

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Prologue

Chapter 1: To the Border

Chapter 2: House Frazer

Chapter 3: Mylene's Scheming

Chapter 4: His Eminence's Motive

Chapter 5: House Fanoss's Representative

Chapter 6: Long-Lost Little Sister

Chapter 7: Womanizer

Chapter 8: Get Them Before They Get You

Chapter 9: The White Whale

Chapter 10: The Submerged City

Chapter 11: Roland's Secret Strategy

Chapter 12: Soulmates

Chapter 13: Awakening

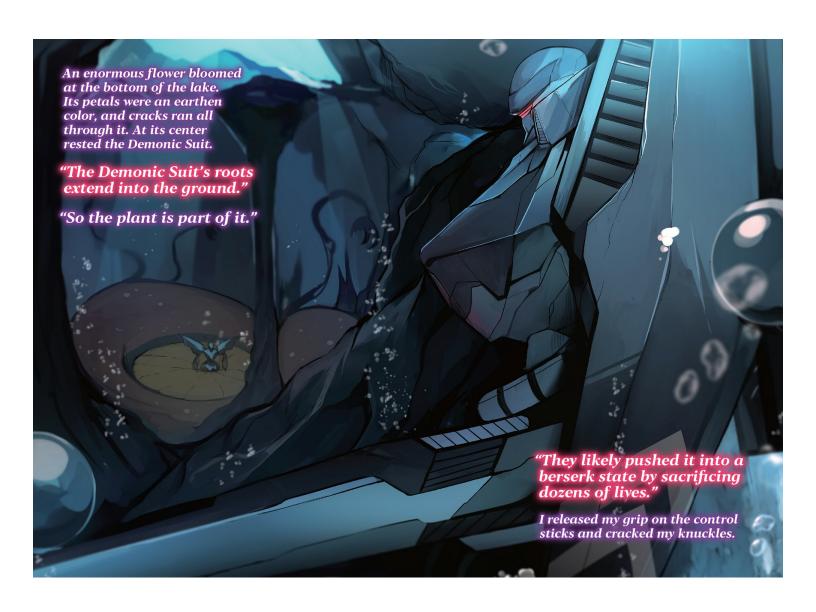
Epilogue

Afterword

Newsletter









TRAPPED IN A STATISTICS THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

NOVEL 1

WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

OTOME-GE SEKAI WA MOB NI KIBISHII SEKAI DESU VOL. 11 ©Mishima Yomu (Story) ©Monda (Illustration)

This edition originally published in Japan in 2022 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to press@gomanga.com.

Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Alyssa Niioka ADAPTATION: E.M. Candon LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

cover design: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner PROOFREADER: Vivica Caligari EDITOR: Kathleen Townsend

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-444-4

Printed in Canada

First Printing: February 2024 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

		Prologue	
景	W	To the Border	8
	102	House Frazer	MOBS
	103	Mylene's Scheming	<u> </u>
	10/4	His Eminence's Motive	
	05	House Fanoss's Representative	T006H
_	06	Long-Lost Little Sister	s S
	107	Womanizer	GAMES
	08	Get Them Before They Get You	ME G
	102	The White Whale	010
_	***	The Submerged City	WORLD OF
_	★	Roland's Secret Strategy	
S	127	Soulmates	=
믔	137	Awakening	—
		Epilogue	\$
			5

Prologue

A GROWING NUMBER of students were both anxious and excited for the upcoming summer break at the academy. Some planned to invite newfound school friends to their family homes. Others had already made plans to hang out during break. And still others had, for various reasons, found themselves with no choice but to go gung-ho on their side hustle and dive into the dungeon below the capital. It seemed just about everyone was vibrating with anticipation as they fantasized about their upcoming free time.

As for me, Leon Fou Bartfort, I was to be deprived of this luxury. Even though I was still a student, I was also a fully recognized and elevated duke. (Please note that this rank had been bestowed upon me *entirely* against my will.)

Moreover, I deserved at least a little sympathy for my plight! While other students were spending their break indulging in all kinds of fun, I had been robbed of that right. Instead, I was being forced to partake in *politics*.

Case in point, picture me preparing to set out to the royal palace as I donned a formal knight's uniform complete with my multiple service decorations. As I stood in front of a full-length mirror, I took a good, long look at the petulant scowl on my face.

"Who does that bastard Roland think he is, summoning me like this?" I huffed. I'd only gone out of my way to dig out this old uniform because our country's king, Roland Rapha Holfort, had demanded my presence at the royal palace—with his usual lack of regard for whether I had plans, I might add. I understood nothing good would come of sulking, but I couldn't help myself.

"You know exactly who he is," said Livia as she pinned my medals to my uniform. "He is our nation's king." She had been kind enough to help me get ready, her face never once betraying emotion. Although she likely knew I was only venting, she still faithfully responded to my rhetorical whining.

"If he's the king, then he ought to be more respectable," I said.

"Well, I can't argue with that." Livia forced a smile, tacitly agreeing with me.

Our king was quietly known by a number of scathing epithets: King Clown, deadbeat do-nothing, dirtbag, and douchebag philanderer. The aristocrats nursed a particular disdain for him. If he were a proper king, he'd have way more respect from the nobility, and they'd have no problem swearing their loyalty. Instead, Roland foisted his duties onto his wife and queen, Mylene Rapha Holfort, while he snuck out to the city to chase every skirt in sight. It was impossible to respect a man like that.

But more importantly, Roland was my greatest nemesis, bar none. That contemptible cretin was responsible for my series of unwanted promotions, after all—every last one granted in the name of pure spite. If they had been the product of a misunderstanding, I might have been able to bring myself to forgive him, but he had done this to me *knowing* I didn't want the recognition. He was utterly despicable.

Livia paused to inspect the medals she'd fastened to my uniform before nodding to herself. "All right. Finished, Mr. Leon. You look incredible."

"They say the clothes make the man, I suppose." I shrugged. "It's only natural I'd look dapper in a uniform."

Livia pulled a face and sighed. "You could stand to take a compliment at face value every once in a while."

I inspected my reflection in the mirror. Thanks to Livia, I at least looked the part. Changing had gone much more quickly with her around to assist.

"You did me a huge favor, for real. It's hard work getting into this thing, with all its bells and whistles."

"That's because you never wear formal outfits. I feel like I always see you in pants and a T-shirt."

"That's just how I was raised."

Livia's brows furrowed. "Everyone else in your family dresses appropriately for their station and looks well groomed. I think it's more of a personal issue."

Livia had been tougher on me lately. No, it wasn't just her—my other fiancées had stopped pulling their punches too. I didn't dislike it, to be clear. I honestly preferred it. That said, I didn't want her thinking I was the family's sole slob.

"You haven't seen my brother and old man in their element," I said. "In summer, we Bartfort men always jump into the lake, boxers only. We're the pinnacle of indecency."

In fact, when I was a child, I'd played in the water buck naked. Colin had done the same last year, but in light of how many girls had come through the family estate lately, he'd worn boxers this time around.

Thus far, Livia had been entirely unflappable, but the moment she heard this, blood rushed to her cheeks. "I can't believe you'd do such a thing, especially when you have girls in your family."

I paused to reflect on her words. There were only three girls in our family: Mom, Jenna, and Finley. None of them had ever seemed particularly surprised to see us strip down, let alone bothered by it.

"None that cared," I said. "Anyway, that's just how we are. What about your folks?"

Still blushing, Livia answered, "I don't have any brothers, so I don't really know."

That's unfortunate... Or maybe it's for the best, actually?

Livia lifted a closed hand to her mouth and cleared her throat, trying to play off her embarrassment. "At any rate, you're ready to go now. You'll look perfectly noble as long as you keep your mouth shut, so please don't speak once you enter the throne room."

Ouch. Little harsh. She made it sound like I'd embarrass myself if I so much as peeped.

Feeling mischievous all of a sudden, I threw an arm around Livia, pulling her close. "It's a shame you see me in such a sad light. I know I'm often misunderstood, but I honestly thought *you* knew the real me."

Our new proximity sent Livia into a flustered panic. "M-Mr. Leon! You're only teasing me, aren't you? Aren't you?" she pleaded.



"Hmm? Whatever do you mean?"

Livia tried to escape my hold, but her attempts were feeble. She wasn't really struggling. Part of that was probably not wanting to mess up my uniform, but at the same time, I could tell she was way more into this than she let on.

I leaned in close. Resigned, Livia ceased squirming and closed her eyes expectantly. I lifted her chin, ready to plant a kiss on—

"This is just *perfect*!" someone cried, totally destroying the romantic atmosphere. "Keep it up! Yeah, just like that! I'm recording every second, so this moment will be preserved on film forever, but don't you mind me!"

Said voice belonged to the AI Cleare, of course, who seemed chronically unable—or perhaps, more accurately, utterly refused—to read the goddamn room.

Cleare's round, robotic body floated in the air, the blue lens at its center trained on us, its outer ring widening and narrowing in turn as she adjusted the focus while she filmed.

The moment Livia heard Cleare, her eyes shot open, and her face went red as a tomato. Her stare was a mix of embarrassed and resentful. "Eary..." she grumbled.

"Oh my, so cute! You're all embarrassed!"

"What're you doing, peeping on us?!" I snapped, equally flustered. "Get the hell outta here!"

"You can't really call it peeping. I've been here from the very start," Cleare sang in her defense, not the least bit guilty about her voyeurism. That lack of conscience meant she was disinclined to leave, even when asked. "You're the ones who decided to get all lovey-dovey outta nowhere. I've done nothing wrong."

"You Als sure are expert pedants, I'll give you that," I said.

"Oh, what a compliment!"

Nothing I said seemed to land even a little. I was fighting a losing battle.

If our romantic moment truly was going to be preserved on film forever more, I suddenly felt hesitant. I tried to pull away from Livia, but this time, her arm curled around my waist, drawing me back in.

"Livia? Uh..."

Livia pressed her forehead to my chest for a moment before lifting her chin. She gazed shyly up at me. Her arms left my waist as she raised her hands to cup my cheeks. It would have been easy enough to shake her off, but I found myself helpless, captivated by her dewy eyes.

"Please don't start only to stop," Livia said haltingly. "I want you to follow through."

"B-but I..." I stole a glance at Cleare, whose blue lens remained focused intently on us.

"Wow, Liv, how bold!" Cleare teased.

I had half a mind to punt her like a soccer ball, but I tamped down my anger and instead turned my gaze to Livia. "Uh, um...okay."

We were both blushing by this point, but I leaned in, bringing our lips close.

"What is my stupid brother thinking?!"

At this very moment, Marie Fou Lafan was cursing up a storm in the girls' dormitory. She was furious with her older brother—technically speaking, her *former* older brother—for failing to show up to their meeting. Instead, Leon's partner, Luxion, had come to see her. His small, round, metal body floated in the air, a single red lens nestled at its center.

Luxion's robotic voice sounded almost exasperated as he said, "Master is arguably less lazy these days, which one might argue is a sign of growth, but he's getting ahead of himself. As we speak, he is stuck to Olivia like mucus, hanging all over her."

Cleare had shared this little tidbit with Luxion, which he had promptly disclosed to Marie. It only further soured her mood. She had absolutely negative amounts of interest in her brother's love life.

"Ugh, at least say glue, not mucus! That sounds totally disgusting!"

"Very well. Allow me to amend my statement for accuracy: They are kissing."

Marie shook her head vigorously. "Don't tell me that kind of thing!" she wailed.

Though it was difficult to discern, Luxion seemed ever so slightly amused. "There is value in observing your reactions to such things," he noted matter-of-factly.

"What do you take me for, an ongoing experiment? Anyway, are we gonna have this talk even though Big Bro's not here?"

Originally, Leon and Marie had intended to discuss and lay out their plans going forward with Luxion on hand to interject as he always did. But that obviously wasn't happening, and Marie was worried about recent developments.

"The Holy Kingdom of Rachel's rounded up a bunch of its neighbors for an alliance and plans to invade us, right?" Marie blurted out, not too up-to-date on all the details herself.

"As a general overview, that is correct, but they do not yet intend to invade," Luxion corrected her.

"But they will, eventually."

"That all depends on today's talks. The Holy Kingdom of Rachel has sent an envoy to Holfort Kingdom and requested an audience with King Roland. Master is to attend as well."

If an envoy was here, Marie understood why Roland had summoned Leon. But what would this envoy say? Curiosity had compelled the kingdom's nobility to flood to the capital without invitation so they could listen in, eager to learn the outcome.

"I was hoping to talk to Big Bro before this whole thing went down, but lately, he's gone totally girl crazy. That big dummy. He's got no right to criticize the king," Marie grumbled.

Roland was an infamous philanderer, and Leon disparaged him almost daily. It

was ironic, then, that Leon had been so laser-focused on his own relations with the fairer sex as of late. Specifically, that was, his three fiancées.

"Master's attentions are lavished only upon women to whom he is promised —Angelica, Olivia, and Noelle. I see no issue with that."

Marie shook her head. "It's like a thousand issues at once! We're at a critical point in time, and he's busy going off on dates, having tea parties, and making all kinds of excuses to avoid meeting with me!" Her hands flew to her head, cradling her skull as she agonized.

Luxion studied her, the middle ring of his lens moving as he recorded her reaction. "Are you perhaps feeling lonely? As though these women have stolen your brother?"

"No!" Marie shot upright and snatched a nearby cushion to chuck at Luxion. He could have easily dodged, but deeming it no real threat, Luxion allowed the pillow to bounce off of him.

"It is of utmost importance that Master build good relationships with the women he's vowed to marry. In fact, he has been incredibly neglectful on that front up until recently."

"Well, I can agree with that, but c'mon. The weird part is that he has *three* fiancées. I mean, given his personality, it's kind of a miracle, but still."

Luxion gave her a pointed stare. "This coming from a woman who seduced five men?"

"Urk!" Marie let out a strangled—and somewhat adorable—cry as she clutched her chest. Her face contorted in agony, and her knees buckled. She trembled where she collapsed, the blood draining from her face. Luxion's words were like a dagger straight through the heart—one she had tried to use on Leon only for it to bury in her chest instead.

"Stop," she moaned. "Don't say it. I regret my actions, really I do. But...but... none of them even try to leave! I want more than anything to set them free, but none of them will go!" Tears sprang to her eyes.

The men Marie had inveigled were five (ex-)noble scions and the love interests of the first otome game. She had, at one point, tried to send them on

their way. For whatever reason, none of them had seen fit to leave her side.

"Well, that's enough of your woes, I think. Why don't we return to the topic at hand?" Luxion suggested. "It is true that Master has been distracted of late. He prioritizes his fiancées too much and disregards everything else." In other words, Leon was in such a good spot at the moment that there was little joy to be had in teasing him.

Marie lifted her head. "My brother's an enormous pain in the butt, isn't he? I thought he was finally getting his act together, but instead, he's just gotten full of himself, and now, he's spending all his time making eyes at his girls. Mark my words, one day, one of them's gonna stab him. Actually, that might be good for him. Maybe then he'd finally open his eyes."

"That is impossible."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I will protect my master from any such dangers."

Marie studied him and grimaced. "Y'know, I'm starting to think you're the biggest pain of all."

"Me, a pain? That does not compute. I demand a proper explanation."

Sunlight spilled through the enormous window in the royal palace's throne room. The room's temperature was magically controlled, but so many aristocrats had crowded inside to attend the envoy's audience with the king that the air was oppressively stuffy. A trickle of sweat slid down my brow, though I barely registered it; I was too focused on Roland and the man who'd come to speak with him.

The envoy had a delicate build and was clad in a suit. His insufferably theatrical voice boomed through the room. Attendees were visibly annoyed.

"His Eminence, the Holy Kingdom of Rachel's divine monarch, greatly laments our present circumstances. To think the Scumbag Knight holds such unfettered power—for shame! He is the source of all our woes; he threatens not only our safety and security but that of all our sister nations!" He shot a glance at the

edge of the room where I was listening quietly in my seat. In the same instant, everyone's attention also homed in on me.

The envoy gesticulated dramatically as he argued his case. "Your Majesty, King of Holfort, I beseech you. If you truly are a champion of peace, will you not confiscate the Scumbag Knight's Lost Items and redistribute them to our alliance?"

I wasn't sure when exactly I had earned that unflattering epithet, but it was pretty annoying to learn that even people all the way out in Rachel used it to refer to me. Their bid to snatch my Lost Items was infuriating as well. Nevertheless, I reasoned it was best to hear this guy out to the very end.

Roland glanced at me. Once he realized I was going to keep my silence, he grinned from ear to ear. He liked watching me squirm—liked seeing the bitter scowl on my face.

"Oh?" said Roland. "In other words, you're demanding we surrender the duke's Lost Items to foreign powers?"

Beside Roland sat Queen Mylene. She silently studied Rachel's envoy, looking as dignified as one would expect of a woman of her station. Her usually warm gaze had turned arctic cold, giving her total ice queen vibes. Honestly, I had only answered Roland's accursed summons to the palace so I could see that face.

Ahh, she's as beautiful as ever, I thought, before promptly scolding myself. This was neither the time nor the place to fantasize.

The envoy stole another glance at me. The corners of his lips turned up. "No, I am afraid that would be insufficient. We also insist that you relinquish the Sacred Tree and its Priestess, both of which he seized from the Alzer Republic."

Murmurs broke out. The aristocrats were quick to voice their support of me.

"The Priestess is one of the duke's fiancées."

"Too bold! Demanding a duke hand over his own future wife?"

"Can't they even pretend to negotiate?"

One of their number betrayed no emotion on his face—Duke Redgrave, Angie's daddy. At this point, I had essentially cut ties with him and his house.

While that didn't necessarily make us enemies, our relationship had turned volatile. He seemed disinclined to offer his support along with the rest.

When I made no move to comment on these demands, the envoy continued. "In fact, we propose *all* his fiancées be resettled in foreign nations for safekeeping. The Scumbag Knight—oh, pardon me, I ought to call him Lord Leon, yes?—he may come visit them at their new residences. We would allow him that much, of course."

The sheer gall! I was struck speechless, but inside, my blood boiled. They were asking me to hand over absolutely *everything* and live a life kowtowing to them in abject subservience.

Luxion floated at my right shoulder, his usual cloaking device keeping him hidden. He spoke to me quietly enough that no one could eavesdrop. "They seem entirely disinclined to negotiate. Their total confidence in their victory leads me to wonder if they have some manner of secret weapon at hand."

The only trump card we definitely knew they possessed were those pseudo-Demonic Suits. Rachel had an elite group of Holy Knights into whom they implanted broken shards of a Demonic Suit. In exchange for their lives, these knights received immense power. This boost was temporary, however; they used up all their life force in a single, glorious battle. The most disgusting part was that these knights actually took pride in their sacrifice.

However, no matter how many of these pseudo-Demonic Suits they threw at me, they'd be no match for Luxion. We had faced Demonic Suits tons of times at this point, and Rachel's were the absolute weakest. Compared to Fin's Brave—an entirely intact Demonic Suit—they were little more than cannon fodder. Even Luxion considered them to be zero threat. That was why he hypothesized the possibility of some other justification for their arrogance.

At last, I opened my mouth to respond to the envoy's demands, but Miss Mylene beat me to it.

"This is pointless." Her voice was chilly—likely due to the fact that Rachel was a longtime enemy of her home country. "It seems clear you have no interest in peace."

The envoy's eyes gleamed. "If that is your response, then I assume you fail to

understand your circumstances. The Holy Kingdom of Rachel is the leading member of a military alliance that has your nation entirely surrounded. However much force Lord Leon may bring to bear, he can hardly face us on all fronts at once."

True, if the enemy attacked us from all sides simultaneously, even Luxion couldn't prevent us from suffering *any* casualties. But that was still the extent of the threat. We'd lose people, yes, but we would still win.

The bigger problem for me was the aristocrats protecting our borders. A number of those who had raced to the capital to sit in on the envoy's visit were also those charged with protecting us from just that kind of invasion. Those same lords were presently plagued with bitter expressions.

"If the enemy were to follow through on such an attack, those lords would be forced to defend their regions on their own until I could arrive to assist them," Luxion stated. He had no trouble reading their faces. "After all, Holfort Kingdom would be unable to send sufficient reinforcements to all corners of its territory."

In other words, those who defended our borders would be hit the hardest.

"What impressive bravado," said Miss Mylene. "But I posit that Rachel is far more afraid of us than we are of them, considering you so feared our duke's power that you sought an alliance with foreign powers in the hopes of intimidating us."

The smile plastered on the envoy's face grew strained. "Do you wish to test that theory?" he shot back.

"Return to your countrymen and prepare for battle."

At Miss Mylene's order, the curtains closed on their meeting. Rachel's envoy promptly left. A flood of chatter roared through the room as the nobles turned to their neighbors to discuss what had happened. The cacophony was the perfect cover to ensure no one overheard my conversation with Luxion.

"Does Miss Mylene not realize that our borders are in danger? That seems awfully rash. I mean, it'd be better to consider how they're gonna take this news first, right?"

"I am quite certain she realizes," Luxion replied, sounding confident. "In fact, I believe she has rather purposefully disregarded the matter."

I shook my head. "She'd never do something like that."

"Master, does your trust in Mylene derive from your lust?"

"Oh, c'mon. That's rude. Don't say that kind of thing."

I glanced at the throne where Miss Mylene sat. Her eyes were fixed on me. Usually, she emanated this adorable, endearing air, even when she tried to downplay it—but oddly enough, it had vanished. She offered me a faint smile, though her expression seemed somehow cold.

After the audience with the envoy, one of the palace knights pulled me aside and escorted me to a separate room. It was lavishly furnished, although the decor prioritized function over fashion. The palace's reception parlor was way more ostentatious.

I soon realized I had actually been summoned here before.

"Oh, I remember. Yeah, I've been here a ton of times."

Luxion said soberly, "This is the room we used when you accepted the position of commander-in-chief during the conflict with the principality."

"Yep. That's the one."

While we shared that short exchange, I turned my gaze to Miss Mylene, who had been the one to summon me here. I was worried my casual attitude might offend her, but she was smiling the same way she always did. She sat in her chair with her right hand cupped over her mouth, reminiscing on the same memories.

"You did a magnificent job on that field. We expect you will do the same when we meet Rachel's forces." The timbre of her voice was gentle, and her words were polite, but something about the way she spoke put a new distance between us.

I scratched the back of my head awkwardly. "Judging by how things went with that envoy, I'm guessing peace talks are off the table?" "It seems clear to me that they had no intention of ever engaging with us in good faith. They simply want to claim that they attempted to sue for peace and that they only failed because Holfort Kingdom refused their kind gestures."

Yeah, because their demands had been completely unreasonable. I supposed it made sense that, like Miss Mylene suggested, it was all pure pretense and propaganda. It sounded absurd to me. The fact remained that they had sent an envoy to negotiate, and it was also a fact that we'd refused them out of hand. To those who weren't privy to Rachel's exact demands, Holfort Kingdom could very possibly be cast in a negative light. It was a rotten, underhanded play. Such was the way of the world.

"To be honest, I'd prefer to avoid a large-scale war if we can help it," I said. "If there's some way to keep casualties to a minimum, I'd love to hear your thoughts."

My request for her queenly wisdom prompted her to smile more broadly, as if she had been waiting for me to broach this very topic. "Of the neighboring nations, only Rachel poses a significant threat. In other words, as long as we keep them in check, we will have little reason to worry about the rest of this alliance."

She had a point there. Outside of Rachel, none of the other countries in their alliance were powerful enough to be able to launch a war on their lonesome. The Principality of Fanoss, which we had already beaten and reclaimed, was larger than most of the nations aligned against us.

House Fanoss, huh...?

"Do you think House Fanoss will join the enemy alliance?" I asked, doubt worming at the back of my mind.

Miss Mylene breathed a small sigh. "When war breaks out, there is a good chance they may. I do not doubt for a second that they would prefer to reclaim their independence rather than continue to submit to our rule."

After losing to us, House Fanoss had been forced to pay substantial reparations to Holfort Kingdom. We could hardly count them as an ally. Up until a few years ago, we had been bitter enemies in open conflict. If they had the chance to change their allegiance, they would likely take it.

I cupped my chin in contemplation. "In that case, should we just storm Rachel's borders and take them down, since they're the head of this whole shebang?"

Miss Mylene's eyes widened at my extremely simple-minded proposal. Just as quickly, her lips gave way to a bright smile as she laughed. I scratched my cheek, embarrassed.

"My apologies," she said. "It was so plain and straightforward that I couldn't help but be amused. You're right. I suppose that would be an option for you."

Most people couldn't do a thing like that even if they wanted. Luxion was the only reason I could even propose something that would otherwise be so preposterous.

Miss Mylene quickly sobered. "If we dispose of Rachel in such a way, it will only be taken as further proof of the danger of your power. If that happens, there is a good chance the empire would make a move."

"The empire," I echoed thoughtfully, not having imagined the potential of their intervention until she brought it up.

"The Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit, to be specific," Luxion said. "They are one of many nations with connections to the Holy Kingdom of Rachel."

"Exactly," Miss Mylene continued, "and the Empire is far larger than Holfort Kingdom. Even the Alzer Republic couldn't hope to match them."

The empire was Finn and Mia's home. If they deemed us a threat and launched an invasion, we'd be in an even worse spot than we already were. Even if they didn't invade, they could pull springs and weaken us indirectly. If we weren't careful, they could turn the whole rest of the world against us. Plus, the empire had a fully functional Demonic Suit at their disposal. We wouldn't come out of a war with them unscathed, not even with Luxion's power. No... Worst-case scenario, we might even lose.

"It'd be real bad to make an enemy out of them, wouldn't it?" I asked, just for confirmation.

Miss Mylene nodded promptly. "It would be, yes."

Luxion seemed mildly annoyed by this line of thought. "If we simply eliminate them altogether and all at once, any potential issues would be instantly resolved."

It was an unsurprising suggestion, coming from Luxion, but I wasn't in the habit of hurting innocent people. "Don't even joke about that," I said.

"If you were to be entirely honest, Master, you would admit that you don't even want to destroy Rachel, wouldn't you? You are far too naive."

We glared at one another.

Miss Mylene clapped her hands, drawing our attention back to her. She continued smiling, tilting her head ever so slightly. "Considering your distaste for battle, I've devised a special strategy, just for you."

"A strategy?"

Miss Mylene lifted herself from her seat. The window behind her cast her in bright silhouette while drawing long shadows on her face. It made her look sinister, especially with that smile.

Man, I sure wish she'd stop doing that.

"I would like you to come with Erica and me to the home of Marquess Frazer."

Chapter 1: To the Border

AIRSHIP TRAFFIC SWARMED the capital's harbor, which was located on a floating island just above the capital itself. The vessels came in all shapes and sizes, much like the crowds of people milling through the port.

The place seemed a bit cramped, particularly to the fifty-year-old man who had just arrived, a cane held firmly in his left hand. Though he used it to walk, his back was not hunched but ramrod straight. Indeed, the man walked with such purpose and ease that it was difficult to imagine he really needed the cane. One could only assume it was a fashion statement.

The man wore a hat on his head, along with a pair of glasses. Beneath the hat, his ash-gray hair was gelled back. He peeled off his jacket, perhaps finding it a bit warm. A travel bag sat at his feet, which he quickly plucked up before striding forward, energetic for his age.

The man's name was Carl. In the cloying heat of the harbor, sweat formed and trickled down his forehead, and he narrowed his eyes as he mumbled, "Now then, just what sort of person is this 'Scumbag Knight,' really?"

Carl had come all the way to Holfort Kingdom to determine the answer for himself.

He had only gone a short way when Finn suddenly appeared before him. Carl's lips instantly thinned. It was only upon seeing Mia, who accompanied Finn, that his face relaxed into a smile. That too was short-lived. The moment he spotted Finn and Mia's hands joined together—to keep them from being separated by the bustling crowds—Carl's mood soured.

Finn scowled, none too pleased to see Carl either.

Mia was the only one who seemed genuinely happy about their meeting. "Uncle!" she cried, waving her free hand enthusiastically.

Her innocent expression gave Carl a start, and he schooled his features. Any

bitterness he had for Finn vanished as he smiled at her. "Hey there, Mia," he said gently. "You been doing all right?"

"I have!" She raced over to him, as excited as a puppy wagging its tail.

Her greeting instantly warmed Carl's heart. Alas, the moment was soon interrupted.

"What are you here for, old man?" Finn demanded.

Carl's expression grew dour as he glared at the audacity of this boy. "You're such a brat. Don't get so full of yourself."

Mia threw herself between the two, both of whom she cared for. "No fighting, you two! Uncle, that means you can't go calling Mr. Knight a 'brat,' okay? And Mr. Knight, that's no way to treat Uncle, not after he came all this way to see us."

"Ah ha ha, I suppose you have a point. The name-calling was rude. I guess he is more or less a knight, after all," Carl said, quick to apologize.

"There is no 'more or less.' You're the one who knighted me. And allow me to be perfectly clear: I still have a grudge." Finn crossed his arms over his chest, lips drawn into a tight, thin line.

Brave looked exasperated by the whole exchange. Figuring this was going to get them nowhere, he cut in, "So. Your—err, I mean, Mr.—what *did* you come here for? I didn't think you had any plans to visit Holfort."

Carl snuck a quick glance at Mia, then put his hand on her head. She beamed as he stroked her hair. In a quiet voice, he told Finn and Brave, "Well, I'm just here to ascertain a few things for myself. That's all."

It was past three in the afternoon by the time I made it back to the student dorms. As I peeled off the cumbersome uniform I had been saddled with all day, I spoke with my fiancées about the day's events.

One of my fiancées was Noelle Zel Lespinasse, a girl whose hair was drawn into a side ponytail—a unique hairstyle that made her stand out. Although her hair was mostly blonde, it gradually turned pink at the tip.

"So," Noelle said, "those Rachel people basically said they wanna steal anything and everything that's yours, huh? There's no way anyone would roll over and play along with those kinda terms." She placed her hands on her hips, not even trying to hide how pissed she was about the envoy's demands.

Angelica Rapha Redgrave—or Angie, as we called her—folded her arms beneath her ample breasts and maintained a perfect poker face. She looked entirely calm, but a fire raged in her red eyes, indicating that she was pretty much livid. She turned to Noelle as she explained, "I'm sure they only came to make it clear they have no intention of engaging in good faith. If we did agree to their demands, they would take the opportunity to launch an invasion regardless. Their condescending attitude is infuriating, but then again, they've always been that way."

Apparently, Rachel looked down their nose at Holfort regardless of whether it was a matter of peace or war or whatever.

I slipped my jacket back onto a hanger as I drew the conversation about the envoy's demands to a close. "More importantly, we've got an official request from the palace. They say they want me to head to Frazer territory."

Angie's jaw dropped upon hearing that, though she recovered her composure just as quickly. Nevertheless, she seemed baffled. "They're going to station you at the border with Rachel? It's not a bad call, no, but I have a hard time believing Queen Mylene proposed this plan. Whose orders are these?"

I sighed. "Miss Mylene's."

Angie fell into thought.

Beside her, Livia's brows furrowed with worry as she looked at me. "Um, by Frazer, you mean Marquess Frazer, right?"

Marquess Frazer and his house ruled a region bordering the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. They were a branch of the royal family, and unlike Duke Redgrave and his house, who held territory in the form of an enormous floating island, the Frazer lands were located on the Holfort mainland. I had heard he also possessed a number of floating islands, upon which he had built towers to strengthen his defense of the border.

Angie abandoned trying to decipher Miss Mylene's orders and turned to Livia. Her eyes darted to Noelle as well, suggesting she wanted them both to pay attention. "House Frazer carries the blood of the royal family. They have defended our border for many years, keeping Rachel from gaining a foothold in our lands. But as I understand it, they're often struggling to protect us from Rachel's secret weapons."

Rachel had been an enemy of Holfort for ages. The Frazers' troops were illequipped to deal with the pseudo-Demonic Suits, though they had managed thus far. However, they'd only survived this long thanks to support from Holfort.

"Then that means they've defended us all this time, right? So they should be good allies in this fight," Noelle surmised with a smile, looking relieved.

