with.

In the game, this whole school trip had been designed as an opportunity for the protagonist to develop her relationship with her chosen love interest. I remembered that well, because I had to play through it an ungodly number of times—primarily because there was a completely randomized element. You could get your hands on a really powerful item, but whether you did was completely random, so the trick was to save scum until you nabbed it.

The whole thing had been a massive pain in my butt when I played. Anyway, we needed to address bigger problems now.

“Let’s talk about the school trip stuff later,” I suggested.

Marie looked offended. “Later? We don’t have much time before then!”

I heaved a long, beleaguered sigh. “But the Offreys bowed out of the story a lot sooner than they were supposed to,” I reminded her.

Marie flinched, finally sinking back into her seat. All her eagerness and excitement disappeared as an anxious shadow settled on her face. “You’re talking about Stephanie, right? It’s my fault you had to do all that.”

Stephanie, Earl Offrey’s daughter, was supposed to be the mid-game boss. Her family had consorted with air pirates and were involved in all kinds of crimes. They were villains, to put it bluntly.

Halfway through the game, Stephanie was supposed to get fed up with the protagonist and use the Offreys’ power and influence to try to get rid of her, sending air pirates after her. The love interests would all flock to the protagonist’s aid, saving her before anything unfortunate could happen. Stephanie would then be promptly punished by the crown. In fact, after all their misdeeds were revealed, the entire Offrey family would be divested of their rank.

That, at least, was how it had gone in the game.

“There is no need to trouble yourself over the matter, Marie,” said Luxion. “The Offreys made the first move, and their own crimes were their undoing.”

However much he consoled her, Marie’s hands remained tense as her fingers interlaced in her lap. “It’s my fault for approaching Brad and trying to snag someone out of my league.”

The episode she was talking about had taken place around the time we first met. Marie had attempted to use her limited knowledge of the game to seduce one of the love interests herself. She’d wanted to usurp the protagonist’s position. Only after I encountered her and gave her what information I had about the game did she truly realize how dangerous her actions were. And despite my warning, her attempts at romancing the love interests didn’t cease at Julius. Her persistence with the other guys—Brad, specifically—was what had incensed Stephanie so much that she went after Marie.

My only recourse at that point was to demolish the Offreys completely.

“I won’t disagree that you’re culpable to a degree, but Stephanie’s the one who took things too far,” I said. “Besides, she and her family would’ve been judged for their crimes sooner or later.”

That said, it would’ve been *much* later if the scenario had played out fully, since the game’s midpoint was during the protagonist’s second year at the academy. Still, the Offreys would’ve fallen either way.

Marie lifted her head. “You’re terrible at comforting people. If you’re trying to console me, at least do it right.”

Embarrassed, I scratched the back of my head. “The point is that I had to take the Offreys down to save you. With them out of the picture, a huge hurdle the protagonist and her love interest were supposed to overcome together is gone.”

Although the results had been the same, the core issue was *who* had defeated the mid-game boss. I wasn’t simply beating the protagonist to the punch by taking down the enemy first. That was supposed to be an opportunity for growth in which the protagonist and her chosen man rose to bravely face the challenge. It was an especially pivotal event because it determined which love interest’s route the protagonist would pursue.

Marie cupped her chin and scrunched her face. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t the protagonist end up romancing whatever guy saves her during that event?”

“Yep. And in the next part, the two figure out a way to overcome the problem together. So this isn’t as simple as us having skipped over a trivial mini-event.”

If the protagonist didn’t pick a man for herself, our chances against the final boss would be abysmal, to put it mildly. Olivia and her partner’s love for each other was the key to battling that boss.

Love really is powerful stuff, huh?

Sadly, that wasn’t the only problem this turn of events had caused us. We’d also stolen all the battle experience the protagonist was supposed to gain from the ordeal.

I flopped forward and pressed my forehead against the cool surface of the

table. “I don’t want to get all technical about video game details and whine about wasted experience points, but it really throws a wrench into things that she’ll lose out on so much because there’s no longer a mid-game boss. That fight was supposed to help level up the love interests, too.”

So much had been invested in that mid-game episode that its absence would lead to significant losses.

Marie cradled her head in her hands. “I can’t begin to guess which of the guys Olivia has the hots for. And you’re right. As if things weren’t bad enough, that loss of experience puts us at a real disadvantage.”

Marie and I had both struggled considerably in the battle portions of the game. We knew all too well that losing out on experience and, in turn, levels would make everything significantly harder.

Luxion glanced between the two of us before finally blurting out, “Am I correct to assume that, judging by the way you two discuss the matter, your robbing the protagonist and her love interest of this significant moment of development poses a very real problem?”

“Duh,” I said irritably. “That’s exactly what we’ve been saying.”

The ring in the center of his lens hummed as it twisted back and forth. “And the only reason you are so anxious about Olivia and her love interest growing and gaining ‘levels’ is because you need the two to defeat the final boss?”

Marie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that should be obvious. If Olivia and her guy of choice don’t step up, we’ll be up the creek without a paddle.”

If they couldn’t defeat that final boss, Holfort would be completely destroyed. It would be game over for *all* of us.

Okay, realistically, I don’t know if we’d actually die, too. But I sure don’t want to find out what’d happen if the whole kingdom was annihilated. Even if we survived, navigating everything afterward would be a real pain.

It boiled down to this: I wanted the protagonist and whichever guy she was with to keep the peace so I could live a nice, calm life. I’d be the first to admit that wish was selfish, but even Luxion couldn’t defeat this final boss.

Luxion spent a few seconds digesting everything we'd said, then continued, "And you are absolutely certain that my spaceship cannot exterminate this final boss?"

"Yup. That's why we've got to get Olivia and her love interest to do it for us," I said.

"I question how accurate that really is at the present moment."

I narrowed my eyes. "What're you trying to say?"

"You have informed me that the Principality of Fanoss must use a Magic Flute to summon this final boss."

Marie and I exchanged glances. It seemed we both understood where Luxion was going with this, and we were equally embarrassed that we hadn't thought of it sooner ourselves.

Luxion ignored our epiphany and proceeded to state the obvious: "I suggest that we retrieve or otherwise destroy the Magic Flute in question before Fanoss can carry out their plan to summon the boss. With the flute out of their control, no one will need to do battle."

"Y-you've got a good point! And it's best to strike while the iron is hot. Let's get the flute and avoid future catastrophe altogether!" The words rushed out of my mouth in my haste to gloss over the way I hadn't thought of this first.

Marie's hand shot into the air. "Y-yeah, you said it! With the flute gone, I can rest easier at night!"

Luxion stared at us coldly. "Could it be that this didn't occur to either of you until I brought it up? Although it is the simplest, most obvious solution to the issue at hand?" His gaze bored into me uncomfortably.

Okay, he's got a point. Why didn't I consider doing this sooner? In my defense, I'd been trying to stay out of the whole mess by letting the protagonist and her love interest handle everything. That was why it never occurred to me that we could take care of it ourselves so easily.

"I-I was just trying to come up with something else, that's all," I replied. "And don't you think this should kind of be our last resort anyway? I mean, I wanted

to believe in the protagonist and her ability to overcome and triumph."

Marie bobbed her head quickly. "Yeah! What Leon said! This is her story, not ours. It would've been crass of us to steal her limelight and defeat the final boss before she got the chance to!"

"For your sake, I will leave it at that," Luxion said with an exasperated shake of his eye.

It came as something of a shock that the AI was reining itself in for the sake of our pride.

Luxion turned his attention back to Marie. "Since we have decided on our course of action regarding the final boss, we should next address the issue concerning Marie."

I glanced at her, knowing immediately what Luxion was talking about. "Yeah. And it's a pretty big issue."

Marie pulled a face, sulking. "You're telling me. How could I have known the Saint's necklace was cursed?"

Cursed indeed—much to my chagrin, since I was the one who'd given it to her. This particular mess had started the night after I left the necklace in her care.

Chapter 1:
The Being Locked In the Holy Relic

THE INCIDENT IN QUESTION had taken place the very same night that Marie accepted the Saint's necklace from Leon. She'd crawled into bed and was fast asleep, her stomach exposed since she'd kicked her blanket aside.

Marie smiled to herself, mumbling in her sleep. "Leon, you dummy… Luxion, you big jerk… Zz…"

While she was oblivious to the outside world, her desk drawer began to rattle. When it finally popped open, black mist spilled forth. It floated through the air, stopping near Marie, where it finally took the distinct shape of a woman. The way her almond eyes narrowed into upside-down crescents suggested that she was grinning maniacally.

"Finally, I've found you. I'll be taking your body."

The black mist figure stretched her hand toward the sleeping Marie. The moment she touched Marie's skin, there was a snap of electricity, almost like built-up static.

The mist quickly retracted her hand, eyes widening in shock. "You're resisting me? Considering how foolish you look, I didn't anticipate that you'd be so stubborn."

Marie continued sleeping, blissfully unaware of the danger, although her unconscious mind had somehow rejected the mist's attempt to possess her.

It was clear now to the mist that taking over Marie's body would be no simple task. Even so, she had no intention of giving up. "If that's how you want it, I'll just have to interfere with your mind."

Such manipulation typically met with fierce resistance from the host, but the mist was fortunate; Marie was unconscious now, so invading her mind would be much less difficult.

"This would've been far easier for both of us if you'd simply let me possess

you.” Ignorance was bliss, after all.

The mist delved deep inside Marie’s mind, to the very depths of her soul. “You’re making this a lot more difficult than it needs to be,” she grumbled.

Marie’s mental fortitude was proving an unfortunate obstacle to the mist’s plans, and she was opting for a much more roundabout method of achieving what she wanted. Sadly for the mist, this route was substantially more draining; it was something she would’ve preferred to avoid if given the choice. Still, she wasn’t about to let this long-awaited chance slip through her fingers. She had to get a body no matter the cost, and she was willing to push her limits if that was what it took.

The mist snickered to herself as she finally arrived at the deepest depths of Marie’s mind, where she found a door in front of her. “There you are.” Naturally, the door was locked. “Of course you keep it locked to protect yourself. But however strong your defenses are, they’re pointless against me.”

The mist forced the lock and wrenched the door open. She strode confidently inside, only to be hit with confusion at what lay within.

“What is this?” she blurted. “The inside of your mind doesn’t look like a room from this kingdom.”

This room was supposed to be a manifestation of someone’s heart—the place they felt most comfortable, which was typically their personal quarters. Marie’s room was feminine, to be sure. That part wasn’t odd at all. It was more that the items and decorations in the room were wholly unfamiliar. That could also be said for the furniture itself, of course, and there were many other items the mist couldn’t fathom the purpose of.

“Oh well. It doesn’t matter. The bigger question is where this room’s resident is.”

The mist scanned her surroundings. The chamber wasn’t all that spacious, so it proved easy to locate Marie immediately. She was sprawled on her bed in the center of the room.

Curiously, her body here differed wildly from the one in reality. Someone’s inner self took whatever form they most strongly identified with, and it wasn’t

rare for that to differ from their actual physical appearance. In Marie's case, though, the discrepancy was more pronounced than any the mist had ever encountered. In reality, Marie had blonde hair and blue eyes. Here in this room, her eyes and hair were incredibly dark. On top of that, her figure was more feminine and curvaceous.

"She looks like an entirely different person. Is this how she wishes she looked?" The mist shook her head. "I can't believe she's still sound asleep, even with an intruder present."

As if on cue, the woman meant to represent Marie's inner self—though she looked nothing like Marie—blinked away her drowsiness and let out a great big yawn. "What is it? You're disturbing my beauty sleep," she grumbled, annoyed.

This woman was Marie's core essence, a completely unfiltered version of her personality. She rubbed her eyes and studied the mist, looking tired. "Who are you?" She still wasn't fully awake.

Seeing this as an opportunity, the mist jumped on her chance to possess her victim by first starting to introduce herself. "You want to know who I am? My name's…"

Before the mist even finished her sentence, Marie let out another huge yawn and nodded off again. Her eyes had slid shut; she was clearly headed back to dreamland.

"How dare you fall back asleep after asking me who I am?!" screeched the mist.

Marie flinched, eyes flying wide open. She stared at the mist and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I-I wasn't asleep. And if I was, well, you managing to put me to sleep is pretty impressive."

If that was an excuse, it was a poor one, primarily because it made no sense. But maybe that was because Marie still wasn't fully awake.

Standing in front of Marie's true form, the mist resisted the urge to sigh. *Am I sure that this is who I want to possess…? No one else is available to me. I can't be too picky.*

Taking a deep breath to regain her composure, the mist told Marie, "I have an

offer for you. Wouldn't you like to have my power? I am the force that resides within the Saint's necklace, you see. If you accept me, I can lend you even greater strength. Don't you want full access to the Saint's power?"

Marie hugged her pillow to her chest, not bothering to neaten her hair, which was tousled from sleep. Instead, she just sat there and studied the mist for a moment. Her eyes were intensely skeptical.

"Wh-what? Don't you want power?" the mist asked again. "I'm talking about enough power to achieve whatever you desire."

This simple spiel was normally sufficient to entice someone's inner self. Even if they had the good sense to doubt the authenticity of the mist's offer, their lust for power would be too great for them to heed their better judgment. A desire for power was universal, after all. This speech had worked perfectly for the mist numerous times.

The only difference this time was that none of the other people she'd tried this with had been her direct descendants, so she hadn't been able to possess them anyway. The best she could do was manipulate those victims from behind the scenes. Even then, things never went exactly the way she wanted.

Marie snorted with laughter.

"What's that snickering about?!" the mist demanded, indignant. She was baffled, since that wasn't normally the reaction such an offer received.

"What you're saying sounds fishy," Marie said. "Besides, I don't need the Saint's power."

The mist gawked. "Why not? It can achieve anything you want."

Marie sneered at the mist. "See, that's exactly why I smell a rat. You're offering me incredible power without asking something equivalent in return. You're basically hinting that there's a catch—that you're plotting something."

The moment Marie saw right through her, the mist lost her composure. "Th-that's not true at all!" The stammer in her voice gave her away.

Marie grinned knowingly. "Looks like I was right on the money. If I were trying to hoodwink someone, I'd do the exact same thing."

“What?” Then the mist reached a realization: *We could be two sides of the same coin, couldn’t we?* Was Marie also a villain? But, no, she couldn’t be. The mist had seen numerous people as simple and transparent as the woman before her. “Hmph. I suppose you won’t be so easily duped. In that case, why don’t we make a deal, you and I?”

The mist still wasn’t being sincere; this was just another ploy, meant to appeal to Marie’s pride and move the conversation along.

Marie lounged on her bed, propping herself half-upright on one elbow. Her derisive snicker at the mist’s counteroffer made the pose seem even more arrogant. “It’s no use lying to me. The two of us are too similar for your fibs to work.”

The mist’s blood boiled at the insinuation. She didn’t want to believe they were really related anymore; Marie was too infuriating. “Don’t lump me in with the likes of you! You’re obviously far worse than me!”

“Nope. I can tell. I’m good at picking up on another girl’s worst aspects, and women’s intuition tells me you’re bad news.”

The mist balled her fists. “R-ridiculous! Your ‘intuition’ is a pain in the neck.” She’d had enough of trying to deceive Marie. It obviously wouldn’t work. Instead, the mist lunged at the woman—it was time to take Marie’s body by force!

But an invisible barrier blocked the mist’s attempts, proving much more resistant than she anticipated.

“What?!” the mist cried. Her hands groped the empty air as she reached toward Marie. The invisible barrier kept her far from her target.

Marie simply watched her and yawned again. “It’s useless,” she said. “I don’t trust anyone on principle. If you really think you can take over my body and do whatever you want with it, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“You wicked witch!” the mist howled.

That outburst finally seemed to have an effect; Marie’s mood soured instantly.

“What’d you say? You’re the one trying to force your way in. What right do you have to take that kind of attitude with me? I mean, this room is supposed to be my personal, private space. My domain. You’re the one who barged in without permission. If anyone’s a witch here, it’s obviously you.”

Vexing as this was, the mist knew that she couldn’t possess Marie as she’d hoped—not when the woman was so guarded against others. *She’s much more resistant than I ever imagined.* Given that guardedness, the mist had no choice but to give up, desperate as she was. The woman’s personality was too strong. There was no way to steal her soul and gain complete control over her body. Her overwhelming mental fortitude made that all the more impossible. The mist didn’t intimidate her at all. In fact, it was the other way around.

“If I can’t steal your body, I’ll simply have to leave deep scars on your soul. That’s the price you’ll pay for mocking me!” The mist would have her revenge by going on a rampage and destroying this room’s interior. That would cause Marie substantial mental damage.

At the mist’s declaration, Marie’s eyes widened, her pupils giving off eerie light. Her long, pitch-black hair undulated through the air as if it had a life of its own.

If anyone else were to observe this situation, they’d think the two women were monsters facing off against one another.

“You’re threatening me with violence in *my* domain?!” Marie hissed, now seething with unrestrained hostility. “Unacceptable. I’ll curse you. You and all your descendants!”

The venomous way she spat the words made the mist believe she truly meant what she was saying. “I hate to break it to you, but *you’re* my descendant! The same blood runs through our veins!”

Their power clashed, knocking Marie’s entire room into disarray.

What’s with this woman?! The mist was gobsmacked—terrified, even—by the extent of Marie’s power. *Her mental strength is almost inhuman!* She was a monster, a true monster.

“In case you’ve forgotten, you’re inside my mind right now,” Marie said. “It’s

time for you to leave, and I'm going to give you a personal escort in the form of the most powerful existence I can summon." Her voice went high-pitched as she proceeded to wail, "Save meeee, Big Bro! This girl's bullying meeee!" She shrank back, playing the part of the wilting flower, the damsel in distress who needed saving.

The mist sensed a presence thundering toward them outside the room. *Wh-what now?* She could already tell that, whatever this being was, its power far surpassed Marie's.

The door burst open. A young man stood on the threshold, a dark aura emanating from him. His eyes glowed red, and his hand held a metal bat. "I'll destroy her," he muttered. Without a split second of hesitation, he lifted his bat high over the mist.

"Wha—?!" the mist cried.

The "most powerful" being that Marie could conjure in her mind was, apparently, her older brother. She'd imbued him with incredible power, and it slammed into the mist as the man brought his bat down on her.

"Wait! Hold on! Ow! Ouch! That *hurts*!"

However much she screamed, the man wouldn't let up. He kept striking her mercilessly with no intention of stopping until she left.

Marie cheered from the sidelines. "Get her, Big Bro! Beat her to a pulp and send her on her way!"

The mist couldn't defend herself. Since Marie genuinely believed with all her heart that this man was the most powerful, he was simply too strong for her.

Something about the whole thing bothered the mist, though. "You're really going to let your older brother invade your personal space like this?!"

As Marie had rightly stated, this was her sole domain. Most people wouldn't want to invite anyone into the deepest, most private part of themselves. But Marie… Not only had she created a version of her brother inside her own personal domain, she'd let him waltz right into this room.

"Are you obsessed with your older brother or something?!" the mist blurted as she scrambled to escape the bat that brother brandished.

"So what if I am?" Marie shrugged, not looking the least bit sheepish. "I adore my Big Bro!" Her inner self was completely true to her own nature, so she felt no embarrassment. "Now, off with you! Get out of my room already."

Losing all interest in further conversation, she yawned and promptly curled up in her bed, ready to drift back to sleep.

"I cannot accept this! There's no way you're my descendant!" the mist howled at the top of her lungs, just as Marie's older brother swung his bat hard at her. The irresistible attack booted her out of Marie's mind.

"You rotten wench!" the man cried. "Don't you dare think for even a moment that this is over!"

In the next instant, the mist—fully expelled from Marie's mind—was thrust back into reality. The ordeal had worn her thin, leaving her exhausted.

"I never anticipated this outcome," she murmured to herself.

Marie had looked so vulnerable in her sleep. This had been the best chance the mist would ever have to take over her body. Yet Marie's mental protections were so overwhelmingly powerful that the mist hadn't stood a chance.

"Damn it! Why did this happen? This should've been my moment. Never before has a descendant of mine laid hands on the Saint's necklace imbued with my bitterness!" That was the mist's true identity; the necklace harbored the grudge of Marie's ancestor. "No. No, I won't squander this prime opportunity

because of that wicked little witch.”

The mist lamented her failed attempt. Actually, she might’ve preferred outright failing over being forcefully thrown out, as she had been.

“She’s the perfect candidate, with the right attributes and power. Her appearance is perhaps a bit immature for my liking, but other than that, I couldn’t hope for better. How unfair that her personality’s so distasteful that I can’t use her.” The mist glowered at her would-be victim’s sleeping form—at least until a new presence caught her attention. At the edge of the room, a sphere simply floated in the air.

“What’s this?” murmured the mist. The sphere’s singular red eye flashed eerily. It was watching her. Sensing danger, the mist’s first instinct was to flee. However, a barrier had already been cast over the window, trapping her.

“Such impudence. Fine, I’ll simply return to the necklace here in the—” She cut herself off as she dropped her gaze and realized the necklace was no longer tucked inside the desk drawer. Panic set in. She whipped her head around trying to spot the object, the room blurring, only to see it floating next to the sphere.

“Is this what you are searching for?” the sphere asked.

“It speaks?” the mist said to herself in disbelief. “Could it be a Lost Item, then? Strange. I’ve never heard of one so technologically advanced.”

Faced with the mist’s shocked mumbling, the sphere remained perfectly composed. “You are right to be wary of me. That said, I find you to be an incredibly curious phenomenon. I shall capture you and use you as a research subject.”

“Ha! As if I’d let you take me so easily! I have a duty I must carry out, so I can’t allow myself to—” The mist broke off, trying to find another route to flee the room, but magical barriers blocked every corner. As a last resort, she tried to squeeze beneath the small gap between the bottom of the door and the floor.

Before she could do so, the sphere made its move. “It is my first time encountering an astral spirit like you. It is a relief that magic works so effectively against you.” A vacuum-like object appeared seemingly out of nowhere and

sucked in the mist, sealing her in a transparent bag. Try as she might to tear her newfound cage open and take flight, it was impervious to her attempts. “Let me out of here!”

“I cannot. You are an incredibly precious research sample. Besides, there are questions I have to ask you.” The sphere’s gaze wandered back to Marie. “I will thoroughly investigate why you targeted Marie specifically.”

When his eye returned to the mist and focused on her, she shrank back, terrified. “St-stop this. I have my own priorities—and my own duty I must accomplish! I don’t have time to waste as your test subject!”

“Indeed, I would like to hear much more about that as well.”

“I can’t believe that witch has a minion like *this* under her thumb, too!” The mist glared at Marie, who was still fast asleep, her stomach exposed and a tendril of drool running down her chin.

“Big Bro,” Marie whined, “I can’t eat any more…” She must’ve been dreaming about delicious food.

The misty figure’s glare intensified. “I can’t believe I lost to this spoiled brat!” she hissed, humiliated.

***

“Who could’ve guessed the Saint’s necklace was possessed by someone’s deep-seated grudge? Not me, that’s for sure. But she’ll pay for trying to steal my adorable body. I can promise you that!” Marie munched on a cookie as she said all this. Her flippant attitude suggested that she wasn’t giving the necklace much thought. She was too focused on the sweets in front of her.

“I can’t believe how carefree you are even though you were almost possessed,” I said. Then I instantly felt guilty. “Sorry. It’s my fault this happened in the first place.”

If Luxion hadn’t stepped in and protected her… Actually, according to him, she’d managed to fend off the astral spirit on her own. Regardless, I felt awful about the close call.

Marie stared at me. “Did you eat something funny? It’s not like you to

apologize so sincerely."

What a jerk, I thought. Especially after I'd gone out of my way to say sorry. "I really envy your inability to grasp the seriousness of a situation like this. Must be nice," I said, sipping my tea.

Marie brushed cookie crumbs from her mouth and shot back, "It's not like my life is all sunshine and roses!"

"No?" I laughed. "What bothers you, then?"

Her gaze darted away from me. "Oh, uh, well… Like, what'll be on the next test, or how I'll budget enough money for all my daily expenses. That kind of thing."

"In terms of the nature of this academy, not much importance is seemingly placed on students' academic performance," said Luxion. "Moreover, Master covers your daily expenses, does he not?"

Marie's face flushed. "Okay, fine. Then my height and breast size."

I burst into laughter. "Seriously? *That's* what you worry about?"

Her face turned even brighter red. "Oh, shut up! Even I've got insecurities. What's wrong with that? It's not fair that my efforts to improve landed me with a body like this. I was so confident about my appearance before I reincarnated here."

Here she goes again, bragging about how stunning she was in her previous life. Marie seemed deeply affected by how different her body in *this* life was.

"You can't do anything to fix it, so just let it go," I said. "Or would you prefer Luxion do something to fix your looks?" Knowing the AI, he could probably perform plastic surgery without much effort.

Marie's face lifted, her eyes sparkling with newfound hope. "Luxion, help fix my height and boobs!" She really wasn't sheepish at all in her demands.

Despite her earnest pleading, Luxion simply answered, "I refuse."

"Wha…?" Marie's smile became strained, her lips pulled tight.

"To begin with, I see no reason to alter your physical appearance," Luxion

explained. “I acknowledge that you lack the physical maturity of other females your age, but you are perfectly healthy that way.”

Marie’s eyes shimmered with tears. “Who cares whether I’m healthy or not?! You could at least make some minor adjustments for me!”

“No.”

“Stingy jerk!”

Such childish banter, I thought. “Why do you want to be taller and bustier anyway? Last time we talked about this, you said you were beautiful enough and happy as you were.”

Marie puffed her cheeks and averted her gaze. “It’s your fault for always ogling Olivia.”

“What? When have I ogled her?!”

When I attempted to deny Marie’s accusation, Luxion projected an image of us in the cafeteria in which my gaze was obviously glued to Olivia’s ample breasts.

“You have ‘ogled’ her chest numerous times. I fail to see how it could be mere coincidence,” he said.

“You guys are misunderstanding things. That’s just male instinct, you know? Not something I can control. A guy’s eyes are just naturally programmed to lock onto a woman’s chest.” It was in all men’s DNA. Inescapable, really.

Marie flung her handkerchief at me. “I knew it! You *were* ogling her! Are breasts really all that matter to you? You big jerk!”

“I can’t help it if I like big boobs! What? Would you prefer I live the rest of my life lying that I hate them? Hate to break it to you, but that’s not something I can pull off!”

“Why’re you trying so hard to excuse your sexual preferences? Are you an idiot? Don’t you feel at all embarrassed, announcing that kind of private stuff in front of others?”

“Yeah, I’m embarrassed!” I shouted back. “But however embarrassed I feel, I don’t want to lie about who I am, or I’ll regret it for the rest of my life! That’s

why I’m trying to be open with you!”

“You want to make yourself sound brave and heroic, but this whole argument’s about your obsession with big breasts,” Marie scoffed at me, shaking her head. “God, are all men complete idiots?”

“Call me an idiot all you like. I’m not gonna change who I am.”

She rolled her eyes. “Go play in traffic.”

Why did I have to put up with this kind of vitriol from her? What was so wrong with liking them?

Marie and glowered at one another.

Exasperated with both of us, Luxion cut in. “Please feel free to continue your lovers’ quarrel if you so desire, but I will excuse myself to focus on the preparations necessary for what is to come.”

His framing of the situation floored us both.

“It ain’t a lover’s quarrel!”

“This isn’t a lover’s quarrel!”

Our voices overlapping, we vehemently denied it.

Chapter 2:
The Slave Market

ALTHOUGH SLAVES WERE SOLD at an enormous, gated trading firm in Holfort's capital city, its proprietor didn't take kindly to his company being referred to as a "slave market."

That proprietor was currently guiding a few customers who'd reserved his services for this particular time slot. He gestured exaggeratedly as he spoke to them, explaining his firm's situation. A large man with a portly figure, he wore his finest suit, and gold and silver accessories covered his neck, wrists, and fingers. That opulence hinted at his business's prosperity.

"Fools refer to this place as a slave market, but that was only true in the past. What our establishment does now is oversee employment contracts for workers. You could say we're something of an intermediary." Despite the fact that none of these visitors had even uttered the words "slave market," he still went out of his way to address the matter, hoping to improve his patrons' impressions of the place.

This group of customers consisted of three people, all of whom trailed behind the proprietor. The most important among them was the crown prince, Julius Rapha Holfort. The man accompanying him was his foster brother, Jilk Fia Marmoria. While Julius was the future king, Jilk was a viscount's heir. Dealing with such important people made the proprietor sweat profusely, carefully considering each word that left his mouth.

Following several steps behind them was Olivia. As they traversed the gaudily decorated corridors, she noticed that the proprietor only gave her a single brief glance before practically ignoring her.

This place looks like the inside of a castle, she thought.

For a commoner like her, raised in the distant countryside, the extent of the luxury was intimidating. And Olivia could tell clearly that there were differences between the proprietor's treatment of her and of the two men. That wasn't

obvious—he behaved politely enough toward her—but he was nowhere near as deferential and attentive as with Julius and Jilk.

Tired of the proprietor's rambling defense of the company, Julius responded, "I understand. The past is the past, and you now comply with the established system of employment contracts. Nothing you do is illegal; everything's aboveboard. Correct?"

The proprietor was visibly relieved. "I'm glad you understand, Your Highness. Men habitually misconstrue our business practices, which has often created great enmity toward us."

Olivia, who was listening to their conversation, found the whole situation odd. She couldn't tamp down her curiosity. "Um," she said hesitantly, "how come men aren't allowed their own personal servants at the academy?"

She was ignorant of the aristocracy and its many unspoken rules, and her question was a natural one, but it still earned her a brief glower from the proprietor. Then, before Julius or Jilk could notice the expression, he feigned uncertainty.

"I suppose you could say it's historic precedent or custom. Signing a contract with a personal servant reflects poorly on a man's reputation."

"It affects his reputation?" Olivia asked in disbelief. "But that doesn't—"

Before she could say what was on her mind—that the idea of a personal servant affecting a man's reputation, but not a woman's, was nonsensical as far as she was concerned—Jilk interrupted. "Miss Olivia, you mustn't antagonize the proprietor. This has been customary for many, many years. Pushing for more nuanced answers will only place him in an awkward position."

"Oh. Um, all right." She still wasn't satisfied, but since Jilk had shut the conversation down, she couldn't pursue the matter.

The proprietor sagged with relief. "Thank you for your understanding."

"At any rate, where are these personal servants you promised to show us?" Julius asked, anxious to move the whole appointment along.

"Right this way—over in this room here!" The proprietor motioned to a door

and led them through. Inside, demi-humans dressed in suits were lined up. No metal bars or barriers separated them, nor did they wear any kind of restraints. There was a great variety of elves and beastmen alike. Each was incredibly handsome. Some were slender and androgynous, while others sported bulging muscles. They all held their heads up proudly.

"All our workers are top class, but these are the cream of the crop," said the proprietor. "They've been taught the requisite etiquette to adapt to any situation. In fact, they can act as a tutor for their mistress, if required. Should you wish it, they—oh, pardon. Never mind that part." He stopped short, censoring whatever he was about to say.

Julius gently nudged Olivia forward with his hand, making her stand in front of the demi-humans. "You can choose whoever you want. They'll be your personal servant, after all."

"Um, uh…" Her eyes wandered. Each servant wore a tag on their vest that noted their race, name, and the cost of a contract with them. They all smiled at her.

Olivia couldn't possibly choose. *I know His Highness said he would pay for me to have a servant, but these are absurd salaries for only a year of employment—so exorbitant, they'd cover all three years of my schooling.* Still bound by the monetary values she had learned as a commoner, she was paralyzed in front of the prices she glimpsed.

Jilk noticed her hesitation and glanced at the proprietor. "She's really looking for someone who can support her daily life. She's in a bit of a unique situation at the academy and has a complicated relationship with her female peers, which has left her feeling somewhat isolated. She wants a servant who can help support her emotionally through that. She doesn't really need anything else, so we'd appreciate your taking that into consideration."

Olivia had no quibbles with what Jilk said. He'd hit the nail on the head.

The proprietor studied Jilk and Julius for a moment, stealing occasional glances at Olivia. He seemed to grasp the situation immediately. "In that case, I have someone in mind who'd be perfect for the job. He fits your criteria exactly. That said, he does have a bit of a…problem."

Olivia's stomach twisted with worry. This would be her first time signing a contract with a personal servant, so she was anxious to begin with. If the other party had issues, she'd feel even more nervous. "What problem, exactly?" she asked.

"He's not always considerate with his words, although he does his work impeccably. I wouldn't go so far as to say he's rude—but he might be a bit insensitive."

Jilk nodded thoughtfully. "Hm. If I understand right, he's a bit rough around the edges but still fully competent as a servant. Correct?"

As Jilk looked at him, the proprietor tensed and became flustered. "Y-yes, of course, my lord. His previous contracts were annulled due to his lack of politeness and flexibility, but not for anything egregiously inappropriate. Beyond those few flaws, he's exactly what you requested."

Jilk placed a hand on his chin, turning over this new information in his mind. Finally, he turned to Olivia. "I recommend choosing him, then."

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Contracts were official documents agreed upon by employer and employee. No magic bound either party to the terms and conditions listed, but both were protected under the law.

After the proprietor brought out a contract for Olivia to sign, he reiterated, "You mustn't mistake a personal servant for a slave. He doesn't *belong* to you. This is an employment contract, and it details the duties both parties should fulfill in this arrangement."

"Duties?" Olivia echoed, confused.

"Yes," he said. "A personal servant will attend to you as stipulated, but only by performing the type of work specifically named in the contract. If you want them to do something they aren't legally obligated to, you must either befriend them or offer additional compensation."

"I-I see. All right."

Olivia thought the younger, more immature Kyle would be easier to talk to

than any of the adult men she'd seen. That was the only reason she was signing this contract. She didn't have many—or really any—people in her corner at the academy, so she just wanted someone she could be more relaxed with.

"Now, since you've signed the contract, you have duties to your servant as well," said the proprietor. "You must cover Kyle's room and board, Miss."

"Of course," Olivia said.

"Your obligations don't end there. You also need to pay him a salary and give him days off. That's part of your role as his employer."

Olivia froze, her jaw dropping. "What?"

She'd been aware that she would have to provide Kyle with room and board, and she didn't mind giving him days off. A salary was more than she'd been prepared for, though.

"B-but we're already paying so much for the contract," she protested.

"Yes. That's *only* for the contract. The salary is separate. Now then, should you fail to fulfill your obligations, you'll be in violation of the law and punished accordingly, so please keep that in mind. There have been cases of ladies who were expelled from the academy for their inability to hold up their end of the bargain. You should pay Kyle at least a thousand dia per month."

Olivia wanted to hold her head in her hands. This had completely blindsided her. *What am I going to do? There's no way I can pay him such a ridiculous amount every single month.*

With no other recourse, she told the proprietor honestly, "That's more than I can afford."

"Aren't the men you brought with you going to pay it for you?"

She shook her head quickly. "I-I couldn't possibly ask them to cover his salary on top of the contract payment." She wasn't so shameless that she could request more, least of all after how much this had cost already.

"This isn't something I would personally recommend, but as a student of the academy, you *could* cover Kyle's salary by dungeon diving. I hear a person can easily net a thousand dia a month doing that."

“Dungeon diving?” she repeated dubiously.

“Yes,” the proprietor said. “That said, your best option would be using your position to your advantage. Entice men by dangling the possibility of marriage in front of them, and have them fund your expenses. That’s how most aristocratic women afford their servants’ salaries.”

“Oh. Um…” Olivia stopped herself from saying anything more. She hadn’t realized most aristocratic women made money that way. For the proprietor to recommend the same to her, he must have assumed she was a noblewoman as well.

Olivia lowered her gaze. *I could never do something like that. It wouldn’t be an option for me, even if I wanted to. That only leaves me with one choice: to venture into dungeons. But if I do, it’ll cut into my study time.*

As she worried her lip, debating this in her head, the proprietor said, “Your companions are awaiting you.”

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Julius and Jilk were outside, waiting for Olivia. Their backs turned to the building, they discussed the matter of her personal servant.

“Jilk,” said Julius, “are you really sure this ‘Kyle’ person will be a good fit? If you ask me, he sounded like a problem child that they pawned off on us.” He frowned. “We should’ve picked someone else.”

Exasperated, Jilk smiled. “No, trust me. It’ll be a much greater relief for us to have Kyle at her side than anyone else.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Jilk shrugged. “I’m glad you’re so innocent, Your Highness. I’d prefer you stay that way, at least for now.”

“That’s your way of dodging my question, isn’t it? You’re always like this.”

Jilk grinned at his sulking friend.

***

“Leon, look over there.”

“Hm?” I craned my neck to follow Marie’s gaze, and my eyes landed on Olivia. “Ooh! She finally got hold of him!”

Olivia’s flaxen hair was cut in a short bob around her chin. Her eyes—though full of anguish—were aqua-blue. Her beauty was a simple, straightforward kind, enhanced by the delicious swell of her chest.

At Olivia’s heels was a handsome blond boy. He wore a three-piece suit, and two long elf ears jutted from his head. Marie and I both recognized him instantly as the game protagonist’s personal servant. He’d served a support role, offering information and updates about each love interest’s affection level. Kyle was something of an impudent brat, but I was relieved that he was at Olivia’s side now.

“Looks like the game plot is proceeding smoothly,” I said. “On their end, at least.”

That was the best we could ask for. I’d been worried that defeating the Offreys ahead of schedule might cause a ripple effect that impacted the protagonist, so it was reassuring that she’d met and employed Kyle successfully.

I nodded to myself, satisfied with this development.

Marie shot me a dubious look, almost like she was suspicious of me. Or annoyed with me. I couldn’t really tell; her expression was a mix of emotions.

“Uh, why’re you giving me that look?” I asked reluctantly.

“You were checking out Olivia’s boobs again.” If the furrow in her brow was any indication, Marie wasn’t about to forgive me for that, either.

Oh, come on! I can’t help that they were right there and my eyes happened to focus on them! Will she really interrogate me every time my eyes wander even a little?!

“I-I didn’t,” I lied.

“Admit it.”

I hesitated, then finally said, “I did.” I was too intimidated to double down.

Marie’s cheeks swelled as she glared daggers at me. Eventually she burst out, “Why are breasts the only thing you care about?!”

“It’s basic human nature. I can’t help it.”

“Don’t assume I’ll let you get away with it just because you use that as an excuse,” she grumbled.

“Ahem.” Clearing my throat, I tried to change the subject. “Moving on, it’s good to see the plot proceeding smoothly. But before we can enjoy our relaxing school trip, we’ve got our own annoying problem to wrap up.”

As Luxion suggested, we were going to make the most of our knowledge of the game and take out the last boss before it ever got a chance to appear. That option was only open to us because we’d reincarnated here with our memories intact.

Marie pressed a curled finger to her lips, thinking. Her attention was still focused on Olivia. “I hope you’re right about it ‘proceeding smoothly,’” she said, then shook her head. “Either way, I guess it isn’t my place to worry about it.”

She didn’t seem as convinced as I was that everything was going well with the protagonist. Regardless, the last boss was a bigger priority. There were other problems, but that came first.

“Wrapping this up will be a huge load off our shoulders. As soon as we’ve got that single Magic Flute, there’ll be nothing more to worry about,” I said.

As long as the last boss was dealt with, Luxion could take care of everything else. I did feel like we relied on him a little too much, but we really didn’t have a choice. We needed his help to do this, so we were going to have him pitch in.

Marie stared at me, brows knitted.

“Wh-what? Did I say something weird?”

“Leon, in case you didn’t know, there are *two* Magic Flutes.”

My eyes went round. “What?”

“The Magic Flute doesn’t just appear in the first installment of the series. It also shows up in the third. So there are *two* flutes, not one,” said Marie.

I slapped both hands over my mouth. “The hell?! You never mentioned that before.”

“You never asked, so why was I supposed to? By the way, it’s Hertrude’s little sister, Hertrauda, who summons the third game’s final boss.”

Wonderful. Not only were there two flutes, the princess responsible for summoning the first boss had a younger sibling.

Luxion, who’d listened to our whole conversation, dropped his cloaking device and fully materialized.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Given what we now know, this means that retrieving both flutes shall resolve the majority of our present issues, correct?”

Marie and I exchanged looks. “All that’s left afterward will be the issue with the Saint’s relics.”

“Yes, indeed,” Luxion agreed. “We should resolve that problem promptly as well. Something about that specific subject has been bothering me, too.”

Bothering him? I tilted my head in confusion, but he ignored me, reengaging his cloaking device. He apparently had no interest in explaining further.

Chapter 3:
Infiltrating the Royal Castle

THE PRINCIPALITY OF FANOSS had once been an archdukedom under the Holfort Kingdom's flag. The bloodline of the archduke's family could be traced all the way back to Holfort's royal family. Fanoss had won independence from Holfort after frequent outbreaks of war between the two.

They'd been part of the same country and shared the same bloodline, but fighting still broke out. In the wake of all that, they were now bitter enemies.

For the lore of what was supposed to be a fluffy otome game, that part was particularly bloody and brutal. Maybe the developers had tried to flesh out the backstory to make the Principality seem more evil, since they were the game's villains.

"So this is the royal castle of Fanoss, huh?"

Fanoss's capital was much like Holfort's, though on a much smaller scale. Both cities were built around a royal family's castle. This one sat on an elevated slice of land, jutting upward as befit a fortress.

Marie pulled a face. "The place has no design sense," she said. "It's shaped like a plain old box."

In the gaming sphere, we often referred to blocky, undecorated buildings as having a "tofu" aesthetic. That kind of architecture was convenient and simple, but at the cost of visual appeal, so that was really what it resembled: a plain, boring block of tofu.

"Considering that this is an enemy fortress in the game, I think the unrefined look suits it, don't you?" I said.

Marie rolled her eyes at me. "What's wrong with you? You always frame stuff based on how it was back in the game."

I grimaced. She had a point. I treated this like a video game, rather than as the reality it had become for us.

“My bad,” I said. “Anyway, let’s do this.”

“Yeah.”

The two of us began scaling the fortress’s outer wall, hoisting ourselves upward. Luxion had made our gloves and boots expressly for this purpose. They used suction to latch on to flat surfaces, which made our job easy. He’d done even better with the black outfit he’d made us; although piloted suits whizzed around the castle’s perimeter, guarding against intruders, we melted right into the background. Thanks to our optical camouflage, they couldn’t see us at all.

“I know they can’t physically see us,” I told Marie and Luxion as I continued hauling myself up, “but I’m worried about whether they have magic radar or anything that could detect us. What do you think, Luxion? Will we be okay on that front?”

Luxion hovered above, leading us up the wall. “What capacity they *do* have to sense magic is primitive at best. My mobile unit is more than able to fool them. But, just in case you need a reminder, your coming here personally to carry out this mission directly contradicted my recommendation.”

In his formal, roundabout way, he was telling me off for ignoring his advice and choosing the hard route. What he didn’t mention was that his recommended course had been unthinkably barbaric, so we’d only had this option in the end.

“And in case *you* need a reminder,” Marie said, mimicking his tone, “your recommendation was to sink the entire island that the Principality occupies, remember?”

“I simply recommended the quickest, easiest method to accomplish your goals. If there was any demerit to my proposal, it was that we would lose the opportunity to properly analyze the Magic Flute.”

According to Luxion, the Magic Flute that the Principality kept secretly tucked away hadn’t existed back when he was created. The flute had the ability to manifest and control monsters. In exchange for the user’s life, it could also summon a behemoth which had been the first game’s final boss.

“Monsters did not exist when I was created,” Luxion added. “They are most

curious beings, given how they simply disappear at the moment of their defeat. I am deeply interested in them."

That interest was, in fact, what discouraged him from throwing too much of a tantrum when Marie and I opted to infiltrate the castle and steal the two flutes ourselves.

"You annihilation-obsessed maniac. Couldn't you come up with a more peaceful solution to the problem?" I asked.

"I was merely offering the most efficient one," he shot back insistently. "I ordinarily oppose anything which would endanger the two of you."

While Luxion and I bickered, our group finally reached a window that led into the castle proper. Luxion slipped in first to make sure the coast was clear, then urged us to follow.

"We can reach our destination from here," he said.

Once I was through the window, I paused, turning back and reaching a hand out to help Marie inside. "It almost feels like we're phantom thieves," I mused.

She grabbed my hand. "There's no 'almost' about it. That's exactly what we are."

***

Vandel Him Zenden, often still referred to as the Black Knight, was an old knight well past his prime. The crown of his head was balding, though he'd grown out the surrounding gray hair that remained, and he had an impressive beard to match.

The Black Knight was a viscount, which gave him great influence in itself. More importantly, he was the realm's most powerful knight, which made him an exceptional figure in Fanoss. Vandel was a hero who'd saved the Principality from danger countless times.

Currently, the Black Knight was visiting Fanoss's royal castle. He'd been meeting with the two princesses, but now that business was over. The hour was growing late; all that remained was for him to leave the premises and return home.

But something gave him pause.

“There’s a foul presence in the air,” he said as he stood before the castle’s gate. He froze, glancing behind him.

The knight seeing him off smiled wearily. “I assure you, should any intruders appear, we’ll have things well in hand. They can’t escape our notice.” The young man sounded confident that their night crew could keep a vigilant watch.

His words rang hollow to Vandel, however. *The ranks of the castle knights teem with weaklings who can’t even sense when the enemy is near,* the Black Knight thought. *How ironic that the guards here are the least dependable of all.*

The quality of Fanoss’s knights wasn’t necessarily lacking, but that was only if you weighed the army as a whole. The worst of their number were, sadly, the very ones assigned to guard the castle.

“I forgot something. I’ll need to go get it,” Vandel said unconvincingly. It was obvious that he’d made up an excuse, but he quickly spun and began marching back into the castle.

The knight with him panicked at the Black Knight’s sudden decision. “There’s no need to retrieve it yourself. I can do so for you!”

“That’s not necessary!” Vandel barked gruffly.

***

As soon as Luxion led us into the castle’s treasure vault, we began our search in earnest.

“Now, where are those flutes?”

The first game only ever mentioned the Magic Flute the princess used; it wasn’t shown. Therefore, I didn’t know the flutes’ exact properties beyond their ability to manipulate monsters and summon final bosses. Still, those abilities were enough to show they were dangerous.

As I hunted for our marks, the other treasures inside the vault distracted Marie. “Look at all this, Leon!” she exclaimed. “These accessories are amazing. I wonder what kind of price they’d fetch?” She was drooling over a selection of royal necklaces and the like, but rather than fantasizing about wearing them

herself, she was interested in pawning them off. It was ironic that she'd been so eager to land a rich man not long ago, yet now it didn't even occur to her to want any of this treasure for herself.

"Don't take anything," I warned her.

"I wasn't going to!" Marie snapped back. "At any rate, I'm shocked that we got in here so easily."

It wasn't surprising that she found it strange; it had really been a piece of cake. We had Luxion to thank for the smoothness of the operation.

Still scanning our surroundings warily, Luxion responded, "Belated though his reaction was, after hearing you speak about the game's sequel, Master finally requested that I investigate the Principality of Fanoss. I was pressed for time, so I was unable to gather as much intelligence as I would have liked. Still, it was easy enough to find schematics detailing the castle's layout, security detail, and patrol schedule."

Marie blinked at him. "You're really capable of anything, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'm an exceptional AI."

I sniffed at that. "And way too full of yourself."

"I am merely stating facts, but let's return to the matter at hand. The two Magic Flutes are secured in separate locations. Only one is hidden in this treasure vault."

When Marie first told me there were two flutes, I'd been shocked. I had to send Luxion on a rush job to investigate, and subsequently to plan our infiltration. None of this would've gone so smoothly without him.

Spotting a fancy pedestal with a flute at the center, Marie declared confidently, "I found it! That's got to be the Magic Flute! I'm pretty sure it looked like that in the game, too!"

"Unfortunately, that is not the real Magic Flute," said Luxion.

"Huh?" Marie blurted, deflating.

"It's a replica. The real one is tucked away in a secret room here." He then explained how to access that room.

Following his instructions carefully, Marie and I soon discovered a switch allowing us passage through a hidden door. As Luxion had indicated, there was another flute within. It looked exactly like the replica Marie had found.

“There it is,” I said.

Marie scoffed. “Just how scared are they of it getting stolen that they made a replica and put it in plain sight to trick people?”

Both our hands stretched out toward the black flute, only to stop short when Luxion said, “Please do not touch the flute heedlessly. There is a trap in place to stymy would-be thieves. We must disarm it to retrieve the flute safely.”

“Wow,” said Marie. “They’re super cautious.”

Once the trap was disarmed, we snatched our prize. The flute was an ominous-looking object if ever I’d seen one.

“What’re we gonna do with it?” Marie asked with a slight tilt of her head.

Destroying it would put our minds at ease, but there was no telling what the consequences of doing so might be. It could unleash the behemoth sealed within, which would be absolutely terrifying and defeat the whole purpose of our coming here.

“I think our only option is to take it and have Luxion analyze it,” I said. That seemed the safer route.

“First the Saint’s necklace, now this. *Everything* could be cursed,” Marie grumbled.

Speaking of, we’d left Luxion the necklace to analyze as well, since there was no way to do that ourselves.

“I am in the process of analyzing it now,” Luxion said, referring to the necklace. “As for the flute, please place it in this case for safekeeping.” He had brought along an attaché case the perfect size to hold the Magic Flute. Marie hurriedly tucked the item inside, then snapped the case shut. The locks on the lid clicked, securing it. They were sturdy enough that no one else would be able to crack the case open.

“Good,” I said, dusting my hands. “That’s one flute safely recovered.”

Marie wiped sweat from her forehead. “Yeah, and one more to go. Here’s hoping it’s this easy. Let’s get moving.”

“Hold on. Before we do that…” I started messing things up in the vault, making our break-in more obvious. It was important that Fanoss realize the Magic Flute had been stolen. “Once they know their ace in the hole is gone, they’ll think twice before declaring war on us.”

The whole trigger for the conflict—or, at the very least, a major contributing factor—was the Magic Flute itself. Fanoss wouldn’t go to war with Holfort without the flute to fall back on.

I placed a card on the dais where the item had been. Written on it were the words *We took your flute.*

“*Now*, I feel like a real phantom thief.”

With that, we left the treasure vault.

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Since this was the royal castle, patrols were carried out and guards were stationed at regular intervals, even during the night. It was a well-planned security setup meant to prevent intruders. But what if said intruders knew exactly when the patrolling guards made their rounds and changed shifts?

Luxion had gathered that information beforehand, and his mobile unit was proving adaptable even on the fly. He was using everything at his disposal to gather additional intel in real time to map our route. Marie and I depended on him entirely for guidance. Our confidence in him wasn’t misplaced; en route to our next destination, we never once encountered a single enemy. There were spots along the way where guards stood watch, but the special optical camouflage suits that Luxion had made helped us blend in with our surroundings perfectly. No one was the wiser to our presence.

“These guys are way too lax for palace guards,” I said. It was hard to believe how many of them we’d seen yawning and bleary-eyed.

Marie shrugged. “It works in our favor that way. Now, where’s the other flute?”

As we neared a door, Luxion lurched to a stop. “I must warn you, acquiring the next one will be particularly difficult.” He explained that it was kept in the royal quarters of the younger princess, Hertrauda Sera Fanoss, and that guards were posted outside her room.

“Great. More guards.” I shook my head. “I mean, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but still.” I slipped the pistol from the holster on my hip. It already had a silencer attached, and I took aim and squeezed the trigger. Muted pops sounded as I fired off each successive round. “Take a little nap, why don’t you? This’ll be over before you know it.”

The guards were momentarily shocked by the sudden pain. They reached for their weapons, only for their eyes to roll back before they could do anything, and then they collapsed to the floor.

“I know you’re just using a stun gun, but that sure was gruesome,” said Marie.

Luxion urged us along. “We only have thirty minutes until the next shift change. I suggest you make this quick.”

I understood why time was of the essence here, but I couldn’t get on board. “Look, it’d be way too awkward for me to go into a girl’s room.” I turned to Marie. “You get the flute.”

Marie glowered at me. “What?! Why do I have to do the dangerous part? Get your butt in there with me!” She snatched my hand and yanked me along, shoving me through the door before I could figure out how to slip out of her grasp.

Several women were inside the room already. They were all taken aback by my sudden entry.

“Sorry about this,” I said, aiming my gun and stunning them before they could process what was happening. All the women slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Now that there was no one to impede us, Luxion began scanning the room. “I have located the flute,” he announced. He activated a secret switch, and one of the paintings on the wall swung aside to reveal a small vault.

Marie stepped up to the closed vault. “What’s the security code?” she demanded.

“That dial on the front is fake. To open the vault, follow my instructions,” Luxion said.

She did so, and in no time at all, we’d completed our mission.

“The second flute is ours now!” Marie cried in a hushed voice, cracking the attaché case open to place the two flutes together inside.

It had proven surprisingly easy to retrieve both. This would be a huge step toward preventing the war that had broken out in the game. Marie and I looked at one another. We nodded and, careful not to make any unnecessary noise, gave each other a soft high five.

“Done,” I said. “Mission complete.”

“Phew. What a relief it is, too.”

All that was left now was to sneak out and make our way back to—

“Who’s there? Father? Mother?” Hertrauda called out, stirring.

I lifted my gun, ready to fire at the princess, but Marie smacked my hand. “Dummy! She’s still a child!”

“You’re the dummy here!” I retorted.

Luckily, Marie and I were fully decked out in black, including ski masks that hid everything but our eyes. Still, it wasn’t a good sign that Hertrauda had spotted us or heard our voices. Worse, while Marie and I bickered over how to handle her, she was blinking away the last dregs of sleep.

Hertrauda spotted the repositioned painting and the unconscious women on the floor. Her eyes widened. “Y-you rogues!” she cried loudly. “Who sent—”

Marie leaped at her, clamping a hand over the princess’s mouth. “Quiet! If you shout like that, you’ll call attention to us!”

Pretty sure that’s the point.

While I aimed the stun gun at her, hesitating over whether to shoot, Luxion drifted toward me. “I have completely soundproofed the room so no one outside can hear anything,” he said. “Any violence you enact will not call attention to us.”

“Not sure I liked how you phrased that,” I replied.

After all, the girl in front of us was still quite young. She had long, straight black hair, porcelain skin, and gleaming red eyes that spoke to a strong spirit. She was probably only Marie’s height, but she had one prominent feature Marie lacked: Despite her youth, she was particularly well-endowed.

I kept my gun trained on Hertrauda and stepped forward, hoping to intimidate her. For a girl her age, being confronted by a man with a weapon had to be terrifying. Her eyes shimmered with tears, but she glowered at me courageously.

What a strong princess.

“Let her go,” I told Marie.

Startled, Marie stammered, “Wh-what? Are you sure?”

“I want to tell her something.”

Marie peeled her hand away from Hertrauda’s mouth.

“Knaves!” the princess shouted at the top of her lungs. “Guards! Guards!”

However much she called for help, no one came. As soon as reality sank in, she turned meek. Or had she sunk into despair at this point? She was still putting on a brave face, but she was considerably paler now.

After a long pause, she said, “It seems as though you’ve already taken care of the guards outside.”

“It was easy enough,” I replied. “I got the sense that Fanoss doesn’t have the best soldiers.”

Hertrauda glared daggers at me for that comment. I studied her face, wondering whether it was really wise to proceed down this path. But if we avoided war with Fanoss, she and her sister would survive, and it would be dangerous for them to live without knowing the truth of their circumstances.

I beat the first game. There’s got to be some way for me to drop a hint so she can figure things out herself.

“We took your Magic Flute,” I said. “You no longer have your trump card against Holfort.”

“You really don’t think so? If you honestly believe that is the only weapon at our disposal, you’re awfully naive.” Hertrauda huffed and looked away from me.

I wasn’t sure whether her confidence came from an assumption that we hadn’t taken the other flute from their vault or if they really did have another weapon in their arsenal to use against us. Whatever the case, I was impressed that she could stand her ground like this despite her situation. In the game, Hertrauda was just an enemy; meeting her face to face now made me appreciate what an amazing princess she was, with a true backbone.

“Posturing does you no favors. We took the other flute you had in the treasure vault as well,” I said. “And I don’t mean the replica you so cleverly set in plain view. I mean the real one you tucked away in a secret room.”

Hertrauda’s shoulders flinched. I’d cracked her bravado. A more seasoned princess would’ve hidden her emotions better, but nevertheless, I appreciated her honest response.

Marie watched our exchange silently.

“Does that vex you?” I asked the princess.

“Not particularly. If you wish to kill me, then by all means do so. However, you must know that you will pay dearly for it.”

I shook my head at her sadly. “I pity you. Really, I do. You’re completely ignorant of the truth and haven’t even realized they’re pulling your strings. You’re nothing but a convenient puppet to them.”

Her back straightened. “How dare you?”

“If you want to know the truth, look into your country’s *real* history. The old man in your archives ought to be able to steer you the right way.”

That man had only been mentioned in passing during the game. *I think he’s the one who helped the protagonist and her love interest find out the truth about the relationship between Holfort and Fanoss. I can’t quite remember the details, though.* It was a vague recollection at best, and I wasn’t sure my hint was sufficient to get Hertrauda the answers she needed. Regardless, I hoped it would at least be a starting point for her.

“Of course, that’s assuming you’re brave enough to face the truth.”

Keeping the gun trained on Hertrauda, I reached for Marie and pulled her along to exit the room. As soon as we were out the door, I began pumping my legs as hard as I could. Marie sped after me.

“Hold on! What was that conversation about?! You never mentioned any of that to me!” she yelped.

Luxion seemed similarly puzzled. “I saw no purpose in that entire exchange. Even assuming that Hertrauda learns the truth after this, what benefit will that

have?”

“Who knows?! Maybe it’ll bring our nations closer to peace!” I said.

I hoped that, once she knew the truth, that might at least lead us to a more amicable path. If it would help us avoid war, I was happy to give her some vague advice.

“Now that they no longer possess both Magic Flutes, there should be no issues in that regard,” Luxion reminded me.

“Yeah, well, taking the flutes wasn’t my preferred method of solving things!”

I was eager for us to get out of the castle altogether and hop on our airbike so we could blow this place. With our mission complete, we just had to make it out of here safely.

“This is the end of our stint as phantom thieves,” I declared. “I never want to do this crap again!”

“I’m as done with it as you are!” agreed Marie.

I beelined for the exit, taking the shortest route available.

“Master,” Luxion cut in, interrupting my concentration, “I have detected an unexpected, powerful enemy presence.”

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When Vandel reentered the castle, the guards within were panicked, rushing around.

“What happened?” the old knight demanded of a guard that he managed to catch.

The man’s first reaction was to give Vandel an annoyed look. When he realized who was talking to him, though, he flinched. “Y-you’re…the Black Knight!” He hurriedly saluted Vandel.

Vandel furrowed his brow in irritation. “What’s all this fuss about?” he asked again.

“R-right! You see, sir, we found some of the guards on duty unconscious. Someone seems to have broken into the castle.”

Vandel's eyes widened. Now it made sense that the castle had descended into such chaos. "Are the princesses all right?!" he boomed.

The guard shrank back. "I-I don't know. That's what we were going to check on next."

"Enough!" Vandel shoved the guard away and started for the corridor, only to encounter Hertrude, a retinue of guards and maids at her heels. She was still in her nightclothes, a dressing gown secured over them.

This princess's full name was Hertrude Sera Fanoss, and she was Hertrauda's elder sister. The commotion had woken her suddenly, and her long, silky black hair looked a bit bedraggled. Vandel saw easily how shaken she was at the news of an intruder; her alabaster skin had turned ashen.

Vandel rushed to Hertrude's side. Rather than greeting her with the traditional bow to show his reverence for her, his foremost concern was checking her over to ensure she was unharmed. He knew doing so was most discourteous of a retainer, but her safety was of paramount importance to him.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?!"

At a glance, her clothes weren't disheveled, and she at least had no visible wounds.

"Yes, I'm unharmed," she told him. "But what's going on? All I've been told is that there's an intruder. No one seems to know anything more than that."

The hand hanging limp at Vandel's side, hidden from Hertrude's view, clenched into a tight, trembling fist. He was livid at the incompetence the castle's knights and soldiers had displayed tonight.

They should all be ashamed of causing the princesses this undue anxiety! I knew I shouldn't have left Gelatt to lead. That was a terrible mistake on my part.

Despite his simmering anger, Vandel affected complete composure. "I'll look into the matter personally," he said to Hertrude, his voice soft and gentle so as to reassure her.

"I would appreciate that." She paused and scanned the area. "Is Hertrauda all right?"

When Vandel likewise realized that the other princess hadn't shown up, the blood drained from his face.

A soldier rushed into the room with them. "The intruders attacked Princess Hertrauda!" he shouted, blanching as the words left his lips. "There were two of them! They stole both Magic Flutes and are on the run!"

Vandel shot forward. "Get me an Armor!" he shouted.

These scoundrels have some nerve targeting Princess Hertrauda directly! I'll cut them down myself!

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As soon as we'd made it out the castle window, we were confronted by a staggering number of Armors whizzing around in the air. If that wasn't enough to make my blood run cold, a number of searchlights pierced the darkness as well, hunting for us.

"Looks like they know we were in the castle," I said. "We need to get out of here quick."

"Couldn't agree more!"

We retrieved our airbike from where we'd hidden it in some bushes and hopped on. Marie settled in behind me, wrapping both arms around my waist. Her viselike grip made me smile bitterly to myself. One wouldn't normally expect a woman to have such a powerful grasp.

"You'd better not fall off," I teased. There was no way that was possible, given how firmly she'd latched on.

"I'll resent you forever if you somehow *knock* me off," she retorted.

The bike slowly lifted and hovered in the air. I turned the accelerator and felt the engine roar to life beneath me.

"Our ability to interfere with the enemy's magic-detection capabilities remains stable," Luxion reported. "Additionally, our optical camouflage will prevent visual detection."

We sped away from the castle, shooting through the air at top speed with no enemy Armors in pursuit.

“Easy-peasy!” I cried happily. At long last, we could enjoy our school lives without worrying constantly about our entire nation being annihilated.

But my relief was short-lived.

“Hold on a sec. There’s an Armor headed straight for us!” Marie shouted.

“Wha—?” I craned my neck to look behind me.

Marie was right. A single Armor blasted through the darkness, making a beeline for us. It was the same model used by the castle guards, and its right hand carried an enormous sword. In its left hand was a rifle, which it was now aiming at us.

“Engaging emergency evasive maneuvers!” said Luxion. In the next instant, the airbike’s handles moved on their own, yanking us left. A bullet narrowly missed us, piercing straight through the spot where we’d been a second earlier. It took me several seconds to digest the fact that we’d almost died.

“Whoever’s piloting that can *see* us?!” I screeched.

Our optical camouflage was supposed to prevent exactly that, but it wasn’t doing anything to deflect this enemy’s vision.

Luxion began analyzing the suit. “The Armor is the same model employed by all the castle guards. However, the pilot is the Black Knight himself—the most dangerous person we could possibly encounter. I already had Arroganz on standby in case of an emergency. I will deploy it now.”

The mention of the Black Knight sent a chill down my spine.

“Wait,” Marie said. The tremor in her voice indicated that she was as unsettled by this development as I was. “What’s the Black Knight doing here?!”

“My information indicated that he wouldn’t be posted at the castle during this mission. It seems that assessment was off, however.”

The airbike zigzagged through the air, avoiding the barrage of bullets as the enemy sped closer and closer to us. I continued watching the Armor, brow knit. “We can’t throw him off at all, huh?”

Behind the Black Knight was a large detachment of Armors following him to join the pursuit. If we didn’t pull out of here fast, they’d soon surround us.

“You’re going to have to take over driving,” I told Marie.

“What’re you going do?!”

“Me? I’m going to…do this!” I peeled her hands from my waist and dove off the side of the bike, hurtling through the air. As I fell, I caught a brief glimpse of Marie’s shocked face. *Hey, it’s not like this was* my *first choice, either, you know.*

“You better catch me, Arroganz!” I howled.

While I prayed silently and waited, Arroganz swooped in and snatched me out of the air.

“I trusted that you’d make it in time, partner!” I said.

Arroganz’s eyes flashed several times, as if responding to my voice.

Chapter 4:
Fanoss's Black Knight

AFTER BOARDING ONE of the castle's Armors, Vandel had taken to the air. There, he spotted an unnatural ripple moving through the sky over the capital.

"I've never heard of magic rendering a person completely invisible," he said to himself. "This must be the effect of some kind of Lost Item. But whatever tricks they're using, it's my own old age that undermines me." He muttered the last few words bitterly to himself.

If Vandel were still in his prime, his eyes would've spotted the intruders sooner. He'd already have sniped them down. How vexing that age had diminished him. Perhaps equally infuriating was this piece of junk he was piloting—the castle guards' sad excuse for an Armor.