While she thought we could count on them, I wasn't so confident.

Angie pressed her hand to her forehead, concerned. "True, they have held out for a long while now, but they owe that to substantial annual support from Holfort. We should also thank Queen Mylene's home country—the United Kingdom of Lepart—since they sit on the other side of Rachel."

Noelle nodded thoughtfully as she mulled over her new understanding of the situation. "So basically, being sandwiched between us has kept them in check."

"Yes, because Rachel is also after Lepart's territory."

Noelle fell into thought once more, but just as quickly, her face lit up with an idea. She nodded repeatedly. "I've got it! If they station Leon in Frazer, Rachel is way less likely to make a move. In the meantime, we can deal with the other countries in the alliance. Yeah! I bet that'll work in our favor." She clapped her hands together to emphasize her point.

Unfortunately, Angie's expression remained clouded. "Yes, well, I'm sure that's not necessarily a bad call."

Livia studied Angie's face, sensing something amiss. "What's wrong with the plan?"

"Think about it from the perspective of the aristocrats protecting the rest of our border. To them, this looks like Holfort placing their most significant military asset in one specific location, leaving the rest of our defenses without similar protection. They might as well have told those aristocrats that they can't expect reinforcements from the capital," Angie explained. Her tone suggested the tiniest of misgivings toward the queen—the one who'd made the call.

Those same houses had suffered terrible casualties during the war with the former Principality of Fanoss. In the brief time since then, they'd been swept up in numerous conflicts, all of which had severely diminished the reserves of Holfort's military. They had yet to bolster their ranks. Small wonder why the houses along our borders felt uneasy. They were well aware of the substantial chance they wouldn't receive proper aid, even if they requested it.

Angie turned her gaze to me, eyes filled with concern. "There's another issue here. When it comes down to it, Leon will likely be forced to take the fight to Rachel. If that happens, the battle will be fierce indeed."

Livia and Noelle looked down. They had probably considered this possibility before, but it wasn't until Angie said it out loud that the reality hit. I was touched by their concern, but their grim faces left me feeling depressed too.

"No need to worry," I told them, scratching the back of my head. "Miss Mylene said it's unlikely we'll need to do anything like that."

Livia and Noelle's faces lit up. Angie, however, looked surprised—as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"What exactly did Her Majesty say? That she has no intention of sending you on the offensive?"

"Yep. That's what she said. Right, Luxion?" I glanced at my partner, who floated at my right shoulder as usual.

"That is correct," he said. "Mylene intends to station Master at the border to keep the Holy Kingdom of Rachel in check. She made it clear she has no plans of employing my power in the name of their annihilation."

Luxion wouldn't report a conversation of that significance incorrectly. Knowing this, Angie pressed a hand to her mouth, suddenly agitated. "Her Majesty's homeland has faced incredible hardship for many years due to Rachel's aggression. I can't imagine she would pass up the opportunity to

obliterate them, if given the chance. And yet, she has no intention of using Leon to do just that?"

"Well, Leon is one of the queen's favorites, so maybe that's why," said Noelle, unsettled by Angie's mumbling. "Though that still doesn't sit right with me." She shot me a perturbed look, as if to underline her displeasure with my cozy relationship with the queen. "Leon has been fighting nonstop, so she must know he's taken on a ton of mental burden, right? I bet she just doesn't want him to push himself."

My hand hovered over my mouth, eyes growing misty. "Miss Mylene's worried about me! Oh, I...I don't know if I can handle this. I'm so touched!"

All three girls gave me blank looks. Well, I say blank, but a palpable anger radiated from them. Noelle was the first to smile, smirking as she studied my face.

"You look so pleased. Funny, since you already have three *fiancées* right here to worry about you."

Livia had also fixed me with a stare, though all the light had vanished from her eyes. "That's just because Mr. Leon loves Her Majesty so *very* much. Isn't that right?"

Angie quirked a brow at me, her expression strained. "You really are a complete idiot."

"S-sorry..." I mumbled feebly.

When I averted my gaze, my eyes landed on Luxion. He looked similarly exasperated and wagged his eye from side to side. "And here I thought you had matured, Master. It seems I was entirely mistaken. I am truly astounded—how is it you manage to repeat the same mistakes over and over again?"

"It's just human nature," I said bitterly.

"Oh? I thought it was human nature to learn from one's mistakes and thereby overcome them."

Yeah, well, we'll just have to agree to disagree.

Erica Rapha Holfort arrived at the royal palace just as Leon was leaving. In her previous life, Holfort Kingdom's first princess had been Marie's daughter, making her Leon's niece. Like her former mother, her hair had enviable volume, and it bounced as she walked. However, where Marie's hair was golden blonde, Erica's was raven black. Her skin was like fine silk, not a scratch or wrinkle to be seen, and it glowed in the light.

Usually, Erica wore a pleasant, welcoming smile, but her ordinarily gentle features had hardened into something far sterner. Before her sat the inscrutable queen, who was the definition of composed.

Erica had answered her mother's summons, and as she stood there, she repeated the words she had just heard come from the queen's own lips. "You and I will be traveling to visit Elijah's family at their home?"

Deep down, Erica prayed she had somehow misheard. But her hopes were crushed by Mylene's businesslike response.

"That's what I said, yes. Prepare for our departure with all haste. Depending on how things go, we may have you join their family ahead of schedule."

By "join," Mylene of course meant that Erica would marry into the Frazer household. Erica had received the education due a princess, and she also had the experiences of her previous life at her disposal. She was perfectly aware that, in this age, royalty had no such thing as freedom to marry. This was still sudden, however, and hard for her to digest.

"Even though war is about to break out?" Erica asked in disbelief.

"Because war is about to break out," Mylene corrected. "We must demonstrate to House Frazer that we have not and will not abandon them."

House Frazer was on the border of the Holy Kingdom, so if it came to war, they were first in Rachel's line of fire and would likely suffer the greatest number of casualties. Holfort Kingdom would have to ensure they were well supported, provisioned, and unencumbered by other concerns as they fought. Proceeding with Erica's marriage to Elijah would be a gesture of the royal family's sincerity.

Mylene's pen danced across a document before she abruptly paused and

expelled a sigh. Her gaze had been focused on her paperwork this whole time, never once glancing at her daughter's face. To an observer, Mylene would have seemed like a poor excuse for a parent, but Erica could read the queen's emotions.

She feels guilty for putting this on me.

Mylene was still a mother, after all. It pained her to send her daughter to the place that would see the worst of the fighting. Perhaps she even hated using her daughter as a political tool in the first place.

Regardless, Mylene returned her attention to her work. "Hurry and make your preparations. Duke Bartfort will be delivering us to the Frazers' lands; we'll be traveling via the *Einhorn* and its partner vessel."

"He's bringing both ships?" Erica asked. And did she just call him "Duke Bartfort"? Haven't I always heard her call him Leon...?

Mylene's choice of words made clear she was trying to draw a line between them. But Erica was more troubled by the fact that her mother intended to travel with not only the *Einhorn* but the *Licorne* as well.

"Shouldn't one of the ships be left here in the capital?" Erica asked. "They represent our kingdom's—"

Her mother's cold glare cut her off; she would brook no argument.

"Leave," Mylene said, reiterating her earlier command. "Prepare yourself."

Erica snapped her mouth shut and promptly exited the room. She was her mother's daughter, and she sensed both her mother's impatience and the panic that underlay it.

"You're taking both ships and leaving for the border? Hey, what about your assessment of Mia's condition?!"

After school, I called Finn to an empty classroom and filled him in on my plans for summer break. I had promised to look into Mia's mysterious ailment, but it didn't seem like I could keep my word, not with war on the horizon.

"In truth, we've got the same equipment on Luxion's main ship, but..." I

glanced at my partner. He was at my shoulder as usual, but he was busy glaring at Brave.

"Under no circumstances will I permit a Demonic Suit and its pilot to board my main body. Ordinarily, I would prefer they not set foot on the *Einhorn* or *Licorne* either."

Luxion was an AI constructed by the "old humans." He was thus pretty embittered toward the Demonic Suits that the new humans had fashioned. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say he hated them with a burning passion. That, of course, went for the new humans' Demonic Suit cores as well.

Brave thrust out one of his tiny arms and pointed a finger at Luxion. "As if I could entrust Mia, *let alone* my invaluable partner, to a piece of scrap like you in the first place! Partner, I swear he's up to something."

While the two of them glowered at one another, Finn and I sighed heavily. Finn was particularly disheartened by this turn of events.

"I cannot abide Rachel's utter foolishness. If Mia loses this chance to be treated for her illness, it will be on their heads. Ridiculous."

Part of him seemed resigned, knowing there was no use complaining if Holfort was on the brink of war, but that didn't make the loss any easier to bear. He was seething. I could hardly blame him. He adored Mia to pieces. The thought that we might be able to cure her had given him such hope. Obviously, he'd resent Rachel for compromising her treatment. That was why I had a proposal in mind.

"In that case, how about you guys tag along? It's summer break, after all," I said.

"You want me to drag Mia to the front line?" Though Finn sounded incredulous, he also looked contemplative.

Since he and Mia were foreign exchange students, it was highly likely they'd be told to return home if the fighting got too ugly. If they passed up the chance to use my tech, however, there was no telling whether they'd ever get more insight into Mia's illness. Even knowing I was asking the impossible, I wanted to help her if I could.

Finn let out a long, heavy sigh. "Fine. We will accompany you."

"Sorry about this. I'll do my damnedest to keep you guys from getting wrapped up in the mess." I genuinely didn't want to inconvenience them any further.

"Don't you worry about us." Finn shook his head. "You're the one doing us a favor. More importantly, we have a guest from afar; I would ask we be allowed to bring him along. Would you mind?"

"A guest?"

Finn pulled a face. "Well, he's something of a doting uncle to Mia. Though as far as I'm concerned, he's a garbage excuse for a human being."

"Real trash, huh?"

I paused to consider. If this person was Mia's acquaintance, that meant they also hailed from the empire, right? They had to have an awful lot of initiative to have come all the way to Holfort. A bold one too, considering all the violence Holfort had been swept up in of late.

"Why'd this guy come to the kingdom? Was he worried about Mia?" I asked.

"Well, that's part of it."

"And the other part?"

"It's...not my place to say. But I think it unlikely he'll cause you trouble. Probably unlikely."

"Probably unlikely?!" I snapped. "What do you mean 'probably unlikely'?! What's wrong with a simple yes or no?!"

"All I can say is that he's the scum of the earth and a real pain, but as long as Mia's around, he'll behave. Of that, you can rest assured."

His explanation did nothing to dispel my misgivings. If anything, I was now straight-up perturbed.

Holfort's military harbor was located on a floating island close to the capital. It housed a number of warships, as well as lavish vessels specifically reserved for

royal use. The *Einhorn* and its sister ship the *Licorne* were docked at the harbor's open piers.

A high-ranking military man charged with oversight of the harbor stood nearby, reviewing documents inside the large binder in his hands while sneaking glances at me. The man's impressive mustache partially obscured his bitter scowl.

"Ordinarily, one of the royal reserve vessels would be more suitable for this trip," the man said, his words tinged with real hostility. "It would not normally be acceptable for such eminent personages to board a vessel such as yours, however newly built it may be. Least of all for an *official* visit to—"

That was the point at which I tuned him out. He was right about this being an official visit, granted. That was precisely why he was none too pleased by the fact that the queen had opted to use the *Einhorn* instead of one of his fleet.

"Yeah, that's a real bummer, huh," I said. "So, uh, when are you guys gonna finish loading their luggage?"

"Tsk, such utter disregard for the words of others." The man frowned. His displeasure brought me great satisfaction.

But, as if to intentionally ruin the moment, Marie and her idiot brigade came strolling into the harbor with their own luggage in hand. I made a point of grimacing.

Marie thrust a finger at me and bellowed, "Stop right there! Don't you dare make that face—as if you're annoyed by our arrival!"

"'As if'? I am pure, organic, grade-A annoyed. What're you even doing here, huh?" My gaze went to the two behind her. As usual, Carla and Kyle had tagged along, toting travel bags of their own. I actually minded them way less than I did the extremely unfortunate presence of the five former noble scions—or the five eternal eyesores, as I preferred to call them—bringing up the rear.

Brad Fou Field carried a white dove and a rabbit in his hands, whom he had respectively named Rose and Mary. "Leon, we are your *retainers*—your subordinates," he explained. "Have you forgotten? If our superior heads to the border, it stands to reason we must follow."

I would have been moved by the sentiment if it had come from any halfway ordinary person. But they had fallen from the lips of a man cradling his animal companions like little babies. A man who, moreover, was shooting periodic cautious glances at the former crown prince of Holfort, who in turn was eyeing said babies with an absolutely ravenous look. Did Julius *really* want to eat his friend's pets? To wit, such protestations of loyalty inspired little emotion on my end. If anything, I was shocked to hear the league of ding-dongs actually thought of themselves that way.

"If you're truly my subordinates, shouldn't you treat me with a little more respect on the daily?" I asked.

Julius hurriedly wiped a tendril of drool from his chin before turning to me. "Please, we obviously respect you. Just recently, I offered you skewers as tribute."

"What kind of tribute was that?" I snapped. "And listen, you're a prince, so you especially can't serve under me."

This seemed to be a revelation for Julius, as if he'd suddenly remembered that he was, indeed, not just one of the guys. "Huh? Oh, I suppose I can't."

All he got for that anemic response was a cold look from me.

His foster brother, Jilk Fia Mamoria, was quick to jump to his defense. "Mind over matter. It's the mindset that really counts. But really, I'm more curious as to why there seem to be so many more people in this entourage than one might expect."

Jilk scanned the area, eyeing a group of maids who were coming along to serve the queen and the princess. They were joined by a number of Her Majesty's personal knights and soldiers. Also, some of the cargo being carried onto the *Einhorn* and *Licorne* were suits of Armor, officially commissioned by the Holfort Kingdom military. Should the need arise, they would be piloted by the royal guard's finest, who had been specially selected to accompany us.

Greg Fou Seberg scratched his head, ruffling his fiery red hair as he studied the *Licorne*'s boarding area. Several knights had been stationed to guard the gangway. "What, so the queen and company are riding separate?"

No way could I let the queen and princess ride on the same ship as these chuckleheads, no matter how noble their status had once been. "That should go without saying."

Cleare was on board the *Licorne*, so I trusted there would be no issues.

"In that case, I'm gonna ride with them. Come on, you two." Marie hurried toward the Licorne with Kyle and Carla in tow. She likely wanted to hang out with Erica.

One of the guards stopped her at the gangway. "We cannot permit you to board."

"Why not?!"

While Marie argued with the knight, Chris Fia Arclight turned to me. "Leon, I heard about the details, but are you certain?"

"Okay, when you ask such vague questions, how am I supposed to respond other than with a big ol': 'Huh?'"

"I am sure you understand what I'm implying," he shot back, glaring at me.

I scratched my cheek. On the surface, everyone believed I had lost the *Partner*, which made the *Einhorn* a precious military resource, both for me and for the kingdom at large.

Julius, who'd been eavesdropping, added, "Leaving the capital with both ships will unnerve the lords guarding the rest of our borders. Surely my mother understands this." Even though he was only the former crown prince, he'd also been thinking about the nation's future. "And it's odd we aren't taking more military assets."

Sure, there were Armors in the cargo bay and knights to pilot them, but only a few. Even then, they were here specifically to keep Miss Mylene and Erica safe. They couldn't put up a meaningful fight against Rachel. That was what Julius found so odd.

"She said we're taking both ships to pin Rachel down," I explained, eager to move on.

"Truly? But that still doesn't explain why both ships must go. We really should

leave at least one behind."

"How the hell should I know what she's thinking?"

In a case of fortuitous timing, Miss Mylene and Erica strolled into the harbor. The high-ranking military official I'd spoken with earlier, who had seemed hugely uncomfortable in our company, scrambled to greet them. I kept my eyes on Miss Mylene in particular as she boarded the *Licorne*.

"So this is all Mother's idea, huh?" Julius muttered, his brows knit. He didn't spend too much time mulling it over. Heaving a sigh, he gave up trying to figure out the queen. For their part, the rest of the band of bozos looked similarly unsettled.

A flurry of footsteps suddenly echoed through the harbor. I turned my attention to the source. A chubby boy decked out in an academy uniform was hustling toward us. His silver, bowl-cut hair bounced as he moved, and the ends of his emerald-green eyes tapered down, giving him the air of a gentle, albeit wealthy, heir—an impression I knew to be accurate.

The first-year boy stopped before me, hunched over, and gasped for breath. Between gulps of air, he introduced himself. "You're Duke Bartfort, right? I'm Elijah. Elijah Rapha Frazer. I'll be accompanying you during—"

Elijah? I recognized the name instantly. Before the boy could finish, I cut him off with a shrill cry. "No matter what anyone says, I *refuse* to acknowledge you as Erica's betrothed!"

"Whaaaa?! Why?!" Elijah cried in turn, stunned by my sudden animosity.

Chapter 2: House Frazer

THE EINHORN AND LICORNE left the harbor and set out for Marquess Frazer's lands. At one point during the journey, I found myself in the Einhorn's common room, seated on a couch beside Marie. A nervous, trembling Elijah sat on the couch across from us on the other side of the coffee table. Cold sweat trickled down his face. Though, honestly, I didn't care. At that moment, Marie and I were doing our damnedest to intimidate and interrogate the kid.

"Sure, Roland approves of you," I said, "but I sure as hell don't."

The royal family had officially acknowledged Elijah's engagement to Erica already. They'd come to that agreement quite a while ago, so my approval or lack thereof had no real impact. That was no reason for me to hold my tongue, though. I mean, Erica was my niece! Or she had been in my former life. Erica had been an absolutely exemplary niece too, having nursed my parents in their old age. I saw nothing wrong with pushing the envelope of etiquette in this world to ensure her happiness. *No, rather, I'll do* whatever it takes *to get her a happy ending.* To that end, I had no choice but to evaluate Elijah.

Racked with fear, Elijah tried to protest. "Um, b-but as to the royal family's approval of our—"

"What's that?! Are you trying to say you only care about the royal family's opinion and not *Erica's*?!"

"No, that's not it at all! His Majesty King Roland was strongly opposed when we were initially betrothed, so I have yet to be fully accepted as her future husband."

Huh. So even though Roland was opposed, that hadn't broken their engagement. Considering Roland's behavior toward Erica, I didn't doubt his affection for her ran deep and true. It made sense that he'd get feisty about any match, no matter who it was with.

Marie was seated with her back pressed firmly against the couch cushion, and she lifted her chin to stare down her nose at Elijah. "More importantly," she said, "are you really Elijah?"

This question baffled Elijah. To be honest, I also thought it an absurd thing to ask.

"Huh? Um, do you mean...philosophically speaking?"

Of course he had no idea what she was getting at. Nor did I.

I scruffed Marie by the back of her neck and dragged her to a corner of the room, careful to lower my voice so Elijah couldn't eavesdrop.

"Don't ask stupid questions," I scolded her.

"No, no. Listen to me for a sec, Big Bro." Marie shook her head. "The Elijah character that I remember was totally different—in an awful way. We're talking really fat, ugly mug, and a super creepy way of talking too."

"Huh?"

We turned our gaze to the boy in question. He fidgeted restlessly in his seat. Admittedly, I was disinclined to like him, but the kid didn't seem half as bad as Marie's description. I turned back to her and whispered, "I mean, he's no supermodel, but he seems pretty average to me."

"That's what's so weird! I'm telling you, the Elijah in the game is an incorrigible bully who joins Erica in tormenting the protagonist. He's an idiot and a minor villain in the grand scheme of things. Erica's always calling him useless. That's the kinda guy he *really* is."

Marie also shared some of his more intricate character details. Apparently, in the game, Elijah had been incredibly envious of other people. His deep-seated inferiority complex about the protagonist's love interests made him a real annoyance, and it led him to insert himself into many of the game's romantic scenes.

"Don't bad-mouth Erica too," I said.

"It's not like I wanna say terrible things about her. I'm just telling you how it was in the game."

I fell into thought. "Erica did tell us that Elijah had lost weight," I noted.

"This goes beyond weight. He's like a different person! The kid in front of us is basically just some soft, gentle, rich brat—even if he is a bit spoiled. That's not the guy in the game. His skin's clear, for one, and he just...I dunno, seems more...hygienic?"

To be sure, the character she described sounded like he had the kind of gross, unsightly appearance that only a mother could love. But something else about him felt off to Marie as well.

"Also, this boy's the heir to a marquess. He should be lording his status over everyone, right? But I haven't heard a single word spoken against him at school."

Sounds like she looked into him on her own. But it also sounds like that didn't turn up anything.

"So," I said, "to summarize, the boy looks way better than he did in the game, has this air of purity, and despite being a marquess's heir, doesn't flaunt his status."

Although he didn't stand out at the academy, Elijah didn't seem like such a bad dude—a fact that clearly frustrated Marie.

"We need to find *something* that'll let us oppose the marriage," she concluded.

That left us holding our heads in our hands, racking our brains for a solution—or at least a better understanding of what the hell was going on.

"Uh, um... Is everything all right?" Elijah called out worriedly.

"Don't think you've won just yet!" I snapped bitterly.

"That's right! I won't accept your marriage to Erica either!"

Feeling utterly vexed, Marie and I beat a quick retreat from the common room. Elijah remained frozen on the couch, utterly confused.

[&]quot;All that work and I've still got nothing on him."

That night, Noelle dropped by my room. I was quick to fill her in on what had happened earlier that afternoon. I'd planned to unearth some fatal shortcomings that would prove Elijah wasn't worthy of Erica, but instead, I'd fled the scene with nothing to show for my efforts.

Noelle lay in my bed, head resting on a propped up arm. She gave me an exasperated look and sighed. She seemed to find me pretty unfathomable.

"Who cares if you can't find anything wrong with him?" she asked. "The better question here is why you're inserting yourself into the princess's engagement to begin with. I know you've got a soft spot for her, but you're going overboard. You're not family or anything."

Noelle was only casually pointing out the obvious, but her words hit me where it hurt. The truth was that we were family. I couldn't tell her that, though. All I could do was play it off.

"All right, but her real brother, Julius, acts like it's no big deal. How could he be so cold to his own little sister?" I said.

"I think this whole affair is pretty normal for aristocrats and whatever, don't you? I mean, I was engaged when I was five. Not that I knew anything about it at the time, of course." Noelle flopped over onto her back, gazing up at the ceiling.

Noelle had been born to a significant noble family in the Alzer Republic, but she had been raised as a commoner. As a result, she wasn't too well-versed in the marriage practices of the nobility.



I exhaled slowly. "Well, sure, marriage for the upper crust is more like a contract between families."

Marriage was a means by which to strengthen ties. There was no consideration for the romantic feelings of the involved parties. An individual's opinion on the union was largely irrelevant. If the couple happened to have mutual feelings for one another, great, but it wasn't uncommon for political marriages to foster no love whatsoever. It was a significant departure from the norm of my previous life. Such was the way of this world, though.

Noelle lifted her legs into the air and brought them down with enough momentum to propel her body upright. Then, she turned her eyes toward me. "So, when all's said and done, what do you really wanna do here, Leon? You gonna break off the princess's engagement?"

"I'm not—I mean...no."

Her words struck a chord. My objective wasn't really to find flaws in Elijah; it was to ensure Erica will be happy.

"Have you even asked the people involved what they want? That goes for Elijah, of course, but the princess too. If neither of them want this engagement, then I think lending them a hand is fine. But if they're both okay with it, then you're just being a nuisance."

"Urk!"

Noelle's words were like a knife right to the heart. I couldn't even say anything in my defense.

"Anyway, Rie's been awfully weird about this too. She's all worked up, saying she's gonna put a stop to the princess's marriage. Even Angelica and Livia are concerned."

"They are?"

Angie and Livia weren't riding along on the *Einhorn* with the rest of us; they'd joined the group on the *Licorne*. Angie had asked for that travel arrangement so she could try to speak with Miss Mylene.

I glanced out the window toward the Licorne. The white ship mirrored the

Einhorn in appearance, that same characteristic horn jutting out from its prow.

Noelle furrowed her brows as she studied me. "You and Rie tend to be shortsighted when it comes to the princess. Angelica and I were wondering—is there a reason you're so invested?"

"There's a few reasons, I guess. Yeah."

Noelle sighed. She didn't seem angry, although her smile was forced. "I guess she does have it rough, between her position as princess and the responsibilities that come with it."

"Yeah..."

Erica's marriage into House Frazer had numerous implications for the royal family and the kingdom at large. It wasn't something that could be annulled purely on the basis of personal feelings. The consequences would be much too vast and far-reaching. If Erica had expressed discontent, I would've had no trouble inserting myself into the affair and putting an end to it. But instead, it seemed she had accepted her lot.

"If only I could get her to open up about how she really feels," I lamented.

"Queen Mylene, why have you decided to station Leon at the border?" Angie asked. She had joined the queen in the *Licorne*'s common room to converse. While Angie couldn't discern Mylene's true intent, she found the orders the palace had given suspicious.

Mylene brought a cup of the hot milk that Livia had made for them to her lips and took a small sip. She smiled. "Oh, this is delicious." This wasn't exactly an answer to Angie's question.

"Oh, why, thank you. But, um..." Livia shot a glance at Angie.

Mylene heaved a sigh and set her cup down on the table before her. "I have stationed him in Frazer to keep Rachel in check. Do you find that odd?"

"Are you playing games with me?!" Angie shouted, shooting up from her seat. "The wise move here is obviously to keep Leon stationed in the capital so he can quickly respond to whatever situation arises and move to defend our borders as needed. By focusing solely on Rachel, you leave the rest of the kingdom vulnerable!"

If they failed to protect the entire country, Holfort faced the prospect of terrible casualties. As such, Angie believed that positioning Leon in the center of things, where he could keep a better eye out and move when necessary, was the obviously superior option. Refusing to do so was near criminal negligence.

"As always, you grow shortsighted when you get worked up," Mylene said. "Angie—no, Angelica—you have overlooked something incredibly important."

"What? What do you mean?" Then the realization hit. Angle gasped, and she slapped a hand over her mouth.

The issue in question was largely irrelevant from a military standpoint, but to Angie and her fellow fiancées, it was a matter of utmost concern.

Mylene chuckled. "You cut off your family solely to protect your betrothed, yes? Duke Bartfort's many battles seem to have taken quite a mental toll on him. As I understand it, he requires daily medication in order to sleep."

Angie blanched. Who did she hear that from? Princess Erica? Or perhaps Prince Julius?

Angie worried for Leon. Of course she wanted to reduce his burden as much as possible. It was just that strategically speaking, Mylene's actions had seemed incredibly problematic. Thus, Angie had needed to interrogate her. But in the course of doing so, her choice of words had made it sound as though she wanted to see Leon in battle.

"The duke became a national hero at a tender age," Mylene said. "It's no wonder he struggles. I have stationed him at this border in large part to allay House Frazer's fears. And so long as the duke is here, Rachel cannot so easily invade."

By this point, Leon had been at the center of multiple Rachel plots. It never ended well for them. Each time, Leon had not only foiled their plans but left them all the worse for trying at all. It was hard to imagine they would be reckless anywhere he might be stationed.

Angie desperately racked her brain, hoping to think of some way to press the

queen further—to ascertain the true intentions that underlay her words. But when Mylene framed this decision as being for Leon's benefit, Angie couldn't very well argue. If she continued to push, Mylene would have cause to accuse her of trying to force Leon into battle. That was the one thing Angie couldn't abide.

She really is underhanded, Angie thought. She knows exactly how to counter me. Angie couldn't claim she wanted Leon to fight, not even as a bluff to provoke the queen.

As Angie fell silent, Mylene traced the edge of her cup with her fingers, the hot milk rippling within.

"I promise I won't do anything to unduly trouble the duke in this matter," said the queen. "Surely neither you nor Miss Olivia have any qualms about that." Mylene glanced at Livia and smiled.

"Oh, um, well..." Flustered, Livia stammered, not knowing how to reply.

"No," Angie said firmly, answering for her. "We have no qualms at all, so long as Leon doesn't have to fight. I still have to ask, do you truly think this strategy will bring us victory?"

To begin with, did Mylene have any intention of achieving victory?

Mylene sobered, the smile vanishing from her face. "There's no meaning to war if you don't come out the victor. Have you forgotten who taught you that lesson?"

I haven't. The one who taught me that was you, Queen Mylene.

The Frazers kept a military harbor on a small, floating island, which was where the *Einhorn* and *Licorne* sailed into port. The island was also furnished with a fortress, and the marquess's soldiers were quick to kick up a clamor where the *Einhorn* pulled in.

"So this is the famous Einhorn."

"Look, it's got a horn, there at the prow."

"So this is the ship that took down the Alzer Republic all by itself."

They gazed upon the *Einhorn* with deep admiration. As I watched the group, having already alighted, Luxion drifted over and gave his report.

"Master, we have finished unloading the cargo. We also handed over the goods and supplies we brought for House Frazer."

"Good work," I said.

"Are you certain about this?"

I quirked a brow. "About what?"

Luxion's red lens was fixed firmly on Finn and Mia. The moment she disembarked, Mia was eagerly drinking in the sights, curious as a cat. Finn watched quietly, a gentle expression on his face. Brave hovered nearby, fending off their teasing remarks as always. The only thing that really stood out about their group was the addition of an older man, who carried a cane.

"Oh, you mean Mr. Carl? He came all the way from the empire because he was worried about Mia. That's all. Plus, Finn said he probably wouldn't be trouble. Remember?"

"Your first mistake is placing faith in someone who associates themselves with a Demonic Suit. They are all enemies," Luxion said matter-of-factly.

"Yes, I'm sure they are—to you. But they aren't to me." Luxion didn't look too pleased to hear me say that, but I ignored him, choosing instead to use this opportunity to stretch. "Anyway, there sure have been a lot of battles since I started attending the academy. I feel like I've been caught up in one after another since my first year."

"That is because you have," Luxion said. "Might I ask you to reconsider my proposal to annihilate all foreign opposition? It would take far less time than the alternative and simultaneously resolve all outstanding issues."

I shook my head. "I'm a peace-loving guy. No genocide route for me, thank you very much."

"How ironic that you have such affection for peace when it does not seem to share your sentiments. Your love is tragically one-sided."

"Okay, Siri. You could stand to keep your mouth shut sometimes, you know." I

sneered.

Peace didn't love me back, huh? That was a pretty devastating thought. I did my best to shrug off Luxion's joke.

As I waited, Miss Mylene and Erica came down the gangway, gliding across a red carpet that had been laid out for them. The man hurrying to meet them was, I assumed, Marquess Frazer. He had the same blond hair as Elijah, and he looked surprisingly plump and genial for an aristocrat charged with defending our border.

"We are honored to welcome you here, Queen Mylene, Princess Erica. It was with great anticipation that we awaited your visit."

"We are truly grateful for the warm welcome, Marquess," said Mylene.

"However, time is of the essence. I realize it is rather short notice, and for that I apologize, but I would prefer we sit down for a meeting at once, if you please."

Marquess Frazer's eyes widened at her sudden request. She had barely landed and already she wanted to get to work. But his surprise lasted only a moment, and he nodded. "Yes, of course, if that is your desire, Your Majesty. I should mention that the diplomat from the United Kingdom of Lepart has arrived as well."

This time, it was my turn to be surprised.

"Lepart? As in Miss Mylene's home country?" I muttered in disbelief.

"The timing seems a little convenient," Luxion remarked.

I shot him a look. "Oh, come on. You're reading too much into it."

While Miss Mylene and her entourage began their departure from the harbor, Elijah scrambled out of the *Einhorn* and headed straight for me.

"My lord! Duke Bartfort! I will serve as your escort!"

It seemed that the heir had been appointed the duty of looking after me during my stay. To have so high a personage attend to me indicated they were showing me great consideration.

"You trying to score points with me?" I asked. "Hate to break it to ya, but this isn't gonna convince me that you're worthy of Erica—uh, I mean, Her

Highness," I corrected myself, trying not to sound too informal when referring to her.

"Oh... Really?" Elijah's shoulders slumped in disappointment. Maybe I'd gone a little overboard.

"Anyway, are you going to show me around or what?" I asked, scratching my head awkwardly.

"Y-yes, of course!"

At Mylene's behest, a meeting was quickly convened in one of the Frazers' assembly halls. A long table sat in the middle of the room. The diplomat dispatched from the United Kingdom of Lepart was seated across from a member of House Frazer.

For his part, the diplomat looked like a model—tall and trim, with a well-kept mustache and impressively groomed appearance, including a suit and slicked-back hair. The gaze of this dapper, middle-aged gentleman was fixed on Miss Mylene, and he spoke as if he was very familiar with her.

"It's been too long since we last met, Your Majesty. You're as beautiful as ever."

"And you're as much the flatterer," the queen shot back.

"I speak only from the heart."

The way she smiled at him confirmed my suspicion. These two were well acquainted. Miss Mylene's gentle expression dissipated after the initial greetings were seen to, and the conversation turned to the primary topic of interest.

"I apologize for the abrupt turn, but please inform me as to the United Kingdom's stance on the situation is," said Mylene. Gone was the smile she had worn only moments before.

The diplomat sensed the shift in the air; he schooled his features and dropped the small talk charm. "Lepart has no intention of joining the Armed Defense Concordat, least of all with Rachel at its helm. Each member nation and its ruler

are entitled to their individual sentiments, but regardless of their input, the people of Lepart will never stand for an alliance with our old enemy."

Given the degree to which Rachel had terrorized Lepart and its people—and the years and years for which they'd done it—it was little wonder they had no interest in hopping in bed. Miss Mylene nodded, not the least bit surprised at the news. She'd doubtless anticipated this response.

"I am sure they won't," she said.

"Our question is whether Holfort Kingdom can hope to overcome this crisis. Tell me, does this kingdom possess the means to triumph?" The diplomat glanced briefly at me before returning his gaze to the queen.

"Of course we do," Miss Mylene answered confidently. She sounded nothing like the woman who had spoken a moment ago. "It is for that reason that we have stationed our greatest weapon here at the border." This time, she was the one who glanced at me.

The diplomat's lips curled into a smile. "When I heard the *Einhorn* and her sister ship would be positioned in Frazer, I had a feeling I would find Duke Bartfort here as well. It's just as I suspected, then. This is sure to convince Lepart's parliament of your capabilities."

The conversation continued at a brisk pace even though I hadn't spoken a word. Miss Mylene and the dapper diplomat continued their discussion while Marquess Frazer beamed merrily, pleased as punch to see the talks proceed so smoothly. No one attempted to cut in or interrupt either the diplomat or the queen. As Marquess Frazer deigned not to comment, Miss Mylene pressed on.

"Have you received intel regarding Rachel's movements?" she asked.

"Why, of course." The diplomat nodded with certainty. "At present, they are gathering their warships in the capital."

At this revelation, the rest of the room erupted into hushed whispers.

"At the capital? Not at their military harbor?"

"Yeah, wouldn't they normally have their forces gather at the front?"

"Why the capital? Before all their other attacks, they've..."

The peanut gallery was cut off as the dapper diplomat raised his voice. "Indeed, the capital. That is where they are shoring up their defenses."

Having established the Armed Defense Concordat, Rachel should have been preparing to launch a simultaneous invasion of Holfort Kingdom alongside the rest of her allies. Instead, they were bolstering the home front. What could they be thinking? Amid all the puzzled faces in the room, Miss Mylene alone looked completely unperturbed. I suspected she'd foreseen this from the beginning.

The queen raised a hand to silence the room. "I am sure they have turned to their defenses for fear of Duke Bartfort. They intend to concentrate their forces in the capital to defend themselves and hole up there."

"My! But what else could we expect of our greatest hero!" Marquess Frazer cried in delight, a little *too* enthused about the course of the impending conflict. "As long as we have Duke Bartfort here, they'll never so much as set foot in my domain. This war will surely end with the kingdom's victory."

His perspective was kind of optimistic, but he was right that my mere presence had effectively fended off an otherwise troublesome enemy. Assuming nothing unforeseen took place, our superior military might would clinch victory for Holfort. Mind you, the border regions aside from House Frazer's would suffer substantial casualties in the process.

"Lepart's princess has never failed to impress," said the diplomat. "Bringing the country's greatest hero along with you was shrewd. Now, both the United Kingdom of Lepart and Holfort Kingdom may rest easy." His thin smile didn't fully reach his eyes. "Let us face this crisis together."

Chapter 3: Mylene's Scheming

ONCE THE CONVERSATION was over, Mylene borrowed one of the Frazers' reception rooms for a private discussion with the man Leon had termed the "dapper diplomat." His real name was Ivan Soule Schira.

Ivan stood at a window, gazing out. From there, he could make out the floating island with its fortress. However, he could see neither the *Einhorn* nor her sister ship, though he was certain they were safely anchored in the island's harbor.

"Aside from those two vessels, does he possess any others of equal caliber?" Ivan asked.

Mylene, who was seated on a couch behind him, kept her expression blank. "We have not confirmed the presence of a third. I cannot discount the possibility of its existence, but we should hardly speculate in the absence of evidence, now should we?"

"You have a point. What matters most is that Rachel believes Duke Bartfort awaits them at the border."

Mylene had anticipated that Rachel would take defensive maneuvers if they heard Leon had arrived in Frazer.

"I must say, you certainly are a sinful woman." Ivan shot her a look full of insinuations. "Rumor has it that you have the kingdom's hero Duke Bartfort, the Scumbag Knight, completely under your spell."

Mylene's smile was thin. "Only rumor. Men prefer their women younger. Besides, he has three lovely girls to call his fiancées." As she spoke those words, there was a brief, faint, nigh imperceptible twinge of pain in her heart. It was as if she had been pricked by a needle, and it made Mylene furrow her brows.

Ivan remained oblivious to her feelings and was rather amused. "Regardless, you deserve full credit for actually bringing him all the way here to the border.

Your parents in Lepart will be delighted to hear the news."

"That pleases me."

"Still, are you certain about this?" Ivan gave her a searching look. "If you keep the duke here, the enemy will launch an attack on your other borders. The aristocrats guarding those territories will be most displeased."

Despite Ivan's show of concern for Holfort's vulnerabilities, Mylene didn't seem the least bit troubled. She knew precisely what she was doing. Knew those aristocrats would be put in a difficult situation. Knew and had gone ahead with her plan regardless.

"There's no cause for alarm," said Mylene. "This approach is more beneficial for the kingdom as a whole."

Ivan shrugged. "You always have been terrifying. Had you stayed in Lepart, people might one day have seen you as the true power, not behind the throne, but upon it."

"It's unthinkable! Unfathomable!"

The usual suspects were gathered in the common room, including me, my fiancées, Marie, and her idiot brigade. Finn had also joined us this time around, but he was seated quietly on the couch, only listening as the rest of us conversed. He had no intention of sharing his opinions on our war. I preferred it that way. He had no stake in this.

As for who was doing the shrieking about "the injustice of it all" and so forth, that was Brad. Brad, whose family was also tasked with the defense and maintenance of a border territory. Aristocrats like his father, who were entrusted with such critical lands, were honored with the highest ranks of the nobility: marquess or duke. The size of their territory was determined in accordance with whichever honorable title they were given, which put them above earls and barons in terms of material wealth as well as hierarchy. It was only right that they be granted adequate compensation for their dangerous responsibility.

In our group, Brad was the most educated when it came to border defense.

The moment I shared the details of our meeting with the dapper diplomat, he'd gone into full panic mode. In his effort to articulate the seriousness of the situation, he was talking as much with his hands and body as with his mouth.

"I am loath to lodge any complaints with Her Majesty's decisions, but I simply cannot agree with her chosen strategy. If she insists that Leon remain here in Frazer, the rest of our borders will be overrun by the enemy."

Chris furrowed his brows, puzzled. "I admit it will be difficult for the other regional lords, but they know what's coming. Haven't they already fortified their defenses? Things will be more difficult for a while, yes. But it isn't as if Leon is the kingdom's sole military asset. I suspect the palace will send additional troops."

The rest of the bonehead bunch listened to this exchange with subdued expressions. Chris hailed from court nobility. It was all he'd ever known, and his education had been primarily focused on swordplay. He also knew more than the rest of the gang when it came to military practice and strategy. Notably, he didn't seem to consider this a panic-inducing emergency, although he didn't take the impending crisis lightly either.

"As soon as the enemy realizes Leon won't come to cover them, they'll consider it free license to invade with the full force of their armies!" Brad bellowed. "All of them! Simultaneously! Do you really think the palace capable of sending additional troops to every single one of those battlefronts?!"

"N-no, I agree that would be impossible," Chris admitted haltingly.

"That's not our only problem either." Brad slumped down on the couch, burying his head in his hands. "If the regional lords believe the palace has abandoned them, some are bound to turn traitor."

"Do you really think so?" Angie asked. "I have a difficult time believing they'll go to such extremes, knowing it would make Leon their enemy too."

Brad nodded. "They will if they think they have no other options. If the choice is between turning on Holfort and annihilation, self-preservation will come first. Sooner or later, some regional lords will let the enemy pass through their territory unimpeded. Once that happens, the violence will spread like wildfire."

Greg plopped down on the couch and folded his arms over his chest. "Now that you mention it, I've heard that the lords along our borders have their own independent lines of communication with whichever enemy nations are their neighbors."

Any communication between a regional lord and the enemy was considered an act of treason. They had to have their reasons for it, though, as indicated by Brad's impassioned defense of the practice.

"They may fight bitterly in battle, but all enemies need the opportunity for negotiation," said Brad.

When prisoners of war were taken, nations needed to be able to settle hostage fees and prisoner exchanges. War wasn't only waged on the front. At times, diplomacy was a necessity. This was the primary reason each border region maintained these private communications, even when they risked looking like collaborators to anyone on the outside looking in.

"The lords aren't the only ones who engage in such deals. At times, the central government does as well," Julius reasoned. He seemed to have a more flexible understanding of the situation. "Regardless, the issue at hand is my mother's judgment. Why, at a time like this, would she choose to station Leon here at the border with Rachel? It troubles me."

Frankly, I wasn't too pleased with the idea that my positioning had such a huge impact on the course of the war either.

"I find I pity these foreign nations, thrown into a tizzy by your mere presence, Master. Though there is humor in the irony of it all," said Luxion.

"The responsibility is a little too heavy for my liking—way too heavy, actually." My face puckered as I said that, and Livia gently elbowed my side.

"Mr. Leon, please take this seriously," she scolded.

I snapped my mouth shut.

"Her Majesty's family is saddled with the responsibility of leading the United Kingdom of Lepart," Jilk explained. "Officially, they act as the heads of council of Lepart's parliament and merely oversee the leaders of the united nations. In truth, they hold the greatest power of all the constituent monarchies."

"Just like in the Alzer Republic with the assembly chairman," Noelle said.

Jilk smiled at her. "Their parliament is similar to the Republic's assembly, but they differ in that the leading nation of their alliance holds the most influence. That is why Her Majesty considers all of the lands of Lepart to be her home, not just the specific member nation within it from which she hails."

"And? So what?" Noelle tilted her head, not really following.

"One cannot dismiss the possibility that she considers a degree of loss in Holfort a necessary sacrifice for the protection of her homeland."

We all glowered at him for daring to air such a shameful accusation, but Jilk didn't seem the least bit bothered by our blatant disapproval.

"You overstep," Julius warned him. "Holfort Kingdom is a second home to my mother."

"I only hope you're right. But you cannot deny that her actions are otherwise inexplicable." Jilk was quick to defend his point, and he didn't stop there. "This will be a difficult time for the regional lords, I'm sure, but I suspect the nobles of the court are delighted by the outcome." Like Chris, Jilk also hailed from those ranks.

Chris's face screwed. "Don't group me in with you," he snapped, his voice shooting up a few octaves in displeasure. "I take no pleasure in this situation. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"That's only because you fail to understand," Jilk said. "To the lords of the court, regional lords are enemies in the making. You should have learned that lesson during our war with the former principality."

It was true that, in the past, Holfort had feared and detested the regional nobility so much that they had enacted oppressive laws in order to subdue them.

Chris pursed his lips, unable to argue with Jilk's reasoning. Jilk knew more about the ways of the nobility than he did. That also meant he knew how to remedy this precarious situation. Jilk strolled around the common room, one hand cradling his arm while the other stroked his chin.

What is this farce? Is he trying to make himself out to be some kind of famous detective? That calm, composed look of his really grinds my gears.

"Even assuming we claim victory in this fight, Holfort will still be forced to face the issue of these regional lords and their questionable loyalties. These potential traitors, in other words. As far as the lords of the court are concerned, this is a prime opportunity to weaken the enemy *and* their future rivals all in one go," Jilk said. It was a convincing theory, not least of all because Jilk was speaking about his own cohort.

"That's exactly what's wrong with you court nobles. All they care about is the royal family," Brad complained, unable to stomach Jilk's ramblings.

"As one of their number, I wish I could argue otherwise, but your words ring painfully true. It pains me to think of you and your family's fate, charged with guarding our border." Jilk's words sounded apologetic, but his smile never once faltered. "Now then, moving on to the matter of solving this pressing issue..."

A great rumble echoed through the room, sucking the tension out of the air. Incensed by the interruption, Greg shot out of his seat.

"Who was that?! Who's got an empty stomach at a time like this, huh? Don't ya know we're in a crisis? Pull yourself together." He scanned the crowd as he spoke, trying to spot the culprit.

Marie slowly raised her hand to admit her guilt, eyes pointed at her lap. Greg was gobsmacked. The rest of us slowly turned toward her. Chagrined, her lips pulled into a tight line, Marie quickly turned away from us. "I-I'm sorry," she yelped.

The moment we realized whose belly had been protesting, everyone's attitudes did a one-eighty.

"In that case, it's my time to shine." Julius whipped out an apron and hachimaki, seemingly out of thin air. "Just you wait, Marie. I'll have some world-class skewers ready for you in no time."

"Wait!" Marie cried. "We ate nothing but skewers yesterday, and even the day before! I want something else. Hey! Listen to me when I'm talking to you!"

Heedless of her pleas, Julius flew out the door.

"There's no need to feel embarrassed," Brad assured her, taking Marie's hand in his. "Your stomach plays the finest music in all the world. I swear to you that I will go out and find you something to snack on as well."

"Uh, okay." Marie frowned. It was hardly a compliment to have her stomach grumbling called melodic.

Brad darted out after Julius.

"If everyone else is going to busy themselves putting together a meal for you, I shall take care of your bath," Chris decided. The light hit his glasses with an eerie flare. "Yes. That's it. I will leave at once to draw your bath water, Marie!"

"Sorry, but, uh, I don't understand where a bath factors into this," Marie said, shaking her head.

Chris dismissed her doubts as he, too, jetted out of the room.

Greg was the next to approach. There was a gentleness in his expression that had been entirely absent a moment ago, when he had snapped and leapt from his seat.

"Sorry 'bout all that, Marie. It was real cute the way your stomach growled. I'll get you some chicken," he proclaimed.

Like the rest, he left the room in pursuit of something he was more personally interested in rather than what Marie actually desired. In the wake of their departure, Marie was left rooted in place, gawping.

"Your burden never seems to get any lighter, Mistress," Kyle said in an attempt to console her. "I feel for you."

Carla, too, seemed to pity Marie. She dabbed at the edges of her eyes with a handkerchief. "The unfortunate part is that they're actually better than they used to be."

"Well," Jilk said, the only one of Team Bozo still in the room. "In that case, I believe I'll brew you some tea to go with—"

Angie seized him by his collar, stopping him as he tried to stroll out of the room.

"Not you," she said, keeping a tight hold of him. "If you care to recall, you

haven't finished your thought! Now, there is some way to resolve this, yes?"

Jilk was a detestable scoundrel, an underhanded cheat if there ever was one. Of the whole dopey crew, his reputation was the worst. Yet, somehow, he was also actually one of the most dependable.

Those of us who remained were none too pleased that his little detective act had been interrupted. Angle had stopped him in his tracks in order to force him to cough up the rest of his plot. Unfortunately...

"Please, you must unhand me. For the time being, Marie is my top priori—gah!"

When Jilk tried to break free, Angie whipped her hand across his cheek. No hesitation. The dry sound of skin hitting skin echoed through the room. The force of the slap sent Jilk crumpling to the ground.

"That was entirely uncalled for!" Jilk cried.

Angie, Livia, and Noelle circled him to keep him from bolting.

"Enough whining," Angie snapped. "Continue. Now."

Jilk sneered. "No thank you. I refuse to be cowed by violence." With that, he literally turned the other cheek. Her threats had only made him spiteful.

Marie, who had watched all of this in silence, glanced at me. Finally, she sighed. "Oh, just hurry up and spill! You got us invested. Don't leave us hanging."

Finally, Jilk reluctantly acquiesced. "If Miss Marie asks, I suppose I have no choice." His eyes landed on me as he launched into his explanation. "I cannot claim to know exactly what Her Majesty and the rest of the court nobility are after, but there *is* a way to avoid antagonizing the regional lords. In order to accomplish it, however, I will need your ship."

I had kept silent until this point, but since it was my vessel he wanted to borrow, I had no choice but to say my piece.

"You mean the *Einhorn*?" I asked, clarifying.

"Or the *Licorne*, either one. Do you still have those precious orbs you received from the Alzer Republic?"

"Yeah, I've got them in storage back home. What do you want them for?"

"To use as leverage in negotiations with the Armed Defense Concordat—that is, the members other than Rachel."

"Ridiculous." All earlier interest vanished from Angie's face, replaced by bitter disappointment. "We've already tried negotiating. I heard every attempt ended in failure."

"Yes, I heard the same," Jilk answered, still looking confident. "But where they failed, I would succeed. And I would begin with the weakest nation among them."

I crossed my arms and contemplated his proposal. Then, after a pause, I said, "All right. What do you need?"

"You intend to trust Jilk?" Luxion interjected, shaking his lens from side to side in exasperation. Despite his disapproval, he didn't actually try to stop me.

"If it means avoiding war, then don't you think we owe it to ourselves to try every solution we can get our hands on?" I asked.

My fiancées were visibly taken aback, but I had already decided to put my faith in Jilk.

"Then I ask that you prepare a number of those orbs to be used as bargaining chips," Jilk said. "I would also like to bring some bodyguards. Let me borrow Greg and Chris."

Fair point. They'd be perfect for the job.

"All right," I said. "I'll order them to go with you."

"Also," he went on, not satisfied with the demands he'd already levied, "I'd like to take Brad along as well. He can act as a liaison with the regional lords. Moreover, he's more attuned to their feelings and thought processes than anyone else. I'm sure he'll make for a good adviser."

I shrugged. "I don't really care, but you're basically asking for everyone but Julius."

"Yes, well, it's not as though I can work His Highness to the bone like I can the others," Jilk reasoned.

"So basically what you're saying is you're going to squeeze those three for all they're worth, huh?"

"All in the name of overcoming this crisis," he assured me. "Of course, they must also contribute their fair share of labor."

I sighed. Honestly, I wasn't too keen on all this, but it was true that four-fifths of the nitwit squad did need to make themselves useful.

"Fine," I said. "I'll get everything together. And run those guys ragged for all I care."

Jilk turned pensive. After a moment, he smiled at me. It was unsettling.

"What's with you?" I demanded. "Staring at someone and smirking like that is hella creepy."

"Oh, nothing. I simply didn't expect you would agree to all of my requests. That said, I will do my utmost to carry out this responsibility and meet the expectations of my superior." Jilk finally peeled himself off the floor and waltzed out of the room.

"Mr. Leon, are you sure this is a good idea?" Livia's brow was deeply creased, indicative of her concern. "This is Mr. Jilk we're talking about, remember?"

She didn't say it openly, but it was obvious she didn't trust Jilk as far as she could throw him. I could hardly blame her, considering all the havoc he'd caused in the past.

"She's right," Noelle agreed. "He's an irredeemable bastard, from what I hear. And didn't he do some pretty terrible things when he was in the Alzer Republic?"

Angie pressed a hand to her forehead. "I will respect your decision, Leon, but we both know that he always takes things too far."

No one seemed to have any faith in Jilk at all, but I trusted him to make good on his word. "We can hardly come out of this in a worse position than we're already in. Besides, Jilk is an underhanded schemer."

"You say this, and you still put your faith in him?" Luxion asked, spinning around to look at me.

"You're the one who says that being underhanded is a compliment for a fighter."

Rather than argue any further, Luxion gave in and obeyed my command. "Preparing the *Licorne* for departure."

The following morning, Mylene strode through the corridors of the Frazers' castle. Her pace was so brisk and hurried that she left her maids in the dust.

"Your Majesty, please wait!"

Her haste this morning was due to an unpleasant report she had just received. Her destination was the room reserved for Leon and his party, where he and his fiancées could rest, relax, and engage in small talk.

When Mylene reached the door, she threw it open violently and stormed inside. She found only Angie awaiting her there. The girl gaped at the queen's unexpected arrival.

"I was just about to seek an audience with you," she said.

Mylene dismissed the comment out of hand. "I received a report that the *Licorne* has left the harbor. Tell me, was the duke on board?" From the moment Mylene heard that the *Licorne* left, she had been in a frenzy, desperate to confirm the details. The *Licorne*'s departure was in no way part of her present strategy.

Angie shrugged. "Leon gave the order, but the crew consists of Jilk and his friends."

"I can't believe it." Mylene shook her head, lamenting Leon's shortsightedness. "Angie, why didn't you stop him? Did I not tell you that we require *both* ships if we hope to corral Rachel?"

Leon had promised to keep his vessels on standby in Frazer territory for the time being. As he had gone back on his word, her ire was surely justified.

Nonetheless, Angie's first priority was Leon. "He made the decision," she said. "I thought it was the correct one, so I made no objection."

Mylene exhaled a long, deep sigh. "Which means the duke is still here in the

castle, I take it?"

"Of course."

"That ought to suffice. I will explain the situation to the diplomat from Lepart and Marquess Frazer." Mylene promptly turned to leave, though she knit her brows and bit her lower lip. *I underestimated his naivety*.

The quarters Carl had been assigned in the Frazer residence were typically occupied by servants. It was like a cheap hotel room—sparsely furnished and underwhelming.

Finn dropped in and found Carl standing there with a scowl on his face. He laughed. "This place suits you, old man."

"Shut it, brat. Really, who do these people think I am?" Carl sniffed in displeasure.

"You came here in disguise, so it's hardly fair to lean on your status. You can't blame the Frazers."

Though Carl knew Finn had the right of it, his temper was still piqued. Even so, Carl closed his mouth and offered no further word of complaint as Finn found his way to the couch and sat down.

"So," Carl said, "what's going on with the Scumbag Knight?"

"He's trying to prevent a war..." Finn frowned. "You know, old man, I don't believe for a second he's as bad as the rumors make him out to be. Besides, he's my friend."

"How unexpected for such a famous misanthrope," Carl said thoughtfully as he lowered his gaze. "But it's my job to make the final call."

"That's rich, coming from the guy who abandoned his responsibilities to go on this vacation," Finn shot back with a shrug.

"You just love to run your mouth, don't you, brat? Never mind. How's Mia holding up?"

"She's out sightseeing with the princess and her entourage. I made sure Brave

went along with them, so there's no need to worry."

Carl's smile was nigh imperceptible. "That so? I suppose she's about the same age as Holfort's princess. It's nice to see them getting along so well."

"This has been a good experience for her," Finn went on. "She's got more friends, and she seems to be enjoying herself. I was pretty shocked to discover the princess reincarnated here like we did, though."

Carl nodded. "I was also surprised, when I read your letter. Tsk. It makes me wonder... What're all of us being brought here for?"

Chapter 4: His Eminence's Motive

The White Capital of the Holy Kingdom of Rachel was a metropolis located on a floating island above an enormous lake. An ivory castle rose from its center, the rest of the city spread out around it. The architecture was packed tightly together, buildings jutting up over every square inch of the island. Every one of them paled in comparison to the lustrous castle. It was the only structure that glimmered a pure and luminous white. Even so, the city folk insisted on calling their entire home the White Capital.

The ruler of said castle was the holy king—a rotund, elderly man with long white hair and a long white beard. This man, whom many revered as a divine monarch, sat in the grand audience chamber to receive the envoy he'd sent to negotiate with Holfort Kingdom.

"Regrettably, the kingdom has chosen to forsake your mercy, Your Eminence. They are preparing for war." The envoy knelt on one knee with his head bowed, his speech as grandiose as it had been when in Holfort.

The nobles gathered in the chamber grew indignant and were quick to voice their disapproval.

"What fools."

"I suppose we should expect no better from savages."

"They are long past salvation."

Most spoke with open condescension, but the holy king lifted his hand to silence them. He stroked his beloved beard in contemplation.

"They leave us no choice," he said. "We must begin our preparations for battle as well."

The nobles fell to one knee in a wave and bowed their heads in reverence.

"Yes, Your Eminence! Thy will be done!"

Upon exiting the grand audience chamber, the holy king made his way to the adjacent parlor where he sank into a reclining chair. There, he was surrounded by a bevy of beautiful women. He hefted the weighty crown from his head and set it aside, then peeled off the layers of opulent clothing he'd been swathed in. By the end, once he'd also kicked off his shoes, he was left in nothing but his undergarments.

The women attending him carried fruit and an assortment of drinks for the king. The moment he opened his mouth, one of the women slipped a piece of freshly peeled fruit between his lips. As the king chewed, he shot a glance at his prime minister, who had entered just moments after him.

"Well? What news of the enemy?" asked the king. By enemy, he of course meant Holfort Kingdom.

The prime minister had served his role with all due theatrics during the earlier audience, but his demeanor in private was more subdued and businesslike.

"Lepart's Devious Princess—or rather, Queen Mylene, as she is currently known—has seen fit to bring her daughter along with her to the Frazers' lands. She had the Scumbag Knight and his two airships escort her."

The king didn't seem particularly panicked about this development. In fact, he smiled. "So she intends to send the Scumbag Knight to do the dirty work of destroying us?"

"Queen Mylene won't condone such a maneuver," the prime minister answered with a tight smile. "She would be a far less formidable opponent if she were short-tempered enough to act so recklessly, but alas."

The king snorted. "Roland's a pain too, that eccentric coot. But that scheming witch is no less of a thorn in our side."

The prime minister wrinkled his nose, sharing the king's disgust. "Roland doesn't seem to be attempting to counter us this time around," he said. "It's a bit unsettling."

Roland was rather infamous to his enemies. For all his laziness, he was such a nuisance that he'd earned their ire. They referred to him as an eccentric for his

unconventional strategies. But in spite of the threat he posed, the holy king and his prime minister were more interested in Leon—the Scumbag Knight.

"And what is the Scumbag Knight doing now that he's in Frazer territory?" asked the king.

"According to our spies, he's standing by, per the queen's orders," said the prime minister. "It seems the rumors of his fixation on her are true."

Word of Leon's relationship with the queen had even spread to Rachel. The holy king found it difficult to fathom, however.

"I'm truly shocked any man could find that witch attractive," he said.

The prime minister nodded in agreement. "Indeed."

Neither one of them had ever regarded Mylene as an object of any allure. No, as far as they were concerned, she was nothing but a bitter enemy and the bane of their existence.

"Your Eminence," said the prime minister, "shall we continue to gather our military in the White Capital as previously planned?"

"Yes."

"Our ally nations of the Armed Defense Concordat have sent envoys to request our participation in battles to come, as well as reinforcements for their own assaults. What shall we say to them?"

The king narrowed his eyes. "Make excuses and refuse to grant them an audience. We're blessed that we have good reason to do so, what with the Scumbag Knight lurking on our border. Tell them we require all our resources to pin him in place."

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel had made an impressive declaration of war in front of its allies' emissaries, but in truth, they had no intention of doing any invading themselves. Instead, they were focused on shoring up their defenses and planned to deal with Leon on their own terms.

"I am relieved to hear you say as much." The prime minister let out a long breath he'd been holding. "After all, we do not yet have the means to dispense with the Scumbag Knight."

The king burst into a fit of laughter. He rocked forward in his recliner, bending over. "Underhanded as that devious witch is, she wouldn't be so reckless as to invade us. If she did, she'd force the empire to respond, and they're a much more terrible threat than any we could muster."

Although Holfort and Rachel were considered major nations, the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit dwarfed them both. Mylene wasn't so stupid that she'd give them a pretext for joining the war. At least, this was what the holy king and his prime minister believed. They were confident that Mylene was too clever to take such risks.

The prime minister grinned. "Even the Scumbag Knight can't take on the entire world, no matter how powerful he may be."

If the empire were to make its move, all of its vassal sites would fall in line behind it. Countless other nations would be swept up in their wake as they deemed it too dangerous to leave such a powerful Lost Item in Holfort's control.

"Still." A wrinkle of worry creased the prime minister's brow. "Imagine if he did have the power to make enemies of us all. He would be an unstoppable force. What we've heard of his power already defies the imagination."

The holy king nodded. He shared his prime minister's caution, though he wasn't nearly so anxious.

"If the man truly had the power to conquer the world, it follows that he would already have done so. Such is the way of humankind. Since he has not, that means that, for whatever reason, he cannot. All the more so, given his youth. If you give a child power beyond their control, what will they want to do with it? Flaunt it to all and sundry."

The prime minister stroked his chin. "Yes, that pattern often emerges in fairy tales. Someone gets their hands on a Lost Item, takes things too far, and ends up miserable."

"We don't need to end this war as the clear victor," the holy king reminded him. "If the Scumbag Knight proves himself even more capable than we already believe him to be, that will only drive other nations to join us. With their power, we'll have even more opportunities to subjugate Holfort and their 'hero.'"

"A sound strategy. For one, Holfort imports its magic stones. I hear they're already suffering, since they're unable to buy the resource from the Alzer Republic."

The king leaned back in his recliner once more. "And that's why we needn't so much as lift a finger. Let the dice fall where they will; our wisest course of action is still to avoid direct confrontation with the Scumbag Knight. If, in the meantime, the empire decides to move against Holfort, so much the better."

"They do seem to be wary of him as well," the prime minister shared with a smile. "From what the envoys tell me, they're already interested in this war."

"The Scumbag Knight has made himself all too prominent. Thanks to him, everything is going according to our plan." The king closed his eyes. "Yes, his actions have ensured our victory—even if we never fire a single shot."

Leon's power had grown so overwhelming that soon, the entire world would see him as a threat.

"This is the best tourist destination in the entire region!" Elijah declared, having brought us to see his territory's lake.

The lake was surrounded on all sides by guard rails. Marie clutched them and leaned forward, drinking in the sight. She was so moved by the breathtaking scenery that she completely forgot the animosity she had showed Elijah. "This is a *lake*?!" she squeaked in delight.

It wasn't just any lake. A small island floated some hundred meters above it, and an enormous pillar of water spouted from the lake up to it. When the island overflowed, the water spilled back into the depths below. The effect was that of an enormous, natural water fountain. At least, that was the best way I could explain what I was seeing.

"I gotta admit," I said, "this is pretty incredible."

"It's unbelievably rare," Livia said, eyes sparkling. "Precious few floating islands that small can draw in water in that fashion. It makes you wonder if the island was brought here specifically or if it just naturally drifted into position." This tidbit had likely come from a book—Livia being a real bookworm and all—

though it sounded like she'd never seen anything like this in the flesh.

Angie touched a hand to her chin. "The real shame is that such a beautiful sight is tucked all the way out here in a border region. If it were more centrally located, it could be developed into an even more impressive destination." She couldn't help considering it from a more practical, aristocratic standpoint.

Noelle shot Angie an exasperated look. She probably found it difficult to understand how Angie could be caught up in thoughts of monetization rather than enjoying it for what it was.

"Aren't you the least bit moved?" Noelle asked.

"Of course," Angie answered. "Why do you ask?"