"It only looks fancy on the surface. It has no functionality!"

Vandel had felt that something was off from the moment he entered the cockpit. His instincts proved accurate; he'd now realized that the Armor had less powerful output than he was accustomed to. This suit had probably been stored as a spare in case of emergencies, so perhaps it wasn't shocking that it wasn't in peak working condition. Still, its inferiority was obvious.

Despite his defective Armor, Vandel had sped past the other guards. None had caught up with him yet.

The Black Knight's rifle eventually ran out of bullets. He tossed the weapon aside, lightening his load so he could fly faster.

"You vermin, stealing into the princess's bedroom as she slept… I'll rip you to pieces!"

As if responding to Vandel's intense desire, his Armor accelerated until it at last reached the anomaly in the air. Vandel raised his blade, ready to cut whatever it was down, but stopped pressing the pedal at the last second.

"An Armor?!" he cried in disbelief.

An ash-gray suit descended from the sky, snatching something out of the air. On a subconscious level, Vandel sensed that this new enemy was truly dangerous—far more so than the anomaly he'd been pursuing a moment ago. He moved his focus to the suit instead.

"It's enormous," he noted. "About twice the size of my personal Armor, I'd wager."

That was part of the reason he was wary. Under ordinary circumstances, the larger an armor, the less mobile it was. There were a few exceptions, but larger models were generally at a severe disadvantage. Therefore, under different circumstances, he might not have taken his opponent so seriously—but something told him this was a definitive exception.

"A hatch opened on his chest," he murmured to himself. "What a fool I am!"

Embarrassed though he was by his belated realization, he immediately sped toward his target, but it was already too late. In the few extra seconds he'd taken to react, he'd given the enemy a chance they never should've had.

"I really didn't want to have to fight the Black Knight," the enemy Armor said as it lurched forward, charging toward Vandel. It reached for the enormous container on its back and pulled out a battle axe, which it skillfully wielded in only one hand.

Vandel's face pinched as his sword parried the attack. *This Armor's incredibly powerful! Is it on the same level as my personal suit? No… No, its functionality, at least, is superior.*

The Black Knight fought calmly, analyzing his enemy all the while.

"Time for you to take a dirt nap, old man!" the enemy suit's pilot cried.

The timbre of his voice clued Vandel in to his age. "You're awfully young," he said.

Thanks to his armor's superior capabilities, the enemy was gearing up to overpower Vandel, but the Black Knight interrupted him with a swift kick that launched the two apart.

"Gah!" There was a note of panic in the enemy's strangled cry.

Vandel took that as confirmation of his suspicions. “I can tell you’ve been training, but it’s all too obvious that you have no real combat experience,” he said. “Unfortunately, that shows that you’ll be a true threat in the future, so I cannot allow you to live. Your life ends here.”

He sped forward and swung his sword.

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Vandel’s sword slammed into the side of Arroganz’s chest and sent a shock wave through the cockpit. Sparks flew upon impact as steel bit into steel.

“Hey, Luxion, want to explain to me how this old man’s managing to chop through my plating?!”

Luxion had crafted Arroganz’s outer plating from a special, sturdy material that no normal weapon could pierce. It was lightweight but still perfectly durable—bulletproof, even. It was hard to believe that the Black Knight had made a dent in it, especially while piloting a subpar suit.

“Since he’s flying that garbage, I thought I’d have no problem beating him,” I complained.

I tried to pull back and put some distance between us, but the moment I did, something jerked my entire Armor.

“What the…?” My eyes landed on my left arm. “He’s got a wire wrapped around me?!”

In the few precious seconds when I’d let myself get distracted, the Black Knight had jammed his sword against Arroganz’s cockpit hatch. Fortunately, he hadn’t pierced it. Still, I sure didn’t want to repeat this experience, that was certain.

“If you think you can run from me, you’re sorely mistaken,” said the knight. He was tugging the other end of the wire.

No wonder I couldn’t get away. “You’re crazy, old man.”

With me lashed to him, the Black Knight continued jabbing his sword at me skillfully, denting and scraping Arroganz’s outer plating. His managing to damage my Armor at all was one issue, but the last thing I wanted was for him

to target the same spot repeatedly. If he kept chipping away at the plating, there was no guarantee he wouldn't cause permanent damage.

"Why, you…!" Air hissed beneath my teeth. I managed to parry one blow with my axe, but I was too slow to catch the next one. "Guess this is the difference between our skills as pilots."

I was loath to admit it, but he was clearly superior. Arroganz was far more powerful than the piece of junk the knight was using, but his piloting skills surpassed mine by the same margin—or perhaps a bigger one.

"I can hear a Holfortian accent in your voice," said Vandel. That little tidbit gave him even more motivation to take me down. His attacks became faster and more ferocious.

"Geh…"

"What did you do to our princess?" Vandel demanded. "Answer me, you Holfortian scum!"

He was so intimidating that I almost recoiled, unable to defend myself or put up any real resistance. I was becoming a complete sandbag. Each blow that landed jostled me in my seat. Static began to appear on the screen in front of me, obscuring the once-clear image. Apparently, he'd even damaged the outside cameras.

An alarm blared in the cockpit, indicating abnormalities in multiple sections of the suit. Further damage to Arroganz could put me in true danger.

"Fine. I can't do anything to match your piloting skills. That just means I've got to take advantage of my superior suit and overpower you!" I readjusted my grip on the control sticks and slammed my foot against the accelerator. Arroganz's engine rumbled in response.

"It's futile!" Vandel cried.

Despite his claim, I realized I was on to something. What would the Black Knight hate more than anything else? Being bested not by superior might but by a superior Armor. He'd talked big, but I wasn't the only one panicking in this fight. It definitely rattled him that, however much he sliced and slashed, Arroganz took no substantial damage.

That's it. The reason he kept talking like that was to get in my head and psych me out.

"I'm the kind of guy who prefers only to fight the battles I can win. So let's switch things up and make this a battle of Armor superiority, not pilot skill!"

"You pigheaded greenhorn!"

"Yeah, I *am* a greenhorn. That's why I'm going to play it smart and press my advantage. You know I'm still an amateur, so you ought to play nicer, old man!"

Flames shot out of Arroganz's thrusters, accelerating my Armor well past a point that the Black Knight could combat through skill alone. The wire still linked us together, and I whipped him through the air like a ragdoll.

"Holfortian scum!" he howled at me.

"Try not to die on me, okay?"

The sheer velocity put so much strain on Vandel's Armor that its limbs began to rip off. Ultimately, not much more than his Armor's torso remained; it hurtled through the air and slammed to the ground below.

"He's not dead, is he?" I murmured to myself. When I saw his Armor move, a wave of relief washed over me.

By this point, the other Armors from the castle's security forces had finally reached me.

"There's only one enemy! Surround him and take him down!" shouted their leader.

I stowed my battle axe in Arroganz's rear container again, then threw my arms open wide. "This won't be so lethal it'll kill you. But it's still gonna hurt, so I hope you're ready."

A hatch on Arroganz's rear container opened, unleashing missiles in rapid succession. Those projectiles sped toward their targets, which were quick to dodge out of their immediate path.

"Wait!" one man cried. "Are these things following us?!"

They tried to outmaneuver my missiles, but the weapons' homing capabilities

ensured that they eventually found their mark, exploding upon impact. The ensuing blast damaged each enemy suit enough that they plummeted to the ground. Since the Armors were still mostly intact, I was pretty sure all the pilots were safe. The missiles' firepower was at least low enough not to blow them to smithereens, I knew that much. Some of the Armors stayed airborne even after taking a direct hit.

"This thing's eerie!" one yelled.

"Why're these guys treating me like I'm inhuman or something?" I grumbled to myself. "Ah, well. I guess that makes things easier on me."

Insofar as there was no discernible indication as to what country Arroganz was affiliated with, it was essentially an unidentified flying object. That was convenient for me. Once the Principality discovered that we'd stolen both their flutes, they'd have no choice but to lie low—for a while at least.

"With that out of the way," I said, "I guess it's time to make a run for it!"

"D-don't let him get away!" some armor cried. "After him!"

"Ha! As if you could ever catch me, morons!"

Despite the notable damage to Arroganz's exterior, I managed to shake them off fairly easily, speeding away.

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Vandel's Armor had crashed into the middle of a forest. It had lost all its appendages, but Vandel was unscathed. He jammed his foot against the cockpit hatch, ripping it off its hinges before lifting himself out of the opening. His eyes focused on the skies above, where the enemy was dancing circles around Fanoss's knights.

Vandel clenched his fists at his sides. Part of his anger was directed toward his own countrymen, but the person he resented most right now was himself.

"The way that pilot moved suggests he was taught his skills somewhere. Could he be a Holfortian knight?"

The Armor that the enemy piloted wasn't one Vandel had ever seen before, but the young man's piloting reminded Vandel of the knights of Holfort.

The thought that he'd lost to Holfortian scum was the most vexing of all. Vandel's nails bit into his skin. A thin tendril of blood trickled between his fingers and dripped to the ground. His eyes were bloodshot and wide with rage as he watched his enemy flee.

"I won't lose the next time we meet, brat. That I swear. I *will* bring you down."

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The next day, a large crowd congregated inside Hertrauda's—or Rauda, as Hertrude called her—room. Specialized investigators had arrived and were using magic and other tools to search for traces of the intruders. Thus far, they were coming up frustratingly empty-handed.

"Who in the world could they have been?"

"Holfortians, perhaps?"

"What's most shameful is that neither the knights nor maids noticed anything."

Rauda watched the group discuss the situation. An earl by the name of Gelatt stood beside her. His opulent clothes spoke to the enormous authority he wielded within Fanoss, yet the way he gazed at Rauda was visibly cold and uncaring.

Gelatt's fingers traced gently over his beloved mustache. "You failed us, Princess Hertrauda," he said curtly. "How could you let the enemy take your Magic Flute?"

"It was inexcusable," Rauda agreed, gritting her teeth.

That seemed to give Gelatt some sort of sadistic satisfaction. "Of course it was," he said. "That flute isn't only a national treasure but also our secret weapon. It was only due to your capacity to wield it that you were even in the line of succession. I simply can't understand how, knowing its deep significance, you allowed this to happen. Without the flute, your very reason for existing is gone as well."

Gelatt was technically a retainer of the royal family, but the way he spoke was

arrogant and condescending. It wasn't at all the attitude a servant to the crown should have had.

Unable to stand by and watch this exchange any longer, Hertrude interjected, "How could you expect Rauda to withstand them when even our own knights were powerless? Gelatt, you need to let Rauda rest. Immediately."

Gelatt frowned. He apparently had enough shame to realize Hertrude had a point, but even that didn't discourage his belligerent attitude. "I cannot. We must collect as much information about these ruffians as we can, and as quickly as possible. Princess Hertrauda is our one and only eyewitness. She can rest once we conclude our investigation here."

"I am ordering you to let her rest," Hertrude said.

"This incident was disastrous, Your Highness. I understand that you're both royalty, but I must request your cooperation nonetheless." In saying this, Gelatt was openly ignoring her order, but no one else in the room dared to admonish him for that. They watched from a distance without involving themselves at all.

"Gelatt!" Hertrude snapped, losing her temper.

A moment later, a bear of a man—Vandel—marched into the room.

"I-It's you, Black Knight!" Gelatt squeaked, suddenly sounding deferential. "Have you recovered from your injuries?"

Vandel glared at the cowering Gelatt. "Those injuries were minor and inconsequential. I am more concerned about how exhausted Princess Hertrauda looks. We'll let her rest. I assume you take no issue with that."

"What? N-no! Of course I don't." Gelatt's face strained with reluctance, but Vandel was so intimidating that the earl didn't dare argue the point. Once again, no one else in the room tried to intervene.

This whole exchange illustrated something very clearly to Hertrauda: *Our only ally in the entire castle is Vandel.* The others weren't openly hostile to Hertrauda and her sister, but they also wouldn't stick their necks out for the two princesses.

The situation made her recall something one of the intruders had told her.

“You’re nothing but a convenient puppet to them.” That hadn’t been all. *He mentioned something about the truth—that I should ask the old man in the archives about it. Maybe there really is something I’m not aware of.*

It vexed her to feel that even the intruder was pulling her strings, yet she couldn’t help her growing curiosity.

***

Once Rauda was finally free from her interrogators, she followed the intruder’s advice and visited the old man in the archives. She’d been there countless times before, but she couldn’t remember ever having a proper conversation with the elderly archivist.

“Do you know anything about the truth of our nation?” she asked him.

The archivist looked visibly shaken, his eyes widening. “Wh-what could you be referring to, Your Highness? This old man doesn’t understand what you’re asking, I’m afraid.” If he was trying to deceive her, he was completely unconvincing.

“I want to know!” Rauda burst out. “I promise to keep whatever you reveal to me confidential. So, if you’re aware of something, please tell me. What is this ‘truth’ I don’t know about?”

The old man’s gaze drifted around the room as beads of sweat rolled down his face. After a few tense seconds, he seemed to make a decision. He moved to the rear of the room, plucked out a few hidden tomes, and then carried them back and set them in front of her.

“I was ordered to get rid of these a while ago. I suspect what you’re looking for is in them,” he said.

The books’ covers and pages were worn and ancient.

“Are these history books? Why would anyone order that they be…” Rauda trailed off as she cracked open one of the books and began perusing its contents. When she absorbed the secrets it contained, she was rattled. “What… what *is* this?”

The first tome she’d picked up recounted the history between Holfort

Kingdom and the Principality of Fanoss. It was a story she knew well, but the details within differed wildly from what she'd been taught.

The old man kept his gaze lowered as he answered, "I don't know whether that is the truth you're looking for, but I can confirm that those are facts some within our nation have tried to bury."

Hertrauda had grown up under the impression that Holfort was the source of all evils, but the history she was reading now painted the opposite picture: It had, in fact, been the Principality of Fanoss that started it all. She was so shocked that she was lost for words.

"I was ordered to dispose of these after the previous king and queen passed away," the archivist explained. "But I was reluctant to follow through, given their value as accurate records of our history." And so he'd disobeyed the order and instead stowed the books away.

Rauda's entire body trembled. "And these…these are facts? This is all true?!"

But why—and moreover, how—did those intruders know about all this? If the archivist hid these and didn't show them to anyone, how could they possibly know the books existed?!

The old man nodded. "Yes. Holfort did invade us twenty years ago, but it's also true that we wreaked havoc within their borders before that."

Rauda was in shock. This went against everything she knew, everything she'd believed. The story she'd been told was a convenient lie to hide all the difficult truths about Fanoss's own culpability. It was like the very earth beneath her had crumbled and disappeared, leaving her in free fall.

"Why…why would anyone hide this? Why didn't anyone tell us?" Her voice trembled.

"My deepest apologies, Your Highness." The old man dropped to his knees and lowered his head, tears streaming down his wrinkled cheeks. "At one point, our country was split into two major groups: the pacifist faction and the pro-war faction. Your parents belonged to the former group. Almost immediately after you and your sister were born, the pro-war faction assassinated them."

"My parents were…assassinated?" Rauda echoed numbly.

What the archivist explained next was actually an open secret within Fanoss. The royal family at that time had been strong advocates of peace. Given the complex history between Fanoss and Holfort, as well as the two nations' distinct difference in military might, Rauda's parents thought a protracted war would be unproductive and pointless. Their stance incensed the pro-war faction, which responded by murdering the king and queen and taking the princesses under their wing. That was how they'd reached their current situation.

Rauda crumpled to her knees. Fat tears tracked down her face. "This is too unfair!" she cried. "We really are just powerless figureheads."

It finally made sense why they were treated so poorly at the castle, despite everyone referring to them respectfully. As far as the others were concerned, she and Hertrude were just convenient tools who could wield the Magic Flutes. There was no other meaning to their existence. People made a pretense of caring for Rauda and her sister, but their regard was paper-thin. None of them had ever considered the two their true princesses—not really.

"B-but wait…" Rauda swallowed the lump in her throat. "What about Vandel? He was my sister's bodyguard. But only those from the pro-war faction—the very people who backstabbed our parents—ever approached us, right?!" Her panic rose like a tidal wave, threatening to crash over her.

Vandel was part of the pro-war faction, she knew that much. He was a hero, Fanoss's savior. He had pushed strongly for the war between Fanoss and Holfort to continue. But if what the old archivist said was true, then…

"I don't believe Lord Vandel was involved in your parents' assassination," the archivist answered with a pained look. "That said, he's always been an important linchpin within the pro-war faction. I have a hard time believing he didn't know about the murders beforehand."

Rauda's tears fell even faster as the betrayal of a man she'd so deeply trusted sank in.

Chapter 5:
The Being Inside the Saint's Necklace

ONCE OUR LITTLE EXCURSION to Fanoss was over, Marie and I found ourselves inside a laboratory on Luxion's main ship. We'd brought the two Magic Flutes all the way here so that he could analyze them. After we set the attaché case down, he retrieved the instruments and began a basic scan. We stood there for a little over ten minutes waiting for him to finish and make his report.

At long last, Luxion said, "I suspected this beforehand. It appears that the flutes were crafted after the ancient civilization that created me had already collapsed."

That essentially meant that these flutes were Lost Items as well, although they came from a different time period than Luxion and his creators. A bigger concern was what the flutes were capable of: manipulating monsters and summoning final bosses. They could hardly be considered standard, run-of-the-mill Lost Items.

"What stumps me is how a civilization that came after yours created something like this," I said. It beggared belief. Even current technology couldn't develop objects like these flutes.

"Indeed," said Luxion. "By my calculations, it's most likely that several civilizations followed mine and preceded yours. One of those must have been responsible for the flutes."

Marie stared at the flutes, completely uninterested in our discussion about the planet's history. "Okay, fine. So there was another civilization. And? What does that tell us?"

I sniffed at her, exasperated. "Why don't you take a little more interest in history and appreciate its depth? Doesn't it excite you at all to think that there might've been a civilization far more advanced than our own?"

She gave me a bored look. "The fact that Luxion exists already proves that

fact. Duh. Who cares if other advanced civilizations came after his? What direct impact does that have on us?”

“None, I guess.” I shrugged.

“Yeah. I thought not.” She didn’t think learning more about the past would benefit us in any way, so she considered taking an interest in it completely pointless.

“Regarding this mystery civilization,” Luxion said, ignoring her cynical commentary, “We know that they managed to enable those flutes to manipulate monsters. I infer that this is done by creating a magical contract between the user and the monsters under the flute’s influence, the catalyst being the user’s soul.”

“What?!” Marie screeched. She must’ve been listening, despite acting like she was bored of the whole conversation. She jumped back from the flute.

I quietly retreated a step as well. “Uh, let’s just destroy them already, okay?”

“They could be useful, so I will analyze them thoroughly before disposing of them,” said Luxion. “That said, there is no reason for you to be anxious. Using the flutes to manipulate the inferior monster varieties in this region of the world would not require the user’s soul. At worst, it might cause mental exhaustion.”

“Oh, really?”

“However, the monster sealed inside each flute itself is a different story. Some sort of mechanism allows the flutes to summon an artificial behemoth, though at the cost of the user’s life,” explained Luxion.

The worst thing about the final bosses the flutes contained was their capacity to revive even after being defeated.

“Actually, it is technically incorrect to say the monster is sealed within,” Luxion clarified. “Rather, what is actually stored inside the instrument appears to be *data* about the monster. The user utilizes the flute, sacrificing their own soul to gather demonic essence in the air. That manifests the behemoth into reality. Since the monster’s data is within the flute, and the monster has unrestricted access to demonic essence in the surrounding environment, it can

revive itself endlessly."

"Sounds like a pain. Can't we just destroy them already?" said Marie.

I was on the same page.

"We could," Luxion said, but his tone indicated he planned to do anything but. "There is great value in the magic and scientific technology behind the flutes, however, so I wish to continue my analysis."

I was ready to be done with the flutes—the sooner the better—but I knew better than to think Luxion would be on board if I pushed the topic. It'd be worse if I forced him to destroy them; he'd never let me hear the end of it. It was better to suck it up and let him have his way.

"Fine," I said. "But once you're done, destroy them."

"Of course," said Luxion.

Since we'd entered his laboratory, I'd noticed a number of other items—and even creatures—stored inside. Some of the creatures were actually monsters. One thing in particular stood out due to how securely it was stored: a black mist inside a glass sphere. That transparent cage was about two meters or so wide. The mist trapped inside had a woman's silhouette. She appeared to be pounding the glass wildly, trying to break out, but to no avail.

"I've been wondering since we came in—what's that thing over there?" I asked, motioning to the sphere. "Some kind of monster?"

Marie eyed the mist curiously before recognition flashed over her face. "I'm pretty sure I've seen that thing somewhere before. Where was it?"

As she fell into silent contemplation, Luxion answered, "That is the being that possessed the Saint's necklace. She's an astral spirit. I suppose you could say that she is a deep-seated grudge that lingered in this world."

A lingering grudge? As in, like, a ghost? A vengeful entity? It was the first time I'd seen something like this since reincarnating into the fantasy world. The spirit was far less terrifying than I might've imagined, though, largely thanks to the fact that she was caged.

"So that thing was possessing the necklace," I muttered. "Is she trying to say

something? Looks like she's thrashing around in there."

"I have soundproofed her container, so she can't hear anything we say. She can't see beyond the glass, either. She is screaming, demanding that I release her at once, and she has thus far refused to answer any of my queries," said Luxion. "So I have been conducting experiments on her."

I hope it's just my imagination, but when he said the word "experiments," his lens seemed to flash eerily.

Marie gripped my hand and squeezed. "Leon, I'm starting to think that Luxion is way more terrifying than this grudge-made-manifest. I'm not crazy, right? To think it's scary that he's experimenting on that thing?"

"Nope. In fact, I'm of the same opinion."

Luxion studied us, his lens whirring as it focused. "How disrespectful. I would never do anything to harm humanity."

You little liar. "Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. You tried to kill me when we first met!" I shouted.

"A most unfortunate miscalculation on my part," he admitted.

You are something else.

"Hold on a sec," Marie said. "When he says 'humanity,' he's referring to *old* humanity, right? He doesn't think of people other than us as part of humanity, does he?"

We both turned, eyeing Luxion suspiciously.

He immediately averted his gaze. "Now then, Masters, why don't you try to speak with this astral spirit? Perhaps it will react differently to you than me."

Don't change the subject! I wanted to object aloud, but before I had the chance, Luxion had already removed the restrictions on the mist's sphere so she could see and hear us.

Soon enough, the astral spirit's shrill voice blasted over the room's speakers. "I'll kill you! I'll murder each and every one of you!!"

Her earsplitting shout made Luxion turn down the volume immediately.

“You are being too loud,” he told the spirit gruffly. “I brought Marie here as you requested. I would appreciate your showing a response distinct from your usual caterwauling.”

As the mist registered Marie’s presence, her two yellow eyes widened. She slammed against the glass as if trying to claw her way to Marie. “I found you. I found you! Marieeee! You are my descendant. Now give me your body!”

Oof. What a horrific demand. Not to mention that she *looked* horrifying, exactly as I’d imagined an evil spirit might look. She *was* a little—okay, no, very—scary. I didn’t mind monsters I could vanquish. They didn’t intimidate me at all. When it came to fighting things like ghosts, though, I wasn’t so brave.

While I trembled in fear, Marie snorted with derisive laughter, knowing the spirit couldn’t touch her. “You’re like a ferocious beast trapped in a zoo cage. How cute. It’s not very nice to demand a person’s body like that, though. Luxion, eliminate her for me.”

“If that’s what you wish, I shall,” he responded obediently.

“How can my descendant have that attitude?!” the spirit howled. “Aren’t you the least bit resentful of Holfort?! I’ll chase those bastards’ progeny to the pits of hell! I am Lier’s… Lier’s…” She froze abruptly, going quiet. Those almond-shaped yellow eyes widened and focused on me.

Uh, crap. This is kind of terrifying.

“Wh-wh-what do you want? What’re you looking at me for?” The blood drained from my face. “Wait. Don’t tell me I’m cursed or something.” As my heart raced with fear, I took another step back.

“Lier! Lieeeer!” the astral spirit howled, swelling in size and slamming against the glass sphere like a wild beast.

“Gaaaah!” I screamed. She was so menacing that I was almost in tears.

A crack ran through the glass confining the spirit. Thick shutters dropped around the spherical cage, rattling, to ensure she couldn’t escape. By that point, my breathing was erratic. I put a hand to my chest and forced myself to heave a long sigh, relieved that the experience was over.

“That was absolutely terrifying.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Marie. “What kind of man are you? Pathetic.”

“Come on. Even you have to admit that was bone-chilling! Who doesn’t find ghosts and paranormal stuff scary?!”

I could handle monsters, but ghosts were completely different! I mean, okay, there were ghost-type monsters, but since this was a fantasy world, there was probably a way to deal with those. But not actual ghosts. There was no way to defeat *them*. That was what made them so terrifying.

“Ha!” Marie snorted at me. “There’s way scarier stuff out there than ghosts. Reality—and the people in it—are much worse.”

Before reincarnating into this world, Marie had led a brutal life, so I understood that other things might strike more fear into her.

“At any rate,” I said, eager to change the subject and obfuscate my own cowardice, “You’d better keep that thing under lock and key, Luxion.”

“She displayed an astounding level of power, didn’t she? I am curious as to why she responded so strongly to you, Master, especially given that Marie was the one she requested to see. Moreover, she called you ‘Lier.’ I assume that must be a name?” Luxion was far more interested in this new discovery than anything else.

That was just as well. If the astral spirit captured his interest, he was less likely to let her slip out of her confines, right? Personally, I’d have liked him to send her to the other side as quickly as possible. But as long as she was sealed up tight, that was at least reassuring.

“The hell if I know!” I said. “Man, that gave me goosebumps. I’m ready to head back to my dorm and go to bed.” I’d take care of washing and stuff as fast as possible, then make a beeline to the mattress beneath my blanket’s safety and warmth.

Marie put her hands on her hips and stared at me. “Are you seriously scared? Like, so afraid you couldn’t even go to the bathroom by yourself in the dark? Aw. You’ve got a cute side. Want me to sleep beside you so you don’t have

nightmares?”

She’s totally making fun of me! “I’m perfectly fine!”

“Sulking like that only makes you seem more childish,” she said.

She’s just gloating because ghosts don’t scare her as much as me.

Regardless, I was still pretty shocked that a bitter astral spirit had possessed one of the Saint’s relics. I could only hope that problem was limited to the necklace, since there were two more relics out there.

Maybe I should have Luxion look into those. “Luxion, there’s something I’d like you to do,” I said.

“Yes? What is it?”

“I want you to check into the other relics.”

There was a short pause as he considered this. Then he replied, “I can do so. However, it will be a considerable amount of time before I get to that, given its low priority and my lack of resources to allocate to it.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I cocked my head to the side, gobsmacked. This was the first time he’d designated a request of mine as a low priority.

“We have already removed the threat posed by the Principality of Fanoss. Thus, I will prioritize investigating this planet as a whole from this point forward. We no longer have to worry about those final bosses, so we have less reason to be preoccupied with the Saint’s relics.”

Luxion had me there. Not only were those final bosses out of the way, we’d even handled the Offreys already. We’d dealt with all the protagonist’s obstacles, so there was no real need for her to possess the Saint’s relics anymore. In fact, given the problem with the necklace, it was probably safer for her not to have them.

“Although we confiscated the Magic Flutes, it is still perfectly possible that similarly powerful items are out in the world somewhere. I would prefer to allocate all my attention and resources to neutralizing those,” Luxion continued.

It was chilling to think that other items could destroy the entire world. If those items existed, we certainly couldn’t leave them lying around. It was

probably best to trust Luxion's judgment and have him investigate them.

"All right," I said. "Prioritize those if you want, but try to look into the relics as soon as possible. It'd be a real problem if Miss Olivia got her hands on one, and it was possessed, too."

"I will be as quick as possible. However, the chances of the astral spirit being capable of possessing Olivia are remarkably low, given that spirit's inability to possess Marie."

We both glanced at Marie in unison.

She was initially surprised to be called out, but her expression soon turned sullen. "What's that supposed to mean, huh?" she demanded.

Luxion and I traded brief looks. We both seemed to be on the same page about this.

"You're right," I said. "If Marie was okay, Miss Olivia shouldn't have problems."

"Judging purely on the abilities and powers ascribed to the Saint, Marie seems the best candidate for the position. In terms of pure potential, however, Olivia will eventually overshadow Marie," Luxion mused. In short, even he agreed that Olivia was a better-qualified candidate for Saint.

Marie wrinkled her nose, her face reddening. "What's with you two, tearing me down like this? Is comparing me to the protagonist that fun?!"

My smile faltered slightly. "We're talking strictly in terms of who'd be the better Saint. No need to blow a gasket."

"You are a splendid woman, Marie," Luxion cut in, trying to pacify her. "In my opinion, you are far superior. That said, I allow that Olivia is better qualified to become Saint, that she has far more magical talent, and that—given how well-endowed she is, compared to you—men prefer women like her. I will even admit that she has incredible mental strength. Having said all that, you are the one whose old-human features are more prominent. That alone is sufficient for you to outshine her."

Oof. I'm sure he meant all that as a compliment, but he phrased it like he was

just trying to push her buttons more.

Marie's face morphed into that of a demon out for blood. Her entire body trembled with barely contained rage.

I glowered at Luxion. "Why can't you even try to be more sensitive toward humans?" It was like he'd stepped on a land mine on purpose. I was often oblivious myself, but even I was disgusted with him.

"I simply wanted to communicate that Marie is wonderful just as she is—that she need do nothing more than simply exist."

Marie cracked her knuckles.

Knowing that we were in the wrong, Luxion and I knelt in front of her obediently, despite sensing that was futile. Well, Luxion just kind of lowered himself to the ground, but it was the same concept. He tilted back to look up at her, attempting to appear as deferential as possible.

Chapter 6:
A “Fun” School Trip

WHEN THE SCHOOL TRIP was almost upon them, some bad news reached Julius. Sadly, the one delivering it was his betrothed, Angelica Rapha Redgrave.

As a duke’s daughter, Angelica had grown up around Julius. She had lustrous, shining blonde hair, carefully braided and pinned up on her head. Her crimson eyes were particularly piercing, which reflected her strong will. She’d been raised like a princess in her house, and had received a cutting-edge education to prepare her to be the nation’s next queen. She was a breathtaking woman and would one day be Julius’s wife.

Yet, for all the history between them, Julius found Angelica insufferable.

Angelica was brief and curt in delivering the news. “Father has arranged for you to join the discussions, Your Highness.”

The date of the discussions was written clearly at the top of an ostentatious document. Julius’s fingers tightened at its edges, wrinkling the entire page. Anyone else would’ve been surprised to see him react so emotionally, but only because they wouldn’t know that the date selected for the meeting seemed too purposeful to Julius.

“Duke Redgrave is awfully sadistic to schedule discussions that coincide with the school trip,” said Julius. “No, let me guess. You chose this date, didn’t you, Angelica?”

She frowned at him. “Please consider the situation instead of throwing accusations, Your Highness. Houses Offrey and Lafan have both fallen, and their noble titles have been revoked. That will cause great unrest within the aristocracy. As for the date…” she hesitated, then said, “I can only ask for your understanding.”

Up until their demise, the Offreys had been the source of a great many horrifying rumors. The Lafans hadn’t been much better; they’d abandoned their

duties as a noble house, resorting to complete debauchery until they lost in battle. The Roseblades were the ones who'd carried out the capture of the Lafans and Offreys, but Leon Bartfort and his family had been the real masterminds behind it.

To protect the crown's authority, the palace claimed responsibility for stripping both houses of their titles and land. The Roseblades and Bartforts were content to let them do so, since they still benefited greatly in the process.

Julius hated such behind-the-scenes power plays.

"The administration itself was at fault for overlooking the Offreys' misdeeds for so long. Now that someone else has stepped in to deal with them, they're just scrambling to save face," he said sardonically. "Isn't that right? And the Roseblades played the game well. They've reaped all the benefits, while they've left the hard work of cleaning up afterward to the palace."

Angelica's face fell. "I passed the message along. I'll excuse myself now," she said, quickly striding out.

Jilk stood behind Julius at a slight angle. His face betrayed no emotion, but there was a thread of annoyance in his voice as he said, "She very likely found out our plans for the school trip."

"I feel badly about what we did to Chris," Julius replied, his expression clouding. "Especially now that all of our efforts were in vain."