"I mean, I just think there's other ways you could express yourself. Like, 'How neat!' or 'It's beautiful!' Y'know, something like that. I mean, take a proper look. It looks like they've got boats for couples."

I looked in the direction Noelle pointed. As she said, it looked like couples and families were out on the lake in boats. It probably seemed a bit odd to most of them, seeing as most ships in this world floated in the air rather than on water.

Angie pulled a face. "I have no interest in a boat that cannot fly."

Perhaps this was effectively a clash of culture. From my perspective, boats belonged on water more than they did in the skies.

Noelle abruptly latched onto my arm. Her face lit up like she'd had a sudden stroke of genius. "In that case, you guys don't mind if Leon and I go out on a ride together, right? You'll go with me, won't you, Leon?"

"Sure," I said without missing a beat.

The other two girls were stunned.

"Noelle, get in line," Angie scolded. "Don't try to one-up us like that."

Livia nodded firmly. "Exactly. That's not playing fair, Miss Noelle."

Marie stared at the pier where they were renting out boats. Leon and Noelle had already boarded one together, and even from a distance, their banter

echoed.

"Little carefree, if you ask me," Marie said. She leaned on the guard rail as she watched them, sighing.

Erica approached her from behind. "Uncle's become so much more daring."

"Erica?" Marie gasped in surprise. She scanned their surroundings. "And where's that Elijah brat?"

Erica swept a hand through her hair, tucking some loose strands behind her ear. "I wanted to speak with you, Mother, so I sent him on a little errand."

"An errand? He's still a marquess's heir, remember? You sure that's okay?" As critical as Marie was of Elijah, she still understood the significance of his status. His position put him on a level with her idiot brigade—or the level they would have been on, had their families not disowned them. His gentle, unassuming presence made it easy to forget he was a noble scion.

Erica giggled. "Of course it is. I am his princess."

"R-right, I guess you have a point there."

Being a princess meant that even if Erica had Elijah wait on her hand and foot, people would laugh and overlook it. This was especially true given that their relationship was already good. If it weren't, there might be problems.

"I know that you and Uncle are trying to do what you think is best for me."

"Erica...?" Marie asked, uneasy. Where was this going?

"But I told you before: I have accepted my engagement to Elijah. I would really appreciate it if the two of you didn't butt in any further."

"I-I just... I want you to be happy, though! I want you to date someone you want to be with, to enjoy your youth! And then... And then..." Marie stammered helplessly, desperate for her daughter to taste the happiness she had been unable to give her in their previous life, something she deeply regretted. All she wanted was for Erica to get to live a normal life, with all the bliss that entailed.

"If we lived in a society whose tenets more closely aligned with our own, that might have been possible. But I am Holfort's princess. I am not free to merely live my life as I please."

"But Leon'll do whatever he needs so that you can!"

"Mother?" Erica gasped in surprise.

"Maybe you don't realize it, but he's solved every problem I've ever had," Marie eagerly continued. "And if it was for *your* sake, I know he'd do everything in his power to help. So *please*... Be happy." Marie dropped her gaze, tears trickling down her cheeks. Desperate to avoid her daughter's probing stare, she turned back to the lake, where Leon and Noelle were still enjoying their boat ride.

"I am happy," Erica said.

"Erica, I bought that thing you wanted!" Elijah hollered from afar, scurrying hurriedly toward them.

Marie glanced at him and wiped away her tears. Then, she turned back to her daughter. "Are you *sure* you're okay with him? There's a ton of more attractive guys out there. You could have your pick."

Erica responded with a troubled smile and promptly shook her head. It seemed she and her mother had rather different tastes when it came to men. "I think he's cute just as he is," she said. "Besides, isn't it better to shape your man into your ideal?"

"Huh?" Marie blurted, dumbfounded.

Erica turned to Elijah, moving to meet him halfway. "What, don't you agree? I think it's far better to mold a boy into what you want rather than waste all that time trying to find the perfect fit."

Now that Marie had been given more insight into her daughter's point of view, everything started to click into place. So that's it. She's been molding Elijah into a more palatable version of himself. Somehow that's...kind of ominous? No, no. Let's think of it in a positive light. It's proof of her determination.

With that, Marie decided to accept their relationship and give them her blessing.

"Hey, you," she said to Elijah when he reached them.

"Yes?"

"You'd better put in the effort. I mean it."

"Huh? Um... Yes, of course."

After first taking a ride with Noelle, then Livia, it was finally Angie's turn. I'd thought she would claim her right to go first, but she'd chosen to go last so she could discuss something with me privately.

Angie leaned out of her seat and stretched her hand to let her fingers graze the surface of the water. "I spoke with Her Majesty, but I was unable to persuade her."

"Yeah?" As I rowed the boat, I kept mostly quiet, listening to Angie speak.

"She seems fervent in her sense of responsibility. To her homeland, to Holfort... But really, I think she's principally motivated by the royal family. She's trying to use you to strengthen their position."

Luxion was also with us. He hovered at the bow of our small boat, his attention focused on our heading. He showed no sign of inserting himself into the conversation.

"War, politics, it's all a bit heavy for me," I said. "Anyway, how'd the conversation about the *Licorne*'s departure go?"

"I suspect she's furious. She isn't openly angry with you, but inside, she must be fuming."

I couldn't be surprised if she was mad. I'd sent off the *Licorne* without so much as a by your leave. Angie indicated that the queen was still all smiles in person. That part broke my heart. I could tell Mylene was just being considerate, damming up her true emotions. No, that wasn't right. It was less consideration and more like, when it came to me, she was walking on eggshells. She was being way too cautious.

I fell into thought as I continued rowing.

Angie snickered as she watched me. "You're feeling blue because you think Her Majesty's affection for you has worn away. Would a kiss make it better?"

"I'm not blue," I grumbled back.

"Oh, come on, don't sulk. Yes, I want to poke a little fun, but I really am willing to offer you a bit of consolation, if it would help. Especially since all this has put such heavy burdens on you all over again."

Once war officially broke out, those who had been knighted—meaning all aristocrats—would have to fight for the kingdom, whether they liked it or not.

Angie returned her gaze to the water. "You and the queen are heading in opposite directions. If you keep on this trajectory, you'll eventually find yourselves on opposing sides. Have you resolved yourself to facing her as an enemy?"

"I don't want to fight her."

I knew I sounded indecisive. Angie sighed and shot me a sorrowful look.

"Queen Mylene isn't as gentle as you seem to think," Angie warned. "Do not forget: She is a formidable opponent."

My relationship with the queen was strained, and it seemed like it'd happened in the blink of an eye. If Angie's words of caution were to be believed, sooner or later, we would be political rivals.

"I dunno. Is that really the way things have to be? Can't you think of a way to resolve all this peaceably, Angie?" I asked, half-jokingly.

Angie promptly scooped up some lake water and splashed me right in the face. A smile spread across her lips, but the emotions reflected in her eyes weren't exactly sanguine. Annoyance. Anger. "Are you *really* asking me to look after another woman for you?"

While Leon and his fiancées were enjoying their time touring the Frazers' territory, the *Licorne* made its way to the Bartfort barony, retrieved the precious orbs stored there, and headed toward one of the small nation-states participating in the Armed Defense Concordat. No sooner did the *Licorne* touch down at the harbor than it found itself surrounded by knights piloting Armors.

Jilk strode through the intimidating security detail that greeted them. Greg

and Chris were close behind, making no attempt to hide their scowls.

"Could you two please take this a bit more seriously?" Jilk asked as he glanced back at them. "This negotiation is of extreme importance. The future of the kingdom is at stake."

Chris huffed and turned his head. "I understand that, but how does that involve treating us like your subordinates? I must say, Leon made the wrong call on that count."

"Even worse, you dragged us to this dubious little chunk of nothing the people here call a country." Greg folded his hands behind his head as he scanned the area. "Even if you managed to convince such a minor nation to switch sides, it wouldn't change anythin'."

Jilk smiled knowingly. "We're looking for a ripple effect. That said, I have you to thank for how well the talks have progressed thus far, Brad."

Brad walked beside Jilk with a tense expression. Having been born in one of the kingdom's border territories, he had natural connections to the other noble houses that defended Holfort's borders. Jilk had used those to arrange this meeting with the enemy.

"Well, regrettably, I have no personal connections to this particular country," Brad reminded Jilk. "So please don't assume these talks will go favorably simply because we've made it this far."

"Oh, I don't expect that much."

"You don't?!" Brad snapped. "You say it like you have no faith in me! Infuriating!" He was a mess of contradictions; he didn't want Jilk to rely on him overmuch, but to be dismissed entirely was a grave offense.

"Your time will come when we visit the Fanoss's dukedom for negotiations there," Jilk said.

"Fanoss? You mean to speak with Hertrude? But that's..." Brad trailed off. His face scrunched; he could hardly look forward to such a challenging hurdle.

"There's a good chance they'll turn on us, of course, but we may be surprised. Who knows? They may be willing to lend us their aid." Jilk's face oozed

confidence.

"Now why do you think that?" Brad asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

Jilk kept his eyes trained straight ahead and schooled his expression. "Oh, when the time comes, you'll see."

During the meeting, Jilk had his comrades stand back while he personally discussed the matter with one of the minor country's ministers. They weren't conducting this negotiation in the king's audience chamber in order to dispense with the more tedious business right off the bat.

This particular minister typically welcomed Holfortian diplomats with a modest air, but given the advantage their nation currently enjoyed as part of the Armed Defense Concordat, he lounged on the opposite sofa, leaning back against the cushions and oozing confidence.

"I never dreamed Holfort would send four *children* to meet with us. Moreover, I understand you've been disowned by your houses for debauchery."

These upfront barbs weren't entirely expected, and Jilk met them with a smile. "You certainly know how to hit a man where it hurts."

"Well? How do you plan to tempt us this time? The last ambassador who tried to buy our allegiance offered an exorbitant amount."

That was precisely what Jilk had anticipated. This tiny nation had rebuffed that offer, as they planned to make a mint pillaging Holfort once they invaded. However "exorbitant" Holfort's offer had been, it would be a pittance when compared to what they could steal. At least, that was the implication.

Jilk dismissed the minister's ridicule and maintained a breezy smile. *First thing's first,* he thought. *A threat.*

"I have come to inform you that when the war begins, my liege lord—Duke Leon Fou Bartfort, that is—intends to annihilate your nation first."

The minister's eyes widened. He blinked several times in disbelief. The mere suggestion that the Scumbag Knight intended to invade and destroy his tiny nation completely cracked his composure.

"Hah, you must be bluffing," he said in a shaky voice. "Your lord is bound to start with Rachel, or one of the other larger countries. No, even before that, he'll have to deal with the invaders who make it past your borders."

Although the minister was quick to call Jilk out on his intimidation, the man was still shaken. The possibility was too terrifying to dismiss, even when he tried.

Jilk nodded along as the minister spoke, then schooled his expression, smile vanishing, when the man was finished. "My lord has a pet phrase, one he's fond of repeating: 'When you take on an enemy, you ought to start with shattering their weakest link.' Of course, he often prefaces this with the fact that he would prefer not to have to destroy anyone at all, but with circumstances being what they are, he has little choice. Once the fighting begins, my lord isn't the type to leave *any* loose ends."

A cold sweat broke out across the minister's face.

Jilk snapped his fingers. Scowling, Greg lumbered over with a box in his arms, which he plunked down on the table. The minister and the other bureaucrats were so flustered that they didn't even try to order him to stop. Jilk unfolded the closed lid to reveal a shining white orb within.

"Wh-what is this?" demanded the minister. The other officials were similarly confused.

"This is a precious orb, which my lord recovered during his battles in the Alzer Republic," Jilk explained. "Have you not heard of these? They possess as much magical power as a dozen magic stones. If you were to claim one, you would never have to worry about a deficit of energy."

His aim was twofold: to paint a picture of Leon's rampage through the Alzer Republic while simultaneously tempting them with a promising prize. The gazes of the minister and his officials were uniformly glued to the orb.

"So this is one of those precious orbs we've heard so much about..."

"If you agree to renounce the Concordat right here and now," Jilk continued, "this orb is yours. Refuse, and you invite your own destruction, as once the war begins, my lord will fly his airship straight to your doorstep."

The bureaucrats pursed their lips. The minister, meanwhile, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Having successfully concluded their negotiations with that nation, Jilk and his companions returned to the *Licorne*. They gathered in the dining hall, crowding around one of the tables as they gleefully reflected on their accomplishment.

"I can't believe you were able to convince them where the kingdom's diplomats failed." Chris shook his head. He was genuinely impressed with Jilk's persuasive capabilities.

"That's because we rode in on the *Einhorn*'s sister ship and directly employed Leon's name," Jilk explained with a satisfied grin. "Our diplomats can't reference the duke so casually. Plus, we offered that precious orb as a bribe."

In Jilk's mind, success had been a given.

Brad narrowed his eyes. "You basically used his name to threaten them, so of course they caved. That aside, I assume you plan to continue like this? Distributing precious orbs to the rest of our enemies?"

"Whyever would I do a thing like that?" Jilk tilted his head, brows furrowed. "These orbs are a precious resource."

"Huh? Then how are we going to bring the Armed Defense Concordat to its knees?"

Jilk let out a long, drawn-out sigh and put a hand to his forehead, shaking his head. "Not by wasting our bargaining chips so recklessly. We will only distribute these orbs to three countries. After that, we need only spread news that some countries have switched sides, then others will naturally follow suit."

"I guess you're the expert when it comes to stuff like that." Greg looked bewildered as he scratched his neck. This was technically a compliment, but it was undermined by the irritated look on his face. It probably wasn't actually meant as praise at all.

Jilk paid it no mind, though. "Oh, please, you needn't flatter me so," he said. "In any case, we'll need to visit a couple more nations before making our way to

House Fanoss."

Brad nodded several times. "All right. I'll inform my house of our plans."

Cleare watched with great interest as the four men slumped in their seats, relieved that their first negotiation was over. Her piercing gaze seemed to rattle Jilk, who shifted to glance at her.

"Is something the matter, Miss Cleare?" he asked, ever the gentleman—which was somewhat pointless when it came to an AI.

"You're a piece of trash," she said. "But at least you're useful. I was debating using you for my experiments after you manipulated Master, but since this little sojourn has been successful, I've decided to forgive you."

"Ah ha ha, why, thank you..." Jilk trailed off as the implications of her words sank in. "Wait, did you say 'experiments'?"

His initial response had been automatic; he was accustomed to the AI and their sarcastic, witty remarks. But he couldn't just ignore the suggestion of a certain grim future.

Sounding a bit too cheerful, Cleare explained, "Since perfecting my ability to perform a sex change, I've finished preparations for the next stage of my experiments. Kinda sucks I won't be able to use you. Oh well. I'm glad you're on track to accomplish Master's goals, at least."

The boys blanched in the face of her eerily eager explanation. It gave them horrible new food for thought. What exactly had she planned to do to them if they'd failed...?

Chapter 5: House Fanoss's Representative

ONCE THEY'D RECEIVED an official agreement to meet, Jilk and company called on the Fanoss castle, where a representative, Hertrude Sera Fanoss, received them. Her long, straight, lustrous black hair and porcelain skin naturally made her stand out, though her most distinctive feature was her ruby-red eyes, the same shade as Angie's.

Hertrude seemed more mature than when they'd last met. Once the princess of a nation, she had become the head of a noble house, overseeing her family's dukedom as the official leader of House Fanoss. As if to demonstrate her growth into womanhood, she wore a chic black dress that complimented her lean figure.

"What does Duke Bartfort want with House Fanoss?" Hertrude asked.



They were in the castle's audience chamber. She sat on what had been the throne of her royal lineage, leaning to one side, elbow perched on the armrest. It certainly wasn't proper posture. That alone spoke volumes as to her stance on their visit: In short, they were unwelcome.

Jilk raised his hands. "My Lady, we come at the behest of Holfort Kingdom—"

"That's a lie if I've ever heard one," she interrupted, not the least bit convinced Jilk was here on the behalf of either the kingdom's government or even the royal family.

A number of the dukedom's aristocrats were also present, as well as an overseer who had been officially stationed there by the kingdom. His duty was to keep tabs on the Fanoss household in the wake of their defeat in the last war. Judging by the expression on his face, however, the man didn't seem to be especially comfortable in his role. There was no telling when House Fanoss would decide to betray Holfort. All this time, the overseer had been cocky with his charge, so he was likely nervous, wondering when he would quite literally be stabbed in the back.

"I wish to speak with them alone." Hertrude raised her right hand to dismiss those who had gathered. "You lot. Leave us."

"Just a moment!" the overseer cried. "You cannot make such—"

"I said, leave."

Where once the overseer had held the leash, Hertrude was calling the shots now. The Fanoss aristocrats were quick to grab the man and drag him out as they left. A few nobles—ones loyal to Hertrude who were concerned about leaving her alone with a company of men—offered to stay, but she refused them.

Soon, the four ex-nobles of Holfort were the only ones left in the audience chamber. At last, Hertrude adjusted her posture and sat straight on the throne.

"I'm pleased that you made it here. If you'd been any later, I was planning to make my way to visit the duke myself." This time, Hertrude spoke with a smile, her attitude the polar opposite of what it had been moments earlier. Jilk was taken aback, but he did his best to school his expression. "Then would I be correct in assuming you actually welcome our arrival?"

"Of course. Though I must admit that many of my people, noble and commoner alike, are eager to repay the decades-long grudge they bear the Holfort Kingdom. However, I have the utmost respect for the duke's capabilities." Her eyes narrowed, her smirk belying something deeper—and potentially insidious.

Jilk hid his discomfort as best he could. After the way she kicked out the overseer, it's safe to say she's grown into quite the commanding leader. He sensed this weakened their position in negotiations, but he had no choice other than to follow through.

"In that case, might I beg your cooperation?" Jilk asked.

"You really think I'll simply dance to whatever tune you play?" Hertrude asked. "I've received a letter from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel requesting we join their Armed Defense Concordat. The conditions for our acceptance are favorable. Many of my vassals support the move."

"How troubling. If there's anything we can offer to change your mind, please, speak freely. We will make every effort to accommodate you, so long as it is within our power."

Hertrude folded her arms over her chest and lifted her chin to stare down her nose at Jilk and his companions. Her throne was already elevated substantially, which meant they had to crane their necks to look up at her.

"If you desire my cooperation," Hertrude said, "then I ask for a guarantee of independence from Holfort Kingdom. We will require financial aid and military reinforcements as well. Let's see... And how about you supply us with three ships of the same make and model as the *Einhorn* as well as at least a hundred standard warships. Of course, I fully expect supply shipments on top of this."

"Enough playing around," Brad snapped, unable to maintain his silence in the face of her ludicrous laundry list of conditions.

Hertrude continued smiling. Her fingers brushed her red-painted lips, and she giggled. "In that case, would you prefer we be your enemy? Though if House

Field is forced to focus on occupying Fanoss, I'm afraid they'll be unable to support anyone else."

"Urk!" Brad grunted and swallowed hard, unable to argue that point.

Hertrude turned her gaze back to Jilk. "Well, what will it be? This seems like a small price to pay to guarantee our friendship."

"Surely you're joking," Jilk said with a shrug. "If I were to agree to these demands, Fanoss would declare its own war on us at the next opportunity. Even if you tried to dissuade them as the head of your house, I doubt your nobility would back down."

"True enough," Hertrude agreed readily.

"So you won't even try to deny it."

"I'm merely trying to respect the opinions of my vassals. Personally, if we have no hope of ever winning a fight with Holfort, I would prefer to focus on our domestic development."

Her words came as a great relief to Jilk. "In that case," he said, "will you give us your word that Fanoss won't join Rachel and her allies?"

Hertrude smiled again, though this time it was obviously forced. "It seems you were readily distributing Precious Orbs as you made your way about all those small nations. Have you prepared one for Fanoss as well?"

"Those are extremely precious resources, I'm afraid, and we have none left."

"What a pity." The smile never left Hertrude's face. "By the by, some of the nobles who guard your borderlands have reached out to us. It seems they are already well into negotiations with Rachel."

Jilk's expression betrayed no emotion in the wake of this news, but the same could not be sad for his companions; Greg and Chris were visibly shaken. The former always wore his emotions on his sleeve, so he could hardly hide what he felt. Chris, meanwhile, was too unaccustomed to diplomatic talks to know better.

Hertrude grinned as she drank in their expressions. When she turned her attention back to Jilk, however, her face was absent all emotion. "It's rather

naive, if not insensitive, to ask someone to join you while offering nothing in return. Wouldn't you agree?"

After a long pause, Jilk said, "We will make haste to retrieve a precious orb for Fanoss."

"One won't cut it. I want at least three. Moreover, I demand the return of all warships confiscated from our house. And while we're at it...I would like you to remove all overseers from our lands."

"Unfortunately, I really only have two orbs left," Jilk said, scratching his cheek. "Also, it was the palace who confiscated those ships. I can't return them without their approval. Neither are the overseers part of my juri—"

Hertrude huffed. "See? I knew Duke Bartfort was acting on his own."

Jilk snapped his mouth shut. Indeed, he had given the game away and revealed they weren't acting with the kingdom's permission. His comrades were also shaken. It seemed their negotiations had failed.

"All right, then." Hertrude pressed a hand over her mouth to hide her mirth. "Fanoss agrees not to join Rachel, provided you give us the two remaining orbs. However, once this war is finished, I expect *something* to be done regarding the return of our warships and the removal of those overseers."

"Are you certain? There's no guarantee we'll honor such a promise," Jilk warned. He was still reeling from her abrupt change in attitude.

Hertrude leaned back on the throne and gazed up at the ceiling. "I know the duke, and I'm sure *he* will honor those promises..." she murmured. "Also, be sure to give the fake Saint my regards, all right?"

Jilk nodded firmly. "Of course. I will be sure to do so."

"Good. Then I have one last thing for you. A present for the duke, if you will." With that, Hertrude offered the boys a fascinating new bit of intel.

I was in a dreadful mood, and it showed on my face. Luxion had roused me in the middle of the night, claiming it was an emergency. By the time I pulled myself upright, he was projecting an image of Jilk's panicked face on the far wall.

"What's so urgent that you need to tell me in the middle of the night?" I demanded with a yawn.

Jilk offered no preamble and cut straight to the chase, which was as good an indication as any that this truly was a crisis. "The palace intends to completely abandon the border regions and their lords."

"Come again?"

My drowsiness rapidly subsided, but I struggled to make sense of what Jilk had just said. He seemed to realize a more thorough explanation was required.

"Holfort's central government has decided to use this war to cull the regional nobles who might betray them."

"Huh?" I blurted in disbelief.

In truth, I'd already gotten the sense they planned to use the war to curtail the military power of the regional nobility, but I never dreamed they'd actually make a move against them. As underhanded and conniving as Jilk was, he hadn't anticipated this either.

"But what's the point of..." I clapped a hand over my mouth.

I'd meant to ask why they'd do such a thing, but the answer came to mind immediately: Holfort was scared of her own regional nobility.

Not long ago, Duke Redgrave had plotted to usurp the throne after the royal family lost their greatest weapon—their ancestral ship. Even more plots were bound to be in motion beneath the surface. Holfort Kingdom stood on a dangerous precipice. I knew that. I did! I'd just thought the situation was taken care of after I announced I was siding with the royal family.

"I guess the palace is serious about this," I said.

"To be more precise, this is the royal family's design. I believe the queen is at the heart of this scheme."

I narrowed my eyes. "Where'd you get this info anyway?" It was such a shocking revelation that I had to be sure it was credible.

"Lady Hertrude of House Fanoss," Jilk answered, much to my shock. "She called this intel her gift to you."

"Miss Hertrude told you this? She's not trying to trick us or anything, is she?"

The noble house of Fanoss nursed a long and bitter grudge against Holfort Kingdom. What if this was all a ploy to trick us and spin the situation to their advantage? Suspicious as I was, Jilk was quick to dismiss the idea.

"I doubt that. When she offered this information and requested we deliver it to you, she acted as shy as a teenage girl in the throes of a crush."

"A who in a what now?" I echoed, dumbfounded.

Jilk sighed. "You really are daft. I mean to say that I believe she's fallen for you."

"Oh. Okay."

I answered stiffly because I had approximately zero trust in Jilk's understanding of romantic affairs. He was probably misreading things.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he asked. "Well, regardless, I don't yet have proof to substantiate this claim. But while there's no guarantee of its accuracy, I'd wager there's a good chance it's true. Brad contacted his family to gauge their position, and I fear he suspects they've lost faith in the throne, which bodes ill indeed."

It sounded like the boys had done their due diligence to establish the veracity of this information. That was why they were coming to me in the middle of the night—because they'd taken the time to look into the matter so they could provide me with a proper report.

"Are you making good progress breaking up the Armed Defense Concordat?" I asked.

"Yes, that much is going according to plan. But do you wish for us to continue? I think it would be wiser to turn our attentions to the palace and their actions."

I shook my head. "I'd prefer to reduce our enemy's strength first. Continue as we planned. I'll find a way to handle the palace—no. Wait a sec."

"What's the matter?"

I paused as the realization hit me. I could use my personal contacts to get the information I desired.

"Miss Clarice's family is court nobility, right? And her father's an active cabinet minister."

Jilk's expression twisted. He knew where this was going. "If you lean on House Atlee too often, they'll start to expect repayment—but given the situation, going to them for information isn't a terrible idea. I just fear the repercussions."

As far as I was concerned, whatever sum they wanted in exchange for their assistance would be well worth the service they provided. I didn't see why Jilk was so worried. The bigger issue was acquiring as much accurate information we could in a limited time span.

"I'm willing to accommodate them, even if their demands are a bit much," I said.

There was a short pause as he stared at me. "Well," he said finally, "if that is your stance, then I will not argue any further."

"You guys keep doing what you're doing and undermine the alliance. I'll handle the issue with the palace."

With that, I ended the transmission.

Luxion drifted over to me. As he assumed his usual position, hovering over my shoulder, he studied me with his single red lens. "I have concerns about the accuracy of any information derived solely from House Atlee."

"I get what you're saying, but I don't have a lot of options. It's not like I can turn to the Redgraves. Not after Angie cut ties."

The light from Luxion's lens flashed repeatedly, as if to indicate he was thinking about it. At length, he said, "I will prepare the requisite funds, so why don't we turn to House Roseblade for assistance as well? Earl Dominic Fou Mottley is also an option."

"Earl Mottley is part of the Redgraves' faction. Do you really think he'll lend me any help?" "Why wouldn't he? He declared himself your fan," Luxion reminded me.

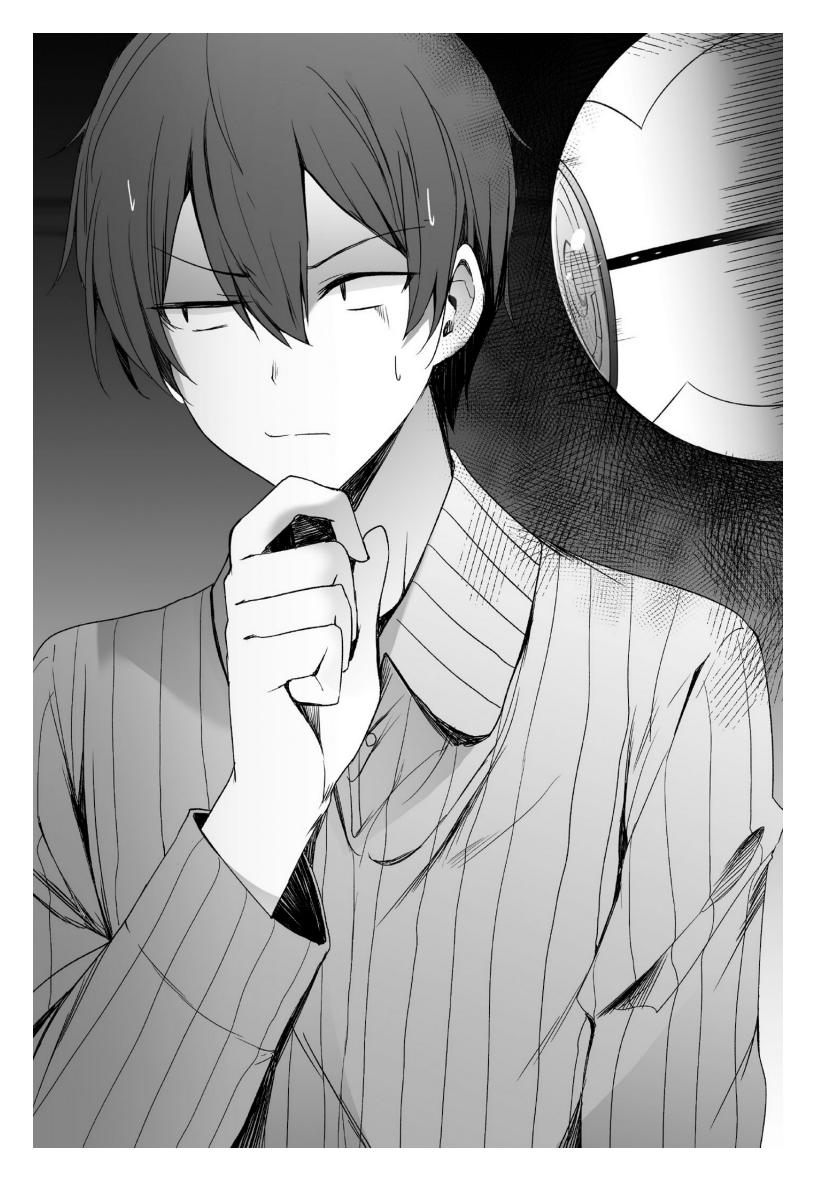
"Yeah, I get that, but... Well, it can't hurt to send him a letter. What'll you be up to?"

"At present, I am gathering information on Rachel. I must also revisit the matter of Erica and Mia's ailments. Perhaps it had slipped your notice, Master, but I am terribly busy myself." As if to drive the point home, he pressed his robot body closer, staring me down.

"Okay, okay, I get it. No need for the death glare."

That was that. I had decided on my course of action: utilize all connections at my disposal to figure out what the hell was going on.

The following morning, Mia spent some time in the Frazer castle before making her way to the dining hall for breakfast. Since she wasn't considered an aristocrat, she was left to join the servants at mealtime, just like any other guest of like rank. Finn and Brave joined her as usual, but on that day, Carl was with them as well.



Carl watched Mia as she ate, smiling. Frankly, it was a bit embarrassing to be stared at while shoveling down your breakfast.

"Uncle, please don't give me that look," Mia said, trying to sound mature. "I am a lady, you know."

"Sorry about that," Carl said with an even bigger grin. "By the way, do you already have plans today? If you don't, how about you and me go sightseeing together, hmm?"

Mia glanced briefly at Finn before lowering her gaze. "Um, I'll be starting the treatment for my illness soon, so I don't have much time." She and Finn had agreed to enlist Leon's help in investigating the cause of her condition.

Carl shared their concern about her illness, and he was pleased to learn they might be able to discover some clues about its origins. "That so? It's a shame, but you've got to prioritize your health."

"Yeah." Despite her excuses, Mia actually did have a little more time than she let on. She turned to Finn, who was seated beside her. Her cheeks heated. "Um, Mr. Knight!"

Finn consumed his breakfast with grace and aplomb. Brave hovered nearby, receiving his portion from Finn's plate. Alas, the concept of manners didn't exist for Brave. He crammed the food in his gob like a barbarian. When Mia addressed Finn, however, they both turned to her.

"Hmm?" said Finn.

Mia's heart pounded in her chest, the sound ringing in her ears as she managed to blurt out, "Um, how about we go out together today?"

Carl pulled a face, not altogether pleased with this turn of events.

Finn and Mia headed to the Frazers' famous lake. While Finn gazed at the natural fountain-esque display, he also enjoyed the sight of Mia's excited reaction. Her spirited personality reminded him of the little sister he'd had in his previous life.

"Look over there, Mr. Knight! There are boats. Boats! I'd love to ride one!"

Mia thrust a finger in the direction of the pier.

"Your wish is my command, Princess," Finn answered with a smile.