They were alluding to the groups their year had been split into for the school trip. The groups determined during a student's first year remained fixed for the next two until graduation. Julius's guilt was over the fact that Chris Fia Arclight had originally been placed in the same group as Olivia.

"Indeed." Jilk sighed. "It's incredibly unfortunate. In order to be assigned to Olivia's group, we went to all the trouble of speaking to a teacher we had connections with…and now this."

They'd gone to so much trouble rigging things in their favor only to be thwarted in the end, prevented from going on the trip. It had all been wasted effort.

"And those machinations nudged Chris into a different group. You didn't

orchestrate that intentionally, did you?" Julius gave Jilk a pointed look. "I never told you to go *that* far."

Jilk recoiled. "I'd never do something like that. I admit that he and Miss Olivia seem awfully close, but I wouldn't stoop to the point of intervening between them."

"We can say it wasn't our intention. But that doesn't matter much, given the results. We hardly look innocent," Julius said, self-derision in his voice.

"Yes. I suppose you have a point there."

They at least agreed that they really didn't have a leg to stand on in this matter; they were guilty.

"Chris probably has no idea what we did," Julius continued. "Still, we'll have to take action later to make it up to him."

"I'll prepare him something by way of apology," Jilk assured the prince, then changed the subject. "That aside, Miss Angelica is proving quite the problem."

Jilk and Julius shared a suspicion that Angelica had orchestrated all these discussions to get in the way of their quality time with Olivia.

Julius shook his head. "I honestly never thought she'd go this far. She sacrificed her own participation in the trip to stay here at the palace for these discussions."

It was ironic that these meetings were innocuously termed "discussions," when in reality they were part of the ongoing faction war between the aristocrats. This latest incident had affected the power dynamic, and Julius and Jilk rightly suspected that Duke Redgrave was moving to counterbalance the shift that had been created.

Jilk stared at the door Angelica had disappeared through earlier. "She's a very passionate woman. Her greatest fault is not recognizing when that zeal goes too far."

"Passionate, hm…?" A momentary silence passed between them. At last, Julius sighed. "And…? How are things shaping up within the palace?"

"Duke Redgrave is openly praising the Roseblades and Bartforts for the roles

they played. He claims they set a shining example by upholding the noble code of conduct."

Julius stared at Jilk, surprised. "Duke Redgrave is *praising* them? Even though they were responsible for this whole debacle?"

"Yes. After all, the Offreys were part of Marquess Frampton's faction."

The Redgrave faction directly opposed the Framptons. By taking down the Offreys, the Roseblades and Bartforts had dealt Marquess Frampton a devastating blow, indirectly benefiting Duke Redgrave and his house.

A shadow fell over Julius's face. "More infighting between factions?"

"I very much doubt that Duke Redgrave is truly pleased with how much the Roseblades and Bartforts have profited from this. That said, he's at least grateful that it disadvantaged his rival." Jilk let out a long sigh. "The politics of it all are unpleasant, to say the least."

In the political realm, today's friend could become tomorrow's enemy. Constant infighting and vying for superiority were part and parcel of life in Holfort's aristocracy. Julius detested it. He stared up at the ceiling, pressing a fist to his forehead. *Nothing matters more to them than whether their faction comes out on top. I really hate the society the adults have cultivated.*

"The Roseblades and Bartforts really stuck their noses where they didn't belong," said Julius. "Let me guess—*they're* still participating in the school trip, aren't they?"

"It seems so." Jilk shrugged as he delivered the unfortunate news.

"I suspected as much."

The ones who'd caused this whole mess could still enjoy the trip. It really got under Julius's skin.

***

"Traveling by luxury cruise liner for a school trip is so freakin' awesome!!"

There were, in fact, *three* cruise ships docked in the royal capital's harbor, one for each of the three groups the student body had been split into. All three ships were set for different destinations. Each was over three hundred meters

in length and was equipped with leisure facilities. Their interiors had already been thoroughly decked out to welcome their aristocratic guests. The ships had obviously cost an arm and a leg to construct and decorate.

Given how rare this kind of opportunity was, we made the most of the moment by taking a stroll inside to revel in the ship's opulence.

Marie's excitement had peaked. "I mean, look how incredible this is!" she continued. "I thought it was silly to spend five days and four nights total just traveling to and from our destination, but since we'll be spending them in luxury with so many ways to enjoy ourselves, I can overlook the travel time."

As she'd indicated, it was two nights and three days each way—the same amount of time we'd have in our actual destination. Technically, most of the trip would be spent traveling. I'd initially thought that was ridiculous, too, but seeing this cruise ship in person chased away any dissatisfaction I'd felt.

"They're treating us way better than I expected," I said.

Maybe I hadn't banked on this level of luxury because the words "school trip" brought up memories of the trip I'd gone on as a student in Japan. That didn't even begin to compare to this. There was also the fact that no game events took place during the traveling part of the school trip—there wasn't even a single background image—so I had no idea what to anticipate.

"Everything about this ship is entirely too inefficient," Luxion complained. "If this is adequate to impress you, I could easily install similar facilities inside *Partner*."

Marie grinned. "You're pretty competitive, huh? I won't stop you. I'd love to see *Partner*'s interior fancied up more."

"Don't egg him on any further than you already have," I warned her. "Anyway, do you have any acquaintances on board? I've got Mr. Lucle and a couple guys from the usual group of poor barons' sons."

Unfortunately, my best friends Daniel and Raymond had been assigned to a different group for the trip. The only person aboard whom I was particularly close to was Lucle. As for other acquaintances, there was probably only Deirdre—though I wasn't sure if I could really call her an "acquaintance," since we'd

soon be relatives. The problem with Deirdre was that she was a little too ostentatious, which made it hard to get close to her.

Marie froze in the middle of the hallway. All the color had drained from her face, and she chewed her lip nervously.

“Wh-what’s the matter?” I asked, worried about her complete change in behavior.

“I’ve got three of them—Ellie, Cynthia, and Betty.” As their names left her mouth, her face stiffened.

Her reaction definitely made sense now. Ellie was a bookworm if ever there was one. The issue was that she had no interest in anything else, not even her own well-being. She had difficulty functioning by herself. Cynthia was the epitome of laziness. She locked herself away in her room to sleep all the time. Betty, on the other hand, had a penchant for painting but was apathetic to everything else. Marie had taken to looking after those three. Actually, maybe “looking after” was an understatement. Those girls couldn’t even function without her, so she was really like a mother hen keeping chicks in line.

“What about Brita and the others?” I was referring to another trio of girls Marie was acquainted with. You could consider Brita their leader.

Apparently they weren’t aboard this ship, though. “Brita was over the moon, saying, ‘I’m going with Lord Chris to the water capital of the world!’” Marie cradled her head in her hands.

“Chris? As in love-interest Chris? I didn’t realize they were all fans of his,” I said.

“They’re only into him because he’s popular right now.” Marie lurched forward, and the two of us continued walking.

“Come to think of it, Miss Olivia’s in our group,” I said. My mind had naturally wandered to the protagonist. With the final boss out of the way, I was curious as to whom she’d spend most of the trip with. “So are two love interests: Prince Julius and Jilk. Who would you say she’s likelier to end up with?”

I thought Marie would enjoy this kind of discussion, being a girl, but her face hardened. Not long ago, she’d hoped to snag one of the love interests herself; I

wondered at first if that was why she didn't find the topic fun.

Marie was quiet. She lifted a finger and twisted a lock of long, flowing hair around it. "I haven't seen them."

"Haven't seen who?"

"Prince Julius and Jilk," she snapped impatiently, giving me a look. "I haven't seen *either* of them. I saw Olivia, so I know she's on board. But among the girls, a rumor's already going around that Prince Julius and Jilk aren't here."

Now that she mentioned it, I realized that I hadn't glimpsed either of them since we boarded. My eyes moved to Luxion, who hovered near my right shoulder.

He performed a scan to identify everyone on the cruise ship, his red lens flashing several times. Once he finished, he reported, "I do not detect Julius or Jilk's signals."

"Where're the other three?" I blurted after I digested his response. "I mean, Chris is definitely in a different group, but how about the other two?"

"I do not detect them, either."

I was sure at least one of them had to be on this ship, so Luxion's ultimate response that they were all absent was a shock. "You're kidding me."

Chapter 7:
Malice on Board

IT WAS THE STUDENTS' first night aboard the luxury cruise ship. A buffet had been prepared in the main dining hall, and performances were being presented onstage. There was music, dancing, and even a magic show. The staff were incredibly busy trying to keep all the students entertained during their stay.

Deirdre Fou Roseblade was among those in the dining hall. A crowd of schoolmates surrounded her. Most of those crowded around her were girls, but a few male students were among them.

"Lady Deirdre, regale us again with the tale of how the Roseblades beat the Offreys."

"Yes! I'd love to hear about how bravely you and yours fought to take down those villains!"

"Are the rumors about those events being made into a stage play true? If so, I'd love to watch it!"

The story of how the Roseblades defeated the Offreys was popular among the aristocracy as well as the general populace. The tale contained clear villains, thanks to the Offreys' involvement with air pirates, which helped it capture the hearts of the people.

Deirdre pressed her favorite folding fan over her mouth. She was a gorgeous woman with golden locks of hair that fell around her shoulders in long ringlets. In addition to being a third-year student at the academy, she was also the daughter of the famous Earl Roseblade. Of all the people in her clique, it was Deirdre whose father wielded the most power and authority, so she was naturally the center of attention.

"Goodness. News travels fast," said Deirdre. "However, I'm afraid my family isn't involved with the stage production. I've heard that they approached us for the rights to perform as our likenesses, though." The Roseblades didn't have a

direct hand in the upcoming play, but staging it was only possible because the producers had begged her family's permission.

At Deirdre's answer, everyone nodded approvingly.

"What you and the rest of the Roseblades accomplished was incredible."

Deirdre puffed out her chest proudly. "It's only natural that we came out on top. If our men couldn't fight properly, I'd be ashamed."

Those around her continued to shower her with praise. Deirdre laughed gleefully and accepted it all, even as she told herself, *The Offreys' dealings with air pirates were a stain on the aristocracy. There's no mistake about that. Still, I can't forget the bravery and resolve Stephanie showed at the end.*

Deirdre remembered the way Stephanie had stubbornly rebuffed her offer of assistance. She'd always hated the Offrey girl, but she could respect that moment of true dignity.

Despite the crowd of fellow students surrounding her, Deirdre found herself scanning the rest of the venue for other familiar faces. *I didn't think Prince Julius and Jilk would skip the school trip. Nor Angelica. If I don't bring some sort of souvenir back, I expect I'll get an earful from them. But maybe it'd be more courteous to let them vent their frustrations.*

The Roseblades and Bartforts had been responsible for starting the fuss which had now prevented those three from participating in the trip. Deirdre felt badly about that. Still, like them, she was part of the upper crust.

If all I have to do is listen to them complain, it's a small price to pay for the rewards we reaped. Especially since Angelica was aiming for a connection to the Bartforts, and we stole it from under her.

As much as Deirdre recognized that she'd done those three a disservice, she couldn't help smiling when she considered how much her house had benefited from ruining the Offreys. *And the Roseblades couldn't be happier that we found my big sister a husband in the process.*

Her gaze landed on two familiar faces: Leon and Marie. They were enjoying their meals while glancing around nervously. *Hm? They seem awfully restless for some reason. I wonder if there's some trouble afoot?* Leon and Deirdre were

soon-to-be relatives, so if something was bothering him, she thought she ought to help.

At the same time, Deirdre sensed something fishy going on between two girls. They seemed to be conspiring together; there were wicked looks on their faces.

My, my. I wonder what sinister plans they're making.

***

Dinner was served buffet style. That didn't bother me, except that Marie lined up mountains of food on our table.

"Are you going to eat all this?" I asked, eyes wide.

She was already slurping down a triple serving of pasta. "Worrying makes me hungry."

It *decreased* most people's appetites, but apparently that wasn't the case for Marie.

I picked at the salad and roast beef in front of me. "Shouldn't you be a little more on edge? Miss Olivia's love interests aren't even aboard."

She reached for her next plate. "More on edge? Why should I be preoccupied with someone else's love life?"

"You're really taking that position now? You know the nation's future is—scratch that, I guess it's not exactly 'hanging in the balance' anymore. Still, aren't you curious where the story will go from here?"

Her fork speared what looked like a meatball. "I don't see any point in getting wrapped up with her and her life when we don't have to worry about war anymore."

"Look, you might not be interested, but I want to know what'll happen to the story. I genuinely hope the protagonist finds happiness," I said.

"Come again?" Marie glared daggers at me.

I'd played the game so many times that I was invested in what happened with Olivia. When you spent so long playing a heroine, you started to kind of look at her almost like a little sister or something. I would've been the first to admit the

game had issues; still, I wanted the heroine to have a happy ending. That was just how I felt.

Marie couldn't understand my sentiments. "You're just biased toward her because you're obsessed with how big her boobs are."

She was already pissed at me and had made her mind up, so I doubted she'd listen even if I tried to explain my motivations. Instead, I considered her accusation for a moment, then blurted back, "Yep." If she wasn't going to accept the truth, I might as well roll with her assumptions.

Marie's face scrunched with fury. "You can't even give me a proper proposal, yet you've got the nerve to ignore me and lose your head over some other—"

"Th-the proposal thing has nothing to do with this conversation, does it?" I sputtered back.

"Of course it does! When will you finally propose decently? Do you realize how many times you've failed so far? I even lower my expectations of you each time it happens, but you're still failing to meet them somehow. Is that on purpose? It has to be, right? Last time, you literally threw the ring at me, remember? And when I asked why you thought that was a good idea, you had the audacity to tell me 'I thought words would cheapen it.' What the hell was that, huh? What's wrong with you?!"

I inwardly rolled my eyes through it all, thinking *Here we go again.* I'd somehow poked the bear, and she wouldn't be happy until she tore me to shreds.

"I do not believe you have any right to be exasperated with her, Master," Luxion muttered beside me. He had activated his cloaking device the moment Marie went off. "In fact, you should take her words to heart and endeavor to improve yourself."

Wait. Seriously? I'm the one in the wrong here?

***

Two female students had retreated to the edge of the dining hall and were chatting between themselves.

One was Dolly, who had long, wavy hair and soft, downturned eyes. “It was a huge pain, but I went around and asked all the professors, so I’m sure about it now,” she said. “His Highness isn’t coming on the trip.”

The student body was already aware that the prince hadn’t boarded the ship. Still, it was possible he was traveling separately and would meet them at their destination. That was why Dolly had poked around for more information. According to the professors, the prince had a meeting to attend at the palace and thus wouldn’t attend at all.

The girl with her was Donna. She snickered under her breath, her canine teeth protruding noticeably when she opened her mouth. “That means no one’ll get in our way, right? Are we going to do it? I mean, it’s our duty to put that commoner in her place and make sure she doesn’t get a big head, right?”

Since the prince was absent, it was the perfect time to teach Olivia a lesson—or, in reality, bully her.

“Donna, you’d better not go too far and stir trouble. Angelica is a duke’s daughter, but the prince didn’t hesitate to scold her publicly. It’d be a real pain if His Highness came to chastise us later,” Dolly warned, her grin indicating that Julius calling them out wouldn’t bother her the least bit. The way she spoke about Angelica was also anything but respectful. Perhaps that was an inevitable consequence of Dolly and Donna’s fathers being part of the faction the Redgraves headed—specifically, high-ranking officials in key government positions.

“But guess what?” Donna said triumphantly. “Daddy and his peers already know all about how Prince Julius and his friends have the hots for that commoner. They’re really unhappy about it.”

Dolly’s grin widened. “All the more reason we’ve got to stick it to her while His Highness isn’t around to protect her.”

“Tee hee hee!” Donna cackled again. “It’s our duty as nobles, right?”

***

The cabin prepared for Olivia was incredibly cramped. Inside was a bunk bed, as well as a desk and chair. The room was obviously meant to be shared, but all

the other female students had their own cabins, so Olivia had hers to herself as well. Students who were of high rank and hailed from houses of considerable influence—like Deirdre—were put up in more opulent staterooms.

Olivia was perfectly pleased with her accommodations, regardless of whether they were inferior to everyone else's. She'd already covered the desk with piles of books she'd brought aboard; she'd spent the entire time since she'd boarded studying.

It feels like it's been a long time since I could hunker down and study like this. For whatever reason, her pen seemed to glide effortlessly across the page as she jotted notes.

The other students were so absorbed in enjoying the rest of the ship—and preoccupied with Julius and Jilk's absence—that none thought to bother with Olivia.

As she was lost deep in thought, a knock sounded at the door.

Olivia shot up in her seat. "Y-yes?!" Her voice came out as a squeak. She walked to the door and cracked it open cautiously.

Kyle was on the other side. He sighed at her, exasperated. "It's dinnertime, and you still haven't left your room. What're you doing?" He was probably concerned that she'd been cooped up in the cabin studying the entire day without grabbing a single bite to eat. "There's a buffet set up in the dining hall. You should come eat, Mistress."

Olivia glanced longingly back at her desk. She still had so many books to read and so much studying to do. "Ah ha ha!" she laughed awkwardly. "Sorry, Mr. Kyle."

"No need for that 'mister' business. I'm your personal servant. If you can't behave more like a proper mistress, it'll put me in an awkward position."

She smiled uncomfortably. "I know. I'm not really used to this dynamic, though."

Kyle shook his head, clearly fed up with her. "You'll only hurt your own health if you skip a meal. You could eat at a restaurant later instead, but they'll charge you."

Most of the facilities on board were free, but still, there were a number that you had to pay for. Olivia was leery of such expenses, which was part of why she hadn't ventured out to have fun.

"I'll go eat, really. I just need a bit longer," she said.

"Dinner ends in an hour. Please finish whatever you're doing quickly and eat."

"I will. Sorry for worrying you."

"As I said, you don't have to…" He stopped himself short and shook his head. "No, forget it."

Giving up on urging Olivia to act like a proper mistress, Kyle turned on his heel and strode off. Olivia nudged the door shut. Her stomach rumbled, but she wasn't in the mood to eat.

"I don't want to go out there," she muttered to herself.

Since Julius and Jilk were absent, she was worried that the students might be more inclined to pick on her if she went out to eat by herself. Her mere presence might ruin their moods and incite even more resentment. So many possible consequences popped into her head that her stomach twisted with anxiety, paralyzing her.

"I think I'd rather just focus on studying today…" Olivia turned to head back to her desk but barely finished her sentence before sneezing. "Achoo!" A chill ran through her. She pressed a hand to her forehead and found it much warmer than usual. "Why now? I need…to study…"

Chapter 8:
Cunning

BY THE TIME OLIVIA next opened her eyes, her limbs were heavy as lead. An uncomfortable weight bore down on her head, slowing her thoughts. It didn't take her long to realize she had a fever.

"But why now?" she asked herself again. It was such a shame to be sick during the trip when she finally had time to study like she'd wanted.

She sat upright in bed and contemplated what to do next. Should she go ahead and study despite her fever or prioritize recovering?

"I guess for now I should try using healing magic on myself."

The healing magic Olivia knew worked well on physical injuries. However, entirely different magic was required to recover from ailments like fever. She pressed both hands to her chest, and faint light enveloped her body, but the spell intended to cure her illness couldn't do so fully.

"I suppose that's good enough," she said. "I haven't yet studied how to remedy sickness, so I have no idea whether this is the right way to do it."

The magic at least reduced her symptoms' severity, but it hadn't cured her entirely. Her body was still heavy and her mind sluggish.

"I guess I have no choice but to rest for the day." Suddenly overcome with drowsiness, Olivia flopped back into bed.

With the worst possible timing, a knock came at the door. As much as she wanted to ignore it, she responded, telling her visitor that the door was unlocked.

The door swung open, and Kyle stepped in. "Mistress, if you don't get up soon, you'll miss breakfast." He paused. "Mistress?" Noticing something was amiss with Olivia, he hurried to her side. Worried, he pressed a hand to her forehead. Relief passed over his face when he found that her temperature was lower than he'd feared. "Thankfully it's only a minor fever. This is what happens

when you skip meals to study."

"I'm sorry."

"Shall I explain the situation to the staff and have them prepare something light for you to eat? It won't cost you any money if we do it that way." Kyle knew all about her financial situation, which was why he made this suggestion.

Unfortunately, Olivia had no appetite. "I think I'll just sleep a little more. If anyone comes to visit, please tell them I'm resting…" She'd barely finished her sentence before her eyelids slid shut and she drifted into unconsciousness.

Kyle sighed. "You really are a hopeless case, Mistress."

***

It was the students' second morning aboard the ship. Most of them gathered in the main restaurant for breakfast. The staff were serving a luxurious spread, and entertainers were staging a live performance for the occasion.

Marie desperately wanted to partake in the top-quality meal, but her troublesome acquaintances were preventing that. She stood in front of Cynthia's room, hollering at the top of her lungs and bashing her fists against the door.

"Cynthiaaaaa!" she shrieked. "If you don't hurry up, breakfast will be over! I want to indulge in the gourmet food they're serving and enjoy my time on this luxury cruise liner! So, please, wake up already!"

Bam, bam! Bam, bam, bam!

She struck the door over and over again, screeching, but Cynthia showed no sign of waking up.

A vein bulged on Marie's forehead. "Open up already, would you?!" Her angry, booming voice seemed to have no effect.

Behind Marie stood Ellie. She hugged a book to her chest, fidgeting nervously. "I don't think Cindy's going to get up, Rie."

Unlike timid Ellie, Betty was ambivalent. She stood there, yawning, with a sketchbook in hand. She'd stayed up late again the previous night, painting. "I don't see why we have to eat breakfast anyway." She wasn't a morning person,

and it showed.

Marie glanced back at them. “All three of you have locked yourselves away in your rooms since lunch yesterday! The professors have been hounding me to come check in on you!” She wasn’t terribly happy about being stuck mothering her three friends, but she did it all the same. “It’s not like I want to do this, either, you know. I’d rather enjoy the cruise, but I can’t, because you three are acting like shut-ins!”

At this rate, breakfast would end before they got their food. Marie tried the doorknob, twisting it violently.

“Wake up, Cynthia!” she yelled. “I’m begging you, open your eyes! I want to eat the omelets the restaurant serves!” She was nearly in tears at this point.

Behind her, Ellie and Betty glanced at one another and shrugged.

“She may as well just go eat by herself,” said Ellie.

Betty shook her head. “She’s too good at looking after other people. The professors take advantage of that.”

Marie was already out of breath, her shoulders rising and falling in a rapid rhythm. Since she’d woken that morning, she’d been running around trying to round up the girls. When she caught her breath and paused to glance back, she noticed that Ellie had plopped down on the floor and now had her nose in a book. “Why’re you reading, Ellie?”

“What? B-because Cindy’s not coming out anyway.”

Marie was on the verge of tears. “Don’t sit on the floor and read! You shouldn’t bring a book to breakfast in the first place!”

“Huh?!” Ellie’s jaw dropped.

She wasn’t the only problem.

“Same goes for you, Betty! Don’t start sketching! And look, there’s already paint on your hands!”

Betty only shrugged. “Who cares? I can still eat with them.”

“You *can*,” Marie agreed, “but you shouldn’t! You’re still an aristocrat,

whether you like it or not!”

Betty might not care whether her hands were paint-covered, but Marie wanted her to be at least a little mindful of proper etiquette, given Betty’s position in society.

“I hate all that status nonsense,” Betty sighed.

Cynthia wouldn’t leave her room, all Ellie wanted to do was read, and Betty didn’t mind getting paint all over her hands before they even ate.

“Graaaaaaah!” Marie roared in frustration, her voice echoing along the corridor.

Why do all the girls around me have so many issues?!

The most unbelievable part was that although these three were quirky—and that was putting it lightly—they were ridiculously popular with the academy guys. That was bizarre, since in Marie’s previous world, most men would’ve written them off.

Marie pounded the door with her fists again. “Wake up! You’re going to make us all miss breakfast!”

She was causing a ridiculous amount of ruckus, given that it was early morning. Cynthia’s door remained firmly shut, but the neighboring door cracked open, and a blond elf boy’s head popped out.

Marie’s fists dropped to her sides. Her gaze was glued to Kyle. *Hold on. If Kyle’s here, I’m guessing it means Olivia’s in that cabin.*

“I’m envious that you have so much energy early in the morning,” he said. “Nonetheless, my mistress is under the weather this morning, so I’d appreciate it if you could tone it down.” His voice was soft, but there was hostility in his words.

Marie’s gaze darted awkwardly. *He’s got a point. I was making a big fuss. Everyone else already left for breakfast, so I naturally just assumed no one would be left in their cabins.*

She cleared her throat. “S-sorry about that! I was a little panicked. My friend won’t come out of her cabin.”

The only reason she was being so deferential toward Kyle was his employer. Olivia was a commoner right now, but she’d eventually awaken as the Saint, an extremely special figure within Holfort. The Saint was so special in the game that she was, in fact, even permitted to marry the crown prince. Olivia would thus eventually become queen. Even if she didn’t, she’d marry another of the love interests, all of whom were from high-ranking, respected houses. Either way, she’d far, far outrank Marie.

Given the unnatural foresight Marie’s knowledge of the game provided, she naturally apologized and acted more respectfully than she might’ve otherwise. That served to soften Kyle’s sour mood.

“Why not ask to borrow a key so you can get into her cabin?” he suggested.

“Good idea. I’ll do just that. Girls, let’s go get a key.” Dragging Ellie and Betty along, Marie left. *That was my first interaction with Kyle,* she mused. *He’s way more arrogant than I expected. Was he really that bad in the game?*

Marie had pictured Kyle as an impertinent but adorable younger-brother figure. Their brief conversation was enough to completely ruin that image, though. She felt that he’d been an immature brat.

***

After Marie and the other girls left, Kyle was on cloud nine over how respectful they’d acted toward him.

“Of course they were too scared to talk back. Mistress may not be of noble

blood, but she has the backing of the crown prince and other high-ranking nobles."

Though Kyle was still only a child, he was intelligent. He understood that, given Olivia's unique circumstances and how the crown prince favored her, it wasn't too odd that others would behave deferentially toward her employee.

"I was incredibly lucky to get her as a mistress," he realized aloud. "I need to offer her my full support."

Immature as he was, Kyle sensed that he'd benefit most by getting into Olivia's good graces quickly.

"Hm?"

Almost immediately after Marie and the other girls left, two different ladies with personal servants at their heels strode up. As soon as they spotted Kyle, their lips cracked into wicked smiles.

Here comes trouble, Kyle thought. He had enough experience to know that dealing with this type was a pain.

The girls who'd approached him were, unsurprisingly, Dolly and Donna.

"You're that commoner's personal servant, right?" Dolly asked. "As big a pain as it is for us to ask, could you call her out here for us?"

Kyle cringed at the request.

Donna opened and closed her hand as if she wanted something. "I know she hasn't come out of her room since yesterday. We're worried about her, and we came to check in. So, like, hurry up and get her out here."

Their condescending behavior made Kyle think back to his interaction with Marie and her friends only moments ago. *Do these two not realize who they're dealing with? At least those noisy girls earlier showed proper consideration.* He heaved a breathy sigh.

Dolly and Donna's personal servants gawked at him.

"Hey. You can't take that attitude with our mistresses," one warned.

The other asked, "Weren't you educated properly?"

They sounded less angry than concerned. As fellow servants, they were aghast at how disrespectful Kyle was acting. As far as demi-humans like them were concerned, female academy students deserved to be treated with the utmost consideration and politeness, like princesses. Any impertinence toward them was inexcusable.

The same couldn't be said of male students. Deep down, most servants looked down on them, although they didn't openly show it.

Kyle was looking at Dolly and Donna with the same scorn other servants felt for male students. "I personally think they should try using their heads a little more."

Dolly and Donna were both taken aback, their eyes wide.

"What was that?" Dolly demanded.

Donna blinked slowly. "Did he say what I think he did? It sounded to me like he was mocking us. Or did I mishear him?" Her voice had turned into a menacing growl by the end.

Kyle wasn't intimidated, however. *Was that meant to be a threat? They can only act so cocky because they haven't stopped to think about who's backing my mistress.* He snorted at them.

Dolly and Donna's personal servants instantly paled. They shot forward and tried to interrupt Kyle, but he beat them to the punch.

"My mistress is favored by His Royal Highness Prince Julius," he declared. "And he isn't the only one who thinks fondly of her. You're aware of that, aren't you?"

The moment those words left his lips, the other two servants froze. They turned slowly to gauge their mistresses' reaction. Dolly and Donna had fallen completely silent, their earlier cockiness gone.

Emboldened, Kyle continued, "I'd thank you not to attempt crude forms of harassment like this. Otherwise, I'll have no choice but to report you to His Highness and his friends." There was a threat in his words: *Try anything with Olivia and suffer the consequences.*

“Whatever. This is a pain.” Dolly spun and stomped away.

Flustered, Donna chased after her. “Wait for me, Dolly!”

Their servants scurried along behind them.

Kyle stood triumphantly in their wake, a big grin on his face. “Look how easy it was to chase them off just by mentioning His Highness. I can’t understand why my mistress hasn’t yet thought to do the same thing.” He shook his head, exasperated.

He thought himself cunning, but he didn’t realize that this small victory would soon bring about consequences.

Chapter 9:
Pride

"I CAN'T BELIEVE WE'VE GOT to pay for breakfast because you made us miss the free meal," I grumbled.

"Oh, enough already!" Marie snapped. "This is all Cynthia's fault for not waking up in time!"

We'd come to one of the shipboard lounges for our meal, and Marie had brought the three troublemakers with her. She'd wanted to partake in the luxurious spread the staff had prepared, but by the time she'd rounded up her three friends, breakfast was over. Thus, we had had to purchase our food before heading to this lounge to enjoy the nice scenery as we ate.

Having already polished off her sandwich, Cynthia slumped onto the table. "I'm stuffed. Wake me at noon," she said before dozing off.

"Cynthia, no! You need to wake up!" Marie barked, smacking the top of her friend's head.

Ellie sat beside Marie, flipping happily through a thick tome. She paused occasionally to reach for her cup of coffee or the sandwich she'd bought, but her meal was incredibly slow going. Betty, meanwhile, was modeling a painting off her sandwich.

"They live life by their own rules, huh?" I snickered.

Tears welled in Marie's eyes as she clutched my arm. "This is no time to laugh at the situation! You should be scolding them, too!"

"You say that, but from a guy's perspective, their quirks aren't exactly a bad thing."

"How come?!"

It didn't seem like she'd figure it out otherwise, so I sighed and explained, "Look, I admit they've got their faults. From the perspective of a guy raised in a

backwoods barony, though, they're practically goddesses. Look over there if you want proof."

I motioned, and Marie turned her head to see a group of guys from my cohort ogling her three friends. They weren't even the only ones; other guys snuck interested glances this way, too. They all looked intensely envious of me.

Marie tilted her head, still confused. "These three are so immature, I just don't see the appeal. And if *they're* prime real estate to you guys, why the heck am *I* so unpopular?"

"That'd be because of the debt your family racked up."

"Why can't guys just look at me as an individual?!"

Guys had shunned Marie since our first semester at the academy. It didn't help that she'd attempted to seduce some of the aristocracy's most notable scions. The girls iced her out for that, and any guy who approached her afterward was guaranteed to earn other female students' ire.

Still, as I'd said, the biggest reason of all was the enormous debt Marie's family had incurred. In this game world, marriage connected two houses. Marrying Marie would inevitably mean linking yourself to the Lafans and shouldering their financial baggage. Anyone would have reservations about that.

While Marie and I were bantering, Lucle called, "Leon, do you have a second?", his already-narrow eyes nearly shut.

***

Lucle ushered me to the arcade area, which contained a billiard table, among other things. It was a nice shipboard space that offered games with no gambling involved, but apparently it wasn't very popular, since it was largely deserted.

Other guys from the same group of poor baron's sons soon surrounded me. Lucle stood in front, acting as their representative.

"From the bottom of my heart, Leon, please… Give us another opportunity to talk to Miss Cynthia and those other two girls!" he begged. The other men bowed their heads in unison.

I understood their desperation to land a match. I'd been in their shoes until very recently, when my engagement to Marie gave me an out. Seeing them still suffering was painful.

Nonetheless, I said, "You say you want another opportunity, but every time I give you guys one, you end up squabbling. That turns the girls off completely."

They'd bribed Marie to help them by repeatedly buying her flan from the cafeteria, and she'd followed through on setting up group dates for them. Not that it did any good, of course. Each time, the guys just butted heads over which girl they wanted to talk to, and eventually broke out weapons and challenged each other to duels. Their desperation ruined any chance they had.