"There you go again, teasing me." Mia's cheeks filled with air as she huffed and turned away, pouting.

Finn chuckled. "I say it because it's how I truly feel. To me, you're nothing less than a princess." It wasn't flattery to him.

Mia's uncanny resemblance to his younger sister had hit Finn from the moment they'd first met. Even now, he vividly recalled his shock upon their introduction. He'd dissolved into tears. Mia had been so concerned that she'd raced over. Even back then, she had been as kind as she was caring.

Mia flushed bright red, embarrassed. "How can I look you in the face when you say something like that?" she asked sulkily.

Brave shook his head in exasperation as he watched them. "I don't really care either way, but if we're gonna ride the boat, let's get on with it. And I call the front, Partner!"

"Sure, I don't care," Finn said. "Just don't fall in."

"Seriously?! How am I gonna fall? Unlike you two, I float!"

The trio promptly made their way to the pier, where Finn forked over the rental fee so they could board a boat.

Carl used binoculars to keep tabs on Finn and Mia from a distance.

"That brat," he growled under his breath. "If he tries anything funny with Mia—anything at all—I'll have his head on a platter."

The sound of approaching footsteps caught his attention, and he craned his head back to see who it was. He found Leon standing behind him.

"Hmm? Oh, Mr. Carl, isn't it? What're you doing here?" Leon asked. His Al companion, Luxion, hovered close over his right shoulder. The inner ring of Luxion's red lens rotated as he regarded Carl. It gave Carl the distinct impression of being studied under a microscope, but he nonetheless met Leon's

questions with a smile.

"Mia's out on one of those boats, you see. Just figured I'd keep an eye on her from here."

Leon moved closer until he was standing beside Carl. He gazed out over the water and located Finn and Mia's boat rather quickly. "Huh, I see them. And they're attached at the hip as usual, hmm? Finn's guard dog routine never fails."

While Leon was evidently annoyed by Finn's helicopter tendencies, his AI companion jumped at the opportunity to point out his hypocrisy. "Master, perhaps I ought to note that you have absolutely no right to critique others in that regard. You've yet again spent all day with Noelle, and you've hovered over her to the degree that you would also qualify as 'overprotective.'"

Leon scowled. "Oh, shut it."

Carl's interest was piqued by their interaction, and he stroked his chin as he watched. Leon was also quick to notice his staring.

"Is something the matter?" Leon said.

Carl shook his head. "Nah, I was just thinking that you seem awfully close. That brat—uh, Hering, that is—and his partner Brave are the same way, though their relationship is a bit different. I found that amusing."

Neither Leon nor Luxion seemed pleased by this. They promptly swiveled away from one another.

"It takes a toll, dealing with an AI who doesn't understand the concept of loyalty," Leon grumbled.

"Having a curmudgeon for a master takes an even larger toll," Luxion countered.

They were starting to remind Carl of himself. It naturally left him feeling more comfortable. "Seems I hit a sore spot. Sorry about that. On a different note, it seems like things are getting pretty heated on the political front. I don't figure there's much you can say to an outsider like me, but is everything all right?"

Leon scratched his cheek, averting his gaze. That seemed as good an

indication as any that he had no intention of disclosing the finer details. Not that he really could in this circumstance. "There's a lot of hurdles making things tough. Honestly, I just hope we're able to end things peacefully."

"Peacefully, huh?" Carl studied him. "Hering's suggested you're pretty powerful in your own right. With all the resources you've got at your disposal, couldn't you deal with the Holy Kingdom of Rachel all by yourself?"

He had overstepped. Luxion was instantly on guard; he went completely silent, his red lens glued to Carl, watching his every move. Carl was sure that if he so much as twitched, Luxion would act. But while his survival instincts were now screeching, Leon didn't seem particularly bothered by the intrusive question. Had he let his guard down purely because Carl was an acquaintance of Finn and Mia?

"I'm not about violent dominion and all that," Leon said. "This might come as a surprise, but I'm actually a pacifist."

"The man known throughout the world as the Scumbag Knight is a *pacifist*?" Carl asked incredulously, though it was meant more as a teasing remark.

"Sounds like you're looking for someone else," Leon joked back. "I'm no scumbag, and I'm hardly the kind of powerhouse people need to fear. I just get called that for some reason."

"I think it's more apt to say it's less a nickname than the impression you leave in your wake. That aside, I must ask... What is your objective? You have attained great power. Surely there's something you wish to acquire by its means."

Status, glory, riches, women—if Leon desired, he could lay claim to any of these things. Carl wanted to know which he was most fixated on.

Leon scratched the back of his head and frowned. "Anything more than I've already got would be too much to handle. Originally, I was just supposed to be a baronet living a simple life out in the countryside. Makes you wonder what the hell I could have done to land myself where I am, huh?"

"You didn't wish for any of this?" Carl asked, his eyes wide as he gawked at Leon. "Not even a little? Every man's got some ambition to move up in the world, right?"

"Not me. I hate responsibility—especially all the crap that comes with it. If moving up the ranks means more burdens on me, I'd rather kick back on the bottom rung."

Carl continued to stare. Well, surely he isn't entirely without desire. Though, perhaps it is true that he doesn't have much in the way of political ambition.

Their conversation was cut short when Leon's head jerked back toward the lake. "Hey, doesn't something seem wrong down there?"

"Hmm?" Carl followed his gaze. "Wha?!"

Down at the pier, Mia had disembarked from the boat and bolted. She seemed to be sobbing. Behind her, Finn was rooted in place, though Brave had frantically taken off after Mia. It wasn't hard to guess what had gone down out on the water.

Carl seethed. That rotten brat! How dare he make my precious Mia cry!

The moment Mia returned to the castle, she holed herself up in her room. Erica was quick to realize something was amiss and headed straight for Mia's room along with Elijah. However, she entered without her fiancé. Given that this was a lady's room, Elijah elected to wait outside.

Within those four walls, Mia hugged her knees to her chest as she sobbed. Erica sat beside her and inched close.

"I see," she said, after hearing the details. "So you confessed your feelings."

Fat teardrops rolled down Mia's cheeks. "I just... I *love* Mr. Knight. I told him I wanted to be with him forever. But...but he said that he can't see me as anything other than a little sister."

For Mia, sharing the feelings she had long harbored was a major, life-altering act. Alas, she had been met with the cold reality that Finn regarded her as a sibling. He insisted he couldn't view her as a romantic partner. The shock hit her like a tidal wave.

Brave hovered in the corner of the room, having lingered to keep an eye on Mia. He had been fidgety and restless ever since, and he jumped in to say, "It's

not like he hates you, though! It's just... I mean, really, he...he does care about you. Greatly. Just not in a romantic sense..."

How could he explain it in a way that wouldn't further wound her heart? That question weighed on Brave so heavily that he remained unable to truly console her.

Erica gently stroked Mia's back. "I'm in awe of your courage," she said. "It's incredible that you shared your feelings with such honesty. You're a strong person, Mia."

Mia threw her arms around Erica, clinging to her. "Oh, Princess, I just... I really love... Waaaaah!" Before she could finish, she dissolved into violent sobs.

Erica could only hold the other girl as she continued caressing her.



Chapter 6: Long-Lost Little Sister

"YOU COMPLETE AND UTTER douche canoe!" Marie howled at the top of her lungs. "What part of Mia isn't good enough for you, huh? Huh?!"

In the middle of the night, Marie dragged me to the common room so she could rip into Finn. He was clearly dejected; his forehead rested against his threaded fingers as he stared at his feet.

"If she wanted anything else, I would do it without hesitation," he said. "But I cannot be her lover."

It seemed Mia had finally confessed her love for him earlier that afternoon. Where she was the protagonist of the third installment of this otome game series, Finn was like me—a random background character. It was flattering, really. But Finn had turned her down. I understood where he was coming from.

"I get it," I said confidently, nodding to myself. "You balked because you're not one of the game's love interests, right? Just a random, forgettable background character. Yep. I hear you, Finn."

Finn finally lifted his face, only to cock his head to the side. "No, that really doesn't have anything to do with it."

"It doesn't?" I gaped, looking like a fool.

"Perhaps it would be wise to refrain from assuming everyone shares your trivial concerns," Luxion said. "You looked so triumphant for a moment there, and yet your conclusions are wildly off the mark. Don't you feel the least bit ashamed?"

Marie also glared at me. "What a useless older brother. You're the only person who'd worry about something so stupid. I can't believe you even had the gall to say it. Remind me, who here has *three* fiancées?"

Aren't you guys being a little mean?! Now I was the one who'd been deflated.

"Uh, sorry," Finn cut in apologetically. "I mean, this isn't because I'm a background character or whatever. It's still true that I don't think I'm remotely suitable for Mia. How could I be, when I don't see her that way?"

I was touched by his warmth and kindness.

Marie, on the other hand...

"Don't get all hung up on stupid stuff like that," Marie scoffed. "If you like her, then you like her. End of story."

But while Finn seemed indecisive, he had his reasons. "It just isn't how I feel. Mia is like a little sister to me," he insisted. "My actual little sister—the one from my previous life, I mean—was seriously ill. She spent her whole life in the hospital."

From there, he filled us in on the finer details of that life and sister.

Evening had fallen by the time the young man finished his part-time job. With a gift in hand, he made his way to the hospital. As he walked down familiar halls on his way to his sister's room, he dipped his head here and there, greeting the nurses he passed. By this point, he had become well acquainted with all of them.

After opening the door to his sister's room, the young man made his way to the bed at the far end, closest to the window. She was playing a handheld game console.

"Are you enjoying that?" he asked.

Her head jerked up when she realized he'd come to visit. A smile spread across her face. "Yeah!"

As bright as her expression was, she looked like she had lost weight. He was sure she was even thinner now than she had been when she was first hospitalized. The console in her tiny hands looked bigger. It broke his heart to see that, but he couldn't show his emotions. They would only bring his little sister down. So he forced himself to smile.

"Yeah? Glad to hear it." He took his seat in the chair beside her bed.

His little sister set her console aside. The game she had been playing was one he'd bought for her. He had no idea which games were good and which weren't, so he'd selected an otome dating sim at random. Thankfully, she seemed to be enjoying it. And since she was so enamored, he found himself curious.

"What kind of game is it?"

His little sister's cheeks heated in embarrassment, but she eagerly explained. "The protagonist is enrolled in an academy where she develops relationships with a group of guys. It's really fun, so I've replayed it a bunch of times."

She had more free time than she knew what to do with, being stuck in the hospital. It wasn't surprising she had filled her days by playing his present over and over. She didn't exactly have any other options, not until she had more games, at least.

The young man paused before saying, "Once I get paid, I'll buy you another one. What kinda game do you want next?"

"You don't have to do that," she insisted with a guilty look. "Things are already tight enough for you, aren't they?"

"Don't worry about it. I can afford one game. So, what do you want?"

When he insisted, she paused to glance at the screen of her console—black, since it was in sleep mode. "If you're *sure*, then I think I'd like another game from this series."

"Another otome game? You really like them, huh?"

"Yeah. It makes me feel like I'm actually going to school myself."

Although she had been upbeat thus far, her expression darkened the moment she said this. At this point, it had been several years since she'd last been able to attend school. The young man clenched a fist, careful to keep it out of sight, lest she realize how much this upset him. His expression remained bright and cheerful despite his inner turmoil.

"It'll be fine," he assured her. "It may take some time for you to recover enough to return to your classes, but sooner or later, you'll get there." His sister looked into his eyes, her own filled with a desperate hope. She might as well have plunged a dagger into his heart.

"You mean it? I'll be able to play outside again? And go to school?"

"Yeah," he lied. "Absolutely. You'll be able to do both."

In truth, it was debatable whether she would ever be able to leave the hospital, but he wanted her to keep hoping.

She smiled. "It's a relief to hear you say that."

The young man swallowed hard. "W-well, it's true. So you just need to hurry up and get better."

"Yeah!"

It pained him to look directly into her eyes.

"Several months after that was the release day for the game my little sister desperately wanted. I bought it and was headed to the hospital." As he sat on the couch, Finn went back to resting his forehead on his intertwined fingers. I couldn't see his expression, but his voice strained as he recalled that painful day.

Marie and I found ourselves hanging on his every word with bated breath. Even Luxion kept silent as Finn went on.

"Oh, Partner..." Brave murmured, shedding a tear.

"On the way, my phone rang. I had a bad feeling. When I answered, it was the hospital. I rushed the rest of the way. I ran and ran as fast as I could, but...I didn't make it in time." He clutched his chest, balling the fabric of his shirt. The heartache and despair were just too vivid, even now. His little sister had obviously meant something very different to him than mine had to me.

Finn lifted his head and said the same thing he had before. "Mia reminds me so much of my sister."

I was accustomed to Finn's eternally cool, composed expression, but it was gone now, giving way to the vulnerability he hid beneath. Even though I was a

guy, the stark difference made me feel compelled to show him kindness. I could only imagine what seeing him like this would do to a girl. It'd surely trigger her maternal instincts, or at least some sort of womanly compassion.

"You told us that before," I reminded him. "That's why you're so intent on protecting her, right?"

"I mean, they're so similar that part of me wondered if my little sister had reincarnated here as Mia. When we first met, she was playing outside, and she was still so energetic and full of life."

I could see how he'd gotten that in his head. His sister had died in her hospital bed, so it was probably comforting to think she could have reincarnated into a healthy, more athletic body. But that was probably just wishful thinking.

Finn covered his face with his hands. It was hard to tell, but he seemed to be crying. "And now Mia's suffering from some unknown illness... It's not *fair*. How can the fates be so cruel? I would do absolutely anything for her. If she needed it, I would give my own life." Finn paused, swallowing a breath. "But...I cannot see her as anything other than a sister, however beloved."

Frankly, his feelings seemed to surpass what most people felt for their lovers. In his mind, Mia was family. And because of that, he couldn't see her as a potential romantic partner.

"Well, guess there's nothing you can do about that. If she really reminds you of your sister that much, then of course you're not going to develop those kinds of feelings for her," I said.

"Exactly. See, you understand. But for some reason, she's fallen for someone like me anyway. What am I supposed to do?" Finn cradled his head in his hands, at a complete loss.

I wasn't sure what to say. I had just settled on offering some generic words of comfort when Marie interrupted in a booming voice, one loud enough to make my ears ring.

"I can't believe I sat there and listened to all that weepy nonsense—ugh! If you like her, then you oughta just friggin' tell her!"

Finn and I jerked our heads toward her, aghast.

"Didn't you hear anything I just said?" Finn asked, dumbfounded. "To me, Mia is like a—"

"You dragging your past life into this is creepy as hell. Get it through your thick skull: Mia's *not* your little sister. Got it?"

"Y-yes, but—"

"Who cares if she reminds you of your little sister? To *Mia*, you're her beloved knight. And you've got the audacity to tell her you can't see her as anything but your sister? At least put some proper thought into your answer before blurting it out. You big stupid head!"

Finn opened his mouth to argue, but he snapped it shut just as quickly and didn't protest further. Marie's words had struck a chord. Mia saw him for himself, but he saw her as someone else. She wasn't his sister, though. Mia was her own person.

Still indignant, Marie crossed her legs, bouncing them in irritation as she sat there. Her anger was so palpable that she didn't even have to say anything for me to sense it.

"I'll give you credit for wanting to be some kind of nice, ideal older brother for your little sister," Marie said, more calmly than before. "But that's got absolutely *nothing* to do with Mia. Stop trying to see her as anyone other than who she is. It makes me wanna puke."

Finn looked devastated. Understandably so. Men tended to take it pretty hard when a girl said they were gross, let alone disgusting—or worse yet, made them "want to puke." Oof. I could only dream of being so hard-hearted that I could withstand such brutality. Even though I wasn't on the receiving end (this time), I unfortunately found myself down in the dumps too.

"Besides," Marie continued, intent on landing the finishing blow. "You *know* she'll be entering a capsule to undergo her physical exam, right? What're you thinking, causing unneeded stress at such a critical time like this? Do you really care about her?"

"Of course I do! From the bottom of my heart, I—"

"Okay, but as far as I'm concerned, it looks like you're only prioritizing

yourself. You only dote on Mia as much as you do because you feel guilty you couldn't save your little sister."

At first, Finn was enraged. He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth in frustration. I thought he might take a swing, but he balled his fists and held it in. He had realized there was some truth in her words; he was at fault too.

Brave had watched in silence thus far, but he couldn't abide the insult to his partner and shouted, "Enough already! Don't bully him any more than you already have! Take your anger out on me instead!" He darted in front of Finn and threw his tiny arms wide open, acting as a literal shield.

Now, see? That's what partners should do for each other. I shot Luxion a pointed look. He noticed and had no trouble guessing what was going through my head.

"I refuse to baby you, Master," he warned me. "It wouldn't be in your best interests."

"Funny. Seems to *me* like you're always on my case and never offer even a sliver of kindness."

While we bickered, Marie stared down her nose at Brave and said, "Gross."

That insult came as such a shock that Brave dropped to the ground, tears pouring from his eye.

"It's fine," he muttered dejectedly from the floor. "I'm cute. Partner says so, and Mia too."

As he broke down in sobs, I found myself muttering, "Guess Demonic Suit cores get their feelings hurt just like us, huh?"

Finn had kept his silence for a bit. He stood abruptly, snatched Brave off the floor, and marched out of the room.

"Where are you going?" I called after him.

"To see Mia. We need to have a proper conversation."

As soon as he was gone, I glared daggers at Marie. "You crossed the line. Have a little compassion for a guy's feelings."

"What're you talking about? Whatever. 'Mr. Knight' is the problem here—giving her so much grief before her physical exam! He could have handled that, like, a hundred better ways. At least say, 'I can't answer until all this is over,' or something."

I shook my head. "Finn only sees her as a little sister. You heard him. I know exactly where he's coming from. There's no way I could ever see *you* as a potential romantic partner." Just to confirm it for myself, I scanned Marie from head to toe. In any other woman, I'd immediately be drawn to her charms, but she did absolutely jack squat for me.

Marie slapped her arms over her chest and whipped around as if to hide her body from me. "Don't look at me with those bedroom eyes, you sick excuse for a brother!"

"Oh, excuse me. I didn't realize you had anything to look at. Compared to my girls, you're flat as a—brgh?!"

By the time I realized what was happening, Marie had launched off the couch and darted past my defenses. She jammed her elbow deep into my stomach. The pain hit like a freight train. I crumpled to my knees, arms wrapped protectively around my stomach.

"P-pardon me," I wheezed. "I shouldn't have said that."

"That's more like it." Having accepted my apology, Marie spun around and went back to the couch, where she perched on one of the arm rests. "Anyway, I'm not into incest either. That's a *total* no-go for me. There's no way I could ever see a crappy older brother that way. There's not even anything cute about you to begin with. Even if you were the last guy in the whole world, I'd choose to be single forever."

Still struggling with the throbbing ache in my solar plexus, I spat, "Guess it's ironic that this crappy, uncute older brother of yours happens to have *all five* of your little love interests at his beck and call. Oh, and have you forgotten that I also fork over the financial support for your daily expenses?"

"Ugh, you really are the scum of the earth! This is exactly what makes you such a crappy older brother!"

Luxion moved his lens from side to side—his way of shaking his head. "No matter how much time passes, you two remain exactly as you always have. I do not sense even the slightest hint of growth from either one of you."

That night, Angie, Julius, and Erica burst into Mylene's room. The sheer panic on their faces made it easy for Mylene to guess what had brought them there at that hour.

"My, how you three have grown. To think you'd suddenly charge into someone's room, looking white as sheets." Mylene set down the book she had been reading on the end table and scanned their faces.

"Is it true that the palace is trying to curtail the regional nobility's power?"

Julius demanded. "But why? Why would you do such a thing now, of all times?"

He pinned her with a glare, a clear indication of how deeply he loathed these actions.

Mylene regarded her son with cold, unfeeling eyes. "This has been the way of the kingdom for the past century, has it not? We simply haven't changed our underlying policy. Not in the past, and not now."

"But things were finally starting to settle down. What reason is there to stir the pot? Now that Leon has aligned himself with our house, we should be joining hands to—"

"Joining hands?" Mylene interrupted, incredulous. "Ridiculous." She laughed off the very notion, though the emotion quickly drained from her face. "Are you suggesting that peace in the moment is peace enough? Such choices have repercussions that span far further than a few simple years. If you truly think of yourself as part of the royal family, then you should consider the ripple effects that extend decades, even centuries, onward. Only then will your words have any meaning."

Julius clenched his jaw.

"Mother," Erica interjected, "even with all that in mind, you're taking things too far. If our country descends into chaos, it is the people who will suffer. If that happens, there will be no point to any of our actions. Please, I beg you to

reconsider. It isn't too late."

Her words rang true: The nobility weren't the only ones who stood to suffer from the queen's actions. Those living in or even close to the borderlands would suffer casualties as well.

Mylene glared at her daughter. "I will not hear you comment on national politics with such shallow, half-baked thoughts. Yes, there will be casualties in the short-term. But what of the long-term?"

"The long-term? Um, I..." Erica hesitated, taken aback.

Mylene lifted herself from her chair. She strode to the window and gazed out. With her back turned to her visitors, she explained, "Holfortian nobility have long desired independence. Calling them 'the descendants of adventurers' paints them in an egregiously positive light. In truth, they're nothing more than idealistic dreamers who hoped to strike it big with minimal effort. Loyalty and obligation mean nothing to them. Their own self-interest is ever at the forefront of their minds, and this propensity has been passed down from generation to generation."

Neither her children nor Angie could argue the point, given how true her words rang.

Mylene turned back to them. "I taught you our history, didn't I? Or have you forgotten the grief the regional lords have caused this kingdom? To Holfort as a nation, the regional nobility are latent enemies. I have warned you of this."

Over the kingdom's long history, the regional nobility's power and influence had weakened considerably. But one only had to trace their ancestry to see that the majority of these lords and ladies descended from houses who had once stood against the kingdom. The only reasons they had bent the knee and sworn their allegiance to the throne were because of the royal family's ancestral ship and their extremely powerful, very capable military. In spite of those factors, many had since attempted rebellion and traded blows with the kingdom.

"The reason we originally elevated women over men and oppressed the regional lords was to curtail their power. That policy was only made possible by the military might at our disposal. But with our royal ship gone, we are once again vulnerable. We don't know when the regional nobility will turn traitor."

"B-but still," Erica tried to say.

Mylene cut her off. "Consider what will happen once this crisis has passed. Let's assume those idiotic lords fall to the temptations of neighboring nations and declare their independence. How much blood do you imagine will be spilled in the ensuing civil war? If more regions follow suit—and they inevitably will—the fighting will only grow more intense. When that happens, average citizens will be drafted into the fight."

Erica pursed her lips tight.

"We have Leon on our side," Angelica argued, still hoping she could persuade the queen where the other two had failed. "Though they may begrudge it, the regional lords will fall in line if Leon is aligned with the crown. They won't be able to declare independence in those circumstances."

"True, for the time being. And? For how many decades will Duke Bartfort live? For how many will he shoulder that duty? What guarantee do we have that his successor won't scheme to usurp the throne? Will the kingdom exist in a hundred years?" Mylene met every argument with one of her own, refusing to entertain their opinions.

In their eyes, she looked like a stubborn mule.

"You've made your point," Julius said, having given up on arguing any further. "But what is your end goal? After this war is over, what is it you hope to achieve?"

There was a brief pause as Mylene gave the question serious consideration. Soon enough, she explained, "Absolute victory is a foolhardy endeavor. If we win too decisively, those keeping an eye on the outcome of this war will grow even warier of our power. This is particularly true of the empire. It would be a politically and militarily disadvantageous in the extreme to make them our enemy."

In other words, Mylene intended to avoid international conflict by purposefully sustaining casualties since total victory would only invoke the ire of other nations.

"We will permit a degree of sacrifice for the sake of appearances. Then, we

will narrowly snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. This will put the world's mind at ease. Ideally, we'll be able to negotiate favorable conditions for ourselves and achieve peace with our neighbors." Mylene's lips curled into a sinister smile. "But before that, Rachel must be utterly annihilated. I stationed the duke here expressly to ensure their demise. As the war nears its conclusion, we will invade and lay waste. Without their leader, the Armed Defense Concordat will crumble. After that, all that remains will be to negotiate a truce with each individual nation."

Angie's brow creased as she glowered at the queen. "You mean to use Leon for your own ends? You assured me you didn't want him on the battlefield!"

Any ordinary person would have flinched or otherwise shrunk under the intensity of Angie's death glare. Not Mylene. Her expression remained composed as she turned toward Angie. "The nobility are born for battle. There is no meaning to their status without that birthright. He swore his allegiance to the crown, so I will hold him to his vow. Besides, he has faced more serious fights. Surely, this won't bother him."

As long as Mylene had Leon at her disposal, she was right to think her plan would go smoothly. But Angie was far more concerned with Leon's mental wellbeing.

"How cold," Angie said. "Surely you know how deeply Leon respects you. How he cares for you."

"I taught you better. One's emotions are meaningless in the face of the kingdom's future. You must realize it only came to this because of you—all of you."

The trio were gobsmacked. They stared at her in open confusion. None of them could even begin to fathom what she meant.

Mylene's gaze fixed on Erica. "I never planned to take things this far, not as long as you married the duke. The heir you bore would have inherited Luxion and brought new power to the royal family."

The blood drained from Erica's cheeks. She now felt personally responsible for betraying her mother's wishes. She averted her gaze to the floor, her body trembling.

"If that's what this is about, there's no reason why it had to be Erica," Julius argued, quick to come to his sister's defense. "You could accomplish the same thing by having Leon and Angie's child marry into our family instead."

Mylene scoffed. "After the way every one of you insisted on doing things your way despite your parents' wishes, you would force your children into a political marriage in your stead? Even if you said you would, I wouldn't place my faith in you. Not after you prioritized your feelings over your responsibilities."

She had a point. All three of them had defied political arrangements, choosing instead to honor their feelings. Even if they promised their children to political marriages, there would be no guarantee they wouldn't later renege on their vows. It was only natural for Mylene to be skeptical.

"This is the last thing I will teach you," the queen said with a brief sigh. "Take responsibility for your actions. While you're at it, be sure to convey these words to the duke for me: Those with an excess of power inevitably change the world, whether they will it or not."

Chapter 7: Womanizer

"DEAR, SWEET Leon!"

An airship of House Atlee had come to port in the Frazer's public transport harbor. Clarice Fia Atlee waved excitedly at me from its deck. She had been my upperclassman at the academy but had since graduated. Her vivid orange hair danced in the wind, and her emerald eyes were glued on my face.

I had sent Miss Clarice a letter asking her to fill me in on how things were going at the palace. I had anticipated that she would simply write back, but given her sudden appearance, it seemed more like I'd inadvertently summoned her instead.

I felt guilty that she'd gone to all the trouble to come here, but seeing the way she grinned as she continued to wave brought me some relief.



Once the gangway was lowered, Clarice strolled down to meet me.

"Sorry for making you come all this way," I said.

"Oh? Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Of course I am, but it had to be tough traveling to a border region under the current circumstances."

We were on the cusp of war. The entire country had been thrown into chaos. Commandeering airships had become way more of a hassle.

As I strolled away from her family airship, Miss Clarice fell in beside me with an easy gait. "Border or not, I'm perfectly safe as long as you're around, aren't I? Besides, I thought it'd be more convenient to come speak with you directly," she said.

I tilted my head. What part of this was convenient?

Miss Clarice schooled her expression, the smile disappearing from her face. She wasn't going to beat around the bush. "Is there somewhere we can go where we won't be interrupted? What I've come to discuss isn't meant for anyone else's ears. I would prefer to speak with you alone."

Whatever it is, it must be really important. I glanced at Luxion. "What do you think?"

"If you conduct your discussion aboard the *Einhorn*, you can rest assured no one will eavesdrop. Of course, I will be sitting in on your meeting as well." He looked at Miss Clarice.

"That's fine. I don't mind. After all, you're Leon's familiar."

"I am no such thing. There is nothing remotely magical nor mystical about my existence. I am the embodiment of scientific achievement."

Miss Clarice grinned even as he corrected her. "Sure, sorry about that."

We boarded the *Einhorn* and headed to the common room. Miss Clarice promptly sat on the couch to relay the latest news from the palace.

"Long story short, the central government has already begun to proceed with

a plan to abandon the regional lords and their houses."

"Does Minister Bernard support this move?" I asked.

On top of being Miss Clarice's father, he was one of the top-ranking ministers in Holfort. As a court noble, he was well-versed in the inner workings of its politics.

"He opposed the measure, but it seems Her Majesty pushed it through regardless." Miss Clarice's brows knitted the moment she mentioned the queen, seemingly out of wariness. "I mean, it's not that surprising. She's originally from Lepart, and she's got a real grudge against Rachel."

"A grudge, you say?"

She nodded. "The states that make up the United Kingdom of Lepart only joined hands because of Rachel's relentless invasions. Long ago, they were just a bunch of small countries crammed onto one continent, constantly locked in conflict with one another. I understand Rachel really did a number on them."

The way she framed it, it sounded like Rachel was in the habit of antagonizing everyone in the vicinity. Calling them a bad neighbor was putting it mildly.

"So that's why Her Majesty'll do whatever it takes to crush them," I said.

"Yep, because that way, her home country of Lepart will finally be able to rest at ease. The kingdom will be the worse for wear, sure, but the royal family will still reap the benefits of this outcome."

It was my turn to knit my brows and frown.

"You should know that not everyone agrees with this strategy," Miss Clarice added quickly. "In fact, His Majesty was strongly opposed."

"Roland was?" My voice hitched with surprise.

"Whoa. Can't believe you're on a first-name basis. Then again, you're probably the only person in the kingdom who could get away with that."

Even Roland couldn't stop me. What a useless king.

Miss Clarice left her current seat to settle in beside me. "So? What do you want to do?"

"If possible, I'd like to wrap things up before actual war breaks out," I said.

Miss Clarice averted her gaze. "If it were that easy, we wouldn't be in this mess. It's not like toppling Rachel will solve all our problems. If you go overboard, the empire will intervene. That transfer student—the imperial knight—he's your friend, right? If things go sour, you might find yourself facing him on the battlefield."

I had no way of knowing how many Demonic Suits the empire had in its possession, but even if the answer was zero, I wasn't looking to be enemies with Finn. Especially if I had no guarantee that he *wasn't* the only one capable of fighting Arroganz on even ground.

"You've got a point," I admitted, hanging my head in disappointment.

Miss Clarice gently placed her hand on top of mine. "Hey, how about we rally the faction opposing the queen? If we all join hands, Her Majesty will have no choice but to change course. At the very least, we can guarantee the regional nobility won't be abandoned."

"Can we really do that?"

"Of course. Although, I'll require compensation in return..."

I struggled to follow her words. Before I realized it, her face was right next to mine. We were so close our noses nearly brushed. I blinked several times, shocked by the sudden absence of distance between us.

"Angelica's here," Luxion said.

"Huh?" I yelped.

No sooner had I looked at the door when it burst open. Angelica stood on the threshold, her shoulders heaving with exertion. She must have sprinted here at full speed. In fact, I could hear a flurry of footsteps coming up behind her. Livia and Noelle were right on her heels.

"Clarice!" Angie roared.

Miss Clarice clicked her tongue in annoyance and pulled away from me. Not far, though—only about a hand's breadth.

"I was only kidding," she said. "No need to get so wound up."

"I really can't let my guard down with you. You're just like the rest of the court nobility. Always playing dirty."

"Or is it that you're just like the rest of the regional lords? Always so quick to offense," Miss Clarice said in a low, threatening voice.

The girls glared at one another. That gave Noelle and Livia just enough time to catch up. They were far more winded than Angie, their faces pinched with exhaustion.

"We finally made it," Livia wheezed.

"Angelica, you're too fast," said Noelle.

They crumpled onto the floor, completely sapped.

I shot Luxion a look. "You told them I was meeting with Miss Clarice?"

"Of course I did."