"You can hardly blame us," Lucle protested. "It's practically a miracle that we have an opportunity to get to know goddesses like those three."

"Look, I feel you, but no girl wants to witness a bloody throwdown on a group date."

Lucle hung his head. "You have a point there. But I promise to pare down the number of attendees before the *next* group date takes place."

The guys behind him nodded in agreement, but something about the way he worded that reassurance was chilling. It often slipped my mind, since the rest of the student body always looked down on us, but these guys *were* as much aristocrats as anyone. They were probably accustomed to blood and battle. The more I thought about it, the less surprising it seemed that they might try to take one another down to thin the ranks of bachelors.

"I don't think Marie would be too pleased about that," I said.

"Like we have any other choice! Look, right now's the best time for a date, since a good chunk of the other guys aren't here. We're serious about this, Leon!"

I shook my head. "It's fine to be serious about the group date but not about taking each other out."

"I don't want to hear your preaching! You can only act holier-than-thou because you're already engaged to Marie. This might be the last chance for the rest of us!" Tears of desperation trickled down Lucle's cheeks.

I sighed. He and the others were so much more hotheaded about this than I was. While I dithered over how to handle the request, Deirdre showed up with a retinue of female students at her heels.

“Gentlemen shouldn’t shed tears so easily,” she said.

Intimidated by Deirdre’s rank, as well as her ostentatious style and demeanor, Lucle and the other guys stood up straighter.

“Miss Deirdre?!” Lucle blurted, panicked. As a third-year student, he was well acquainted with her. “Wh-wh-why are you here?”

I figured she’d only stopped by on a whim, but she glanced at me and grinned. “I came to check on my adorable ‘little brother.’ It seemed like *someone* was giving him trouble.”

At her pointed accusation, beads of cold sweat ran down the faces of Lucle and the rest of the guys. They averted their eyes.

“R-right! We’ll excuse ourselves, then,” Lucle said. He scurried away, the other boys trailing him closely.

They really lose their nerve when they deal with girls. Not that I’m any better, I guess.

Deirdre and I were technically on track to become relatives, but only because my older brother Nicks was engaged to her sister. It wasn’t that close a bond.

“Tsk, tsk. They all left you behind,” Deirdre said, feigning heartbreak on my behalf. She glanced at me, amusement in her eyes, and giggled. “You poor thing. Need me to comfort you?”

“No, I’m good.”

“What a shame.” Deirdre turned and strode off, taking her throng of followers with her.

What’d she even come talk to me for?

***

Those among Deirdre’s followers who weren’t completely aware of her personal affairs were quick to question her interaction with Bartfort.

“Was that man just now who we think he is, Lady Deirdre?” one asked.

Deirdre pressed her fan over her mouth as she answered the vague question. “Yes. He’s the knight who dealt the deadly blow to those infamous air pirates and led the charge against House Offrey. Though, personally, I’m more a fan of his accomplishments as an adventurer.”

“I-I didn’t realize. I guess he’s the one you’ll soon be a distant relative of.”

They were all taken aback by how eagerly Deirdre lavished Leon with praise. After all, her connection to the young man was rather flimsy; it only existed thanks to their siblings’ engagement. Moreover, Leon would eventually become an independent lord—creating even more distance between him and his family—while Nicks would take the helm of a brand-new viscounty established by the Roseblades and Bartforts. “Distant relative” was almost an understatement; Leon and Deirdre would basically still be strangers. Despite that, though, Deirdre saw Leon as a cute younger brother.

“Personally, I think he’s incredible,” she continued. “It’s such a shame that he’s already engaged.” She let out a small sigh, sounding dramatic enough that her followers couldn’t tell whether her disappointment was genuine or meant in jest.

She was about to tell them herself that it was a joke, but before she got the words out, a pair of familiar faces caught her eye.

Hm? Those are the two girls I spotted before. I believe they’re named Dolly and Donna. They’re nothing but trouble. I wonder what they’re plotting this time, mused Deirdre.

Dolly and Donna were ranting to one another, their moods visibly sour. Deirdre already sensed that they were on track to act out.

They’re the daughters of two of the Redgrave faction’s linchpins. What got them so riled up? I’ll need to look into this later.

***

“I’m seething! Like, absolutely furious!” Donna hissed between gritted teeth, raking her fingers through her hair. “What’s wrong with that servant jerk?!”

“He’s a real pain, that’s what he is. He’s got some nerve, dropping Prince Julius’s name like that.” Dolly downplayed her true emotions, phrasing her complaint as if she were only annoyed, but Kyle’s attitude truthfully made her stomach churn.

The two girls had been livid since their encounter with Kyle that morning. Their anger seeped into the very atmosphere around them, and other female students were actively avoiding them. That was due in part to Dolly and Donna’s high statuses—their fathers weren’t just court nobles with viscount titles, they were also key players in the Redgrave faction. No one wanted to risk sticking their nose into the girls’ problems and getting caught in whatever trouble the pair were up to.

Despite the influence and power their fathers’ status afforded them, Donna and Dolly had still had no choice but to back down at the mention of the crown prince. They both understood that, logically, there was no advantage to messing with Olivia. Kyle’s words and attitude had wounded both girls’ pride deeply, however. They’d been raised in privilege and given whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it, so they weren’t accustomed to—or very pleased by—their current situation.

They’d taken a walk around the ship, hoping to cool their heads, but it hadn’t made a lick of difference.

“We’re not feeling any better about this, so why don’t we go mess with someone else? I want to bully some boys,” said Donna.

Dolly hesitated, unsure whether to play into her friend’s crude inclinations. Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard a familiar voice—the same one that had humiliated her that morning.

“It’s true,” the elf boy said. “They scampered off with their tails between their legs.”

Dolly and Donna had just happened to pass the personal servants’ lounge during their walk. Kyle wasn’t the only one inside; demi-humans had gathered there for their break, and the others showered the young elf with praise.

“Amazing what having the crown prince behind you can do.”

“I guess we should start brownnosing with you now, huh, Kyle?”

“You sure won the lottery getting that mistress, Kyle.”

They spoke comfortably among themselves, assuming that no one—least of all two girls of Dolly and Donna’s status—was eavesdropping. The girls’ eyes widened enough to reveal burst blood vessels as they stood there, waiting for Kyle to say more.

For his part, he hadn’t sensed their presence at all. “They really need to be more self-aware,” he went on. “They should know better than to mess with my mistress, since she has the crown prince’s favor. It’s time they learned their place.”

Donna’s face was a blank, unreadable mask as she turned to look at Dolly. “There’s no two ways about it. Like, I mean, he’s talking about us, right? What’s he mean, saying that we need to learn our place? I guess I’m just stupid, because I don’t understand,” she said, feigning ignorance in her anger.

Dolly’s expression betrayed no emotion as she answered, “We’ll crush him. I was going to let him off the hook, because I thought it’d be too big a pain to bother with him, but I’ve changed my mind. We’re taking that cocky elf brat and his mistress down a peg.”

The two girls had only backed down with great reluctance when Kyle wielded Julius’s name against them, but his triumphant bragging pushed them past the limits of their patience. They turned and stomped off.

Although the girls weren’t listening anymore, the servants’ voices continued to ring through the hall behind them.

“So who were these girls you chased off again?”

“A group of female students who didn’t have a single servant between them. I think one was called Marie.”

***

Olivia awoke that night still feeling sluggish. Her fever had dropped a bit, but she knew she had to take it easy if she wanted to fully recover. Alas, she had little reprieve; Kyle began filling her in on what’d happened as she slept through

the day, including how he'd chased off two groups of female students. His actions themselves were quite understandable since Olivia had been sick in bed all day. The issue was how he'd gone about them.

"You used Prince Julius's name?!" Olivia asked, her voice growing shrill.

Kyle lifted his chin. "Thanks to that, they backed off without any further fuss." He didn't look the least bit ashamed of what he'd done.

Olivia, on the other hand, felt heat rush to her head, as if the fever she'd nearly recovered from was returning. "Why would you use his name?" she demanded.

Kyle scowled like a petulant child who didn't understand why he was being scolded. "Everything I said was true, wasn't it? The crown prince favors you." Mentioning Julius was an easy way to get most students off Olivia's back.

Olivia understood that, but she didn't like it. "Never drop the name of the prince or his friends again!" she warned Kyle. "We're dealing with *aristocrats*. If you upset them, we'll be in hot water."

She recognized how handy name-dropping seemed, but they were trying to handle the upper crust. All traces of the Offrey and Lafan holdings had been completely wiped off the map not long ago. That had been the example Olivia needed to recognize that standing up to someone with their own private military—which most aristocrats possessed—was too dangerous.

It was bad enough that the other students didn't want her at the academy. Olivia could just imagine the consequences if any found out that Kyle was throwing Julius's name around. The first face that popped up in the back of her mind was Angelica's.

Terrifying, Olivia thought. *All the aristocrats here are terrifying.*

Angelica was Julius's betrothed, so once she heard what Kyle had said, Olivia couldn't imagine that she'd sit quietly by. Yet despite the obvious repercussions, Kyle had used Julius's name without compunction. He really didn't seem to understand the gravity of the matter.

"You can consult Prince Julius and the other lordlings," Kyle tried to reason with her. "Tell them these miscreants keep hounding you, and ask for help. That

would solve all your problems, so why do you hesitate?”

Olivia could picture that. Going to Julius would only worsen the already messy situation. A shiver ran through her as she said shrilly, “That’s absolutely out of the question!”

Shocked at her intense reaction, Kyle was left speechless.

“S-sorry,” Olivia said quickly. “Would you mind bringing me some water?”

The elf frowned, obviously still displeased with her stance, but dutifully answered, “Certainly.”

Kyle was perfectly competent at his job and rather clever to boot. His biggest flaws were his bluntness and condescending attitude. Those were partly because he was still young and immature, although he was probably leagues beyond others his age. Nonetheless, Olivia wasn’t sure they could easily resolve his grave mistake.

“Since he used Prince Julius’s name, I’m sure it *will* get back to Lady Angelica,” she muttered to herself. “At this rate, my hometown will be eradicated.”

Bartfort, a mere baron, had helped wipe out two other houses. If he wielded that much power, how much greater was the power of a duke’s daughter? Olivia couldn’t begin to imagine, but the mere thought of her hometown going up in flames brought tears to her eyes.

“I thought life here would be so much easier if I just had someone to talk to,” she whimpered.

She hadn’t wanted a personal servant. Olivia had felt so isolated at the academy that all she’d hoped for was a friend she could talk to. Instead, Kyle was cross that she wouldn’t take full advantage of her privileged position. However much she tried to explain herself, he couldn’t understand.

“If I’d anticipated this, I’d have felt that I was better off alone.” It was too late to rectify the situation, but she regretted signing Kyle’s contract.

Olivia’s fever had returned in full force. She flopped onto her bed and shut her eyes, sending tears racing down her cheeks. “All I wanted to do was a little studyin’,” she mumbled, slipping back into her hometown accent.

Her books, textbooks, and notebook sat untouched on her desk in the same place as yesterday. She was anxious to get back to them, but her body wouldn't let her. She was at her mental limit. Even if she tried to read, she knew none of it would stick.

"Mom, Dad, I'm sorry…"

Her door rattled as someone pounded violently on it.

Olivia was so startled that she leaped up. She realized instantly that it wasn't Kyle on the other side. *Could it be those girls from this morning?*

She grabbed the knob and cracked the door open, her stomach twisting in fear. "Can I help you?"

Dolly and Donna were outside, their faces stoic. Their personal servants stood behind them, silent but strangely intimidating.

Dolly glanced over Olivia's shoulder into the room. "Looks like that cocky, annoying brat isn't with you, huh?" she observed. "Well, whatever. How about we go have some fun together?"

Olivia sensed immediately that Dolly's invitation wasn't genuine. She averted her gaze. "Sorry. I'm under the weather today, so I'd rather not." She tried to yank the door shut.

Donna shoved her foot into the gap, forcing the door to remain open. "We're going out of our way to invite you. Like, I don't get why you'd refuse. Just come along like a good girl."

She grabbed Olivia's arm and managed to drag her outside. Even if Olivia had wanted to shake Donna off, the fever had drained all her strength.

Dolly pressed her face close to Olivia's. "This cruise ship has its own casino. We don't get many opportunities like this, so why don't I teach you to gamble?"

She and Donna wore wicked grins, but Olivia was too scared to resist. Her feverish mind couldn't pull a proper thought together, so she let them drag her along.

What should I do? Somebody save me.

Chapter 10:
The Casino

AFTER I FINISHED DINNER, Luxion and I made our way to the deck and enjoyed the view.

"It gets pretty chilly at night," I said. Our destination would be summery, but the sea winds were strong enough to pierce right through you. I shivered.

"Please dress warmly," Luxion said with obvious exasperation. "You will catch a cold otherwise."

"Nah. This is a perfect way to cool down. A nice escape from the fever."

"Fever? Master, your temperature reads as perfectly normal."

"I didn't mean it like that," I said.

There were heaters aboard the ship, so the temperature was cozy anywhere you went, but what I was really referring to was the excitement among the students. *That* was the nearly inescapable fever. Lucle and his group were desperate for an opportunity to get close to Marie's friends, since fewer rivals were present at the moment. Their overzealousness was what had pushed me to retreat outside and cool my head; they obviously weren't going to cool *theirs*.

"Anyway, how are preparations going?" I asked, changing the subject.

I'd worded the question vaguely, but Luxion instantly picked up on what I was referring to. "They are, in fact, finished. The rest is up to you."

I let out a long, slow exhale. "Now I'm nervous."

"All I can do is offer support in the form of wishing you luck."

"Yeah, I know. I've got to be the one to take it from here." I sighed again, resigned. Eager to change the topic and get my mind off things, I added, "Anyway, I haven't seen Miss Olivia this entire time. I know she apparently shut herself up in her cabin because she's sick, but I'm getting a little worried."

“You already have Marie, yet you are focused on the woman with the larger breasts?”

“You dummy,” I said. “That’s not it at all.”

Lately, Luxion had developed a habit of tying everything to love and romance. I could only guess that was thanks to Marie’s influence. *I really wish she wouldn’t teach him crap like that.*

“I’m saying that I feel bad for her, having to go on this school trip all by herself with no friends or support system,” I explained.

“You ‘feel bad’? Does that mean you intend to intervene?” Luxion asked.

“That’s exactly my dilemma. As much as I want to help her, I shouldn’t. I think it’s better for me to keep my nose out of her business.”

Since I’d already basically derailed the game’s plot, I felt no desire to rub elbows with the protagonist or her love interests. The last thing I wanted was to make the story completely unsalvageable—assuming it *could* still be salvaged, of course.

“I’m sure a background character like me butting in would only mess things up more.” I shook my head, sighing dramatically. “Ugh. Couldn’t at least one love interest have boarded our ship?” If the plot had proceeded as originally laid out, one of them would’ve been here.

“You and Marie seem to view every event as a predetermined element of the game, Master. However, I personally consider their absence a natural consequence of everything that has happened.”

I raised an eyebrow at Luxion. “How so?”

“You and the Roseblades essentially took down two regional lords on your own. It’s no wonder the other nobles are busy discussing the matter back at the capital. From what information I was able to gather, Julius, Jilk, and Angelica are apparently attending those meetings.”

“Wait. It’s *our* fault they’re not here?” My jaw dropped.

“Yes.”

It hadn’t even crossed my mind that our actions would have *that* much

impact. “I guess that means we really ruined things for them, huh?”

“There is no need for you to feel apologetic. Julius is the crown prince and is responsible for this kingdom’s future. Attending the meetings is his duty.” Unlike me, Luxion seemingly didn’t feel the least bit regretful about ruining the trip for Julius.

“Isn’t that a bit cold?” I asked.

“I am merely stating facts. I have no interest whatsoever in Julius or the others. My concern is entirely for your and Marie’s futures. Why does each of your proposals end in failure, Master? I thought you were better-versed in the art of romance. I am beginning to wonder whether you are dealing with a mental issue. Shall I offer you counseling?” There was no sarcasm or spite in his voice. He was being genuine.

I cringed. “Don’t start acting all nice on me! Ugh. That gave me the creeps.” *Maybe niceness is supposed to be some new way of getting under my skin?* “Now I’ve got chills for two very different reasons. That’s it. I’m going back to my room.”

Luxion and I started toward the nearest entrance. Suddenly, his lens flashed several times. “Master, Marie is looking for you. It seems there is some sort of emergency.”

***

“Hurry!” Marie shouted at me.

“How come unscripted problems like this keep coming out of left field?!”

As soon I found Marie, she dragged me toward the onboard casino. In our previous world, that wouldn’t have been an appropriate place for students, but it was perfectly legal for us to enter in this world. In fact, a number of students had visited the casino since we first boarded, and some had already blown all the money they had on hand.

A crowd had gathered in one section of the casino. We immediately headed that way. As soon as I realized what was going on, my face tensed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Sitting there with cards in her hands, betting money she didn't have, was Olivia.

"Those two at the table with her are Dolly and Donna," Marie informed me. "I hear they strong-armed Olivia into joining them."

The two girls wore sinister smirks. I could tell instantly from the location of the chips on the table that they were winning. Something was off about the whole scene, though.

"Those two are cheating, aren't they?" I said, revolted.

Luxion, who was using his cloaking device, whispered beside me, "Yes, they are."

Meanwhile, Olivia was losing repeatedly.

"What a pain. Looks like I won again," Dolly said loudly, a hint of glee in her voice. "You really are bad at this."

Donna's sharp incisor teeth protruded as she snickered. "Aw. What a shame. Looks like all your chips are gone. How far does that put you in the hole? Like, sorry, but I wasn't counting, so I can't tell you."

That basically answered my question about how Olivia got the chips to begin with.

Marie grimaced. "That means they put her in debt by getting her those chips."

"I can't believe they'd go that far," I replied.

Given how rich the two were, whatever money they'd given Olivia was probably negligible to them. But to a commoner like Olivia, it was an exorbitant amount she could never hope to pay back.

Olivia was deathly pale. On top of that, her breathing was erratic, and her eyes had clouded over. She wasn't just physically ill, but also at her breaking point mentally. It was painful to watch.

Marie grabbed my sleeve, tugging it several times in quick succession. "What're we gonna do?"

What she really wanted to ask was whether we'd keep our nose out of things

this time, too. I couldn't give her an immediate answer. Luxion and I had just discussed exactly this—that I wanted to steer clear of the protagonist as much as possible. What irony that the situation unfolding in front of me challenged that immediately.

It was the love interests who were supposed to swoop in and save Olivia from this sort of thing, but they were all either part of a different trip group or hadn't been able to attend at all. None of them were here to rescue her.

"She'll go bankrupt at this rate," Marie said, panicked.

I had no idea how much those two girls were forcing Olivia to bet on their games, but however much it was, it would be well beyond her means to repay.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Olivia pleaded, "Please have mercy. There's no way I can pay all this back." Her voice hitched with a sob.

Dolly and Donna's smiles vanished. Donna reached over and snatched a fistful of Olivia's hair, shoving her head against the table.

"I don't want to hear about how you can't repay it,'" she snapped. "You're *going* to! *You* went into debt to get those chips, remember? I'm not asking for anything unreasonable, am I?"

Not only had Donna cheated to win, she was now determined to make Olivia repay her losses, no matter what.

"Disgusting," I muttered under my breath. I couldn't help it. The worst part of all this was glancing around and seeing quite a few students grinning and supporting Dolly and Donna.

"Feels good to see that commoner get her just deserts."

"It's her own fault for throwing the prince's name around."

"She acted way too pretentious for someone with no rank."

Not a single person was interested in helping Olivia. A few probably thought Dolly and Donna had crossed a line, but they weren't about to stick their necks out for a commoner. I couldn't even blame them. There was no merit to doing the right thing in this case. Everyone knew that the prince favored Olivia, but most assumed it was a passing fancy and that he was only having fun. Thus,

none wanted to risk the ire of two ladies whose fathers were among the Redgrave faction's foremost members.

If I hadn't had prior knowledge of the game, I probably wouldn't have felt inclined to help the protagonist, either. I wasn't so nice a guy that I'd happily risk myself to save someone else's skin.

"What're you doing?!" a familiar voice cried.

Everyone's attention shifted to the young elf who'd arrived. Kyle must've heard about the fuss and rushed here to aid Olivia. Although he found himself surrounded on all sides by aristocrats, he kept his chin held high.

Kyle stomped over to his mistress and grabbed her arm. "Let's be off, Mistress." Even though Olivia didn't respond, he tried to drag her along anyway.

Dolly slammed her fist as hard as she could against the table. "Hold it! Who said she could leave? Don't make this a bigger pain than it already is."

Kyle flinched initially but put on a brave face. "I should ask *you* whether you understand what you're doing. Have you forgotten who favors my mistress? If Prince Julius hears about this, he won't let it go unpunished."

In mentioning the one name he shouldn't have, Kyle had made a costly mistake. The whole room erupted in loud murmurs.

Marie's shoulders slumped in relief. "That should put a stop to this."

Studying Dolly and Donna's expressions, though, I knew it would only do the opposite. "He just added fuel to the fire."

From what I recalled from the game, I'd have thought Kyle would be cleverer than this, but obviously I was wrong.

Donna's lips curled into a Cheshire Cat grin. "What would you tell him? *She's* the one who gambled and lost."

"Excuse me? Who'd ever believe that nonsense?" Kyle grimaced as though he didn't understand what Donna meant. He did need to reevaluate the situation, though. Julius's support didn't mean much if the prince wasn't actually here in person.

"Of course people will believe it. Like, I'm pretty sure everyone here will even

act as witnesses for me," Donna said.

Eyes wide, Kyle scanned the area, realizing for the first time how coldly the other students were regarding him. Few were pleased with how recklessly he'd thrown their prince's name around. Even if some students didn't personally respect Julius, they still didn't appreciate someone invoking his influence to act haughty and superior.

"Look, I don't care if you want to sit here and cry because you lost," Dolly told Olivia in a cloying tone, "but do you really think a scholarship student ought to request mercy?"

"Huh?" Olivia blurted out.

"Don't make me repeat myself. It's a pain. I'm asking whether you really think you deserve to be a scholarship student at our school after digging yourself this deep into gambling debt."

The prince and his friends would probably realize immediately that Olivia had been forced into this situation and pay her debts off for her. The academy's reaction was another matter, though. They might deem her unworthy of keeping her scholarship.

"They're horrible!" Marie cried, realizing that that had been Dolly's aim all along.

I couldn't agree more.

By this point, Kyle also had to recognize that this had been a trap from the start. Dolly snapped her fingers, and her and Donna's personal servants stepped forward to pull Kyle and Olivia apart. Olivia, still feverish, plopped back into her chair like a limp puppet.

"This is starting to be a real pain, so why don't we just close it off with one final bet? If you lose, you withdraw from the academy," Dolly suggested.

"What?" Olivia's head snapped up.

Donna beamed. "Great idea! Like, we'd be over the moon if you just left altogether! You've got no business being there anyway, seeing as you're not an aristocrat."

Olivia dropped her gaze as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Dolly cackled at her. “Don’t assume leaving the academy will erase your debts, though. We’re going to make sure you pay us back in full.”

Donna leaned in, pressing her face close to Olivia’s. “You can’t run from us, either. Our families will follow you to the ends of the earth if need be. We’ll even chase you back home to your family and hound *them* to pay up.”

Olivia’s tears fell faster. “Please have mercy,” she said. “I’m begging you, don’t do anything to my family or hometown. Please.” She bowed her head.

Dolly and Donna exchanged glances, then gave Olivia frosty looks. “It’s a pain that I’ve got to do this,” said Dolly, “but let me spell it out for you. Do you honestly think we’d show you any mercy after the way your servant made fools of us?”

“By the way,” added Donna, “mocking us was the same as mocking our families. Like, I sure hope you didn’t think you could get away with humiliating two viscounts’ houses.” It was kind of scary how maniacal she sounded.

Dolly snatched the cards from the dealer’s hands and began dealing herself, sliding a few cards Olivia’s way. “Your servant mocked us, and as his employer, you’re responsible for what he says and does. That means you’ve got to take his punishment, too.”

Logically, that wasn’t unreasonable. An employer *was* responsible for their employees’ mistakes. If Kyle did something inappropriate, the blame fell on Olivia. She couldn’t use the excuse that he’d acted without permission; it wouldn’t fly here.

“We’re going to keep playing,” Dolly said curtly, impervious to Olivia’s tears. “You can’t wriggle out of this. And not a single person here is going to give you a hand.”

I glanced at the other students. Some looked sympathetic, but they showed no sign of stepping in to help. Honestly, they were right to remain bystanders. That was a perfectly reasonable choice if you didn’t know that Olivia would one day become Saint, as Marie and I did. No—even if those other students knew, they’d probably still be too afraid to intervene, just as we were. The last thing

we wanted to do was butt in and screw the game's plot up even more. This could be a valuable learning experience that helped Olivia grow. I mean, anything was possible, right?

As much as I tried to rationalize my choice to stay out of this, I eventually couldn't tolerate the bullying anymore.

"I can't stand this." The words slipped out before I knew I'd spoken. I even wrinkled my nose in disgust at the two despicable girls.

Yep. I really am a friggin' moron. Because of course, after I said that, the whole room fell silent. Everyone turned to look at me, the idiot who'd spoken up.

Dolly narrowed her eyes at me. "It's a pain to even ask, but I'll do it—you want to repeat that?"

"I said I can't stand what you're doing. While I'm at it, what was that nonsense about how no one will step in to help? Ha! Bold assumption. I'd be happy to step in and take over from here for Miss Olivia."

Olivia lifted her head and stared at me, disbelieving. "B-but why?" Her face said it all; she couldn't believe anyone had volunteered to help her.

Marie snatched my arm. "Hold it right there. You can't gamble."

You don't care whether I help Olivia, but you can't stomach gambling? Then again, after what Marie underwent in her past life, it was little wonder she hated gambling with a passion. It wasn't as though I'd enjoy it, either—assuming, of course, I *was* actually going to gamble.

“Don’t worry,” I told Marie. “I don’t gamble.”

“What? You just said you’d take Olivia’s place.” Marie’s face scrunched in confusion.

“I don’t gamble. I love playing games I’m guaranteed to win, though.”

Luxion, who was still invisible, instantly caught on to what I was saying. Exasperated, he whispered to me, “What you are planning is even more dastardly than their cheating.”

I made a surreptitious gesture with my hand, telling Luxion to get on with it, and he floated unseen through the air to take his position. Meanwhile, I pushed through the crowd to the table where Dolly and Donna were. Kyle was nowhere to be seen. The girls’ servants had apparently dragged him off somewhere, although they were back now, glaring at me from behind their mistresses. The other students scowled at me, too, annoyed at my refusal to read the room and stay out of this.

I stopped beside Olivia and reached for the cards set in front of her. “Anyway,” I added, “it’s not very fair of you two to cheat like that.”

The two girls immediately averted their eyes, trying their best to hide how startled they were that I’d noticed.

“’Scuse me?” Donna said, her canine teeth poking past her lips. “We’re not accepting a stand-in. Like, I mean, what’re you even thinking, offering to help this commoner? Are you really an aristocrat?”

“All you want is the spotlight. Scram already,” Dolly added. “You guys are such a pain. You really think doing something like this will land you a bride? This is exactly why women *don’t* want you.”

Those words were like a dagger straight to the heart. Thankfully, it wasn’t too painful, since I was already safely engaged to Marie! Knowing that other women hated me would still leave me crying myself to sleep for a couple nights, but hey, it could be worse.

My gaze moved to Olivia, who was staring at her lap again.

“I couldn’t just stand by while something this horrible went on,” I told Dolly

and Donna. “Are you really that scared to face me?”

It was practically unheard of for a male student to antagonize a female student the way I just had. The whole room erupted in murmurs again. The guys’ commentary was especially noisy.

“He really just said that to a girl?!”

“He’s being awfully arrogant.”

“He’s a hero. We’ve got a hero in our midst.”

Dolly and Donna flushed with anger. They probably didn’t have much experience with men challenging their authority the way I had. That would be true of virtually all the girls at the academy; they had really short tempers.

“You upstart. You’re a real pain—and you’ve let your success go to your head. You actually think we’d give you the time of day?” Dolly spat at me.

She was absolutely right that I was an upstart, but frankly, I thought I deserved to let success go to my head a little. Now that I was engaged, I was practically invincible. Okay, that was a lie. Women were still kind of scary! So what, though? I could overcome that with bravado. Plus, I had Luxion!

“Yeah? And who are the two cowards backing away from this upstart?” I sneered.

Donna ground her teeth. “Don’t throw your weight around with us just ’cause you got lucky as an adventurer one time. My daddy could swat you like a fly if I asked him.”

“That’s right,” said Dolly. “You’re from a poor backwoods barony. You think you could win against court nobility? If so, you’re as much deluded as you are a pain. Keep this up, and we’ll crush you.”

Military might wasn’t everything in aristocratic society. Court nobles didn’t have personal armies to the same extent as regional lords. Still, they had their own ways of taking down opponents. Such underhanded strategizing was the last thing I wanted to deal with.

As I hesitated, unsure how to respond to the girls’ threats, the click of high heels cut through the murmurs around us. The way the sound echoed through

the air caught my attention somehow. When I turned my head, I saw the dazzling, beautiful Deirdre. Confident and graceful in equal measure, she strode right to the table.

"What an interesting conversation you seem to be having," she said.

The moment Deirdre arrived, Dolly and Donna shrank back. They were so intimidated that they couldn't even look her in the eye. In terms of the school's female hierarchy, Deirdre was well above the pair, which they seemed keenly aware of. Deirdre was also a Roseblade, so her family wasn't part of the Redgrave faction, and the girls couldn't browbeat her with the family's power and influence. In short, they couldn't pick a fight with Deirdre as easily as they had with me.

"Miss Deirdre," Dolly said haltingly, pasting a smile on her face. "What brings you to such a boring place?"

Deirdre pointedly ignored her and walked to my side, planting a hand on my shoulder and leaning her weight against me. "When I heard this cutie was up to something interesting, I came to have a look. But that's neither here nor there. It would be most shameful for the both of you if you're bringing up your family names while also cheating to guarantee your victory."

"What did you say?" Dolly glared at her.

You know, this has been on my mind for a while now, but doesn't it seem like this game's developers took way too much inspiration from manga about delinquents for their characters? And for the academy in general?

"I heard the details on my way to the casino," Deirdre explained. "As I understand it, a servant spoke out of turn to you two, so you're taking it out on their mistress. But aren't you taking this a step too far?" She looked at the other students; they quickly looked away. It was incredible how her admonishment silenced them all.

You're amazing, Miss Deirdre!

Donna trembled but bravely retorted, "Would you please stay out of this? Like, it's personal for us. And this guy friend of yours is the one who stuck his nose in uninvited."

What—is she trying to say this is my fault? I mean, I guess I did *jump in where I wasn't welcome. But how does the protagonist feel about all this? That's the real question.*

I turned to her. "Miss Olivia, please name me your stand-in. Not only will I make sure you don't have to leave the academy, I'll see your debt nullified, too." I'd given up on reasoning with Donna and Dolly.

Olivia's whole body trembled. "Why…?" she whispered hoarsely. "Why would you save me? You won't get anything out of it."

Because you're the game's protagonist, that's why! I couldn't very well say that, although it would've been way easier. Instead, I had to come up with some other excuse—make up something on the fly.

"Because I hate bullying, I guess," I said offhandedly, giving Dolly and Donna a dirty look.

Olivia lowered her head again. In a voice thick with sadness and strained by tears, she said, "Please…be my stand-in. Save me, I beg you."

"I won't let you down." I put my hands on her shoulders and coaxed her out of her chair.

"We don't accept this!" Dolly howled at me.

I had the perfect plan to shut Dolly up. I signaled Marie with a look. Her expression was disgusted, but she approached the table all the same, handing me a bag.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're a horrible person. I hope you know that."

The bag she handed me was stuffed with "platinum" coins. They'd originally been gold, but they were now imbued with magic that made them glow white. Thus, they looked more valuable than normal gold coins.

As I dumped the bag's contents on the table, the looks in Dolly and Donna's eyes changed instantly.

"I've got plenty to bet. See?" I said. "I may have been lucky in succeeding on my first adventure, but as you can see, I'm loaded."

The mountain of coins stoked the girls' greed. Perhaps they assumed that, although I knew they were cheating, I hadn't yet figured out how. Or maybe they were simply so confident in their methods that they thought it didn't matter.

"This means *you'll* owe us everything Olivia lost," Donna snickered.

I nodded. "That's fine."

"For the record, if we take everything from you—even the shirt off your back—we *still* won't be done with you. This game doesn't stop until *both* parties agree. As big a pain as that rule is, we're going to follow it. Are you still brave enough to go through with this?" Dolly cocked her head, her smile self-assured.

They'd probably come up with that "rule" to drive Olivia into a corner. Oh well. It made things more convenient for me.

"That's fine. I like that rule," I said.

Dolly sniffed at me. "We won't show you mercy even if you break down into tears."

"Glad we see eye to eye on that, at least. Now, let's get serious." I plopped down in Olivia's vacated chair.

The two girls exchanged smug grins as if they thought their victory was guaranteed.

Deirdre leaned close to my ear. "You really did see through their trickery, didn't you?" she whispered. "I'd at least like to know that you weren't just bluffing when you said that."

It didn't matter that someone was cheating if you couldn't prove how. Regardless of how suspicious you were that they were up to something, they were free to keep doing it as long as they didn't get caught.

I kept my eyes on Dolly and Donna as they took their seats. Speaking more loudly, so that they heard me, too, I told them, "Speaking of, your servants don't need those cards they have stowed away. Come on, did you think I wouldn't notice the extras tucked up their sleeves?"

Dolly and Donna's servants instantly flinched. They immediately tried to hide

the proof of their involvement in the cheating, but a crowd member stepped forward and grabbed both servants by the arm, shaking loose a couple of cards that fluttered to the floor.

"What a shame. If you were involved in cheating, you'll need to be punished." It was Lucle who'd come forward to catch the servants red-handed for me. His eyes, normally narrowed into solid lines, were now cracked partway open. The hold of both his hands on their arms was firm and unyielding.

"P-please don't!" one servant pleaded.

"If you're going to cheat, you should be prepared for the consequences," Lucle said as he briefly released one servant, only to take the opportunity to snap the other's finger. A terrible crack resounded as their bone broke. There were myriad reactions from the crowd; some people watched grimly, while others glanced away.

I appreciated Lucle seizing the two before they could hide their involvement, but when he meted out justice so quickly, I panicked. I hadn't intended to have them punished. On the other hand, the male students really hated the personal servants. They seldom physically attacked us, but they clearly looked at us with disdain. Maybe, since the chance to get back at them was so rare, Lucle had gotten a little too carried away.

Oh, man, I hope that's it. Someone tell me that's all it is.

Marie stood there solemnly. To my surprise, she didn't seem the least bit bothered by what she'd witnessed. "A single broken finger's nothing. Mine have been broken countless times."

Somehow, I didn't really want to know how or why her fingers had been broken. Maybe she'd injured herself while hunting? Either way, she made it sound like she'd suffered way worse than broken fingers.

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to stay calm and relaxed. It was a rule in Holfort that if cheating was exposed, it had to be punished. If you cheated, and were caught, that was your own fault. I couldn't let anyone see how shaken I was—it would kill the intimidating air I was trying to affect—so I did my best to keep an unreadable poker face.

Meanwhile, the other guys from my group started piping up.

“What’re you doing breaking that guy’s finger, Mr. Lucle?” one asked.

“What?” Lucle responded, confused. “Isn’t that the rule? You get caught cheating, you get your finger broken.”

“No. It’s supposed to be your *arm*, right?”

“You’re kidding. I was always taught it was your finger.”

Everyone seemed to disagree on the appropriate punishment. Different regions apparently had different rules, and of course, bickering ensued as to which was the proper one.

Having retrieved an axe from who knew where, Deirdre returned to the table and swung it down. *Whack!* The blade bit into the wooden tabletop so loudly that it redirected everyone’s attention, and the guys’ arguing voices fell silent.

“Enough pointless squabbling!” Deirdre declared. “Since these ladies brought their family names into the game, it’s only fair that the penalty for cheating be one’s entire arm!”

“Wha—?!” I squeaked in surprise.

Unlike the two girls I was taking on, I had Luxion on my side, so I didn’t need to worry too much about getting found out. Still, an *arm* seemed like too steep a price.

Dolly and Donna shook like a couple of leaves in the wind.

“No, um, like, I think that’s going a bit far,” said Donna. Her bravado had fled.

Deirdre planted her hands on her hips, chin held high. “Why is that? You understand the situation’s gravity, don’t you?”

“B-but I think going that far would be a pain, you know?” Dolly stammered, lips trembling.

“When you bring up your house’s name in the course of a competition, it’s no longer a game,” said Deirdre. “Surely you’re prepared to take this seriously. Or am I mistaken? Let me make this clear—I *hate* people who can’t walk the walk!” She glared at them, her lips forming a thin, flat line.

Rattled, Dolly and Donna just stood there, still trembling. Even I was a little—okay, a lot—intimidated by this point.

Deirdre turned to the crowd. “You all remember Stephanie Fou Offrey. Even she humbly accepted her punishment after being defeated. Surely no one here is so cowardly that they can’t be at least as brave as Stephanie.”

Dolly and Donna were still pale, but when Deirdre mentioned Stephanie, their expressions set in grim determination. They couldn’t let themselves look weaker than someone like her.

“Ha! Fine. We’ll go ahead, then,” Dolly declared.

Her bravery actually made me think a little better of her. Just a tiny bit, though. After what she and Donna had done to Olivia, I still couldn’t empathize with them. Plus, there was a bigger issue at hand.

“Luxion,” I muttered under my breath, quietly enough that no one would overhear me. “I’ll be fine, right? Miss Deirdre and the others won’t pick up on *my* cheating, will they?”

“As I suspected, your confidence in involving yourself stemmed from your plan to use me to cheat your way to victory,” he responded in exasperation. “Now you are terrified because you think they may somehow catch you.”

“Stop stating the obvious! Hurry up and tell me whether it’ll be okay,” I snapped, anxious for some sort of reassurance.

“You underestimate me far too much, Master. This is, as you humans would say, child’s play for me.”

Praying he was right, I charged into this tricky gamble to save the game’s protagonist.

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The excitement inside the casino had transformed completely. Olivia watched from the sidelines, speechless at what she was witnessing. The two women who'd mercilessly tormented her only moments earlier had turned deathly pale, and their hands trembled with fear as they held their cards.

Dolly moved to throw away a card, but Leon pinned her with a hard look. "Hold it. You sure you want to risk losing an arm? If you try to switch in that card you've got hidden, it'll be all over for you." His gaze moved to the axe still embedded in the table.

Dolly sucked in a panicked breath. The axe was intended to chop through a door or wall in an emergency, so its edge was finely sharpened. She only had to look at it once to rethink her intention to cheat. Her breaths were fast and erratic, but it was no surprise that she was so on edge. Leon had already won back all the money she and Donna took from Olivia.

At this point, Dolly and Donna were the ones putting themselves in debt to buy more chips. Meanwhile, there was a *mountain* of chips piled beside Leon.

Having given up on cheating, Dolly and Donna threw down their cards. They had fairly decent hands. Then Leon, with a perfect poker face, set *his* cards down.

"Victory's mine again," he said. "Give me your chips."

They obediently pushed their chips to Leon's side, cleaning themselves out. At this point, they'd already done that—and then put themselves deeper into debt to continue playing—countless times.

Leon glanced at the dealer and nodded, signaling him to deal again. Then he glanced at the two women sitting across from him. "Time for the next hand. Get your chips ready fast." He was essentially telling them to dig themselves even further into debt, since that was the only way they could keep playing. And, due to the way things had unfolded, their debtor was Leon. He'd put a much steeper rate on their loan than they'd given Olivia, and the amount they were borrowing only climbed higher and higher.

Donna burst into tears, collapsing forward onto the table. Tears also streamed

down Dolly's cheeks.

"Have mercy," wept Dolly. "We're sorry for being such a pain, all right?!"

"Yeah! Take it easy on us," sobbed Donna.

It was painful for Olivia to watch.

At first, the girls' card game with Leon had been perfectly ordinary. Then they'd begun losing to him repeatedly. As soon as their chips began to run low, they'd stooped to all sorts of methods to cheat their way to winning. Olivia couldn't even tell what they were doing, but Leon could. He saw through each and every attempt—and let them get away with it. Even so, he beat them. They couldn't best him when they cheated, and they certainly stood no chance when they didn't.

Perhaps most humiliating of all was that, every time Dolly and Donna resorted to cheap tricks and still lost, Leon always ended the hand by saying, "What a shame you couldn't beat me even by cheating."

At the beginning, the two girls kept brave faces on. As the card game pressed ahead, though, their spirits broke. They regarded Leon with looks of terror. They'd been wary of Deirdre initially, but it was Leon who struck fear into them now. That was partly their own fault, given their arrogance and selfishness. Leon shattered their pride and left them in tears, pleading for leniency. It was a complete role reversal; their own rules, which they'd created to trap Olivia, were backfiring on them.

"If I remember correctly, you said the game only ends when *all* the players agree, right?" Leon said pointedly. "You also said the loser needs to pay their debt, however steep. Those are the rules *you* decided on." Despite his winning streak, he wasn't smiling. There was no emotion on his face at all. He wasn't acting triumphant and rubbing his wins in their faces; he was curt and businesslike, as if he found the whole situation burdensome.

Still sniffling, the girls signed another promissory note in exchange for more chips. A minimum bet was in place to ensure no one could weasel through the game by simply conserving their chips each round—yet another rule they'd put in place for Olivia. Every single trap they'd laid for her now came back to haunt them.

Chips were added, and the next round began.

Once the cards were laid out, Leon said, “There. I win again.” It had taken him no time at all to beat them.

“This winning streak is way too much of a coincidence to be fair play!” one male student complained, stepping up for Dolly and Donna. “You haven’t lost a single round this whole time. It’s obvious *you’re* the one cheating! Don’t you guys agree?” He glanced back at the rest of the crowd. Around half the onlookers showed agreement in some form.

Deirdre sighed. “In that case, shall we pat him down and search him again?”

Leon shrugged. “This is already the third time. It’s about time you guys gave it up.”

The male student stepped up to search Leon, confident that he could succeed where others before him hadn’t managed to. This time, he removed Leon’s jacket, shirt, and even his pants, trying to find a hidden card somewhere. There was nothing to be found, however. Not a single piece of evidence.

“Y-you’re kidding me,” he stuttered, baffled.

Deirdre snapped her fingers. “I assume you’re ready to face the consequences of interrupting this game for no good reason.”

The male student immediately tried to scramble away from Deirdre. She didn’t even bother to look at him, but Lucle and the others from our group surrounded the student in no time.

“Really sorry we have to do this,” Lucle said in a chillingly casual voice, “but rules are rules.” With that, he and the others dragged the student to another room.

“Something has to be going on! I just know it! St-stop this. You guys can’t—gaaaah!” The student’s screams echoed even after the door closed behind him.

The whole reason he’d tried to intervene with a baseless claim was that he thought defending Dolly and Donna could score extra points with other female students. That tactic was for naught, of course, since he hadn’t found anything to substantiate his accusation.

Olivia tried to shut out the boy's screaming, her gaze focused on the floor. In the meantime, Leon pulled his clothes back on.

"Let's keep going, then," he said.

It was admittedly odd that he kept winning, but he came out clean in each search. Even when someone thought he was cheating, no one could pin down how.

Since Leon had refused to bend to her tears, Dolly lost her temper and leapt out of her seat. "This game doesn't mean anything anyway! I'm going to tell Daddy all about this. He'll ruin you, you know!"

"Don't say that!" Donna cried, latching onto Dolly's arm and tugging it. "It'll only get worse!" She shot Deirdre a fearful look.

Deirdre stared back at the two with open disdain. "After all the trouble I went to in order to warn you, you still insist on defiling this game. Very well. My family will be your opponents as well. We'll take this as far as you want to go."

By the time Dolly realized what she'd done—made an enemy of one of the most powerful women at the academy—it was too late.

"I'll have to deal with your whole house next, is that it?" Leon asked in a low, menacing voice. From the man partly responsible for the fall of the Offreys and Lafans, that didn't sound like an idle threat.

"Please forgive my impertinence," Dolly muttered meekly as she sank back into her chair. Fresh tears trailed down her cheeks. "I won't be a pain anymore, I promise. I won't do anything. So, please, have mercy!"

Donna followed her example, adding, "We can't pay all this money back! Even my house can't afford it. Like, my daddy would be furious with me. Please!"

Faces wet with snot and tears, they begged with everything they had, paying no thought to how shameful or embarrassing it was. They must've realized how cold and unsympathetic the crowd's gazes were. Still, they didn't hesitate.

Leon showed no inclination of offering them any of the mercy they so desperately pleaded for. "We'll continue," he said. "And we'll keep going until you finally realize who you really need to apologize to. You can't tell me you

don’t know who I mean.”

Olivia. He obviously meant Olivia. He wanted them to bow their heads and apologize to a commoner. In some ways, that would perhaps be the greatest humiliation for a noblewoman.

Dolly and Donna were too terrified to think of their reputations, though. They turned toward Olivia, leaping out of their seats to rush over to her. Then they threw themselves at her feet, remaining on their knees as they apologized profusely.

“I’m sorry,” Dolly cried. “We won’t be pains in the ass anymore, I swear! Please forgive us!”

“Yeah, like, we were the ones who messed up! We’re so sorry! Have mercy!” Donna pleaded.

It was such a dramatic shift from their prior arrogance, Olivia struggled to digest it. “Um…s-sure,” she said.

Watching her accept their apologies, Leon let out a small sigh. Was it just her imagination, or did he look relieved? He seemed disgusted by this whole card game, too.

“Then it’s over,” he told Dolly and Donna. “I’ll put your debts on hold for now. Next time you try anything on the scholarship student, I’ll come after you to collect. Just keep that in mind.”

They were finally off the hook—from the card game and their debt. Bursting into sobs, they threw their arms around one another.

“Donnaaaa!”

“Dollllly!”

Leon lifted himself out of his chair.

“How kind of you,” Deirdre said sardonically. “I doubt you intended to make them pay to begin with, knowing you.”

Although Deirdre was exasperated with Leon, Olivia couldn’t help smiling.

“I’m rich, remember? I don’t need their money.” Leon turned to leave.

Olivia chased after him. “Th-thank you for what you did for me!” she exclaimed. “But, um, why exactly did you save me?”

There was no point sticking up for someone like me, but he did. This is the first time any aristocrat has done something so kind for me. Since he’d rescued her from one of the scariest situations she’d ever experienced, she couldn’t help wondering about him.

Perhaps embarrassed and unsure how to respond, Leon scratched his cheek. “Because you were in trouble, I guess? Also…sorry I couldn’t step in sooner to help you. Anyway, see you.” As if trying to escape her, he hurried away.

Olivia reached a hand out after him. “W-wait! Your name…” She stared sadly as his back receded.

Deirdre approached from behind, arms folded beneath her ample breasts. She sighed to herself. “I don’t know what he’s acting so embarrassed for. If he’d managed to keep that suave act up until the end, it would’ve been perfect. But I digress. His name’s Leon Fou Bartfort.”

“Lord Leon Fou Bartfort,” Olivia repeated to herself.

Bartfort? Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure Prince Julius mentioned him, too. That was back when the two had walked past each other at the academy. Julius had mentioned that Leon was a promising man the same age as them. *I didn’t realize he was so kind.*

“He’ll be a baron once he graduates,” Deirdre added, like a proud older sister. “But right now, he’s just a knight in training. I consider him a cute little brother.” She pressed her fan over her mouth. “Now, if you’ll pardon me,” she concluded, and promptly left.

Olivia set her hand on her chest. Her heart was pounding. So much heat had rushed to her head, she was sure it had to be her fever.

Clutching her shirt, she mumbled his name again to herself. “Lord Leon Fou Bartfort.”

Even if he’s still in training, he’s basically a knight, right? Yes. A knight in shining armor. The thought called to mind an image of the strong, kind knights that bards sang about. *I didn’t know there were aristocrats like him out there.*

Leon was very different from Julius and the other boys, and he’d somehow captured her heart.

Chapter 11:
The Point of the School Trip

WHEN THE CRUISE SHIP finally docked at its destination, the other students were elated.

"It's the first time I've ever been to this island."

"The atmosphere here is so different!"

"All the buildings are wooden!"

While everyone else regarded the foreign culture here with wonder and appreciation, very different emotions struck Marie and I. The view from the harbor was all we needed to trigger our memories of Japan.

"I knew this island was inspired by Japan, but I didn't realize it'd be quite so authentic. Really hits home," I said.

Marie shared my sense of nostalgia and heartache. "It's all a bit *too* authentic," she said. "That's the problem."

The scene in front of us reminded us both of the home we couldn't return to, instilling a longing that we could never fulfill. It would be misleading to say that the island replicated Japan exactly. Still, the buildings and architecture were reminiscent of those you might find in our home country's rustic, peaceful countryside.

"According to my data, this island in similar to Japan in several ways," cut in Luxion, still hidden by his cloaking device. "In particular, its shrine and torii are such close matches that I almost wonder whether they are exact reconstructions."

"Probably because that's how they designed this area in the game, right?" I said.

"Yeah," Marie agreed. "Maybe for the school trip, they wanted to insert a culture that'd be foreign to the game characters, and they decided to go with

Japan.” They’d probably just stuck to doing a traditionally Japanese area because it was too much hassle to actually research and design a location that was also foreign to Japanese players.

“In viewing this solely as a game environment, you two seem to be thinking too narrowly,” said Luxion.

I shrugged. “How else would we look at it?”

“I will conduct my own investigation.” Luxion ended the conversation with that; he must’ve decided it was pointless to argue further.

Taking in her surroundings, Marie looked terribly homesick. She finally smacked her cheeks to force herself out of her funk. “Okay! Let’s enjoy this island for all it’s worth! It might even have some Japanese-inspired dishes for us to try. Can’t hurt to take a look around.”

She had a knack for redirecting her emotions somewhere more positive. In this case, I admired that. “I’d love to try some of their miso and soy sauce, if they have those.”

“We’ll have to look into what kind of wine goes well with the food here, too. Red or white? Sweet or dry?”

We both smiled as we walked along. At one point, Deirdre cut in front of us, clad in a white swimsuit and chiffon cover-up.

“We’ve finally arrived! Let’s head straight to the beach!” she called back to her followers, who scrambled after her.

I stared at her—or rather, at her chest. “We’ve barely arrived, and she’s already changed, ready to hit the water? She sure has a lot of energy—ouch! That hurt!” I turned to glare at Marie, who’d pinched my side.

“Hmph! You’re always ogling other women’s breasts. Jeez, you’re such a jerk!” No sooner had the words left her mouth than she took off running, leaving me behind.

“H-hey!”

“How many times will you continue to make the same mistake until you learn your lesson, Master?” asked Luxion.

“Look, screwing up over and over is human nature.”

“At least learn from it this time so you do not continue to do so. Or perhaps I should seriously consider breast enhancement surgery for Marie.”

If he was serious, I had to level with him. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not interested in fake breasts.” Authenticity was everything to me.

“How lucky I am to have found such an incorrigible master.”

I perked up. “You mean it?”

“It was obviously sarcasm,” Luxion said, dismayed. “Please do not assume I am complimenting you.”

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After she’d disembarked, Olivia found herself scanning the crowds of students, wondering whether Leon was among them. Her hopes were dashed when she realized he wasn’t.

“I don’t see him. Maybe he left earlier,” she muttered to herself, sighing with great disappointment.

Kyle was at her heels, his face pinched with concern. “You’re not looking for that male student who saved you before, are you?”

Olivia’s cheeks flushed. “Um, yes, actually.” She nodded, a little embarrassed.

The elf’s brow furrowed. “I don’t see anything wrong with thanking him, if that’s what you want to do, but you shouldn’t get too close to him. It would be disrespectful to Prince Julius and his friends. Please keep that in mind.”

He couldn’t understand Olivia’s sudden interest in Leon. Julius and the other noble scions who favored her were far superior in every respect, from rank to wealth to influence. Leon couldn’t begin to compare to them.

“Should I really keep my distance?” Olivia wondered aloud.

Since she was a commoner, all aristocrats were equally out of her league, and she found it hard to fathom the hierarchy that existed among them. Since coming to the academy, she’d slowly become more aware of the power structure within the upper crust, but that was mostly a vague awareness; she

couldn’t say she comprehended the pecking order fully.

“What? Yes. You’re not actually interested in him, are you?” asked Kyle. “I’ve heard that he’ll be granted the title of baron once he graduates, but he’ll still only be the minor lord of a remote region of the kingdom.”

Kyle obviously looked down on Leon, which Olivia didn’t appreciate.

“They’re all far out of my reach regardless,” she said.

“What’re you talking about? Of course they’re not. Prince Julius and the others are clever enough that they could figure out a way to make it work somehow. You should focus more on what’ll benefit you in the future.”

Kyle was clearly pushing her to choose either Julius or someone within his group of friends. Yet when her servant mentioned the future, Leon’s face popped into Olivia’s head first.

***

We were staying at a ryokan during our short visit to the island. The other students were elated at the opportunity to sample this foreign culture, but it wasn’t quite as novel to Marie and me. I paid the inn an extra fee to secure us a private room. The academy apparently didn’t mind, since none of the professors admonished me for it. In fact, they seemed content for me to do whatever I wanted, so long as the inn was willing to accommodate us.

Our room was furnished with a table set in the center of a shared space, and Marie and I were currently seated across from one another.

“I’m glad they have green tea here. Still, it’s jarring. It feels almost like we’ve been transported back to Japan,” I said.

Marie wore a yukata the inn had provided. She was happily chowing down on the snacks they’d served with the tea. “It’s amazing how they perfectly replicated every aspect of a Japanese inn, down to this common area. Back when I lived in Japan, I’d never have imagined finding a place like this so nostalgic.”

“You said it.”

The moment was peaceful and relaxing. I really enjoyed kicking back like this,

sipping my tea. But, truth be told, there was a good reason I'd gone out of my way to reserve a larger room for Marie and I.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get down to business, shall we?"

Marie's expression turned serious. "Let's. We have important things to discuss."

We were both suddenly solemn, and why wouldn't we be? We'd come to this Japanese-style island on our first school trip for good reason.

There was an item here that provided a substantial advantage in the game, specifically in combat sections. It was an especially high priority for players because it bolstered characters' stat growth. Since it did so each time a character leveled up, nabbing it while a character's level was still low was most beneficial and efficient. That was the whole reason I'd paid off the professors to ensure Marie and I could visit here.

The real challenge hadn't been getting here, though. It would come now that we'd arrived.

"At tomorrow's festival, the item is for sale as a charm," I said. "But each person is limited to one charm purchase, and—at least in the game—that charm is completely random. You have no idea what you'll get."

Marie nodded. "Yeah, I remember. You have to reload constantly until you get the item you want. But there's no such option for us."

"Exactly. We'll have just one chance."

There was quite a variety of charms, and some were complete garbage. As Marie correctly mentioned, players might need to reload and try again dozens of times to get what they wanted. This wasn't a game for us, though, so we couldn't do that.

"Still, it'd be nice if we *could* reload," Marie added.

I grinned. "Sadly, reality doesn't work that way. But that's okay. I figured out a way around it."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

I plopped a fat coin purse onto the table. "Money. We'll solve the issue with

cold, hard cash. I'm going to buy every single charm the vendor has for sale!"

Marie's eyes lit up. "I should've guessed! Other people would hesitate over how underhanded that solution is, but you've got no compunctions. That's a real asset at times like this!"

"Fwa ha ha ha!" I cackled, then stopped short. "Wait. Is that really a compliment?"

"Yeah. This time, at least!"

Hunh. I guess it makes sense that I only get complimented for being devious when it's helpful. I couldn't quite say being praised for that made me happy, but I guess it wasn't so bad, since I was at least getting *some* acknowledgment.

Luxion hovered at the edge of the room, gazing at us with great disappointment in his singular robotic eye. "Based on the initially tense atmosphere, I expected you to confer regarding something important. This was all over obtaining an in-game item? Master, you should have used this opportunity to propose instead."

Huh? Hold up a sec. Does worrying over an item really seem so silly that this AI got concerned about us?

***

When the day of the festival arrived, Marie and I—both clad in yukata—ignored the festivities around us, pumping our legs.

"Wait right there!"

"Drop those charms if you know what's good for you!"

We were chasing a man in a fox mask. On his back was a box full of charms he'd planned to sell at the festival.

"Someone heeeeelp!" he screeched at the top of his lungs.

When we'd first met the man, we'd greeted him casually and asked to buy charms. He'd been happy to oblige, saying, "Yes, of course. One per person." Inside the box on his back were hundreds of little white bags, each containing a charm. It was impossible to pick out a bag that contained the one we wanted.

That was when I made my move. “Give me all of them,” I’d said. “I can pay whatever price you want.”

Can you guess what he did next? He shouted at us: “No, out of the question!” Then he refused to sell us any charms at all and made a run for it. That was why we were currently chasing him.

“If you’re worried about the money, I can pay you ten times what you normally charge per charm! No, a hundred times!” I bellowed breathlessly.

The man glanced over his shoulder at us. “Absolutely not!”

He was ridiculously fast. It didn’t help that Marie and I were sprinting at top speed; we weren’t gaining on him at all.

“I can’t even catch up to you? Are you kidding me?!” Marie cried. “You can outrun me despite how much training I got fleeing vicious beasts on a snow-covered mountain?! What the hell are you?!” She was impressed but dismayed.

“Hearing that, I should ask you the same thing! How are you still alive?” demanded the man. “Now I’m even more terrified!”

You and me both, I thought. The vendor and I saw eye to eye on that particular matter, at least. *I can’t imagine creatures chasing me around a remote mountain. Marie’s made of tougher stuff than I am.*

Still, the vendor was carrying an extremely big, heavy-looking box, and despite all the running we’d done, he didn’t seem the least bit winded. To make matters worse, he was skipping up the mountainside wearing traditional Japanese sandals; the incline didn’t even slow him down. There was no winning against a local.

Marie and I were meanwhile panting for breath, losing speed. I glanced at her.

She nodded back, equally vexed over how the vendor was running rings around us.

“All right,” I called to him. “Fine! We give up! At least sell us one each, please!”

His whole body turned to face us. “One per person, and that’s it,” he said,

continuing to run backward. “Just one! You better not try to steal any!”

“We won’t! Just stop running already! You’re way too fast…”

How far had we sprinted, anyway? Marie and I were both drenched in sweat.

The man finally stopped, though he still seemed wary of us. I yanked my wallet out of my pocket and handed him enough cash for two charms. Marie and I were still winded, our shoulders heaving with each intake of breath.

“It would’ve been better if you’d just agreed to buy one each from the start,” the vendor complained. “Your rash demands forced us all to run all over the place.”

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I was just that desperate for the charms.”

“This is the first time a customer’s ever offered to pay a hundred times their worth. To be honest, it’s flattering. Still, I want to limit my charms to one per customer. I have patrons who come for the festival each year, and they really look forward to buying a charm.”

So he’s more concerned about making people happy than profiting. It made sense that he hadn’t let me buy them all, then. If he’d only explained his position sooner, that whole nonsensical chase would’ve been unnecessary. *Then again, I guess it was my fault for being too stubborn.*

I scratched the back of my head. “Look, I genuinely feel bad. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

The man lowered the box from his back and lifted its lid to reveal hundreds of tiny white bags. According to his rules, we weren’t allowed to scrutinize them or feel them before deciding which to buy.

“All right. One each,” he said.

I plucked mine out first.

“Since you’re making us pay, you should let us pick out which charm we get,” Marie grumbled under her breath, still huffing and puffing. She wanted to skip the randomized aspect of this.

“The right charm will find the right person,” the vendor assured her. “There are no bad ones, so choose whichever feels correct.”

As far as we were concerned, anything other than the charm we were specifically after was as good as useless.

“Come on,” I begged, “let me luck out… Huh?! No!”

The moment my fingers slipped inside the bag I’d chosen, I could tell I hadn’t picked the charm we wanted. The first thing I felt was a braided cord. When I pulled that, the rest of the charm popped out of the bag. The cord connected to a metal ring that was in turn linked to a marble-sized ball. When the light hit it, the ball reflected a rainbow of colors. It looked like a big pearl, but I knew it had to be an artificial replica. Considering how cheap the charm had been, that was to be expected; it would’ve been much pricier if the pearl were genuine. The only real reason I was disappointed was that this wasn’t the charm I’d hoped for.

Marie waited for me to finish, then reached inside the vendor’s box and grabbed a charm for herself. She wasted no time opening the little sack to see what she’d gotten. “Give me what I want, give me what I want,” she chanted. “Come on! Argh…”

Her hopeful expression gave way to disappointment. I knew instantly that she’d struck out the same way I had. From the little white pouch, Marie pulled a gleaming silver charm shaped like a sword and shield. It was intended to boost melee characters’ physical attributes as they leveled up.

Studying our disappointed expressions, the vendor hoisted his box of charms onto his back once more. His fox mask hid his face completely, but I sensed him grinning beneath it.

“Those charms suit you,” he said. “Now, I’ll be returning to the festival.” He sighed. “It’ll be quite a walk back.”

As soon as he’d faded out of view, Luxion appeared beside us. “I am glad to see that you both acquired the item you so desperately wanted.”

“Yeah… In a sense,” I said.

Marie and I glanced at each other’s charms. My fake pearl strengthened healing magic, which made it entirely useless to me. Marie, meanwhile, had no interest in a charm that would strengthen her physical attributes. At least, I

assumed she didn't. I mean, she *was* stronger than the weaker guys out there, so maybe that charm wasn't bad for her. I could somehow picture her with gorilla-like strength after the charm boosted her stats. The image was partly terrifying and partly hilarious enough that I actually wanted to see it.

While I was lost in thought, Marie held the charm out to me. "This isn't my style, so I'll let you have it."

"You sure?" I asked but accepted it gratefully.

"It looks like the kind of keychain sold at souvenir stores. You know, like a dragon wrapped around a sword… That kind of thing. The stuff guys always like to buy." It sounded as though she couldn't comprehend men's taste.

"Hey, I actually bought that exact type of keychain," I replied. Back in grade school, in fact.

She shook her head at me. "I'll never understand it."

"I think I actually like this," I said. The way she'd described the sword-and-shield charm brought back fond memories for me.

"Well, good for you. Now give me the one you got." Her eyes were fixed on the fake pearl charm I held. When I offered it to her, she snatched it from my hand and slipped the braided red cord around her right wrist.

"There. We're done! We might not have gotten to buy them all ourselves, but this at least wasn't a *bad* outcome." She flipped her hand, appreciating the way the charm looked on her wrist. Flyaway strands of hair on her forehead were now stuck to her sweaty skin. Sweat had also soaked into her yukata, making it slightly translucent. She'd pulled her hair into a ponytail, exposing the nape of her neck.

There was something strangely sensual about the way she looked. I had to tear my gaze away. Unbelievably, my heart was pounding in my chest—over Marie, of all people.

"Man, all that running really took it out of me," I said, trying to distract myself.

"Yeah. I'm soaked with sweat."

The intense exercise had exhausted us both.

“Regardless, by the time you return to the festival, everything will be ready,” Luxion declared.

Marie cocked her head. “What’ll be ready?” She’d already forgotten what she’d been looking forward to when we first arrived.

I forced a smile. “The fireworks, remember? We’re going to watch them from a perfect spot. I can’t believe it slipped your mind. Who is it that won’t shut up about the fireworks, starting yesterday?”

Realization dawned on her face. “That’s right! The fireworks! We need to hurry back!” She took off.

Luxion and I hurried after her, trading looks as we went.

“We’re good to go?” I whispered to him.

“Of course. The rest is up to you.”

“Yeah. That’s the part that worries me.”

Chapter 12:
The Fireworks and the Cog

THE SIGHTS WERE UNFAMILIAR, the smells foreign, and the sounds unrecognizable.

The schedule for the school trip had been planned carefully around the island's festival. There, lanterns emitted gentle light, illuminating the night around Olivia. Tons of food stalls had been set up for the festivities, all offering samples of local cuisine. An instrument she'd never heard in Holfort was producing the music in the background.

When Olivia made her way to the main festival streets, what greeted her was so fantastical and novel that it overwhelmed her.

"Beautiful," she murmured to herself, genuinely impressed.

She wore her school uniform as she wandered around, but all the local children were clad in yukata as they ran past her; they also wore masks. Most of the faces she saw were smiling, and laughter abounded in all directions. The vast majority of the students from their group were participating in the festivities. Many of them wore yukata as well.