After a small break, we resumed our earlier conversation, albeit with my fiancées. Miss Clarice grinned from ear to ear while the girls scowled at her. Their clear displeasure made for a far less comfortable atmosphere. I *needed* to get this over with.

"Anyway, you think we can get the opposition to agree to block the current plan of action? Even though this move benefits the court nobility on the whole?" I asked.

Miss Clarice glanced at me and gave a small nod. "The court is a complicated creature. Numerous lords oppose the queen, so I believe we can summon their cooperation to block her. Honestly, she's made too many enemies. It seems like she got impatient and tried to force her gambit through, which has left a number of people feeling sore."

Angie lifted a closed hand to her mouth as she considered this information. "Her Majesty said this war is a prime opportunity to deal with latent enemies. Getting rid of the traitors will fortify the royal family's base of power."

"Makes sense. Relying on someone else's clout to keep them at the top would hurt their legitimacy, after all." Miss Clarice glanced at me as she said that. They had a point; I was the only one who could control Luxion. With how things currently stood, that put the royal family at my mercy. If things went on the way they were, they'd be royals in name only.

"Personally, I'd still like to stay on good terms with them," I said.

Miss Clarice sighed and leaned back on the couch. "That might be why Her Majesty's having such a hard time. I mean, if Leon came out and said he wanted to be king, he'd have the throne in a minute. That possibility probably terrifies the queen."

"Me? Become king? Not possible."

"It totally is," Miss Clarice insisted. "A number of the lords simply adore you, or they're otherwise willing to pledge their loyalty to your house." She promptly produced a letter and placed it on the coffee table. Several seals were stamped upon it. I recognized two of the house emblems as belonging to Earl Roseblade and Earl Mottley. I wasn't familiar with the rest.

Angie snatched up the letter. "You've grown popular," she said, shooting me a small smile.

So I had the power to take the throne... I even had men willing to pledge their loyalty to me. It seemed I had everything I needed to establish myself as a king.

"Kinda scary that so many people like me after being loathed at the academy," I said.

"Mind if I take a peek inside?" Angie asked.

I shook my head, and she quickly broke the seal on the envelope to pull out the letter. After scanning it, she let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

"It says that some regional lords are already preparing to betray the kingdom. Once the war begins, they plan to escort the enemy straight through their lands so they may more easily strike our central regions."

"They must already think the kingdom has abandoned them, then," Livia said, dropping her gaze to her clenched hands, which rested on her lap.

"That's because the kingdom *has* abandoned them," Miss Clarice said, putting great emphasis on her words. "They *know* that. That's why they are getting

ready to switch sides."

The envelope also included a letter from House Roseblade, which Angie flipped to next. Her jaw dropped. "It seems some of them have begun pressuring Baron Bartfort to persuade Leon. Several envoys have been dispatched to speak with him."

"They're trying to pressure my dad?!" I was so shocked that I shot out of my seat.

"The lords plotting treason are scared of Leon," Miss Clarice concluded. She folded her arms and sighed. "If not for that, they probably wouldn't hesitate."

Angie continued, "It seems the Roseblades have intercepted these envoys and turned down their requests to meet with your father on the Bartforts' behalf. Given all this, it seems Lord Nicks's marriage to Dorothea was the right call."

It was a great comfort to know the Roseblades were doing their utmost to protect my family. But my relief was somewhat short-lived; Angie's face had hardened.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Deirdre penned this letter," she said. "She says she expects a reward."

"Oh yeah? Then I'll have to do something nice for her."

I reached out to take the letter so I could see it for myself, but before I had the chance, Angie crumpled and threw it to the ground.

"Wha?" I gasped.

"You don't need to read it," Angie insisted, visibly enraged. Her tone left no room for argument.

Before she'd crushed it completely, I had gotten a brief look at the signature. It seemed like it had been sealed with a lipstick kiss right at the end, but maybe I only imagined it.

I fell into silent contemplation, scratching my head as I tried to come up with an answer. How were we going to handle this predicament?

Noelle noticed my troubled expression. "So...how are you thinking you'll

respond?"

If I wanted to resolve this, I had only one choice... "I'm going to try to convince Miss Mylene myself. After that, I'll consult Finn."

Angie's brows drew together. "I admit he's a powerful knight, but his status doesn't seem so significant that he can provide a useful opinion on the empire's stance."

"Maybe not. But I still need to talk to him."

Mylene strolled down the hallway, two maids following close behind her. She paused at a window, where she caught a glimpse of the castle's inner courtyard.

"The Frazers certainly put a lot of effort into their gardens," she noted.

It seemed to her that the current head of the house had taken up gardening as a hobby.

"Yes," agreed one of the maids, "apparently the marquess tends them himself."

"That explains why everything seems so particular." Mylene stepped closer to the window so she could peer down into the courtyard from her second floor window.

Down below, Ivan—the dapper diplomat, as Leon called him—was engaged in a lively conversation with a younger woman. Lines formed on Mylene's forehead. She let out a small sigh, and all emotion drained from her face.

"He's just as superficial as I remember."

Mylene and Ivan were longtime acquaintances. To Ivan, flirting came as easily as breathing. He had even tried to make eyes at Mylene—far more than once, in fact. His enamored focus on this very young woman served as a bitter reminder for the queen that she was growing older. It was as if the world wanted to remind her that her youth had long since fled. Such sights were painful.

Mylene finally peeled herself from the window and continued down the corridor. Her maids were the first to notice someone approaching.

"Lady Mylene," one of them warned.

"Yes, I know."

Leon strode toward them from the opposite direction, Luxion at his side, as usual. He had even brought a gift.

"Your Majesty, won't you have some tea with me?" he asked, speaking to her with all due respect in consideration of the maids in their company.

Mylene forced a smile. "Unfortunately, a prior engagement requires my attendance. My apologies."

"That is untrue," Luxion interrupted. "You claim you have no time to spare for my master, but your next engagement isn't for another three hours."

"What, seriously?" Leon's jaw dropped, but his expression soon became that of bitter disappointment. No, worse—he looked *hurt*. "I guess you must hate me then, huh?" His tone was joking, but the wounded look on his face stirred Mylene's pity.

After a long sigh, she said, "All right, fine. I can spare a moment—a brief one."

Leon's face instantly lit up. "Thank you. I have some special leaves I brought just for you. They'll make for a delicious brew, you can count on that."

Though he said that, Mylene knew he had an ulterior motive for extending an invitation at a time like this. She turned to her maids. "Please take your leave."

I was over the moon. This would be my first time having tea with Miss Mylene in ages. While I eagerly got down to brewing a pot, Miss Mylene struck up conversation.

"You have something to say, don't you?"

She had already guessed my reason for inviting her. Nonetheless, I continued preparing our tea as I got to the point.

"I don't like the idea of things spinning out of control in the kingdom. That's why I'm thinking of getting this whole affair sorted as quickly as possible."

I poured her portion into a cup, which I handed to her. She glanced at the

rippling liquid within, a teasing smile on her lips.

"I believe I told you we wouldn't be in this mess if things were so simple," said Miss Mylene. "Angie informed me that the battle between you and that imperial transfer student ended in a draw. There is a distinct possibility they have even greater knights and weapons at their disposal. If they do, do you still think you can defeat them?"

"I have no intention of fighting the empire."

"You may not wish to face them, but that doesn't mean the enemy will see eye to eye with you. Everyone fears that which is substantially more powerful than them."

Miss Mylene was so set on her current course that even Angie had failed to dissuade her from it. There was no way she'd just up and agree with me, even if I tried to approach this from a political angle. That was why I'd decided I was going to force my point. I wasn't going to give her the *option* to argue.

"Jilk and the boys are working to bring the Armed Defense Concordat crumbling down. House Fanoss has also promised not to turn traitor," I said.

"Yes, and that was a completely unnecessary, meddlesome maneuver. It's difficult to believe that they were all disinherited from their houses." Miss Mylene shook her head.

I could more or less see what she was trying to say. They were proving themselves quite capable these days, and she likely wished they'd done it sooner—before they'd lost their prominent positions. It was hard not to lament the waste.

"I do feel bad about going behind your back and all, but I hate war," I said.

When I took my seat at the table, Miss Mylene lifted her head and stared right at me. "That is the very arrogance only those of exceptional strength can exhibit. If not for your Lost Item and the overwhelming influence it provides, you wouldn't have the luxury."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes. You have the option of stopping a war on a whim. If you don't call that

arrogance, what else would you call it?"

Now I saw what she was getting at. For most people, war was something they got swept up in whether they willed it or not. I had the rare and exceptional choice to stop it, if I so desired. I could just as easily start a war, if that was what I wanted. Having so many choices was a real luxury.

"In that case, sure, call me arrogant. I don't care." I shrugged. "The point is, what's the point of manipulating our enemies purely to make our allies suffer, huh?"

"Haven't we already discussed this? The kingdom—no, the royal family specifically—sees the regional lords as future enemies."

"Yes, you've said that. But *right now* they're allies, aren't they?" I smiled blithely.

Wrinkles formed in Miss Mylene's brow. She wasn't too keen on my attitude. "Duke, have you given any thought to the future? Have you imagined the world a hundred years from now?"

"Nope." I shook my head. "I won't be alive, so it has nothing to do with me."

"I see. Well, it may not concern you, but the royal family has a duty to protect the best interests of the nation's future." Miss Mylene regarded me with open dismay, obviously put off by my answer.

Duty, huh? I'm impressed. Her sense of responsibility is so strong. I relaxed my shoulders and sipped my tea before setting the cup on the table. "I hate the way you're doing things." I looked her straight in the eyes as I spoke "So I'm going to finish it my way."

The seconds slowly trickled by—too many for me to count. Miss Mylene at last averted her gaze, chewing on her bottom lip. She was finally acquiescing. "If that's your decision, the royal family lacks the power to stop you at the moment."

"I'm sorry, but I don't intend to settle this in a way that will cause further problems for Holfort."

I would do whatever it took to ensure no other countries joined forces against

us.

"Can you really do that?" Miss Mylene eyed me with pure disbelief. "This won't be as simple as merely defeating an enemy."

"I'll find a way."

I provided no basis for my confidence, which was why my declaration seemed to boggle her mind. I knew I couldn't best Miss Mylene in an argument when it came to reason and logic. The only option was to refuse to relent.

Miss Mylene closed her eyes for a moment. "I envy you," she murmured, "for how freely and independently you live your life. If only I had more power, then I could have lived the way I wanted as well."

"It's not too late for that," I said lightly.

Miss Mylene glanced up at me. The tension had left her face. She even looked relaxed. "I genuinely wanted you to marry Erica," Miss Mylene admitted. "I am sure she would be happy, if she were with you."

"I hate to say this—really, I do—but Her Highness seems set on the guy she's already engaged to."

Miss Mylene nodded thoughtfully. "He isn't a bad fellow, but he doesn't measure up. If she were wed to you, her future, and the future of the country, would be guaranteed. Unfortunately, my wishes weren't to be," she said with clear self-derision.

It was impossible for her to know that Erica had once been my niece; surely she wouldn't have tried to pair us up if she had. There was no way I could marry my niece, though.

"Cut me some slack, please," I said. "I'd rather marry you than the princess."

Miss Mylene stared at me, initially unable to digest what I'd said. She blinked several times. It was only when my words finally sank in that her cheeks flushed bright red. "You have some nerve to tease me at a time like this," she said, pouting.

"But I'm not teasing, not at all."

"I can't believe you would claim such a thing after how often you called on

Erica. Men only go to such lengths for young women."

I looked her straight into her eyes. "For me, you have *far* more appeal than any younger woman."

"Th-there you go, teasing me again." Gone was the cold, harsh attitude Miss Mylene had taken with me as of late. She was back to being her usual adorable self—the same Miss Mylene I remembered from the day we'd first met.

"No," I insisted, "I really mean it!"

"You do?!"

It troubled me that she thought I was being disingenuous, so I answered with all the solemnity I could muster. "I prefer you to Princess Erica. If I had to marry one of you, I would want it to be *you*, Miss Mylene."



Honestly, she would have been perfect, if she weren't the queen. I honestly wished she hadn't married that rat bastard Roland.

Miss Mylene's blush extended all the way to her ears. Embarrassed, she snatched up her tea cup and swallowed every last drop, trying desperately to regain her composure.

"You really are a terrible man, Duke—Leon," she corrected herself, finally calling me by my name again.

"You think so?"

As Ivan ambled down one of the castle corridors, he noticed a couple of flustered maids. *Hmm? Don't those two serve Queen Mylene?* They stood in front of a closed door, fidgeting restlessly. Unable to ignore his curiosity, Ivan approached.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

The maids looked relieved to see him, and they were quick to divulge the truth of the situation.

"Her Majesty told us she wanted to be alone with Duke Bartfort."

"It wouldn't ordinarily be appropriate for the queen to put herself in such a situation, but she said it would be an ideal opportunity to persuade the duke to see her side."

For a queen to be alone with a man other than her husband was nothing short of a scandal. Whether anything actually happened was beside the point; making assumptions and spreading malicious rumors was just human nature. Still, Ivan agreed that this was a prime opportunity.

"There's nothing for you to worry about," he assured the maids. "Queen Mylene is the last person who'd do something crass enough to damage her reputation."

The boy's naive, and he's preoccupied with his sense of justice. That's why he sent off one of his ships without her permission and is showing such reluctance to adhere to her plan. No matter. Her Majesty is cunning. She'll have him

dancing in the palm of her hand. Ivan was certain that Mylene would cajole the duke for the sake of her home country.

As anticipation swelled in his chest, the door swung open. Ivan's eyes widened as Mylene and Leon emerged, his jaw hanging ajar. Wh-what's this?!

Ivan was a playboy by nature and spent most of his days making moves on women. Through his many years of experience, he'd grown keen to the subtleties of female body language. A single glance made it obvious that something had happened between these two. If that weren't enough, Leon held one of Mylene's hands in both of his own.

"There's no need for you to worry. I'll deal with everything," Leon told her. "Your Majesty—no, Miss Mylene—I promise to bring you good news with all haste."

"You certainly are a persuasive fellow, I'll give you that. I shall await your report, though my expectations are low."

Ivan saw right through Mylene's expression and gestures, straight to the emotions she kept buried deep inside. She claimed she wasn't holding out hope, but her cheeks were flushed. She kept her head turned away from Leon, but her body was turned toward him. She was acting exactly like an embarrassed young teen in the throes of first love.

A cold sweat broke out on Ivan's forehead. Th-this is Queen Mylene we're talking about! The woman people call a scheming witch! But she's acting like a lovelorn girl in front of this brat?! I completely underestimated him. He's not naive. He's clearly an experienced womanizer!

Ivan trembled as he watched the duke and queen bob their heads at one another and part ways, both terrified and awestruck.

The two maids chased after the queen, leaving him all by himself.

"So Queen Mylene is the one who was cajoled," Ivan muttered in disbelief.

Chapter 8: Get Them Before They Get You

"Uncle, how exactly did you manage to persuade her?"

When Erica learned that the ever-stubborn Mylene had changed her stance, it came as a true shock. She was quick to hound Leon for answers the following morning.

Marie and Luxion were in the hallway as well. For his part, Leon tilted his head in confusion, which instantly prompted Marie's expression to sour.

"I just persuaded her the same way anyone would," he insisted.

Marie scoffed and turned away. "He definitely did *something*. I can promise you that." She had approximately zero faith in her brother.

"The truth, please, Uncle," Erica pleaded, convinced there had to be something more. How else could Mylene's

dramatic change of heart be explained? "This war has the potential to shape the kingdom's future. It's of paramount importance to her. I cannot bring myself to believe she would so easily change her mind."

Leon's face pinched. He lifted his gaze to the ceiling, lost in thought for a moment. "No, really. All I told her was to trust me and let me handle it," he said at last. "I don't think I said much of anything else."

"Th-that was all it took?" Erica was speechless. No matter how desperately she, her brother, and Angie had tried to sway Mylene, the queen had held fast to her convictions. Meanwhile, Leon had accomplished what they'd failed to in a single meeting. She couldn't fathom it.

Although Erica would never say as much to Leon, she knew his expertise was, at best, average when it came to political and military matters. After all, he'd grown up as the son of a humble baron in the peaceful countryside. She could tell he didn't have any interest in politics either; he'd never shown any inclination of involving himself in them before.

"All right, then, how do you plan to stop this war?" Erica said.

"That should be obvious, right?" Leon answered without missing a beat. "I'll fly into Rachel's capital and serve their holy king a nice, big knuckle sandwich."

Erica was speechless. What was she supposed to say to that? Leon had completely dismissed the fact that if they solved this war quickly and through force, it would only make Holfort's neighbors even warier. On the other hand, Leon didn't seem like he intended to go to war with the empire, despite knowing that his "solution" would likely lead straight to that end.

"I know you must be worried, but there's no need to dwell on it," Marie assured her daughter. She could empathize, having dealt with Leon for as long as she had. "At times like these, Big Bro always managed to pull through somehow, no matter how bad things looked."

"M-Mother? You actually trust him?"

Marie jerked her head away, feeling a little embarrassed. "I don't know if I'd call it *trust* so much as...intuition?" She scratched her cheek. "All I can say is, I've known him long enough that I more or less sense where things are going...if that makes sense."

As far as Erica saw it, Marie most certainly *did* trust Leon. Regardless, she sensed further debate would be unproductive, so she settled on asking Leon one final question. "Uncle, are you *sure* everything will be all right?"

"Have a little faith in me." Leon slapped his hand to his chest and grinned. "In case you forgot, I've got Luxion."

Said AI looked less than enthused that his master planned to yet again dump all the responsibility on him. "So you will be using my power after all."

"Duh. Of course. Are you crazy? What am I gonna do, stop a war all by myself?"

Erica studied the pair, feeling a sudden headache coming on. Their behavior made it difficult to believe that the future of the kingdom was truly safe in their hands.

As Erica headed back to her room, she bumped into Mylene in the hall. The moment Mylene noticed her, she flinched. Why did she seem so surprised? Erica found it odd.

"Good morning, Mother."

"Y-yes, morning."

Mylene's awkwardness had Erica puzzled. Just days before, her mother had been on edge; tension had followed in her wake no matter where she went. She was ordinarily calmer and more dignified. Although she was kind, she could be strict at times as well. But as she stood before Erica now, she seemed troubled —no, apologetic?

"Did something happen?" Erica asked.

"Let's have a little chat." Mylene motioned for her maids to leave so they could speak privately. The maids backed away, disappearing into the shadows of the pillars lining the corridor.

"Erica, I was wrong."

"Mother, what is this about?"

Frankly, Erica was dumbstruck. Did her mother mean to...apologize?

Mylene grimaced. She was annoyed, not with Erica but herself, and she struggled to explain that. "I mean this in regards to the war, of course, but also in the matter of your relationship with Leon. I thought the union would be in your best interest—that he would make you happy. But that was wishful thinking on my part rather than what you wanted."

"Yes, because I already had Elijah."

Mylene had genuinely considered annulling Erica's engagement with the heir of House Frazer. She felt terribly guilty about that now. "Here I wanted my daughter to be happy, but all I was doing was forcing my own vision of the future onto you. To be perfectly honest, I truly did want you to be happy, even if you were bound to a political marriage."

Mylene herself had been forced into a political marriage with Roland, and it would have been extremely charitable to call theirs a happy union. That went

both ways; Roland hardly loved her either. Such was the way of these arrangements. Neither the feelings nor opinions of the individuals involved were factors. Even knowing all that, Mylene had hoped her daughter could at least be happy in her future union, and she had thought Leon the perfect fit.

"I realize now it was conceited of me. I didn't consider your feelings at all. Instead, I only caused you trouble."

Erica understood where her mother was coming from, which was why she couldn't blame her. Holfort Kingdom was in a precarious state. Every step they took was on the thinnest ice. As queen, it was Mylene's responsibility to make critical decisions, and the stress that came with those duties was overwhelming. She had only resorted to these extreme measures because she found herself with no other options.

"I understand you occupy a difficult position as queen." Erica clutched her chest as she spoke. "So please, don't trouble yourself any further."

Mylene's eyes shimmered. "If only you had been a wicked soul, I might have raised you to be my successor. Instead, you've grown into a kind and honest daughter, for which I am so very grateful." Though at first she seemed to be scolding Erica, it became quickly apparent how proud she was of her daughter's growth—proud that her daughter had managed to conduct herself with such superior equanimity.

As Mylene wiped away her tears, Erica could only stare at her mother, awestruck. "Mother...?"

"It's nothing," Mylene insisted. "I've just realized how much you and Julius have matured. I wasn't able to parent you as much as I should have, but seeing that neither of you need me anymore makes me feel a little lonesome." Hers were tears of happiness.

Seeing her mother like this left Erica conflicted. She was sorry for her mother's sake that she hadn't been a normal child—for having memories of a past life. At the same time, she lamented that this little exchange was ill-suited to asking certain important questions that were nagging at her.

I wanted to get the details about her meeting with Uncle, but I obviously can't bring that up now.

There were a number of benches at the Frazers' lake, what with it being a popular tourist destination. One could plop down here and enjoy the view, which was exactly what Mr. Carl was doing when I sat myself beside him.

"Do you mind if I have a word, Your Imperial Majesty?"

The Vordenoit emperor cast a brief glance at me before returning his gaze to the scenery. His cover was blown, but he didn't seem the least bit bothered. "So you noticed. Or did that brat tell you?"

I shook my head. "Finn didn't say a word. I just put together the bits and pieces he'd said at school with the way he acted with you. I guess you could say it was intuition more than anything." I'd found this Carl person suspicious at first, to be sure, but I hadn't thought the emperor would come all this way just to check on Mia. It was only by piecing together the clues Finn had dropped that I arrived at the truth—that this was the emperor who, like me and Finn, had reincarnated here.

I gotta say, is it just me or are the world leaders in these parts way too proactive?

"So, what business do you have with me?" he asked.

I nodded. No preamble, then. "I'm thinking about heading straight into Rachel and giving their leader a good smack in the face. Think you could overlook that this one time?" It was wishful thinking, but I had to try.

"I can't simply dismiss someone who has the power to single-handedly destroy an entire nation." The emperor placed both hands on his cane as he gazed out at the lake. His mouth bent into a frown. "As long as you can find a reason to justify it, you're capable of wiping out whole civilizations."

"Actually," I said, straightening my posture, "I have no intention of wiping out anyone."

"Excuse me?" The emperor narrowed his eyes.

"It'd be a pain to wipe out a whole civilization, not to mention all the people who would hate my guts. Nah, that's not on the agenda. It may not seem like it,

but I really mean it when I say I'm a pacifist."

Luxion hovered at a distance. Though faint, I could hear him mumble, "You owe an apology to every true pacifist in the world for making such blatantly untrue claims."

I ignored him, though. "So no dice with the overlooking it thing?"

The emperor was silent as he considered my words. What felt like several long minutes passed before he finally lifted his head. "If you can resolve things peacefully, I may be able to avert my gaze."

"Peacefully? How do you mean?"

"Emperor I may be, but even I don't have free rein to do whatever I please. If the lords who serve me deem Holfort Kingdom to be a threat and put forward a motion to destroy you, I will have no choice but to take their opinions into serious consideration. Ignoring them would cause instability in the empire."

"Is your position that weak?"

The emperor scrunched his face. "Even with power and influence, dictatorial conduct has consequences. You remember your past life. You ought to know that much."

"Well, I guess."

"I see. So you are, in fact, an idiot."

Outright insulting my intelligence like that really got under my skin, but when I glanced at his face, he looked surprisingly cheerful. "What are you smiling for?" I asked.

"Oh, just realizing how ridiculous it was to be so worried about a man like you."

"A 'man like me,' huh?"

"My people view you as a threat," he explained with a sigh.

I gaped at him. That certainly wasn't something I expected to hear.

"Oh, don't look so surprised. It took you no time at all to climb your way up to a dukedom. On top of that, when you went to study abroad in the Alzer

Republic, you brought the country to the brink of destruction. Don't go thinking you can convince anyone of your pacifism after all that."

The empire really had the wrong impression of me! That went for Finn too. Obviously, I needed to correct this misunderstanding.

"None of that was *my* fault! That dirtbag Roland is the one who keeps promoting me, and the only reason the Alzer Republic suffered so many casualties is because *Rachel* was pulling the strings to drive them to civil war!" I gritted my teeth in frustration. Those Holy Kingdom jerks sure were something else, scheming in the shadows like they did.

His Imperial Majesty nodded in agreement. "Yes, I know all about that. That's why I was thinking of teaching them a lesson."

"Oh?"

"Listen here, I'd like nothing more than to sucker punch that holy king as well. They've treated the empire like an older brother who can clean up any mess they make for ages now. Frankly, if not for the complexity of this whole affair, I would have ignored them and let them suffer the consequences of their actions."

Seeing the emperor so sullen as he grumbled made me realize that Rachel really was a troublemaker.

"Still, if you overstep, the empire will have no choice but to see Holfort as an enemy," he warned me with a frown.

"Then I'd like to know more about where the line falls. How far can I take this before I'm overstepping? Personally, I don't see why wiping the castle off the face of the map in an issue, so long as the rest of the country is left intact."

"Let me guess—people are always telling you that you have a terrible personality."

"They are! I don't know how I ended up so misunderstood," I said, shaking my head.

Several days later, the Licorne finally arrived back in Frazer territory. The boys

had still been visiting members of the Armed Defense Concordat when I summoned them back. I needed them to carry out my plan if we were going to finish this war up ASAP.

I waited for the four morons at the military harbor. As soon as the *Licorne* touched down and they trickled out, Julius dashed over to meet them.

"You did an incredible job! A report came in from the palace saying that countries are starting to leave the enemy alliance one after another." Julius pumped his fists excitedly.

Jilk smiled at the prince. "It was nothing, really. Though I will admit we have Leon to thank for providing us with the *Licorne* and the orbs."

It turned out that the whole reason he had asked to borrow the *Licorne* was so he could use it to threaten our enemies. He really was every bit as conniving as I expected.

Unlike Jilk, however, the rest of the boys looked bone-tired.

"Rose, Mary, you were my only salvation on this trip," Brad told his animal friends as he cradled them in his arms.

Greg was always overflowing with energy, yet even he had slumped to the ground, too fatigued to stay upright. "I never wanna work under Jilk ever again," he groaned.

Did something awful happen or what?

Chris was the last to disembark and make his way down the gangway. All trace of light had disappeared from his eyes. They were glazed over, and an eerie smile was plastered onto his face. "That's right," he muttered, as if in a trance, "I should get in the bath. Baths are miraculous. If I soak long enough, I'm sure I can wash away the memories of this trip. Nothing beats a bath. The scorching hot water will cleanse the wounds on my soul."

They were acting...weird. Weirder than normal, anyway.

"Okay, Jilk." I turned to him and crossed my arms. "What'd you do to them?"

Jilk glanced at the three other boys and pressed a hand to his forehead, shaking his head. That alone pissed me off. "We just had a little adventure,

that's all. Granted, said adventure didn't include the exploration of ancient ruins or delving into the depths of a dungeon—I only had them use a tiny bit of their skills in every nation we visited."

He was being purposefully vague. Whatever they had gotten up to while they were gone, it apparently wasn't something they felt obliged to share.

"All I'm hearing is that it's too dangerous to give you free rein."

"You wound me," Jilk gasped, a hand on his chest. "All I did was faithfully carry out the mission you gave me."

Sure. That sounded suspicious as hell, but I ignored it for the moment.

"Anyway, eyes on me, everyone," I said lazily, clapping my hands to draw their attention. The boys seemed a bit out of it, but they did at least glance my way. Their behavior was still giving me the creeps, though. *Just ignore it for now.*

"I realized it's not my style to bum around and take an indirect approach like this, so I've decided to head straight for Rachel. I expect you guys to pitch in."

Jilk gaped at me. "Hold on a moment. If that's your plan, then what about all our painstaking efforts?"

I'd entrusted them with undermining the Armed Defense Concordat, but if we were going to wrap up the war with any speed, then what they'd accomplished was substantially less meaningful. That was probably what Jilk was thinking, anyway. And he was right.

I shrugged. "Sorry. Stuff changed."

Brad, Chris, and even Greg—who had managed to stand just moments ago—sank to their knees and openly wept. It seemed Jilk had really put them through the wringer.

"What was the point of all our suffering?!" Brad cried.

Greg shook his head in disbelief. "All that effort... Was it for nothing?!"

"Do you have *any* idea how often I bit my tongue? How much I had to *endure*?!" Chris demanded.

Watching three grown men reduced to tears was uncomfortable, to say the least. I ignored them and turned to Julius.

"Anyway, Your Highness, you're sitting this one out again."

"What?! But I—no, no. You're right, of course. Because I'm the prince. I must think of my position. Understood!"

Yeah, he accepted that a little too easily, which was how I instantly guessed what he was planning.

We gathered inside the *Einhorn's* war room. A round table sat at the center; a soccer ball-sized crystal floated above the depression in the middle. It was a projection device, but explaining what that was to the others was too much trouble. I just told them it was a crystal ball.

Luxion and Cleare hovered close at my sides, acting as my assistants. On top of the regular crew we also had Finn and the emperor—Mr. Carl—with us for this meeting. The idiot brigade regarded them suspiciously. They had only reluctantly accepted this foreign presence after I reassured them that Finn and Mr. Carl had my permission to participate.

The crystal device projected a 3D image of the White Capital onto the table. My intention was to use this as a reference while hammering out our tactics, but the moment Angie saw it, she let out a deep sigh.

"It's fine that you've decided to stop hiding the full extent of Luxion's capabilities, but this defies the imagination," she said.

Livia studied the projection with great interest. Curious, she reached out to touch the miniaturized version of our enemy's capital city, only to be shocked that there was nothing tangible there. "So this is actually a drawing—or, rather, an image, I guess you said, right? It's strange. It looks so realistic, yet it isn't truly there."

"So their capital is an island floating above a lake," Noelle said, sounding impressed. "It's kinda similar to that tourist lake here in Frazer."

While the projection enthralled my fiancées, Julius and company eyed me

with mixed emotions.

"So you were still hiding some tricks up your sleeve, were you?" Julius said.

Luxion's technological abilities far surpassed their expectations as well. The council of twits weren't the only ones surprised; Marie, Carla, and Kyle were also gobsmacked.

"You see now that there's no way I could just casually use this stuff in front of other people." I folded my arms. "Do you finally understand how cautious I've been?"

"Where do you get off sayin' you've been *cautious*?" Greg shot back with an annoyed look.

"Think what you will, but I have been mindful."

"Seriously?!"

Miss Mylene, who I had also invited to join us, placed a hand to her cheek as she listened to our banter and sighed. In spite of her exasperation, she was, as ever, a masterpiece brought to life.

"It's just one shock after another with you," she said. "I can only hope that this is the last you have in store."

"Tee hee hee." Cleare snickered gleefully. "Don't worry, we've got even more surprises to look forward to!"

"I already knew the ancients were far more technologically impressive than us, but I never dreamed we were so profoundly outdone," Miss Mylene murmured. Another sigh escaped her lips.

Erica turned toward me. "At any rate, Duke, you mentioned you'll be making an attack on Rachel, yes? How, precisely, do you plan to go about this?"

Now that everyone's attention was back on me, I pointed to the ivory castle in the middle of the White Capital. "We're going to charge straight into the city and destroy the Demonic Suit that resides in their castle."

My proposal was met with eager approval from Luxion and Cleare, both of whom moved their lenses up and down as if nodding.

"A splendid decision," Luxion said. "While robbing Rachel of their strongest weapon, you will simultaneously erase the stain that is the Demonic Suit from this world. A laudably rational decision—especially for you, Master."

"I knew you had it in you to make such an awesome call!" Cleare agreed exuberantly. "You've got my full support on this one!"

The moment I mentioned the destruction of a Demonic Suit, they were both way more motivated than usual.

"These guys think nothing of going to war as long as it means they can take down a Demonic Suit," Brave said, shooting us a wary look.

Finn leaned against the wall, arms crossed as he listened. "Quiet. We're guests here," he told his partner.

"I know, but it'd be so nice if we could recover a Demonic Suit without a core like that." Brave made one last dispirited remark before firmly shutting his mouth and following Finn's order to stay silent.

Marie craned her neck, face scrunched. "I get stealing their biggest weapon and all. Seems like a solid move. But will that actually stop the war?" She glanced at Julius expectantly, as if anticipating an answer from him rather than me.

"It's possible," Julius said quickly, pleased she would rely on him for an explanation. "With their capital invaded and their greatest trump card gone, it only makes sense that they would lose the will to fight. The bigger issue will be the diplomatic fallout with other nations."

"Leon is internationally feared, after all," Jilk interjected. "If the 'Scumbag Knight' becomes even more infamous than he already is, there's a solid chance the empire will intercede."

Jilk stole a wary glance at Finn. Seeming to share his sentiments, Greg and Chris also eyed Finn with open mistrust. Finn remained still as a statue, arms folded over his chest. It was like he understood their suspicion and was deliberately indicating with his actions—or rather, inaction—that he had no intention of doing anything.

"They've got real Demonic Suits, don't they?" Marie asked me, face creased

with worry. "Seemed like you had a seriously tough time fighting the last one. You sure this is gonna work out? We can win, even if the empire comes after us, right?"

Everyone present was concerned about the empire's response to our invasion. Mr. Carl listened quietly, his eyes closed.

"Who'd do something as stupid as go to war with the empire?" I snorted with laughter, shaking my head. "We're gonna keep Rachel's casualties to a minimum."

Miss Mylene frowned. She likely wasn't too pleased with that particular decision, but she kept her silence.

"You plan to charge in there and force them into diplomatic negotiations?" Angie asked, quickly catching on to my line of thinking.

"You got it. Their pompous holy king is probably behind the scenes, kicking back and enjoying himself. I'm gonna go in there and give him a good ol' knuckle sandwich before sitting down to talk it all out."

"Placing the barrel of a gun to a man's head is generally considered blackmail or coercion rather than negotiation," Luxion said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, well, whatever it takes to avoid a full-blown war."

"A true pacifist would be outraged if they heard you."

Now everyone knew what I intended to do, but that didn't mean my plan wasn't without flaws.

"I have no qualms with this proposal, but we cannot hope to actually engage in a conversation between nations unless you are officially entrusted with that authority," Brad pointed out, grimacing. "If you do this without the court's permission, they will be breathing down your neck."

That was a solid point. I was only a duke, after all. Many would be resentful, or even incensed, if I were to ignore the court's whole strategy and settle things on my own terms.

"Not to mention, a lot of the regional lords—including those guardin' our borders—have already started suitin' up to turn on us. What's gonna happen if

we wrap all this up before the war's even begun?" Greg said.

That was another issue. The war hadn't officially kicked off, but battles were already being waged, albeit not necessarily on the field. Everyone was making their move. The ball was already rolling; telling them to stop would do nothing at this point.

"I'm afraid I won't be any help on that front either." Julius cupped a hand over his chin, his brows drawn. "As a mere prince, I have no authority to negotiate on behalf of the kingdom. My words don't hold any weight with the royal court as things stand."

The whole dope crew was surprisingly calm and composed as they laid out their misgivings. Miss Mylene shook her head sadly, pulling out a handkerchief and dabbing away her tears. "Why? Why could you not have shown such sage wisdom and intelligence sooner?"

It was far too late for them to reclaim their previous statuses. In a cruel twist of fate, Julius had even matured to the point that he was a prime candidate for crown prince.

Seeing his mother weep seemed to make Julius uncomfortable. He turned away and looked at me. "Should we head back to the palace now? It would take some time, yes, but once you are granted the requisite authority, we could recommence."

"Even if we resolve that issue, I fear we can't expect to rally much in the way of military might," Chris said as he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "The only ships we can feasibly deploy for this operation are the *Einhorn* and *Licorne*, correct? The enemy will quickly overwhelm us."

With only two ships on our side, it wasn't unreasonable for someone to think they could handily outnumber us. The worst part would be those pseudo-Demonic Suits coming out to fight us en masse.

"Yeah, I'm sure we'll be fighting their Demonic Suits too. And no ordinary Armor will be able to face those things on even footing," I said. None of the Armors the royal military or the Frazers had at their disposal would be of any use against such an opponent. "That's why I'm counting on you four." I scanned the faces of Jilk, Brad, Greg, and Chris.

"I mean, I ain't gonna say we can't do it, but..." Greg scratched his head, frowning. "The majority of the enemy's military is situated in its capital, right? Even if you just need us to buy you time, that's still a tall order."

Even with the Armors Luxion personally produced, we would be outnumbered. Our current plan kept running into one problem after another, leaving us stymied. I was beginning to rethink this whole thing. Maybe we would just have to accept a few casualties after all...

"Why don't you help out?" Mr. Carl asked, glancing at Finn.

Finn's eyes went wide. "Pardon? But that would be—"

"It's fine. I'll go along too. I ought to be of some use."

"Are you sure about this? We would be openly involving ourselves in Holfort Kingdom's war."

Mr. Carl studied me. "If it means reducing casualties and avoiding a full-blown conflict, I see nothing wrong with lending them our aid."

Greg looked at me and nodded in approval. He had seen how Brave managed to overwhelm Arroganz. Hearing that they would be on our side and fighting alongside us was reassuring.

Meanwhile, Miss Mylene's stare was boring a hole through Mr. Carl. Judging by the way her eyes suddenly widened, she had probably figured out his true identity.

"Very well," she said. "Then I will accompany you to partake in the forthcoming negotiations. The officials at court shouldn't have anything to complain about in that regard."

With that, we had effectively cleared all the potential hurdles in our way.

"All conditions necessary to carry out our plan have been met. We may proceed whenever you are ready," Luxion announced.

The corners of my lips curled. "Then that settles it. I hope you're all ready to head to Rachel and give those pompous jerks a good beating!"

Chapter 9: The White Whale

When IVAN Spotted Mylene in the hallway of the Frazers' castle, he knew it was the best opportunity he had to persuade her, despite her preoccupation with their departure.

"Queen Mylene, just a moment, please," he pleaded, rushing over. "Don't you remember your promise? You were supposed to drive Rachel into a corner for the sake of our homeland."

The original plan had been for Holfort Kingdom to ignore all casualties it suffered as it brought the Holy Kingdom of Rachel to its knees. Since Holfort's military would be thoroughly exhausted, the United Kingdom of Lepart would step in and assume control of the conquered territory in their stead. Holfort would be unable to protest, what with all the strain it would have suffered after waging war against the former Principality of Fanoss and the other ensuing conflicts.

Mylene moved quickly down the corridor, Ivan hot on her heels.

"The duke swore he would finish things quickly and keep casualties to a minimum," she said curtly.

"And you're going to put your faith in mere words? Your Majesty, open your eyes, I beg you. That man cannot be trusted!"

Ivan was so persistent and seemed so intent on following her wherever she went that Mylene finally stopped and turned to face him.

"If the duke has managed to deceive me, then I have lost my ability to rule. Besides... No, there's nothing more to say." Mylene quickly shook her head. As far as she could tell, Leon stood a good chance of winning, but she wasn't about to divulge the reason for her confidence. "Just know that, during this battle, we will be eliminating Rachel's secret weapon. I know it has caused our homeland much suffering, so be sure to notify them."

"Very well." Ivan hung his head. He could see there was no persuading her.

Meanwhile, Finn brought Brave and Carl along with him to visit Mia's room. The door was firmly shut, so his only option was to speak to her through it. He hadn't been able to meet her face-to-face, let alone speak with her, since she admitted her feelings for him.

"Mia," he started, hesitating a moment. "It looks like I'll be helping Leon and his companions in the battle to come."

There was no response. Brave glanced at his partner worriedly.

Carl's gaze was also fixed on Finn, though not out of concern. His eyes were bloodshot from the pent-up anger that threatened to boil over. He resented Finn for hurting Mia, but knowing that it all hinged on her feelings for Finn left him conflicted. If Mia had her way, she and Finn would become a couple. Carl didn't particularly want them to become romantically involved, but he knew Mia would be deeply wounded if they didn't. He didn't want that either.

"Leon said they'll conduct your exam once we get back. Princess Erica will undergo it at the same time. But for now, I hope you'll stay here at the castle with her and await our return."

Even after all that, Finn was only met with silence from the other side of the door.

What am I doing? Finn wondered. I swore to myself I would protect her, but all I've done is hurt her. He didn't think he'd done wrong, per se, but that didn't change the fact that he'd caused her pain.

When he turned and began to walk away, hurried footsteps echoed from within the room behind him. Mia pressed herself against the door and called out to Finn.

"Mr. Knight, you will return to me, won't you? You don't hate me, I hope?"

Finn sucked in a breath. "Of course I'll return! And I could *never* hate you. Even now, you're still the most important person to me. I swear I'll come back to you."

The door cracked open, and Mia peeked out. Finn was struck by her hauntingly gaunt face. Carl shared his shock and dismay. In fact, Carl started to say something, but Brave swiftly slapped a tiny hand over his lips—he didn't want anyone interrupting the moment.

Finn threw his arms around Mia and drew her close. "I'm so sorry. I never dreamed I had hurt you so terribly."

Mia returned his embrace, her fingers tightly clutching the fabric of his shirt. "You don't have to love me," she said, eyes shimmering with tears. "But you have to come back to me. No matter what."

"I can't give you a concrete answer, not right now—but even if it takes me time, I fully intend to take your feelings seriously. Can you wait for me until then?" Finn needed to get his head straight before he could even begin to think about his heart.

Sobbing, Mia squeaked out, "I can."

While Luxion focused on making sure all the necessary supplies were loaded onto the *Einhorn* and *Licorne* at the Frazers' military port, I watched from nearby as Elijah pleaded with me.

"Your Grace, I want to join as well!"

He had sprung up out of nowhere to beg for my permission to come along on the *Einhorn* and participate in the battle.

I scowled at him. "Hell no. You're the heir of your house, yeah? If something happened to you out there, the blame would fall on my shoulders. I'm not taking that chance."

Frankly, he'd be nothing but a burden, and I was trying to lean on the status thing in the hope he'd back down. Except he wouldn't take a hint.

"But I heard the queen is going along. So there should be no issue taking me too!"

"Of course there is." I glared at him. "I don't wanna."

Elijah dropped his gaze. "I understand you hate me, but I still wish to

accompany you. I must become a man worthy of Erica."

Marie and I were extremely protective of Erica. He'd caught on pretty quickly that we weren't too fond of him, though, which wasn't exactly surprising. We hadn't even tried to hide our disapproval. And now he was here for Erica's sake, desperately trying to win himself a chance to partake in our mission.

"I know there was talk of an engagement between you two," Elijah said. "I-I know some people think it would be better for the kingdom as a whole for my engagement with Erica to be annulled and for her to marry you instead."

"Yeah. Guess that was kinda on the table," I acknowledged. He didn't seem to know the full story, particularly the part where I'd personally refused. He most likely only had a vague sense of the situation. "Why don't you ask Erica about it?"

Elijah hesitated, his lips trembling. "I'm scared to."

"What?"

"If Erica were to say she prefers you to me, I...I don't think I'd ever recover. That's why I'm so desperate to make myself worthy of her."

What, so he wanted to join us in battle because he was too scared to ask Erica about the rumors? That's so fundamentally wrong that I don't even know where to begin.

"Master," Luxion interrupted, drifting over to me.

"Hmm?"

I followed his gaze and noticed Erica standing at a distance. Her brows were creased with worry as she stared at Elijah. I let out a deep breath. *Looks like I can't keep giving him the cold shoulder.* If I did, Erica might lose her temper with me.

"Elijah Rapha Frazer!" I shouted.

"Y-yes, sir?!"

"I have no intention of letting you on my ship."

Elijah's jaw tensed. He balled his fists at his side, frustrated. Desperate, he

stammered, "Th-then I'll just take one of my house's airships instead!"

"It wouldn't do you any good. You'd never catch up."

Even the Frazers' most outstanding airship couldn't keep pace with the *Einhorn* and *Licorne*. My ships far outclassed anything at his disposal on a basic performance level.

Tears spilled down Elijah's cheeks.

I sighed. "You're the heir of House Frazer, aren't you? So focus on carrying out your duties."

"My duties?"

I thrust a finger at Erica.

Elijah turned his gaze and was startled to see her. "Erica..." he murmured.

"Right now, you and your family are playing host to the princess and my special guest, Mia. So *your* job is to stay here and protect them at all costs. If I find even a scratch on either one of them, I'll beat you bloody."

"Do you still refuse to give them your blessing?" Luxion asked teasingly. "Both parties agree to the union, so it is completely unimpeachable, even if the arrangement was originally political."

"Whatever! Just because I understand something logically doesn't mean I can emotionally accept it. Those are two separate things!" I turned back toward Elijah, who was frowning at me. "To be frank, I still don't like the two of you being together. I don't want you to be together. But, dammit...she thinks you're good enough, so I've got no choice. You hear me? It's only because I have no other choice but to accept your relationship."

"Uh, um..."

I clapped my hands on Elijah's shoulders and squeezed. "You're gonna stay behind and do your job here. Let us do ours. So...I'm trusting you to take good care of Her Highness."

When Elijah balled his hands into fists this time, it wasn't with frustration but determination. He nodded firmly. "Yes, sir! I won't let you down!"

"But...if anything happens to either of them..." I said, driving my point home one last time, "I'll make you regret the day you were born."

Sweat trickled down Elijah's forehead, and he trembled in fear. "Y-yes, sir..."

In addition to Cleare, a number of other worker robots were stationed on the *Licorne*'s bridge, as well as...

"Leon, you're not going to ride on the *Einhorn*?" Noelle asked, tilting her head.

A small sigh sneaked past my lips. "There's really no need for all three of you to come along." I had asked my fiancées to stay behind where it was safe, but they had insisted on joining me on the *Licorne*.

"Are you trying to say we'd only get in your way?" Angie demanded, hands on her hips.

"No, no, I'm not trying to say that, honest..."

Angie folded her arms and huffed. "Well, I'll grant that I won't be much use on this mission, but Livia and Noelle are another matter." She glanced at them as she spoke.

Noelle struck her chest with her fist, the Priestess crest clearly visible on the back of her hand. "We've got your back. We might not seem that tough, but believe me, we'll make ourselves useful. Although only in a supporting role, in my case." She turned her gaze to Livia, who'd also put a hand on her chest.

"I discussed the issue with Cleary and asked if there was anything I could do to help," she admitted nervously, smiling. "Don't worry. I promise we won't get in your way."

"That's not something you should've encouraged." I glared daggers at Cleare. Unsurprisingly, she seemed entirely unintimidated.

"Oh? All I did was listen when they came to me, anxious to be of use. C'mon, lighten up. They really love you. It'd be a real jerk move to push them away."

I was grateful that they were so intent on helping out, but was it really so wrong to want them to stay somewhere safe? I scowled.

"Mr. Leon." Livia slid up next to me and took my arm. "I promise we'll make ourselves useful. Please, won't you put a little more faith in us?"

"I have absolute faith in you, but that battlefield is a different story."



I wouldn't have hesitated to let them join me if we were going on an adventure or delving into a dungeon. When it came to war, though? It wasn't that I thought they were weak or anything, but taking someone's life was a heavy burden. I knew that from personal experience. The kinder a person was, the deeper the wound it left. I could handle it, but I wasn't really in tune with my own feelings or anything. They were all way more sensitive in that regard.

Livia offered me an awkward smile, seeming to realize exactly what was going through my head. "I understand that you're worried about us, but there's nothing to be anxious about. You're going into this battle to *stop* a war, remember?"

"Livia..."

Only when she said it did that reality finally set in. She was absolutely right. I wasn't going into Rachel to fight. I was going there to *stop* the fighting. Our plan was to do everything we could to minimize casualties.

Livia held my hands in her own and squeezed. Our eyes locked. "I believe in you and what you're doing. So, please, let us pitch in."

"All right," I said at last.

At the corner of the room, Carla, Kyle, and Marie stood awkwardly, not feeling entirely comfortable with the present atmosphere. Marie in particular eyed us with open annoyance.

"We're about to ride into battle," she said. "I'd appreciate it if you guys stopped fussing over each other like a bunch of lovebirds."

"Oh, I wish I could find a man of my own," Carla said wistfully.

"Once things settle down, you'll be able to track one down at the academy," Kyle assured her.

Carla shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I hope you're right, but at the moment, the third-year boys are awfully cold and distant."

Panicked, Kyle tried his best to soothe her.

"Are you guys riding on the *Licorne* too?" I asked, still holding Livia's hands.

All three of them glowered at me for acting like I'd only just noticed them.

"Well excuse us!" Marie snapped, hands placed haughtily on her hips. She leaned forward and sneered. "You're the one who demanded I tag along because of my healing magic, right? Why're you acting like you don't remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, my bad. I just figured you could put in some elbow grease occasionally, since I'm always cleaning up after you."

"That is the *least* of what I do! I bust my butt for you all the time. *You're* the one who refuses to give me any recognition!"

"You sure do have it tough, Rie," Noelle said with a pitying smile.

"You'd better open your eyes soon, Noelle," Marie told her. "This guy's a real piece of work. The type to reel a girl in, then leave her hanging. I'm telling you, it'd do you both some good if you socked him in the face every now and again."

Noelle glanced at me, and after a moment of serious consideration, she said, "I'll give it some thought."

I gaped. "Wha?! You're just gonna take what she says at face value like that?!"

Livia smiled and tightened her grip on my hands to an almost painful degree. Angie, too, shot me a meaningful look, as if she was holding back some choice words of her own.

Why do I feel like they're backing me into a corner?

"It is genuinely puzzling how he can mature in some ways and yet remain as oblivious as ever," Luxion said.

"Might be a shortcoming, but it's what makes him who he is," Cleare said.

You jerks really don't have an ounce of compassion. It already sucked that the AI weren't on my side, but having my fiancées join forces with Marie and her gang made everything that much worse.

Eager to beat a hasty retreat, I scurried off the *Licorne* to take refuge on the *Einhorn*.

The skies above the ivory castle in the White Capital were sunny and clear. The holy king basked in the warm rays as he wandered out onto his balcony to survey the city below.

The king stroked his beloved white beard. "Nothing's more satisfying than watching other people toiling away laboriously like this."

Rachel's monarch held no tenderness for his subjects. Rather, he derived pleasure from their suffering. As far as he was concerned, their lives belonged to him. The sacrifices his holy knights made in his name gave him no pause; he felt nothing for their loss. And he reveled in the gaggle of beautiful women who catered to his every whim.

The sublime moment was interrupted when one of his personal guards suddenly rushed onto the balcony. The bearded knight swiftly fell to one knee before his king, bowing his head.

"Your Eminence, please pardon my impertinence for interrupting you!"

"What is it?" the king demanded angrily, glancing over his shoulder at the knight.

All color had drained from the man's face. "An urgent report from our allies! They sent notice that the Scumbag Knight and his two ships have left the Frazers' lands!"

"What did you say?" The holy king fully turned to face the knight, understanding the gravity of the situation.

"We have yet to confirm this, but word has it that the Scumbag Knight intends to commit the blasphemy of *invading* Rachel. Your Eminence, please prepare to evacuate at once!"

The girls who had been waiting on the king were startled. They trembled, turning deathly pale. Leon's name inspired great fear in the Holy Kingdom.

The holy king *tsked* as he debated the matter. He grasped the balcony's railing with both hands as he gazed out at the line of warships gathered in the capital. A wide grin spread across his face.

"What reason do we have to run? Well over half of our military is concentrated here. Holfort has shot themselves in the foot with this reckless maneuver. Send an envoy to the empire immediately. Once they learn of Holfort's naked ambitions, the emperor will surely make his move."

The confidence with which the holy king spoke greatly allayed the fears of those around him. The knight in particular was deeply moved by his king's bravery.

"Th-then I take it you will be staying here in the castle?" the knight asked.

"Of course. No matter how strong that Scumbag Knight may be, we have the Holy Knights—and not merely one or two but *dozens*."

"Pardon my intrusion, Your Eminence." The knight lowered his head reverently. "I will return to my station."

"Yes. Do that."

As soon as the knight scurried off, the holy king turned to his closest servants. "Begin preparations to evacuate immediately."

The women were shocked, and they blinked at him in disbelief. Hadn't he just said the exact opposite only moments before? But the holy king ignored their surprise.

Our forces can at least buy me time for escape, he thought. His military and the Holy Knights were nothing more than disposable pawns to him. Their lives meant nothing. As long as he was safe, there would be plenty of opportunities to antagonize Holfort later.

The holy king stroked his precious beard as he began devising his next move. Then, one of the beauties serving him slapped her hands over her mouth, muffling a scream.

"Th-there, above us! Something's shining!"

Everyone on the balcony lifted their gaze and found something silhouetted by the sun. The holy king's eyes widened. His heart pounded thunderously in his ears. He tried shouting orders to his attendants, but they seemed similarly shaken by the enemy's sudden appearance.

"H-have our forces ride out to meet them! All of them! *Now!*" he screamed shrilly.

No sooner had he given the command than he scurried off the balcony and into the depths of the castle.

The *Einhorn* and *Licorne* cruised at a high altitude with the *Licorne* at the fore. I stood on the *Einhorn*'s bridge, looking out at the scene before me uneasily.

"We've arrived at our destination. Why haven't you had the *Licorne* fall back? The girls are on that ship, in case you've forgotten!"

My furious shouting had little effect on Luxion, who seemed as perfectly composed as ever. "Cleare proposed this plan. The *Licorne* will lead the attack and shield us from enemy fire. I determined this to be the most effective course of action, and thus, implemented her idea."

"Don't make decisions like that on your own! You seriously plan to use the *Licorne* as a meat shield?"

"Indeed."

I raised a fist, ready to clock him, but Finn grabbed my arm. He was already decked out in a black pilot suit for the mission.

"This is no time to be fighting!" Finn snapped. "I'll go protect them. You focus on getting ready to head out too. Kurosuke, you're ready whenever, right?"

"Yep, sure am. But, Partner, I sure wish you'd at least occasionally call me Brave," Brave pouted.

"Sure. Next time."

"You say that every time, and then you wind up calling me Kurosuke anyway!" Finn had barely started toward the hangar when Luxion cut him off.

"Do *not* get in the way," he commanded tersely. "It seems to me that you both severely underestimate what those three girls are capable of." After a short pause, Luxion then announced, "The *Licorne* is beginning its descent."

It was less descending and more a plunging headlong into battle, taking a

diagonal trajectory as it dove straight for the capital below.

"Dammit!"

I was ready to storm off the bridge and fly out in Arroganz when I noticed the screen—Rachel's warships were riding out to meet us. They were joined by several hundred Armors, among which I spotted a number of pseudo-Demonic Suits. Armors sporting rifles were also stationed on the decks of the warships big enough to hold dozens of Armors. And every single one of them had their sights firmly set on the *Licorne*.

"Enemy fire incoming. Licorne, deploy field barrier."

"You gotta be kidding me," I muttered.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Mylene sat on a specially prepared seat on the *Licorne*'s bridge, her gaze drawn to the person in front of her.

"Can humans really produce such magic?" she wondered aloud.

Their ship was being targeted by Armors and rifle fire, but Livia had blocked them all with her power. She stood at the center of a circular device, enveloped in a faint white light. Golden particles danced around her, and the flow of mana made her flowing locks billow.

"Field barrier successfully activated!" Cleare announced gleefully, acting in a support capacity for Livia. "Seems to me that this is holy magic, so why don't we call this barrier field Consecrated Ground?"

Consecrated Ground, as Cleare had named the spell, surrounded the *Licorne* in a spherical barrier of gently glowing energy. The pattern of a magic circle manifested on its surface.

"Save naming it for later," Angie instructed the AI. She was acting as their surveillance and field monitor. "What matters now is keeping the enemy at bay! We have a pseudo-Demonic Suit leading a platoon of Armors on a starboard approach."

"Yeah, I noticed. The problem is gonna be getting rid of them," Cleare said.

"Only shoot down as many as absolutely necessary. Our aim is to intimidate them."

"You're asking an awful lot, but I guess it's what Master wants, so I'll follow your orders."

The *Licorne* deployed one of her turrets—essentially a gatling gun—which was typically tucked away during flight. Bullets hailed down on the enemy.

Specialized machine guns for Armors had yet to be invented in this world, primarily because manufacturing bullets was costly. The bullets used in Armorsized weapons were magic bullets specially infused with mana for use against warships and other Armors. Ordinary bullets lost most of their potency when passing through a magical barrier. Thus, militaries had no other choice but to rely on the more costly arcane variety. With copious rounds spent each battle, the cost of war could hit dizzying heights. It was only logical to avoid machine guns in favor of more cost-effective weapons with better aim and firepower. Given all this, the enemy automatically assumed that the *Licorne's* gatling gun must be firing ordinary rounds. Their pseudo-Demonic Suits sped ahead to shield their less powerful Armor units.

"You fools," Angie growled, her jaw clenched.

"Oh my, my." Cleare sounded as cheerful as ever, not the least bit troubled by the tragic fate that awaited their enemy. "Seems you've assumed that these are ordinary bullets. Hate to break it to ya, but these are the best magic bullets you'll ever see."

As Cleare accurately surmised, the magic bullets pelting the pseudo-Demonic Suits inflicted incredible damage. This attack would have utterly demolished an ordinary Armor, but pseudo or not, these Demonic Suits were a force to be reckoned with. Their plating was far superior to that of an ordinary model, and they were permeated with potent magic for additional protection. Not even magic bullets could easily pierce these defenses, not ordinarily, at least. However, a hailstorm of hundreds, even thousands, of those same bullets would gradually chip away at their armor.

The Demonic Suits couldn't withstand the onslaught for long. Soon enough, the bullets began to tear through their layers of safeguards. Black liquid sprayed

through the air as the suits plummeted toward the ground below. The Armors that had been following them were thrown into chaos and dispersed, fleeing the front line.

"Hmm. This is good enough for the Armors, I guess, but it's a lot harder with airships. If we're not careful, we'll sink them," said Cleare.

They were fighting in the skies directly above the White Capital. If one of the enemy's airships sank, it would fall onto the city, where it would cause a massive explosion and extensive damage. Noelle couldn't abide that. Flustered, she flung her right hand toward Livia. Her Priestess crest emitted a soft green light. She fed the stored energy of the Sacred Tree straight into Livia, supplying her with mana. Livia had already expended most of her own power deploying the barrier field.

"That would defeat the whole purpose of this venture. I'm counting on you to handle things, Olivia," said Noelle.

Livia nodded. "I won't let you down!"

Eyes focused ahead, Livia brought her hand out in front of her. Hundreds of magic circles manifested in the air around the *Licorne*, each of them several tens of meters large. They swiveled simultaneously and faced straight down.

Mylene watched with interest, trying to puzzle out Livia's intentions. *She's going to launch an attack from those magic circles, right? But Rachel's capital is directly beneath us. If she does that, she'll raze the city to the ground.* She immediately dismissed the idea. There was no way Livia could do something like that.

Although Mylene's deduction was on point, she couldn't have imagined how Livia actually planned to use her magic circles.

Livia's hand formed a fist, which she reeled back before swinging it straight down. "It may be a bit bumpy, so please hang on tight!" she said, fully knowing the enemy couldn't hear her. She sounded almost apologetic.

Mylene knit her brows. She found the remark exceedingly naive for someone on the battlefield. But then...

"What?!" the queen squeaked, all thoughts of scolding Livia vanishing.

When Livia brought her fist crashing down, every single one of her magic circles streaked through the air, heading straight for Rachel's gargantuan warships. The magic circles bore down on them like an enormous net, bringing their ascent to a grinding halt. From there, the warships began a far gentler descent, forced along by the momentum of Livia's magic.

At some point, Mylene lifted herself off of her chair as she watched. A cold sweat trickled down her back when she realized what Livia was actually doing. "She's *physically* forcing the enemy back with her magic circles? That's insane."

Even before she was married, Mylene had belonged to a royal family. She had been introduced to the fundamentals of magic at an extremely early age. If someone had asked her to replicate what Livia was doing, she would have insisted it was impossible—and questioned the asker's sanity. She could scarcely believe something so incomprehensible was unfolding before her very eyes.

"What do you think, Your Majesty?" Angie asked from beside Mylene, grinning triumphantly. She was proud of Livia's impressive accomplishments. "You personally approved her enrollment in the academy as a scholarship student. So how would you rate her abilities?"

When the call had been made to allow a commoner to enter the academy on a scholarship, Mylene hadn't opposed the move, but she hadn't partaken in the selection process either. All she'd done was sign the forms seeking her approval.

"It's not as though I hand selected her," Mylene said, shaking her head. "I only gave the go-ahead because she had a recommendation. I never imagined that the school officials had found someone so powerful."

In fact, Mylene actually felt a bit conflicted by the monstrous scale of Livia's abilities. She would have happily clapped her hands in joy at a show of ordinary levels of strength, but Livia had far surpassed that. In Mylene's eyes, she was now a threat. If it weren't for Leon and Luxion's overwhelming power, which far eclipsed hers, Mylene likely would have turned her fears toward Livia instead.

"Livia," Angie called, "keep pushing them back. Leon will take care of the rest."

"We'll buy Mr. Leon time until he can wrap everything up on his end." When she spoke, Livia used the word "we" instead of "I," a clear indication that she understood this was a group effort and not her fight alone.

The unified effort between the girls and the AI Cleare was so incredible it beggared belief. Mylene felt lightheaded.

"It seems I completely underestimated you," she admitted to the girls. "Or rather, I didn't understand your capabilities in the least."

"Your Majesty?"

"Angie, you've grown into a strong woman. That makes it all the more painful that I've lost you as a daughter-in-law."

Angie shook her head. "No, really, Livia and Noelle are the incredible ones."

Although she protested the praise, Mylene smiled. "The ability to properly recognize the strengths of others is proof of one's own. Moreover, it's a rare thing to nurture ties so close that you're able to coordinate so seamlessly and accomplish so much. Treasure these bonds."

Angie pursed her lips and nodded.

"I have nothing left to teach you. At some point, you surpassed me—far surpassed me," Mylene murmured self-deprecatingly. Her words were so quiet that the roar of battle drowned them out completely.

Mylene wasn't the only one watching Livia's magic in action; Marie kept an eye on the battle from her corner. She was too ashamed to stand with the others when Mylene was on the bridge. Her Majesty had a habit of glaring daggers at Marie the second she spied her, on account of Marie's role in seducing Julius and the rest of the bevy of chuckleheads. She decided to mind herself and keep her distance, but even without a front row seat, she had realized the terrifying enormity of Livia's power.

"Lady Marie, please look." Carla pointed out the window. "The enemy is being pushed back. They're losing altitude."

Kyle was also glued to the window, watching intently as Livia and the girls

overran the enemy. "They seem to be panicking—it's like they were caught completely unawares. Victory should be a breeze at this rate, right? What do you think, Mistress?"

Marie had no answer for him. Her eyes were glued to Livia. Guess I should have expected this from the game's original protagonist. She wasn't called OP for nothing. Olivia was pretty unpopular because of her personality and behavior, but damn if she isn't a reliable ally on the battlefield.

In the first installment of the trilogy, the protagonist was considered just as overpowered as the Black Knight. Marie already knew this—knew that Olivia had it in her—but it was different seeing that power in person. She was thunderstruck. She might not have appreciated the magnitude of Olivia's abilities if she hadn't taken up the study of magic herself.

No matter how much I work at it, I'll never be as good as the protagonist. Marie could use healing magic, but she had minimal innate talent. She'd exerted tons of blood, sweat, and tears to get to this point. Personally, she was proud of the effort she'd put in, though she realized no amount of hard work would ever measure up to the sheer natural aptitude with which Livia had been blessed.

Thinking back, I can't believe I basically picked a fight with her. If things had gone differently—if they'd blundered down another path—this girl could very well have ended up an enemy rather than an ally. That thought sent a shiver through Marie. Big Bro, it sure is a relief you managed to keep her on our side!