Most of the students moved in their own circles as they enjoyed their trip. Only Olivia was walking by herself. She couldn't help scanning the crowds, hoping to spot Leon, since she still hadn't thanked him properly for helping her at the casino. That was an excuse, of course. All she really wanted was a chance to talk to him.

I wonder what kind of person he is. He saved me, so I at least have to assume he isn't bad. Ever since he'd come to her rescue, thoughts of him filled her mind.

This was the first time Olivia had ever been so enamored. She'd never experienced love before, not even back home. The concept itself wasn't foreign to her—she'd heard of people dating—but it never really captured her interest.

She preferred reading her books, so naturally, she'd never before felt such intense emotions for another person.

Unfortunately, however long she searched for Leon, she couldn't find him. *Did he not come to the festival?*

This was their second day in their destination. Tomorrow, the cruise ship would depart for home.

The trip isn't over yet, so I've still got time, right? Even after they left the island, they'd spend a few more days aboard the ship. *You just need to find an opportunity to talk to him between now and then,* she told herself.

Then her eyes landed on a man in a fox mask. The enormous box he sported on his back made him stand out in the crowd. Whenever anyone approached him, he lowered the box and handed them one of the white bags inside.

Curious, Olivia walked up to him just as his previous customers took their leave.

Noticing her, he asked, "Interested in a charm?"

"Oh—that's what you're selling?"

The man had been setting the lid back on his box, but as she drew closer, he lifted it again. A range of colored charms was pinned inside the lid, representing the charms hidden in the white bags.

"One, and only one, per customer," he said. "What you get is random—yours to enjoy after you buy it."

Olivia inquired about the price before she committed to anything, and she was relieved to hear it was well within her budget. "All right, then. I'll take one, please."

"Of course. Select whichever you like."

She plucked out a white bag, then pulled it open to peek inside at a braided red cord connected to a piece of wood. Studying it for a moment, she asked, "Is this a cog?" There was a hole in the exact center of the charm; the cord threaded through it. Glancing at the inside of the charm box's lid, Olivia noticed that this particular type wasn't among the display of those available.

“A cog. That’s a rare one,” said the man.

“Um…so what does it mean?” sha asked. The only thing that came to her mind was a cog in a machine.

“It’s a metaphor for a person’s life,” he explained. “When your cog connects with someone else’s, that creates movement, changing your life’s trajectory.”

She tried to clarify. “You mean, it represents fate?”

“I mean perhaps this charm’s a sign that your cog hit someone else’s, and things are going to change.”

Leon’s face instantly sprang to mind. Blood rushed to her cheeks.

The man chuckled. “Seems like what I said already reminded you of someone.”

“No, um… Well, yes.” She tried to deny it but had to admit the truth.

“Wonderful. I hope your two cogs are a perfect match.” He paused, then added, “But, well, I should warn you that the cog of destiny is a fickle thing and can be easily disconnected.”

“What?”

“There are times when your cog connects with someone other than your fated partner, taking you in a different direction than intended. Destiny is capricious. If you’ve indeed found someone who matches you, I’ll warn you that you’d best not let them go.” With that, he heaved the box onto his shoulder and strode off.

Olivia squeezed the wooden cog tightly in her hand.

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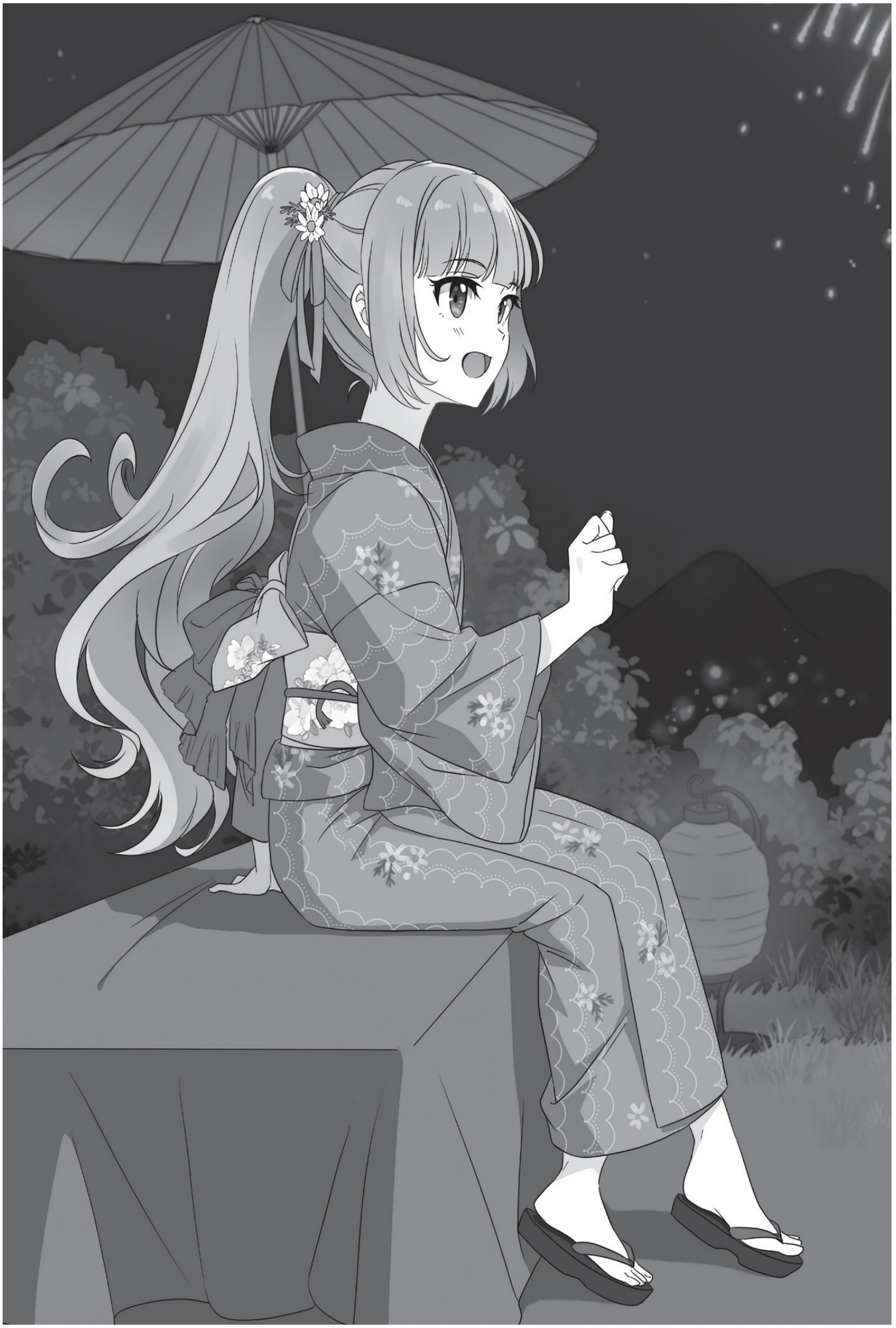
Luxion guided us to our viewing spot for the fireworks. The place was completely deserted. It held a bench with a long red cloth thrown over it; four paper lanterns sat on the ground nearby. A large umbrella jutted from the ground, shielding the bench. Given the faint light it emitted, it was probably more for illumination than anything.

“Oh my gosh! This aesthetic’s perfect!” Marie squealed in delight.

Although it was fairly remote, this spot would be flawless for enjoying the fireworks.

“It’s strange,” she continued. “I mean, I know this isn’t the *most* obvious location to watch the fireworks from, but I can’t believe no one else thought to come here.”

She tilted her head, puzzled that the area was empty, but there was a clear-cut answer to her confusion.



“That is because this is private property,” said Luxion.

Marie flinched. “Wait. We aren’t trespassing, are we?!”

“Most certainly not,” the AI responded evenly. “We have permission to be here.”

“Huh?”

Marie looked so surprised that I explained, “I asked the owners’ permission to use this spot today. They were happy to agree once I paid them.”

“You solve everything with money.” She frowned. Given all that had unfolded in Marie’s previous life, I saw how that might bother her. Still, I’d had good reason to reserve this location for us today.

“It is almost time,” Luxion announced. “Thirty seconds remain until the fireworks show begins.”

He began counting down for us. Marie plopped onto the bench, so I settled in beside her.

“I guess we should be grateful for the developers’ lazy approach,” I mused. “That gave us this opportunity to go to a Japanese-style festival.”

Who knew we’d be able to enjoy familiar foods here in the otome game world? I only wished I’d realized sooner just how similar the island’s culture really was to ours.

“It’s pretty disappointing that we couldn’t sample all the food stall dishes,” Marie said, crestfallen. “I wish I was able to eat more.”

I could trust her to be that big a glutton. Then again, that was part of what made her who she was. “We can head back to the festival after the fireworks,” I pointed out.

“I guess so. I just wish we’d bought a bunch of snacks before they even started. I kind of wanted to eat while we watched.”

She sounds more preoccupied with the food than the fireworks, I mused.

“The show will begin now,” Luxion cut in.

A sharp sound rang out as the first fireworks raced through the air. They

exploded in a dazzling array of colors, lighting up the night.

Marie shot to her feet, shouting, “Amazing!”

More and more explosions followed. The booming noises resonated through my body, bringing back a deluge of memories of life in Japan.

“Even the fireworks are…” I hesitated. “Well, not exactly the same, I guess.”

Unconventional fireworks occasionally went off between the kind we were used to, so it wasn’t the exact same experience.

“Some of these fireworks utilize magic. That is likely what differentiates them from the fireworks with which you are familiar,” explained Luxion. “Do you dislike them?”

“Nah. As long as they look nice, that’s all I care about.”

He moved his lens side to side, disappointed. “I hoped you would say they lack taste for relying upon magic.” Luxion hated the new humans and their magic, hence his disdain at said magic being employed here.

“You can hardly whine about magic and science and whatnot when you see how beautiful the end results are,” I argued. I mean, who really cared as long as the fireworks looked nice? That was the important part.

“I suspected you would say something along those lines, Master. Is the result all that really matters?”

“Good question. I guess, seeing how these looks, I’d say yeah, it is.”

The magic fireworks were just as beautiful. The magic lent a single firework a mirrored effect, creating more explosions of color. Together, they painted the sky like a canvas. It was a novel, if puzzling, experience. Each time a firework exploded, I contemplated whether it was the kind we knew or something entirely different born of magic. Meanwhile, Marie sank back onto the bench, pressing her hand over mine.

“Thank you for all this,” she said.

“Hm?” I turned to look at her. She was still staring at the sky, bursting fireworks illuminating her side profile.

“Like I said, um…all of it.” Too embarrassed to expand on that, she looked away briefly, then turned back to face me. In that moment, something was different about her. Her blue eyes almost seemed to sparkle. “You saved me from the Offreys, right? You even solved the issues I was having with my family. If I’d had to deal with it all on my own, who knows where I’d be?” Her face clouded over at first; she must’ve been picturing how terribly her life would’ve gone if I hadn’t intervened. She quickly smiled, though. “Even if it might not always seem like it, I’m grateful to you.”

“Okay,” I said foolishly.

Marie’s cheeks puffed in frustration. “You don’t believe me, do you?” Despite her accusatory words, her voice was gentle and teasing. “I swallowed my embarrassment to thank you, you know!”

“You just got carried away by the atmosphere, didn’t you?” I snickered. I figured the festival, and the sentimentality of the moment, had enabled her to express what she normally couldn’t.

Marie huffed and turned away. “You really don’t understand women at all. I was being genuine and reflecting on my own mistakes, you know.”

“My bad, my bad.”

I rose from the bench, and she flinched. The panic-stricken look on her face said everything; she was worried that perhaps she’d gone too far. But then I stepped in front of her and sank down onto one knee, taking her left hand in mine. At some point during all this, Luxion had activated his cloaking device, blending into the background to leave us alone.

“What’re you doing?” Marie said breathlessly.

“I’d never regret helping you. I know I’ve got a lot of faults, so I think you’re the most amazing woman in the world for sticking by me despite all those.” My lips curved into what I hoped was a natural smile. Staring directly into her eyes, I slipped a ring onto her finger. “Marie…”

At the exact same moment that I began my proposal, another round of fireworks blasted the sky. But I wanted to believe Marie heard what I said despite the deafening explosions, since blood rushed all the way from her

cheeks to her ears and she teared up. Her whole body trembled. When her gaze dropped to the ring on her finger, the tears broke free, racing down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the sleeve of her yukata.

"One more time!" she said, holding up a finger with her free hand. "I want to hear it once more!"

Dumbfounded by her outlandish request, I shot to my feet. "Why?! You have no idea how embarrassing that was for me, and I forced myself anyway! It was a once-in-a-lifetime proposal, and you want me to do it again?!" I was so nervous my throat was as dry as a desert, and my heart pounded in my ears. Considering the heat in my cheeks, I was probably blushing furiously, too. In fact, my whole body felt feverishly hot.

Marie brushed away her next tears, pleading, "I couldn't hear you fully because of the fireworks! I want to answer you properly!"

"No, I—"

"Please!"

She begged so earnestly that I couldn't turn her down. *Come to think of it, my little sister used to wheedle like this all the time, and I always found myself caving.* "This'll be the last time, though, okay? I already feel like my cheeks are on fire." I smacked them, trying to psych myself back up, then fixed my gaze on her. "Marie, I'm in l—"

The next round of fireworks burst above us as I repeated all the words I'd said the first time. Her face was initially tense with worry, but slowly transformed, her lips breaking into a smile. More tears fell down her cheeks, and her right hand wrapped around her left. Her whole face was wet from crying as she beamed at me and finally answered, "Yes."

Relief crashed over me. With it came intense exhaustion; at long last, this was all finally over. Now that I didn't have to keep proposing to her, I had a sense of freedom, and also of joy that she'd accepted my proposal.

Marie giggled at me. "I'm starting to feel bad for you, so I'll just say you passed this time."

"Wonderful. Thanks." I sank back onto the bench.

The fireworks show had hit its zenith, and the sky lit up with a rainbow of colors as far as the eye could see.

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The fireworks were over. The festival was still going, but now that the show was finished, much of the crowd was already heading home. As the streets grew increasingly deserted, Olivia continued searching for Leon.

“Ah!” she gasped when she spotted him, clad in a yukata. Joy swelled in her chest. She darted forward, only to come to a sudden halt. She couldn’t budge. “What…?”

Beside Leon was an adorable, petite girl wearing a pale-pink yukata. Olivia knew immediately that the girl was a schoolmate; she’d seen her several times at the academy.

She and Leon held hands and seemed to be enjoying each other’s company. The ring on the girl’s finger soon drew Olivia’s eyes. It was a silver band set with a blue gem. Olivia knew immediately what it meant.

As she stared, the cog charm slipped from her hand and hit the ground, the impact cracking the wood. She stopped to pick it up, mumbling to herself, “Oh. Well, I guess it makes sense. He’s obviously an incredible guy, so of course he already has someone. If I approached him, I’d only be a nuisance.”

The knight who’d rescued her was already with someone else—a young noblewoman. That was only natural. A commoner like Olivia had never had any business imagining herself with Leon. That was what she kept telling herself.

“How strange. I can’t stop crying.”

However much she wiped away her tears, they kept coming.

Clutching the broken charm to her chest, Olivia darted away, eager to escape the scene. The words the man in the fox mask had said earlier rang again in her mind: “If you’ve indeed found someone who matches you, I’ll warn you that you’d best not let them go.”

I wasn’t even able to get my hands on him in the first place, she thought glumly.

With that, Olivia’s first love ended almost as suddenly as it had begun.

Chapter 13:
After the School Trip

ONCE THE FESTIVAL ENDED, Marie returned to the Japanese-style inn, grinning ear to ear. She'd brought a smorgasbord of food from the festival stalls back with her; once she'd laid it out on the table, she and her three friends settled in around it.

"You've been all smiles since you got back, Rie," said Ellie.

As Betty dug into the yakisoba, she noticed Marie staring at her own ring finger. "I'm guessing Bartfort finally managed to propose properly. How many tries did it take him again?" She directed the question at Cynthia, who had planted her head on an empty space on the table.

Cynthia lifted a hand and waved it flippantly. "I don't remember anymore. It got to be a pain to keep count." Despite doing absolutely nothing, she acted utterly exhausted.

Betty sighed at her but didn't bother saying anything. Instead, she turned her focus to Marie. "Is marriage really something to be that happy about? I just don't understand it."

"Who cares, as long as Rie's pleased about it?" Ellie asked with a strained smile. "Happiness is different for everyone, after all."

"Happiness, huh?" Betty's forehead scrunched. "Everyone meets the same end eventually. Does what happens between now and then really matter that much?"

Ellie's smile stiffened further. "Well, it's probably important that people live in the moment, right? Though I doubt that sounds very convincing coming from me."

Betty opened her mouth to keep arguing, but must've thought better of it, since she stopped herself. Instead, she simply muttered, "I guess we should hope for blessed futures for the younger generation." She obviously thought of

Marie as part of that “younger generation,” although the two were actually the same age.

Ellie didn’t bother to point that out. She was preoccupied with returning to her spot in her book. Cynthia seemed to be listening, but didn’t bother to join the discussion.

“Tee hee hee,” Marie giggled, lost in her own little world. She hadn’t heard anything her friends had said. She was too lost in her own joy, grinning like an idiot.

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Having departed from the island’s port, the cruise ship was heading back to the capital. Once the island was out of sight, and we were well into our journey, Deirdre summoned me to speak with her.

“The wedding?” I blurted out.

“Right. We plan to hold it during the winter break.” I noticed that she was using a Japanese-style folding fan now—probably a souvenir she’d bought on the island.

I cocked my head. “I realize Miss Dorothea already graduated, but my brother’s still in his third year. There’s no reason we have to hold the wedding this winter, right? He’ll graduate a few months later. We can do it then.”

Nicks was on the cusp of completing his studies at the academy. He’d finish in less than six months. Yet for some reason the Roseblades wanted to hurry his marriage to Dorothea along.

For this particular conversation, Deirdre had called me to a private room. She hadn’t even brought her followers along, and she still scanned the area to ensure we were completely alone. Then she sighed, and her brows pinched together as she said, “My sister has been making a number of unreasonable requests.”

In this otome game, marriage was an extremely important event in a woman’s life, as it was in our previous world. That was why it wasn’t altogether surprising to hear that Dorothea wanted to change specifics of the event.

“Do those include the wedding date? Did some fortune teller say it’d be more fortuitous to hold it in the winter or something?” I asked.

Relying on a fortune teller to determine when to hold a wedding sounded ridiculous, but it was a fairly common practice here. Judging from the look on Deirdre’s face, though, I had the feeling that wasn’t the issue.

“If that was all it was, there’d be no need to rush,” she told me, frowning. “We could hold an engagement ceremony now, then have the official wedding next winter.”

I tilted my head, confused.

She leaned in closer. Although no one was around to eavesdrop, she whispered, which told me this was extremely confidential. “Instead of rings, my sister wants to exchange dog collars.”

“Someone knock some sense into her,” I replied, not even bothering to phrase my response politely. After the words left my mouth, I panicked for a moment.

Deirdre didn’t seem to mind what I’d said, though. “I’ve tried! I’ve attempted to persuade her numerous times. So have my mother and father—practically daily!”

From the sound of it, the whole family was doing their best to talk Dorothea down, but she simply wouldn’t budge. She wanted dog collars.

“I know it sounds terrible of me to say of my own flesh and blood,” she added, “but my sister has a somewhat…unique personality most ordinary people simply cannot comprehend.”

“Yeah, I get that sense, too.” Wanting people to be understanding about *dog collars* of all things at a wedding would be a tall order.

“On top of that, she’s stubborn,” Deirdre continued. “If she can’t have the perfect wedding she envisions, who knows how she’ll act out?”

“You’ll make an adorable sister-in-law, you know.”

Deirdre smiled at me, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Oh? As if I’m not always adorable?”

I averted my gaze. “Aren’t you confusing ‘adorable’ with ‘beautiful’? You have the sensuality of a grown woman, my lady.”

She giggled. “A suave response. I’ll forgive your earlier gaffe. But I digress. Returning to the matter at hand, our compromise with my sister will entail a wedding ceremony this winter. We’ll hold one for just our immediate family, so she can have her wish, and schedule the official ceremony later.”

Weddings—in this world, at least—weren’t just for the two people getting married. They were opportunities for both families involved to publicize their new link to one another, which required them to invite dozens upon dozens of guests. Exchanging dog collars in front of hundreds of people would completely ruin the image of both the Roseblades and the Bartforts. Thus, Deirdre reasoned, we’d be prudent to hold a private ceremony to appease Dorothea.

“How am I supposed to face Nicks after hearing all this?” I asked, my gut twisting with pity and guilt.

Deirdre pressed her fan over her mouth and refused to meet my eyes. “Make sure to bring your fiancée,” she continued. “The Roseblades will be happy to welcome our extended family’s newest member.”

Of course they’d welcome her—in part because our families had shared secrets we didn’t want to get out.

“We’ll hold the ceremony at the Offreys’ former estate,” she added. “We’re in the midst of preparing everything as we speak. And next year will see the emergence of the new Bartfort viscounty.”

That would consist of Nicks, the Bartfort family’s newly titled viscount, and Dorothea, a daughter of the Roseblade family. They would head the new viscounty together. Thus, the destruction of one noble house would lead to the formation of a new one. Deirdre told me that her family had already sent people to begin maintenance on the Offreys’ former estate. The Roseblades likely wanted to hold the ceremony there because they already controlled the region.

“Hard to believe Nicks is already getting married,” I muttered to myself.

However much he tried to argue against it, there was no going back now.

He'd just have to grin and bear it.

***

When Olivia returned from the school trip, three of the love interests—Greg, Chris, and Brad—awaited her with souvenirs. They reserved one of the school's tea rooms, where Kyle brewed and served them tea.

Greg threw his arms wide. "Man, was that a good time. I had a lotta fun. I thought every place out in the sticks was the same, but the sauna we got to visit was really amazin'."

Greg and Brad's group had visited an area rich in nature, and since the climate there was currently wintery, they'd been able to enjoy all kinds of seasonal sports. Greg had loved every moment of it, and even Brad took his own enjoyment from it.

"We were split into teams, and we all had our own duties in our cabins. It was surprisingly fun," said Brad. "We even went camping in the cold, which wasn't too bad, either."

The souvenirs they'd brought back were mostly unusual sweets from their destination. There were also a few wooden carvings—presumably handcrafted by locals—within their haul. Those interested Olivia more, if only because she seldom saw anything like them.

"It sounds like you had a really good time." She smiled at them.

Greg and Brad brightened, but almost as quickly, Greg's eyes narrowed. "Did somethin' happen on your trip, Olivia?"

"What? Why would you ask that?" She tried to feign ignorance.

Brad stared at her, too, his smile falling away. "You don't seem like your normal cheerful self. If it's just our imagination, then it's fine, but still."

Olivia had already warned Kyle against sharing what had happened during their trip. If the five boys found out, that would only cause even bigger drama. Besides, she didn't want them to know about Leon.

Her lips moved into a stiff smile. "Maybe I'm just not used to traveling on a cruise ship like that. I'm a little exhausted after the whole trip."

That excuse seemed to convince them.

“I learned a lot during my trip, too,” Chris said grudgingly, his nostrils flaring. “But I have some words for Prince Julius and Jilk.”

Olivia’s eyes moved to Chris. She could already tell this wouldn’t lead anywhere good. Still, she asked, “What happened between you and those two?”

“They intervened when the professors chose our groups. I was originally supposed to be in your group, Olivia.” Chris shook his head, jaw clenched. “They really stuck their noses in where they shouldn’t have.”

Greg burst out laughing. “Sucks for you, Chris. But maybe you shouldn’t hold it against them too much. After all, they couldn’t even go. They’ve been stuck attendin’ meetings at the palace this whole time.”

He obviously felt badly that Jilk and Julius couldn’t go on the school trip, and Brad and Chris shared his sympathies. They were all scions of reputable houses, carrying the kingdom’s future on their shoulders. It might’ve been Julius and Jilk who’d needed to sacrifice their personal plans for duty this time, but there was no guarantee it wouldn’t be one of the others next. They understood that.

A shadow fell over Chris’s face, though. “I still think I should be allowed to complain,” he muttered.

Brad snickered at him. “If I were you, I’d definitely grumble about it. Anyway, it was pretty pathetic that the prince and Jilk left Olivia all by herself.”

At that, the boys’ gazes turned to Olivia.

She smiled bitterly. “I still had fun. Connecting to a different culture like that was a valuable experience.”

“Y’know what? You should come on a trip with me during the winter break. I’d love to see the spot your group got to visit,” Greg suggested. It was exactly the kind of luxurious vacation a lordling like him would casually express interest in, as if money was no object.

Olivia’s eyes widened. “But you’ll have an opportunity to go next year, and the year after, right?”

“I wanna make memories with *you*,” Greg said. “If it makes a difference to you, I’m happy to let *you* choose a destination.”

She shook her head. “N-no, there’s no need to go out of your way like that for me.”

Greg started to say something but was interrupted when the door swung open. Julius and Jilk entered.

“We’d both be interested in joining you,” the prince declared.

Chris folded his arms and glared at them. “Seems like you two have been awfully busy.”

Julius and Jilk instantly sensed why he was so irritable.

“I apologize,” Jilk said with a wan smile. “Moreover, I have a suggestion: Why don’t we all take a trip together? His Highness couldn’t go on the school trip at all, so how about we make up for it by traveling as a group during winter break?”

The suggestion was sudden, but Chris perked up at the idea of a trip with Olivia. His cheeks colored. “W-well, I suppose I wouldn’t mind that much. A-and I don’t have any winter vacation plans yet.”

Greg shook his head. “Why can’t you just be honest and say you’d enjoy the hell outta goin’ on a trip with us all?” he scoffed. “You beat around the bush way too much.”

“I would argue that you’re too simpleminded and direct,” Chris shot back, launching the pair into a verbal spat.

“Like a cat and dog.” Exasperated by their antics, Brad shook his head, then inquired of the prince and his companion, “That aside, how did the discussions go?”

Julius and Jilk paused to exchange glances, as if silently asking each other how much was safe to disclose. When Jilk nodded, Julius turned back to Brad and said, “Duke Redgrave will, on the surface at least, offer the Roseblades and Bartforts his support.”

“But only on the surface, hm?”

“Well, that does put pressure on Marquess Frampton, but he doesn’t want either house to grow more powerful. So, yes, only on the surface.”

Essentially, they had Duke Redgrave’s approval, but he wouldn’t provide material support. It was hard to believe that days and days of discussions had produced such a trivial conclusion.

Greg sighed. “Was it really necessary that you two cancel your trip for *that*?”

Julius shrugged. “My sentiments exactly. Being surrounded by all those adults wasn’t terribly comfortable, either.”

Listening to their conversation, Olivia had a hard time envisioning what exactly had happened. When she heard Bartfort’s name mentioned, however, her face clouded.

Kyle shot her a worried look. He obviously felt guilty about not telling the boys anything about what happened on the cruise ship.

Startled, Olivia looked back at him with panicked eyes. *Don’t tell them anything,* she tried to communicate.

Bobbing his head slightly, Kyle refocused his attention on serving tea to Julius and Jilk.

Julius took a seat and smiled at Olivia. “Why don’t we discuss our upcoming trip, then? That would be far more productive—and enjoyable for me—than talking about politics.” After missing the school trip, he was understandably eager to start planning their winter vacation.

Olivia pasted a smile on her face in response, although she thought, *I guess this means I won’t have time to study during winter break, either.*

Chapter 14:
However Many Times We're Reborn

BEFORE WINTER VACATION STARTED, all the first years had to go to another party. Marie and I had attended the one during first term, but due to certain circumstances, we'd fled the venue rather abruptly. This time, my incredibly achievable goal was simply to stay for the entire event. I would embrace my role as a background character and blend into the crowd.

I soon stood at the edge of the party, watching everyone.

"From the sidelines, the whole gathering feels pretty…normal, huh?" Marie stood at my side, wearing the dress I'd bought her and holding a plate she'd piled high with refreshments.

Just watching her scarf that much food down filled me up. I was content to sip the juice in my glass. "Yep. And it's almost like the school trip didn't even happen."

My gaze was fixed on Olivia in the distance, surrounded by all her love interests. Julius and Jilk's absence from the island trip seemingly hadn't impacted their relationships with her—based on what I saw, at least.

"Everything good with Miss Olivia and her love interests?" I asked Luxion, who was invisible at the moment. I'd requested that he investigate the protagonist and the boys to ensure nothing had gone wrong with the game's plot.

"They are planning a trip during the winter break, apparently to make up for the missed school trip," Luxion said.

"Oh. Because Prince Julius and Jilk couldn't go?" I thought about that for a moment. "Doesn't it kind of seem like the game's forcing an event between them because they skipped one?" Maybe you could call that a "compelling force," as in a force trying to autocorrect the plot's trajectory by ensuring the protagonist took a trip with her love interests.

Marie grimaced. "It has nothing to do with game events. It's just a trip.

They're using it as an excuse to invite her along, that's all."

"I agree with Marie's perspective," said Luxion. "I see no reason to look into this any further."

Wonderful; they were both against me. "You just want to prioritize your own research," I accused Luxion.

"Now that the threat of the last boss has passed, yes, I believe it pertinent to investigate the rest of the planet."

I frowned. "I get what you're saying, but… I don't know. It still weighs on my mind."

Surrounded by her love interests, Olivia smiled as if she was enjoying herself. The awkwardness that had existed between them in first term had disappeared, like she felt more comfortable with them. Yet that didn't look entirely genuine on Olivia's part. It seemed as if she was forcing herself.

As I got lost in thought, Marie tugged my sleeve. When I lowered my eyes to her, I realized her attention was focused elsewhere—she'd spotted Dolly and Donna in the crowd. They were still blissfully unaware of our presence.

"What a pain," Dolly was saying.

"Like, that's exactly why I don't think we should get invol—eep!"

As Donna's eyes landed on me, she froze. Meanwhile, the color drained from Dolly's face, and she started trembling uncontrollably. Donna's knees knocked together, and she clung to Dolly, unable to stand on her own.

"W-w-we haven't done anything, all right?!" she shouted at me. "L-Like, we aren't doing *any* bad stuff anymore!" She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

Dolly tensed her upper lip, trying to act unaffected, even as she stammered, "H-hope you're having a nice evening. Now, if you'll pardon us, yeah?" From the stiff, unnatural way she spoke, she was obviously flustered. She wrapped an arm around Donna, half carrying her as they scrambled away from us.

Marie watched the two retreat, her face scrunched. "How's it feel knowing you completely broke them?"

I wasn't even sure how to answer. There *was* something incredibly disorienting about two spoiled rich girls falling over themselves to escape me. "I guess I taught a good lesson to a couple selfish girls who needed it," I said.

"And it never occurred to you that they might try to take revenge on us by going to their parents or something?"

"I figure we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Anyway, we've got Luxion."

Luxion—still invisible—cut in, "I currently consider the likelihood of them retaliating exceedingly low. They do not seem to want to create a larger fuss out of what happened."

He spoke with such confidence that he must have already investigated the pair. He was great at watching our backs. "You looked into them, huh?"

"Either way, Master, you are too relaxed about their potential retaliation. You mustn't discount the possibility—or danger—of that."

Marie nodded sagely. "Exactly. You have a habit of going overboard. You should learn to be more discreet and consider the consequences of your actions."

Like you have any right to say that to me. But although there was nothing wrong with my wanting to help Olivia, my actions *had* been a bit reckless. Using Luxion to cheat my way through the game had completely and irreparably broken Dolly and Donna's spirits. If they resented me for that, I deserved it. But it wasn't like I'd rushed into it blindly.

"Remember, all the love interests give Miss Olivia preferential treatment," I said. "I knew that, as long as I got her out of that situation, I'd just need to threaten Dolly and Donna if they tried to take revenge. Tell them 'If you try anything funny, I'll go to Prince Julius and let him know what happened at the casino.' And, if they *still* tried going to their parents, I'd have the Roseblades to back me up."

Looking equally shocked at my explanation, Luxion and Marie whispered to each other.

"For him, that was quite calculating," Luxion noted.

“I guess. Still, he planned to get the prince or the Roseblades to solve the problem for him. Isn’t that kind of, I don’t know, pathetic?”

“Given his constant reliance upon me for everything, I believe you humans would say ‘That ship has already sailed.’ He was, as you said, ‘pathetic’ from the start.”

Let’s be honest for a sec. You guys just hate me, don’t you?

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Leon and Marie weren’t the only ones observing Olivia and the love interests. Angelica was also watching the group from afar. Her followers surrounded her, their expressions full of bitterness as they glowered at Olivia. Even from a distance, they could overhear the conversation between Julius and his friends, who were excitedly discussing the trip they’d planned for winter break.

“I’ve scheduled the winter trip to mirror the school trip’s itinerary exactly, Olivia,” Julius said. “The only drawback is that there won’t be a festival on the island this time around.”

“You didn’t have to match the school trip’s itinerary,” Olivia said, her face drawn.

“Since we couldn’t attend that trip, we at least want to make the experience as similar as possible,” Jilk explained. “Though, since this will be your second visit, I suppose it won’t be quite as novel to you.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem at all.”

Julius’s brow wrinkled. “I debated visiting a different school trip location, but that would ruin your enjoyment of it when you got to visit it next year, or the year after.” He’d put a lot of thought into their vacation, wanting to ensure that —when the next school trips rolled around—

Olivia could experience the locations along with the rest of her group. That was why he’d decided they would travel to the same island on winter break.

As they discussed their vacation plans, they seemed to be enjoying themselves, but Angelica’s followers were understandably irritable.

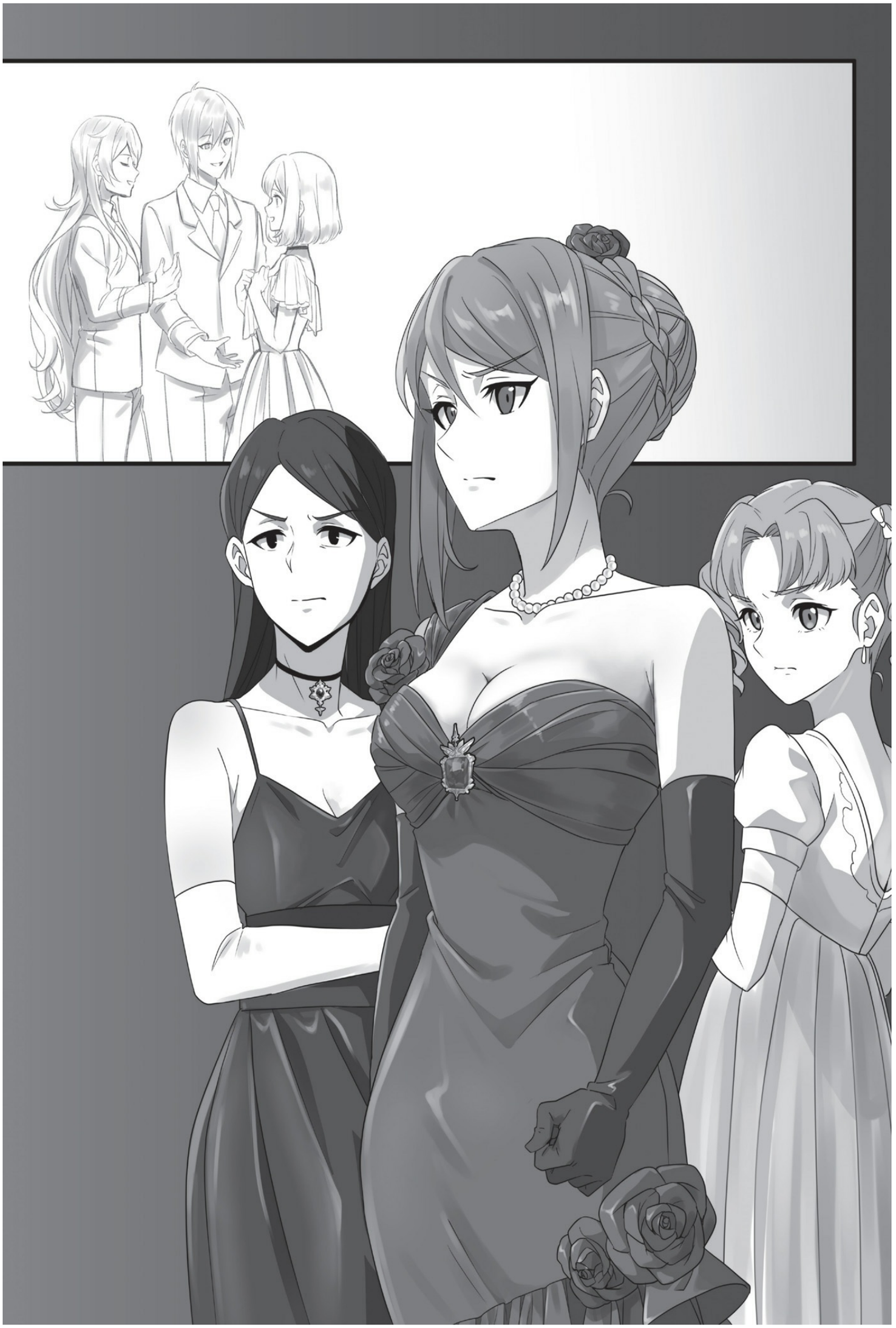
“Lady Angelica couldn’t attend the school trip, either.”

“Exactly. If he should invite anybody, it’s Lady Angelica.”

“Should we pressure Lord Jilk to issue you an invitation, my lady?”

Although Angelica appreciated their indignation on her behalf, she still felt wretched. “I’m not so uncouth that I’d ruin His Highness’s trip,” she said. “I hope they enjoy themselves.”

Though, truth be told, I wanted to join him, too. She was putting on a brave face, but she really had looked forward to going on the school trip together. Still, she couldn’t very well come out and say so openly, given her status. Bravado was her only option.



If she strained her ears a little, she could hear the whispers of the rest of the student body.

“How pathetic,” they said of her.

“At this point, she’s hardly worthy of being called a duke’s daughter.”

“I guess the prince hates her now, huh?”

The insults were mixed with snickers. Ever since what’d happened during the party before summer break, more and more students looked down on her. When her followers glared at them, they were obviously quick to avert their gazes, but Angelica sensed a trend: Her influence over the other students was waning.

That doesn’t change the fact that I’m the prince’s betrothed, she reminded herself. She glared at Olivia and the fake smile the girl kept on her face for the prince. *You’ll understand eventually,* she thought, trying to soothe her fury. *You’re not suited for His Highness.*

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The Roseblades had taken over administration of the Offreys’ former territory. The luxurious estate the Offreys had built themselves had been too gaudy for Dorothea, so it was demolished; a new castle was being built in its place. Several Armors had been repurposed for that effort, and construction proceeded at a feverish pace.

Armors were often deployed for construction efforts, since this world didn’t have heavy machines like cranes and so on. It helped that Armors could fly, which made erecting tall buildings relatively easy.

With a new lord’s reign on the horizon, the people milling about were both anxious and full of anticipation. It was here, on their land, that Nicks and Dorothea’s wedding was being held.

I sat in the groom’s waiting room, wearing a suit for the occasion, though my collar was unbuttoned. Nicks was in there, too, clad in his white suit. He sprawled on the sofa, his expression despairing. None of us could bring ourselves to say anything to him.

Nicks and I had two sisters, Jenna and Finley. Their personalities were horrible, to put it mildly. Jenna was particularly miserable from her exposure to the capital. She'd turned out every bit as insufferable as most of the girls at the academy. But even she looked at Nicks with pity in her eyes. Meanwhile, Finley tried to shield Colin, our youngest brother, from seeing Nicks like this.

My mom and dad were in the corner of the room, whispering to each other.

"How am I supposed to talk to my son when he's got a dog collar around his neck?" My dad sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

"I didn't see this coming, either," said Mom.

The silence in the waiting room amplified their muted voices, making them echo.

Marie was beside me, wearing a dress she'd prepared expressly for the occasion. She squeezed my hand tight. "How's it feel to have sold your brother off to the Roseblades?" she asked accusingly. "Don't you feel any remorse at all, seeing him wear a dog collar?"

The wedding ceremony was held with only close family in attendance, and just as Dorothea had requested, they'd exchanged dog collars instead of rings. Thanks to Deirdre's warning, I'd known what was coming, but that hadn't prepared me for just how awful it had been. Earl Roseblade had come to our waiting room before the ceremony and bowed repeatedly in apology. He'd even promised extra gifts to compensate for his daughter's antics. I couldn't be too excited over that, though, after seeing my brother's devastated face.

"Want to know what I think? I think he's lucky, getting to marry a beauty like her," I insisted.

"Is a woman's chest size the only measurement of beauty in your mind? I bet it is."

"No, dummy. I mean, objectively, Miss Dorothea's absolutely gorgeous. She's slender and fit, and yes, she's got a nice chest. But even I wouldn't consider marrying someone like her. She's nice to look at, but that's it." I'd never actually have wanted to *be* with her.

"And that's the kind of person you forced on your brother," Marie shot back.

“Why don’t you think just a little about what you’ve done?”

“I have thought about it. But I don’t regret it.”

If anything, I wanted *her* to think a little more about it. Sure, Dorothea’s personality was really abnormal, but how did she compare to the other girls at the academy? Was she really so bad that someone would hesitate to marry her?

“When Nicks graduates, he’ll be a viscount,” I added. “Now he has a gorgeous wife and land that’ll provide him a substantial income in the form of taxes. And if that isn’t enough, he has the Roseblades’ full support. What’s he got to be unhappy about?”

I wouldn’t personally want to exchange dog collars at my wedding, but considering all the benefits he’d receive eventually, it really wasn’t a bad deal.

Pausing to consider everything I’d said, Marie likewise started to see that Nicks was lucky as hell. “When you put it like that, I’m kind of jealous. I mean, I really don’t see what he’s acting so depressed about. He got a winning deal out of this, even if it meant he had to put on a dog collar in the process.” She’d empathized with Nicks up till this point, but once she had the same realization I had, we were suddenly on the same page.

You know, I actually like how easily swayed you are. “See? Like I said. He’s lucky.”

Nicks turned his head to peer at me. It looked for all the world like the stare of an evil spirit. Actually, with the collar around his neck, he resembled some poor sod dragged against his will to the altar—and to death’s door—and offered as a human sacrifice. *Well, that’s not totally inaccurate.* I *sacrificed him, after all!*

“If you’re so envious, how about switching places with me?” Nicks asked pointedly.

How sweet of him to offer up his happiness to his beloved little brother. It was honestly almost enough to move me to tears.

“I’ll pass,” I said. As much as I appreciated the gesture, I couldn’t take this away from him.

“You smarmy little jerk!” Nicks burst out, spit flying. “You’ve completely ruined my entire life! How bad do you have to mess things up to land me in a marriage with a woman way out of my league, and on top of that, force a viscount title on me?! I don’t know the first thing about ruling a region!” He shot off the couch and lunged at me, grabbing my collar and shaking me violently.

Look, I get your frustration, but… You really aren’t going to mention the dog collar? Are you saying you don’t mind that, Nicks? Huh? “You told me before that you’d be happy to get married before you were twenty!” I retorted. “I went out of my way to make sure that happened for you. What’ve you got to be upset about?!”

He had no idea how hard it had been negotiating the deal with Earl Roseblade, but it’d be nice if he’d at least appreciate the effort.

“Look up ‘overkill’ in a dictionary, why don’t you! Besides, if you hadn’t sold me off—” His eyes had reddened around the rims, as if he was on the verge of tears. He pulled his arm back like he was about to punch me.

Guess I should let him get a hit in, huh?

Before he could, a loud, impatient knock sounded at the door, which then quickly burst wide open.

“Honey dearest!” Dorothea cried in a singsong voice as she raced in, still wearing her wedding dress. “Your wife’s come to see you!” She carried a chain, one end already connected to her dog collar. I could guess that she planned to connect the chain’s untethered end to Nicks’s collar.

He went white as a sheet. “Miss Dorothea?!”

She flung herself at him and drew circles on his chest. “Please, just call me Dorothea. We’ve already had our sacred ceremony and sworn to love each other eternally, haven’t we? We’ll be together forever and ever. Yes, until the end of time.” That sounded like (an admittedly terrifying) promise.

The light disappeared from Nicks’s eyes. “Yeah, I guess so.” He looked utterly resigned, as if he’d given up on life itself.

Reaching for my hand, Marie whispered, “Their vows were pretty chilling, too,

weren't they?"

"With the collars, I almost couldn't focus on anything else, honestly," I replied. "But yeah, everything about their wedding was horrible."

The exchange of the dog collars had been so shocking and discombobulating, any other off-kilter elements seemed insignificant in comparison. That included the vows—or, rather, Dorothea's specifically. Those had been unsettling, to put it politely.

"'However many times we're reborn, I swear I'll find and reunite with you,'" Marie quoted. "Based on our experiences, that's no joke."

The two of us still remembered our previous lives. We knew reincarnation was real, which was why Dorothea's words rang differently in our ears. It sounded like she'd sworn to hunt Nicks down in all her lives from this one on, as though he could never get away from her again.

"Actually, that was scarier than the collar." I shuddered.

Maybe Dorothea hadn't meant it to come across that way, and it had merely been a way for her to express her love. It just didn't *seem* that innocent when I saw the two together. Especially considering how elated she looked when she hooked the other end of her chain to Nicks's collar.

"You're my perfect husband," she cooed. "We'll never have to be apart for the rest of our lives."

"No, I guess not," he answered numbly. His expression was completely blank, as if his soul had left and his body was running on autopilot.

Deirdre stood in the open doorway with some of the Roseblades' distant relatives. She made a face at her sister but then told her, "I'm glad to see you so happy." She turned to the rest of us. "Now then, if all of you will follow me, I'd be happy to offer you our family's hospitality."

We let her take the lead and treat us to the Roseblades' incredible generosity.

Epilogue

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since winter break started. Olivia was in her room, prepping for her dungeon crawl.

“I have all my tools, my bag’s packed, and I think I’m good on weapons,” she muttered to herself, checking off her list mentally.

“Is there any real reason you need to go dungeon crawl right now?” Kyle asked skeptically as he assisted her. “Our trip with Prince Julius is the day after tomorrow.”

That didn’t leave Olivia much time; she understood that. Still, she had good reason to go on this mission—namely, Kyle. She needed to bring in extra income periodically to pay his wages, even if that meant shouldering more pressure and sacrificing what little free time she had to study.

“I have some expenses I need to take care of, so I want to earn what I can, while I can,” she replied.

“Just, please, don’t get injured and end up in the hospital, all right?”

Olivia nodded. “Yeah. Don’t worry. I’ve done this a number of times.”

She tried to look confident in front of Kyle, but the truth was that she’d only visited the capital’s dungeon on a handful of occasions for class. She’d never ventured in very deep, only scouring the top floors for metal and gemstones to earn a little extra.

Dungeon crawling with a few other people was normally most efficient. Unfortunately, there were no male students Olivia felt she could call for help. Most of the female students didn’t bother to go into the dungeons, and she knew they hated her anyway, so she couldn’t invite them.

“Why not ask that man who helped you during the school trip? He seemed naive enough to lend you money.” Kyle didn’t even try to hide his derision for Leon. He likely thought less of him because he compared him to Julius and his friends.

Admittedly, when it came to finances and physical attributes, the prince and other scions outshone Leon. He wasn't nearly as refined and elegant as they were, either. Most women at the academy would've picked Julius and his friends over Leon without hesitation. But Olivia thought Leon far outdid everyone else in one respect: kindness.

Leon was the only person who'd bothered to help her when she needed it most. She knew that Julius and the others would've stepped in, too, had they been there, but that would never have impacted them negatively. What if, as Leon had been, they were faced with a situation in which doing the right thing would only cause them problems? Would they still follow their moral compass? Frankly, Olivia didn't completely trust that they would. And in fact, it was their fault she'd lost so much valuable studying time.

I know I shouldn't think like this, but I simply can't help finding them annoying. Festering negative emotions welled up inside her. As ashamed of them as she was, she couldn't stave them off.

Logically, Olivia understood that the prince and his friends treated her well. They'd helped her a lot, too. But if she considered it truthfully, weren't they at the center of all her problems? She couldn't help thinking the answer was yes.

Noticing the way her expression had suddenly clouded over, Kyle fidgeted. "So, um…" he started.

"Hm?"

"Uh…would you like me to help out? I could at least carry your things for you."

No clause in Kyle's contract stipulated that he was responsible for assisting with any dungeon crawling. In the past, he'd proven the type to use his contract's fine print to shield himself from extra work. Yet this time, he was going out of his way to offer her help, knowing the dangers involved.

Olivia was too amused to stop herself from giggling. "Are you sure? Even though it's not laid out in your contract that you have to?"

"Y-yeah. That doesn't matter. I'm offering it to you as an extra."

"Thank you, Kyle, but I'm sorry. I think you're still too young to go dungeon

crawling.”

He sulked at that. “I could carry things,” he protested weakly.

“The sentiment alone means a lot to me. Really, thank you,” Olivia said.

She hefted her heavy rucksack over her shoulders and started out the door.

***

Several female students watched from the hallway as Olivia left her room, careful to keep their distance so she didn’t notice them.

“What about Dolly and Donna?” one whispered.

“They ran back home. They’re too scared of Bartfort.”

“Seriously? Cowards.”

The girls snickered, mocking the pair who’d bailed on them.

“Well, whatever. We can do this without them just fine.”

The scheming group watched from the window as Olivia strolled past and headed toward the school gate.

“It’s part of our duty as aristocrats to punish cocky commoners like her.”

***

I was staying at an inn within the Offreys’ former territory for the night. Of course, Marie popped in to visit; she was now sprawled on my bed. When I glanced out the window, I noticed a few snowflakes starting to fall from the sky.

“It’s another cold day,” I remarked. Not in my room, fortunately, since I had a wood-burning stove to keep toasty. Still, everyone milling around outside sported a thick coat.

Luxion’s gaze moved quickly to Marie. “I am pleased to see that you like your engagement ring so much. All the research I did to pin down your exact preferences seems to have paid off.”

Both the precious metal of the band and the inlaid gem were imbued with magic, making them ridiculously expensive. Luxion had reworked the design numerous times before coming up with the finished piece.

Thankfully, Marie loved it. Hoisting herself up, she held out her left hand to show off the ring. “It looks amazing on me, doesn’t it?”

“That goes without saying,” said Luxion. “It was a special piece I prepared expressly for you, after all.”

“That’s not the answer I was looking for. All I wanted was for you to say, ‘Yes, it suits you.’”

It took Luxion a moment to process her words. Then he replied, “Yes, it suits you.” He wasn’t usually one to tell people what they wanted to hear, but he (understandably) hesitated to ruin her good humor.

“Thank you,” Marie said, satisfied. She glanced around the room. “This inn the Roseblades set you up in is a lot more dated than I expected.”

She was absolutely right about that, but it wasn’t necessarily bad. “At least call it rustic,” I said.

“My point is, this is the exact kind of place you’d expect to see ghosts. I’ve got a sixth sense about these things, so I know.”

I quirked a brow at Luxion, certain he shared my doubts. “I’m skeptical,” I said.

“Indeed,” Luxion agreed. “Marie slept soundly through the entire incident with the Saint’s necklace.”

“Yeah. I’m not buying this sixth-sense stuff.” When the necklace spirit manifested, she’d been completely oblivious. It was hard to believe she had anything remotely close to psychic abilities.

Luxion and I snickered, and Marie stuck out her bottom lip. “I’m serious! There’s got to be spirits in this inn!”

“Knock it off!” I snapped. “Or I’ll be too scared to sleep in here tonight!”

“Pfft. You’re a chicken.”

“No, I’m not! Look, I just don’t like that you can’t defeat—” My voice lodged in my throat. A chill ran down my spine, and I broke out in goosebumps. At the same time, cold sweat suddenly beaded on my skin. The abrupt tremors shooting through me could only be a bad premonition. Having experienced that

before, I felt very keenly that this one was intense.

“Huh? Are you really that scared?” Marie asked worriedly. “Sorry. I was just kidding. There’s no spirits.”

I shook my head, but couldn’t speak. I pressed my hand over my mouth.

Luxion scanned my body. “Your heart rate suddenly increased, and you are perspiring. Master, I think you should rest for today.”

“Yeah. Good idea.” Marie nodded. “Get yourself under those blankets, and go to sleep. Your complexion looks awful. Have you got a cold or something?”

“No, I’m fine,” I said numbly, finally managing to speak.

Why did I have this intense sense that something was terribly wrong? Had I overlooked something extremely important? I racked my brain, starting to panic.

Marie looked around the room again.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, finally shaking off the feeling.

“Mmm…I sensed something strange. Maybe this room really does have some kind of shady history.”

I sighed deeply. “Don’t worry. You have absolutely no sensitivity to these things.”

***

Despite entering the dungeon alone, Olivia had really done well for herself.

“With this much loot, I can go on that trip with the prince and not worry about money for a bit,” she said aloud.

She’d now stuffed her rucksack with gems and metals she’d found in the dungeon. It was incredibly heavy, but if she didn’t haul all her loot back and sell it, she couldn’t pay Kyle properly.

“Hup!” she grunted, lifting her bag. “All that’s left is to go back. I made it awfully deep into the dungeon this time.”

That was partly because she was growing more accustomed to the environment. She’d also benefited from some male students clearing the

monsters ahead of her on their way deeper inside. Thanks to them, she'd gotten pretty far. In the process, she'd netted some pure gemstones that would fetch a nice price. She wouldn't need to come back here for a while.

"This went a lot more smoothly than I thought it would. I think I overdid it, though." Smiling to herself in exasperation, she tottered back toward the exit.

Shadows jumped out at her from a side path, startling her. It took a moment to register that they belonged to a couple of female academy students and their personal servants. They'd all moved to block her path.

"Um…" Olivia tried to retreat the way she'd come, but they moved to surround her, so she was completely hemmed in.

"You're awfully careless to come here all by your lonesome," one girl said.

No sooner had she finished her sentence than the personal servants jumped at Olivia, picking her up. They tore away her rucksack and tossed it aside. Without it, she couldn't cash in on anything she'd collected, so she clawed the empty air helplessly, trying to reach it.

"Let go of me! Please, let go of me!" she pleaded. "And please give my bag back!"

The other girls laughed derisively.

"It seems you really let what happened on the school trip go to your head."

"We're not as naive as Dolly and Donna."

"If you think anyone will step in to help you this time, you'll be sorely disappointed."

As they spoke, the female students and their minions began heading deeper into the dungeon, Olivia in tow. In addition to their own personal servants, the girls had male students with them serving as escorts, so they had no trouble moving quickly through the passages.

Olivia had a sinking feeling about what they had planned for her.

"No!" she cried. "Please, let me go!" However much she begged for mercy, neither the girls nor their servants paid her any mind. Olivia clasped the cog charm dangling off the cord on her wrist. "Sir Knight, please save me," she

murmured, picturing Leon's face.

The female students glanced back at her and laughed. "If you're hoping Bartfort will come for you, he's busy with a wedding ceremony. Too bad!" They smirked as they broke the news.

Despair overcame Olivia. *Wedding ceremony? Oh, of course. He must be marrying that girl. She was so much cuter than me, and more petite, too… Plus, she's a proper noblewoman…*

Trying to process everything, she finally fell silent as they hauled her to a dungeon area roped off with a sign saying ENTRY PROHIBITED. The academy had posted that sign specifically to keep students from taking this path, but the bullies ignored it, pressing forward until they reached an enormous chasm. Its depths were unfathomable, giving way to pure darkness.

The female students stood before it, wearing blank expressions.

"The academy always loses at least one student a year to the dungeons. Sometimes there are two or three casualties, or even a whole party."

As she realized where the girl was going with this, Olivia sucked in a breath and blanched.

"It'd be perfectly plausible for a commoner like yourself to underestimate her abilities, delve too far in, and go missing."

She knew the girl meant those words. Still, she had to plead, despite the futility. "Wait. Please, just wait. Hear me out!"

Her cries only served to satisfy the bullies' misplaced pride. They grinned at her and waved. "Bye-bye!"

Their laughter echoed around Olivia.

"This is your own fault for growing so conceited when you're nothing but a lowly commoner."

"It's what you deserve for being so cozy with His Highness."

"Did you drop your guard because they protect you at the academy? That's too bad, then. Your life ends here."

Once the students finished disparaging her, their personal servants tossed her into the chasm. As she fell backward, her hand shot out. *What did I do that was so wrong?* Was it that Julius took a liking to her? That she attended an academy meant only for the upper crust when she wasn't part of it?

Tears streamed down her face, the droplets lifting free and hovering in the air as she fell away from them.

"Why me?! Why?!" Olivia screamed into the abyss.

All those negative emotions festering inside her rushed to the surface. At the same time, she sensed a beast far below her. There in the darkness, the enormous creature cracked its jowls open, ready to devour her. She was certain she was about to be eaten.

Just then, something in the darkness emitted an orb of light that pierced the beast, which disappeared in an explosion of black smoke. Olivia was dumbfounded. In the next moment, something wrapped around her left wrist. It took her a moment to realize it was a bracelet. Shining brightly, the accessory slowed her fall to an almost complete stop and gently deposited her on the floor below.

"Wh-what's this?" Had the bracelet protected her?

She was too preoccupied by that question to realize that, when the bracelet encircled her wrist, it had snapped off the charm she was wearing. The wooden cog shattered completely, its pieces scattered on the floor.

"Am I safe now?" Olivia glanced upward. She couldn't see anything through the darkness, so she had no way of knowing whether the female students were loitering up there. "I guess this bracelet must've rescued me."

The accessory drew back her attention; it was giving off a bright light, and she couldn't tear her eyes away. "What? What's this light…?" she muttered weakly to herself.

All the strength left her body instantly. She collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. From the shining band on her wrist appeared some sort of being with a woman's silhouette. She—whoever she was—had no physical body and was composed purely of black mist. That mist

stared down at Olivia, her two almond-shaped eyes curving into crescents as if she was smirking.

"I found you," she said. "Finally, at long last."

Unable to move, Olivia could do nothing to defend herself. She couldn't even find her voice to speak. *What? Is this some kind of monster? What does it want with me?* Fear swept through her.

"O descendant of my lineage, only you qualify to inherit my power, spirit, and will!" As the figure spoke, the mist that composed her began flickering violently, until at last she flung it away to reveal an incredibly beautiful woman. She had long, flowing blonde hair that gave off a glow. Her crimson eyes were full of inner strength. Olivia was sure she'd seen someone like this before.

Wait. Isn't she…?

The woman leaned down, cupping Olivia's face in both hands. At least, she might've done so if she'd had a tangible physical form. But although she couldn't truly touch Olivia, her hands were somehow chillingly cold, like pure ice—something surely not of this world.

"You poor, poor thing," the woman said to Olivia, voice full of empathy. "They've tossed you away, deep into this dark cavern." Her eyes glistened as if she might cry.

Olivia felt only terror. *Stop it. Don't delve into my psyche!*

But the woman did just that. Her icy, unwelcome presence spread through Olivia, like acid corroding metal. Olivia knew instantly that she was in trouble.

"You're such a sweet girl, too," the woman added.

When their eyes met, the woman looked almost like a spirit, rather than a person. Olivia wanted to escape, but her body wouldn't listen to her. She couldn't do anything.

"So sweet and well-behaved. I feel for you, I really do. That's why…" The woman smiled at her, but then her expression transformed into something utterly hideous. "I'm going to take your body for myself!" The woman's eyes snapped wide open. She lunged forward, her arms wrapping around Olivia; then

she disappeared.

She's forcing her way inside me… No, please, stop! Olivia's body emitted faint light, which seemed to allow her to move. Her hands shot to her head as she tried to withstand the sudden pain inflicted upon her.

"St-stop!" she cried aloud. "Please, don't take my body… Somebody—Sir Knight—save me!"

Her head pounded fiercely. While she tried to withstand the agony, the woman's voice called out from within her. *"You hate them, don't you? The people who tossed you down here—the aristocrats who looked down on you."*

"Stop it!"

"Be honest. You really do hate them all. Even the aristocrats who pressured you into entering the academy, only to abandon you when you needed support."

"I told you, stop!"

"Fill yourself with fury! Let your resentment overwhelm you! Then ask yourself, who's responsible for this? Yes—you already know the answer. It's them—those boys! Embrace your hatred for the nobility! For those deplorable people's descendants!"

An image of the boys in question, those of the aristocracy who'd been kind to her, popped into her head: Julius, Jilk, Chris, Brad, and Greg.

"That's right. You hate them, don't you?"

When the voice accused Olivia of that, she couldn't bring herself to deny it. Why were they so preoccupied with her? Why did they keep getting in her way? Surely they knew how vast the gap was between an aristocrat and a commoner, yet they insisted on clinging to her. Because of them, she had to deal with all the fallout. Even Angelica, a duke's daughter, had her eye on Olivia. Oblivious, the boys seemed not to care. They'd dote on her in their own way, but they wouldn't actually protect her.

"Is…is that how I felt? I resented them?" This revelation shocked her into silence.

In the meantime, the spirit inside her kept egging her on. *"That's right. Let*

your hate for the nobility—for this very country—fester inside you! You have every right to feel that way!”

“Get out. Get out of me! Who…who in the world are you?!” Olivia demanded.

“Me? I’m the woman this nation once referred to as the Saint.”

“What?”

“As I said, the woman you all worship as the Saint…is me.”

Olivia was so shaken that, when the throbbing in her head gradually escalated, she relinquished her hold on consciousness. The last words she managed to force out were: “Sir Knight…save me…”

She toppled to the ground once more. A moment later, she lifted herself back up, and her eyes opened—but all the light was gone from them. Her lips pulled into a grin. Olivia—or rather, the spirit of the Saint that had possessed her—cackled.

“Finally, I’ve found a body for myself! A new body!” She stretched, testing her limbs and reveling in how novel they felt. “It’s been so long. Too long, really. But now I can finally take my revenge upon this kingdom. I’ll make those vermin who stole everything from Lier and me pay for what they did!”

She threw her arms wide, and an invisible force lifted her into the air, propelling her upward through the cavern.

“It was all too easy to steal her body after how much they’d worn her down mentally. This too must be fate.”

The broken cog on the ground briefly entered her vision, but the Saint ignored it entirely.

She picked up more and more speed, racing out of the dark abyss.

“Now, let the bells toll for the Kingdom of Holfort, hailing its coming end and the beginning of *our* revenge! I will see this country consumed in a sea of flames so that I may rebuild it!”

Afterword

DID YOU ENJOY THIS VOLUME of *Marie's Route*, aka *Trapped in a Dating Sim: Otome Games Are Tough For Us, Too!*? I'm the author, Yomu Mishima. I'm particularly delighted to have been able to publish so many volumes already. Each time the afterword comes around, I waffle about what to write. Since this series is a spin-off, though, I thought it'd be good to talk about differences between it and the main series.

In the main series (*Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs*) Leon and Luxion get involved with Olivia and Angelica as the story progresses. Marie serves as a mysterious figure who reincarnated into the world, like Leon, and becomes an obstacle in their path. The main difference in the spin-off is that Leon and Marie join up at the start this time.

I should note, just in case, that I'm writing all this with the idea that some readers may not yet have read the main story. If you're one of those people, let me just simplify this by saying that Leon and Marie are on opposite sides in that series, whereas they're allies here in the spin-off. In the main story, Olivia and Angelica also serve as the main heroines.

Personally, as the author, I've found the spin-off easier to write. There are several reasons for that, but the biggest one is that I can throw all kinds of crazy stuff at Marie. No matter what the circumstances are, or how bad things get for her, I always feel like *This girl can overcome it.* She's especially easy to write when she interacts with Leon. But I'll admit, part of what makes it so easy may be that she's the only heroine in this series.

A surprising realization I came to recently is that I'm not great with writing harems. When I read back through my past works, the parts I remember having the most fun writing weren't those that involved romance but rather situations where the protagonist and other male characters were doing stupid stuff. For instance, in the main story, scenes with the idiot brigade are just really fun to work on.

Honestly, when you get down to it, the main story is more a male-friendship series about Leon and Luxion. I started it wanting to create a harem series, but after I finished it and read back over it, I was shocked by how much more enthusiastic I'd been about Leon and Luxion's friendship.

Well, with that out of the way, I hope you'll continue to support me and this spin-off series!

I've also written an extra story for everyone to commemorate this milestone. To read it, you need to input two keywords. The first is "hagurumanoomamori." You can find the second one in the afterword of the main series's final volume.

CONTRIBUTION

The manga version is being published through the Dora Dora Furatto label (a subsidiary of Kadokawa).
The first full-length volume is planned for release at the end of April!

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