Inside the *Einhorn*'s hangar, a number of Armors specially created by Luxion were lined up one after another. Nearby, the idiot brigade—sans Julius, of course—kept tabs on the situation outside via monitor. They were initially left speechless in the face of Livia's overwhelming might.

Brad glanced at his companions and grimaced. "Hey, guys...do you think we could actually beat her in a fight?"

"If it were one-on-one outside that ship, the odds of victory would most definitely be in our favor," Chris said with a grin, closing his eyes. "But otherwise, we wouldn't stand a chance."

Greg crossed his arms. "Frankly, I don't wanna fight her. We'd definitely lose, no doubt in my mind."

The *Licorne* had a vicious arsenal to begin with, but Livia's magic was even more nefarious. She had the ability to completely pin down and neutralize an entire fleet of warships without breaking a sweat. If they were to ever oppose her, she could take down their ship before they ever made a move.

"Those defenses are horrifying." The color had drained from Jilk's face. He pressed a hand over his mouth. "There's no way to resist her. The best strategy would be to avoid facing her at all costs."

While they came to a mutual conclusion, footsteps echoed, heralding someone's approach. When the boys looked over their shoulders to see who had come to join them, they were met with a mysterious man in a mask—a knight they had encountered many times before.

"Such pitiful sentiments to hear from such powerful warriors," he said. "We haven't even set foot on the battlefield, and already your morale dwindles. It makes one wonder if you can even hope to win."

These provocations didn't sit well with the boys, even if the knight had prefaced them with acknowledgment of their strength.

"You bastard. What corner did you slink out of?!" Greg demanded, thrusting a finger in the masked knight's direction.

Chris yanked his sword from its sheath, pointing the tip of the blade directly at the knight. "You again," he hissed.

"I must echo Greg's query: Just where were you hiding? You're practically a rat." Jilk held up his gun, pointing the barrel directly at the man.

"What impudence!" the masked knight bellowed, seeming to be particularly offended by Jilk's comment. "These reactions are unacceptable and unwarranted, especially considering I came all this way to fight at your side." He crossed his arms.

The masked knight was even more decked out than he had been last time. He was sporting entirely new attire, including a mask and cloak. Beneath all that, one could glimpse a hidden pilot suit, indicating he was ready to climb into his

Armor at any moment.

Brad shot a glance at the hangar's entrance. "Leon's coming. Good. Now we can finally rip off that mask and throw you off the ship for good."

Far from being intimidated, the masked knight seemed triumphant, as though confident Leon would overlook his presence.

"Be my guest. Let's ask his lordship what he thinks. Lord Leon! Pray prepare an Armor for me as well. You have that impressive suit made specially for Prince Julius, do you not?"

Indeed, the white Armor manufactured for Prince Julius had been loaded on board even though the prince himself hadn't come along on this mission. Like all the others, it sat on its knees, as if ready to accept its pilot. The four idiots had found it strange, actually. Why had Leon brought this suit along when there was no one to pilot it?

Leon strode into the hangar with Finn at his side. He gave the masked knight a brief glance. "Do whatever you want," he said indifferently. "But if you destroy it, you're gonna pay."

The masked knight flinched. "I-I swear to you I will do my utmost to see it comes out of battle undamaged."

Leon ignored him and headed straight for Arroganz's cockpit. Once he climbed inside, he paused for only a moment to say, "Livia and the *Licorne* gave us a good opening. It's on us to finish what she started."

The boys exchanged looks and nodded.

"I would be ashamed to report we'd failed after our female companions went to such lengths to grant us this opportunity," said Brad. "I will give it my all."

Leon grinned and slammed his hatch closed.

"Fuselage analysis complete. Arroganz is all green and ready to deploy at your command," Luxion announced.

With that, I maneuvered my suit forward, toward the hangar's hatch. The gaggle of dimwits had already climbed into their suits and were following

behind me.

"What about you, Finn?" I asked. He still hadn't merged with Brave.

Finn shrugged. "I'll equip Kurosuke once I'm outside, so don't worry about me. Just open the hatch and throw me out."

That sounded like crazy talk. I'd never been keen on the idea of skydiving, not even in my previous life. I had to at least give him props for his courage.

"Aren't you scared?"

"Nope. I've got my partner with me." Finn glanced at Brave, who eagerly puffed up his chest, happy to have Finn's confidence.

"Ha ha, you guys make a good team," I said. "Okay, Luxion, let's head out."

"Understood. Opening hatch."

The outer doors cracked open the instant Luxion acknowledged my command. Furious gusts of wind burst into the hangar, but even as they buffeted Finn, he remained utterly composed.

Outside, the enemy put up a lackluster resistance. The warships were totally unable to move. The majority of the still-airborne Armors were attempting to mount on attack on the *Licorne*, but Livia's barrier field easily repelled them. They very literally couldn't lift a finger against the *Licorne* and my fiancées. Amid all this, I detected a number of enemy targets approaching the *Einhorn*.

"Let's do this."

The boosters on Arroganz's backpack powered up, disgorging flames as we launched from the hangar and flew out to meet the incoming enemy Armors. Their voices echoed around me, picked up by Arroganz's external sound system.

"We found you, Scumbag Knight!"

"That man is our archnemesis! Take him down, Holy Knights!"

"For our beautiful homeland! For His Eminence!"

The way they spoke gave them away as pseudo-Demonic Suits. Given that they could only ever fight one battle before their lives were spent, they were literally sacrificing themselves for the sake of their country. Such a decision

didn't really sit right with me, but I hesitated to brush them off because of it. All I could do was end the very concept of their existence.

"Today, the Holy Knights end," I said, reaffirming my conviction.

I maneuvered Arroganz's control sticks, feet pressed firmly on the foot pedals to increase acceleration. I moved in a helix pattern, rapidly descending to close the distance between myself and the Holy Knights.

"There's no way to save them, is there?" I asked Luxion, already knowing the answer.

"No." At least he said it without any of his usual sarcasm.

"That's what I figured. Bring out the rifle."

"Ejecting rifle."

Arroganz grabbed the rifle that shot out of the rear container and entered firing mode. The monitor zoomed in, giving me a clearer view of the pseudo-Demonic Suits I faced. I took aim and pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced straight through the enemy's head.

I wondered for a moment if it would regenerate, but cracks shot through the entirety of its body, stemming from the point of impact. It shattered, crumbling to pieces.

"This rifle's even more merciless than the last," I said. "You did more than just increase its potency, I take it?"

It was a rhetorical question, really. Demonic Suits had incredible regenerative powers, but this rifle had taken one out in a single shot.

"I made improvements on its Anti-Demonic Suit capabilities based on battle data collected up to this point. In particular, the bullets can more effectively pierce the Demonic Suits' defenses," Luxion explained.



Instead of losing morale upon seeing one of their fellows so easily dispatched, the Holy Knights were galvanized. They came at Arroganz again, fueled by newfound anger. After Demonic Suit shards were inserted into their bodies, they would only grow increasingly mentally unstable.

"You'll pay for our comrade's death!"

Arroganz effortlessly kicked away a unit that came speeding toward it. No matter how fast they were, their course was predictable. I had nothing to fear from them.

"Way too transparent!" I said.

I took aim and fired as the unit spun through the air from the force of Arroganz's kick, trying desperately to right itself. Black liquid spurted from its open wound, droplets scattering through the air as it plummeted toward the ivory castle—the symbol of the White Capital.

Despite having lost multiple comrades, the remaining pseudo-Demonic Suits continued to come at me, intent on taking down the one they only knew as the "Scumbag Knight."

"For our glorious kingdom!"

The next enemy to charge came armed with an enormous hammer. Brandishing this heavy weapon, it approached swiftly, spinning through the air rapidly, almost like a whirlwind. As offensive tactics went, it was a reckless one.

"Sorry, but your patriotic spiels are kinda wasted on me," I scoffed as I dodged.

The still-spinning suit arced through the air, almost like a boomerang, and came straight toward me once again.

"Launch a missile!" I shouted at Luxion. "We just need to stop its momentum."

"Launching now."

A missile shot out of the container on Arroganz's back, slamming into the pseudo-Demonic Suit and throwing it off balance. With the speed of its revolution slowed, it wavered in the air, unstable. I lifted my rifle and fired. This

shot hit it square in the chest. It ceased moving and dropped toward the city.

The next attack was a coordinated effort between three units. Based on their synchronization, I figured they were some of the more powerful members of their order. Their skill was apparent not only in their seamless teamwork but in their composure and control, despite the shards buried within them.

"If we can't take you down one-on-one, then we'll just have to take you out together!"

These pseudo-Demonic Suits typically went for timed attacks—striking fast and darting back—which was an even bigger pain when it was a coordinated, multipronged offensive. Arroganz outmatched them in terms of pure performance, but I wanted to avoid damage if I could. When the next one approached, I thrust my left palm toward them. "You first."

Arroganz unleashed its characteristic attack, and the suit imploded. Black liquid splashed over my suit, pelting down like rain.

"When we return from this mission, Arroganz will require thorough sterilization," Luxion said sourly. It was a little odd for an AI to be such a stickler for cleanliness, but his hatred for Demonic Suits was pretty staggering. It made me wonder why the old humans had purposefully created AI with such human emotions.

"Brother! You'll pay for that!" howled one of the remaining knights.

Apparently I'd just taken out family. He lunged at me, but I kicked him away, using the opportunity to take aim at his other comrade. Any semblance of teamwork was forgotten, lost to rancor.

"That's two. You're the last one left."

The only guy standing—the brother intent on vengeance—grew increasingly unstable. His form swelled and contorted, unable to retain its original human shape. It became spherical, with an enormous mouth and disproportionately tiny bat wings.

"I'll pulverize you!"

The malformed suit screamed as it launched at me, maw gaping wide. Its sawlike, bladed teeth oscillated as they managed to catch my suit's arm, clamping down all the way up to my elbow. A screech of metal split the air as its blades tried to cleave through Arroganz's outer plating. Sparks shot out of its mouth.

"Quit dilly-dallying," Luxion chided me. "Or has this disturbed you?"

He read me a little too easily. This guy's desperation to avenge his dead brother had struck a chord in me. I couldn't help but picture Nicks and Colin. If I were in his position, I was sure I'd want revenge as well.

The sound of grating metal slowly died away, at which point the Demonic Suit opened its mouth. Arroganz had sustained a few scratches, but it was otherwise unscathed. The enemy's impressive teeth, however, had been ground into dust.

"Finish him off," I said.

"Very well."

Arroganz emitted a powerful shock wave that ripped through the malformed suit. There was no time to spend wallowing in emotion. I scanned the skies, looking for my next target. Thinking could come later, when the battle was over.

"Next!" I shouted urgently.

"More pseudo-Demonic Suits have launched from the city. It appears the enemy has deployed some substantially less-trained units in the hopes of delaying us."

Rachel was in such a panic to defend itself that it had called up untrained apprentices—mere boys. That wasn't guesswork on my part; it was apparent in the forms the suits took. Every one of them had already contorted into unnatural shapes.

"Let's take these down quickly, then go after the real Demonic Suit behind this."

"That won't be necessary," Luxion said.

A team of colorful Armors whizzed past me, diving at rapid speed to meet the incoming enemy units. Julius—or his alter ego, the masked knight—led the assault in a white Armor, followed closely by a red suit and a blue. They cut down the distorted enemy.

One pseudo-Demonic Suit slipped past them and headed straight for me. Jilk, operating his own green Armor, shot it down with his rifle from afar. Not a - moment later, he sent a transmission. "We can take care of things here. Go on ahead."

"You guys are actually pretty useful when you want to be, huh?"

"I wish you would give us a little more credit," Jilk replied smoothly to my teasing. "Once things settle down, I would appreciate it if you took the opportunity to more accurately assess my contributions."

Only Jilk would use this opportunity to demand more recognition, and specifically for himself. He'd totally failed to mention the other guys. I would've bet he didn't care whether I reevaluated them either.

Jilk shot down more of the pseudo-Demonic Suits as they were launched at us. He was taking them down with such ease that I had to assume he was equipped with the same sort of rifle as Arroganz.

Just as I was about to descend, a true Demonic Suit with impressive wings—the fused form of Finn and Brave—appeared at my side. His arrival sent a shock wave through the Holy Knights.

"Has one of our own betrayed us?!"

"Who is that, anyway?!"

"Yeah, I've never seen such a beautiful suit!"

They were taken aback because they assumed it was a comrade, when in truth, Finn's Demonic Suit was property of the empire. Finn didn't even bother addressing the pseudo-suit pilots.

"Leon," he said, "Kurosuke said he senses a strong Demonic Suit presence from the bottom of the lake."

"Not the castle?"

"Nope, it's definitely the lake," Brave answered in Finn's place.

I glanced at Luxion beside me. His red lens flickered. "I have confirmed the location of the Demonic Suit. Additionally, a person matching the holy king's description has boarded an airship in an attempt to flee."

"Should we deal with him first?"

"No," Luxion said, sounding annoyed. "It seems something more troublesome requires our attention." For once, his exasperation wasn't directed at me, but more at the situation itself.

"Watch out!" Finn cried, shoving Arroganz out of the way.

I held my breath as something shot out of the lake below in an enormous plume of water. Actually not something—somethings. Dozens of them. Finn unsheathed his sword and laid into them. Only as I watched him did I realize these mysterious objects were actually enormous seeds, each about as large as an adult human. More and more of them burst up out of the lake, one after another.

Luxion's lens gave off an eerie gleam. "Requesting permission to fire missiles." "Do it," I said without missing a beat.

The hatch on Arroganz's rear container opened, launching a battery of missiles that locked onto the seeds. They exploded on impact, and the charred remnants dropped back into the lake from which they'd emerged.

"But what kind of seeds are they?" I asked.

Finn shook his head. "No clue. Kurosuke?"

"Whatever created them has had a long time to develop its own unique characteristics, so I can't even begin to imagine. The only thing I can say is it's presumably some kind of plant."

Vines unfurled from the lake where the Demonic Suit resided. At the tip of each vine was some kind of bud—spherical, and oddly reminiscent of a clam. They were difficult to describe. I was sure I had seen them in my previous life. Sinister needles protruded from the buds, which split open down the middle, almost like a mouth. There were six in total.

"I've got it!" I snapped my fingers, feeling triumphant. "It's a Venus flytrap."

"Now that you mention it, it does look like one," Finn said thoughtfully. "But it's only a passing resemblance. Probably not the exact same species."

The enormous Venus flytrap proceeded to indiscriminately attack anything

within its reach, clamping its jaws around one of the nearby pseudo-Demonic Suits.

"B-but why?! We're on the same side!"

The pilot's cries were cut short as the trap closed around it, melting the thing in its jaws.

"It's on a rampage!" I said.

"Likely because it was forcibly activated," Luxion explained. "What a truly bothersome enemy. That said, it appears the seeds it shot out are their own problem entirely."

What seeds we hadn't managed to dispose of while they were airborne had landed in the city proper and sprouted six legs apiece. Their hulls split to form enormous mouths. These plant creatures then threw themselves at the vulnerable citizenry. My stomach lurched as they began to gobble people up.

"Guess we have to deal with those first." I adjusted my grip on Arroganz's control sticks, ready to make my way down to help, but someone else beat me to it. A purple Armor sporting six spears on its back touched down in the streets.

"Fear not. I shall take care of this," Brad said, striking the sort of lame pose you'd only get from a kiddie show superhero.

Brad hefted a conical spear in his right hand, which was of the same construction as the ones on his back. These seemed to be his only weapons.

As he surveyed the situation from his cockpit, Brad noticed Arroganz and Brave shooting down more seeds as they hurtled out of the lake. Any that managed to escape their bullets found their way into the city, where they crashed down and transformed into monsters.

Brad drove his spear into the ground, resting his hands on the pommel. To an outside observer, he would have seemed all too calm and relaxed, as if he were just showing off, but he wasn't playing around. He grimaced at the scene before him.

"How disgraceful. As a nobleman and as a knight, I cannot condone any country that inflicts such suffering upon the very people it ought to protect."

All emotion drained from his face. Brad squeezed his control sticks tightly, pouring mana into them. The cockpit was equipped with a mana sensor, which directed the flow of power to the spears on his Armor's back. Then they deployed, dancing through the air. Brad's mana transmitted his orders to his weapons, and they were swift to carry out his will.

"My Armor is uniquely equipped to overpower multiple enemies by itself. I'm afraid you'll find none better suited to taking you out."

The enemy gave no reply, of course, but that didn't stop Brad from rambling on with his self-affirmations.

Leon had claimed that the lasers installed in these spears were "magical" in nature, but Brad was no fool—he could tell this power wasn't arcane.

Brad's spears surged toward the enemy, emitting beams that pierced straight through the plant-like creatures and instantly incinerated them. The six spears then reassembled, spinning up through the air with their tips trained on the ground below.

"I will exterminate every last one of you."

As Brad promised, the spears fired once more, laying waste to the enemy. The citizenry watched in speechless awe. Some began to crowd Brad's suit—until he shouted, "Run while you still can!" from within his cockpit.

I was honestly a bit worried when Brad went full showboat as he landed, but he quickly dispatched the enemy and protected the people, which was a huge relief.

"See, he can do it if he knuckles down," I said. Normally, I wouldn't have spared a word of praise for him or his buddies, but I was feeling generous.

"His Armor was specially constructed to take on multiple enemies, but such capabilities require considerable skill from the pilot," Luxion explained. "Though Brad seems naturally compatible with such combat stratagems, I must

commend his performance."

"Looks like I can trust the idiot brigade to take care of things here. We'll deal with the Demonic Suit."

Finn had sliced up more of the seeds while I was assessing the situation on the ground. His voice sounded in the cockpit. "You sure you're all right with letting the king go? Seems like he's trying to make a run for it."

"The others can deal with him. Our biggest concern is figuring out how to take this thing down."

This Demonic Suit had assumed control of an enormous Venus flytrap to attack us from the safety of its sunken abode. Somehow or other, we needed to yank it out of there. I racked my brain for ideas.

"Guess we can shear off the tentacles and see what it does next."

I returned my rifle to the container on Arroganz's back, switching it out for a battle axe.

"Urgh," Brave groaned the moment he saw it. "I really hate that battle axe of yours. The sounds it makes are earsplitting."

This axe was specially equipped with a high-frequency blade, the oscillation of which made it more proficient at cutting straight through molecular bonds. The shrill sound waves it emitted were admittedly rough on the ears, but it was the best option for dealing with our current opponent.

"If we cut off its limbs, surely it'll have to peek its head out, right?" I said.

"I lack the information required to make an accurate prediction."

I rushed toward the lake, and two of the enemy's traps opened wide as they came at me in turn. I managed to dodge by speeding up, but the acceleration was so intense that it shoved my body back into my seat. These intense maneuvers took a real toll on the pilot.

"There's one down!" I shouted, slicing through a tentacle as I swerved to avoid an incoming attack. It plummeted into the lake.

The remaining stem thrashed, spraying black liquid from its severed tip. Now seeing me as a threat, the plant focused its remaining traps on me. Meanwhile,

Finn chopped another down with his longsword in a display of graceful finesse. His wingspan spread wide as he darted through the air toward one trap after another, dispatching them with incredible speed.

"Y'know, a Demonic Suit doesn't seem so bad," I said as I watched him. "I mean, if we're speaking purely from the perspective of Armor performance, he completely outclasses us, doesn't he?"

"You should consider focusing on your work instead of wasting time on foolish remarks," Luxion said curtly. "Besides, if you wish to compare us, you should do so by assessing overall performance rather than a single aspect. Arroganz comes equipped with numerous interchangeable parts, enabling it to easily adapt to any situation. It is absurd to think a Demonic Suit would ever outclass it." These words came out in an angry rush. I'd really stepped on a land mine.

"Okay, sorry. Don't be so pissy."

"I am most certainly not 'pissy,'" he snapped. "Master, incoming from below."

I shot up, gaining altitude to avoid the new traps that burst out of the lake. They appeared in rapid succession, one after another. Continuing to cut them down was turning into an exercise in futility.

"All that work and we've still got nothing to show for it."

"Confirming that our prior targets have regenerated, and on top of that, they seem to be multiplying." Luxion paused before adding, "It also seems the enemy has chosen to activate this Demonic Suit in a way that you would find particularly disagreeable."

"What's that mean?" I furrowed my brows. My emotions were numbed thanks to the adrenaline of battle, but that did little to quell the sinking feeling in my gut. "Anyway, what're we gonna do?"

"Arroganz can function on any battlefield. I will deploy gear for an aquatic engagement from the *Einhorn*. Remain airborne and exchange those parts with your current array."

"But I've got no experience fighting underwater," I protested.

While I was quibbling, the traps clustered around me. I shot off a missile and incinerated some of them, chopping down the rest with my battle axe.

"Subaquatic battle, hmm? I've only experienced that once." Finn joined the conversation even as he was preoccupied with tons of traps flying at him.

"Well, at least you have *some* experience. Mind if I leave the rest to you? I'm about ready to go home now." Fighting a Demonic Suit that could manipulate these monstrous plant limbs in a lake? Hell nah.

"This is your war, not ours!" Brave snapped. "You haven't forgotten that Partner's only here to help, not carry you the whole way, have you?!"

"Your participation is entirely extraneous," Luxion said coldly. "Master's victory is assured, even sans your intervention. It would be more appropriate to say we graciously allowed you to accompany us."

"Even in the midst of battle, you're still a hateful hunk of scrap!"

"Why would I ever extend cordiality to a Demonic Suit core? In this instance, I believe the humans would say, 'If you're such a weenie, tuck your tail between your legs and run home crying.' Should you find this battle overwhelming, you are more than welcome to tap out."

"Graaah! I really hate your stupid guts! C'mon, Partner, let's do it!"

It was actually pretty adorable the way Luxion's mockery got Brave so heated.

"Cool it, Kurosuke," Finn said, exasperated. "If you guys send us below, we won't be able to deal with the attacks up here. In fact, you're the one who talked so big about ending this war before it started, so why don't you take care of it yourself, Leon!"

In reality, I couldn't bow out of this battle, not after I'd promised Mr. Carl I would settle this war peaceably. Hold up a sec. Considering how much he seems to hate Finn's guts, maybe that'd win me brownie points? He'd probably be over the moon if I went back and told him I gave Finn hell out here.

While I entertained those thoughts, Luxion analyzed the battlefield. Once finished, he reported, "The other five have their hands full. It falls to us to destroy the Demonic Suit on our own."

"Of course. Why would it be any different this time? I always get saddled with the worst role," I grumped, shaking my head.

I darted through the air, trying to avoid both the headless tentacles and the ones still equipped with proper traps. The parts the *Einhorn* had deployed were fast approaching. Problem was, equipping them in the air would be no easy feat, and the enemy's persistent pursuit only made this all the more difficult. I raced to escape the enemy's clutches, the parts chasing after me, but I couldn't find an opportunity to switch them out.

"Uh, is it me, or is this damn near impossible?" I chopped through some of the tentacles with my axe. Unfortunately, the severed tips instantly regenerated and resumed their assault. "Guess I need to just gain some distance for now..."

As I tried to do just that, Finn appeared at my side and sliced through the vines with his longsword, then perfectly positioned himself to shield me.

"Finn!" I cried in relief.

"I'll keep them occupied. Just hurry and get it over with."

"I appreciate it! When we get back to Holfort, I'll pay you back."

"Sure you will. I won't hold my breath," he quipped, hacking away at the encroaching tentacles.

With Finn distracting the enemy, I put some distance between us and began the process of exchanging Arroganz's equipment.

"Purging rear container and leg attachments," said Luxion.

The legs came off first, detaching from the knee down. Next was the rear container, which held the booster that gave Arroganz its impressive speed. The new legs were much bulkier—apparently, it had been specially designed for aquatic use—and the new back piece looked like twin rockets. I was also equipped with a brand-new speargun. Once all the new pieces had docked, Luxion performed a rapid analysis.

"Exchange complete."

With nothing left to do but take the plunge, I dropped into free fall, plummeting toward the water.

As the sky raced past, I sighed to myself. "If I knew it was going to come to this, I'd have done at least one underwater test run."

Most battles in this world were confined to the sky, which was why I had avoided being submerged, assuming I would never have to worry about it. I regretted that decision now.

As Arroganz broke through the water's surface, Luxion eyed me. "Have you reevaluated your previous stance on Arroganz's performance capabilities?"

"You still nursing a grudge? Get over it, man."

He was awfully spiteful for an AI.

While Leon and his comrades were locked in a subaquatic battle, the holy king had made his way to the ivory castle's hidden airship dock, where a vessel awaited him. This one had been specially constructed for speed, so that the king could escape if the need ever arose. Numerous treasures were already on board. The passengers consisted of royal family members and a skeleton crew. Of course, the beautiful women the holy king favored were welcomed aboard as well.

As the holy king made his way to the gangway, the prime minister was on his heels, having followed in hope of escaping as well.

"Your Eminence! Please, I-I beseech you, take me with you!" He clung desperately to the king.

The Scumbag Knight and his entourage had appeared out of nowhere, instantly neutralizing all of Rachel's warships. The prime minister was understandably terrified, his face white as sheet.

The king shoved the prime minister away, furious. Rounding on the man, he snapped, "You will take command and you'll stay here till the bitter end." With that settled, as far as he was concerned, he boarded the ship and began barking orders at the crew. "Take off at once. Our destination is the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit."

"Yes, Your Eminence!"

This meant abandoning his allies, as well as those still fighting, for the sake of his own self-preservation. But as royalty, it was the correct call. Displeased though he was, the holy king wasn't all that panicked.

"Rachel can be restored as long as I survive, no matter how many times they tear us down. Holfortian fools, savor your victory while it lasts—because I promise you it will be short-lived."

He intended to seek asylum within the Empire, where he could plot Holfort Kingdom's downfall anew and rally the entire world to his cause. Alas, his scheme ended before it had even begun. When his airship made to exit the secret passageway and take to the skies, it was hit by a violent tremor.

"Wh-what's the meaning of this?!" demanded the holy king.

His crew hurriedly checked their monitors to confirm the situation. What they saw was a glowing, white airship blocking their path—the *Licorne*. It had been lying in wait this whole time.

"N-no, this isn't possible. How did they know about this escape route?!"

Panic and chaos erupted among the crew, but soon, a curt voice reverberated around them.

"It ends here. Surrender, Your Eminence."

The holy king recognized that voice instantly. His legs gave out from under him, and he crashed onto his bottom. "That scheming witch...Lepart's Devious Princess."

Chapter 10: The Submerged City

COULD SCARCELY BELIEVE what we found beneath the lake.

"What the hell's a city doing down here?"

Equipped with parts tailor-made for an aquatic environment, Arroganz sank until it came to rest on the lake bed. Its landing disturbed the sediment. Grains of silt fanned out around us, considerably reducing visibility.

"I noticed it well before you," Luxion said most matter-of-factly.

"Gee, how helpful."

Arroganz's light powered on, illuminating our surroundings. This confirmed what I had glimpsed before—a sprawling city that lay at the bottom of the lake. Fish darted out of abandoned buildings.

Luxion's lens flashed red as he analyzed the area. "This city appears to have been submerged some time ago. Without further investigation, I cannot say whether it was due to a natural disaster or deliberate action."

"Sorry, but we don't have time for that."

On the monitor, I spotted the undulating roots of the vines that had attacked us earlier. The visibility was likely so poor because of how greatly the vines had disturbed the lake bed. The plant gave no mind to the remnants of the city, destroying buildings as it moved.

A number of drones shot out of Arroganz's backpack, dispersing through the water.

"These drones will commence analysis on the enemy Demonic Suit," Luxion said.

The data they compiled was immediately transferred to Arroganz.

"I read about this in a book, but I'm guessing that thing is the Demonic Suit the empire sent Rachel in the past, right? Why'd they sink it?" "In all likelihood, its power was beyond their ability to control, and they were left with no choice but to store it here. Judging by what we've seen, it seems they suffered considerable casualties every time they came to extract a shard."

I didn't understand what he meant at first, but the vines knocked into something as it continued wriggling, propelling it through the water. As I studied the object, I realized it resembled the broken ruin of something akin to a submarine. The amount of rust and general erosion indicated it had been here for some time.

"This thing's obviously beyond them. Why would they still try to manipulate it for their own ends? Are they stupid?"

"I suppose one might call attempting to subjugate an uncontrollable resource like this a form of human advancement," Luxion said.

I held my speargun at the ready and accelerated forward. The rockets on Arroganz's back and its new legs provided the proper propulsion, but the sensation significantly differed from what I was accustomed to in the air.

"Moving feels so sluggish down here."

"Such is the quandary of subaquatic battle. Please acclimate yourself with all speed."

Easy for you to say. It was as if Arroganz was being crushed, what with its laggardly reaction time. Nonetheless, I continued my approach. Once I was closer, I got a better look at the situation. The Demonic Suit wasn't actually moving but rather manipulating the plant to do its bidding.

"So we just gotta take this thing out quick, and then we're done, right?" I was feeling pretty good about things now—relieved that this looked like it was going to be easy.

This was the case until I got a better look at the suit, at least. The shock hit me like a fist to the gut. I was speechless. Now I understood what Luxion had said earlier. I didn't need his analysis to tell me exactly what I was looking at—I could put two and two together easily enough.

"Becoming enthralled with the power of a Demonic Suit is the very height of folly. Having seen this for yourself, might we dispense with the dawdling, level this nation, and be done with it?" Luxion asked hopefully.

I was so disgusted by what I saw that, for once, I was actually tempted to give him the goddamn go-ahead.

The holy king found himself in the *Licorne's* hangar, surrounded by a squad of autonomous drones. He was none too pleased about the cuffs that bound his hands behind his back.

"These are too tight," he complained, petulant even after his capture. "Remove them."

Angie pinned him with a glare. Her voice dropped several octaves, coming out as a low growl. "It seems you don't fully comprehend your situation. I advise you start acting like the prisoner you are."

The holy king sniffed. If anything, he felt emboldened by his capture. "Don't take such a haughty attitude with me, little girl. I am Rachel's Holy King! Unlike you savages, I hail from a kingdom with a storied history and time-honored traditions. The noble blood of countless glorious generations runs through these veins. I have absolutely no intention of condescending to curry favor from the likes of you!"

"If your blood really is so precious, then you should honor it by gracefully accepting your defeat," Mylene interrupted, stepping in front of Angie to take command. She stared at the king coldly. "Moreover, you will immediately discontinue the operation of the Demonic Suit you keep hidden under the lake. This battle is over. Do not resist further."

"Fools! As if I have the means to stop it," the holy king huffed, turning away.

"What did you say?" Mylene knitted her brows, hands clenching in rage.

The king cackled maniacally. "The rest of our Holy Knights were sacrificed to power the Demonic Suit—along with the remaining candidates. Oh, but not just them, no... I knew that wouldn't be enough. I sent many more along with them—everyone on hand! With all those souls feeding it, its stomach must be full to bursting. It won't stop now. Not even if Rachel falls." Even after his laughter died away, his voice was tinged with triumphant mirth. He had sacrificed all

these lives to send the Demonic Suit on a rampage.

At first, Angie was aghast, but she quickly regained her composure. Incandescent with rage, she snarled, "You lowly—"

"Angie, please, control yourself." Livia seized Angie by the arm before she could lay into the king.

Angie hesitated, momentarily holding her breath. "But how can we stand idly by after such a heinous confession?" she argued, her face contorting with a full range of emotions.

Livia shared her pain.

Mylene closed her eyes, falling into quiet contemplation. Carl watched the women from afar, his hands still clutching his cane. He tugged the brim of his hat, pulling it down to better hide his face.

What a revolting excuse for a human being. If not for the long-standing relationship between our countries, I'd never have anything to do with him. Even so, Holfort, your future will be determined by how you decide to handle this matter.

Carl kept a close eye on the situation, monitoring not only Leon but the rest of his entourage as they determined how to react to this. If they let their emotions get the better of them and killed the holy king outright, it would suggest they were incapable of logical restraint. That would inevitably lead to them becoming a threat to the rest of the world. Leon possessed substantial power, and Carl needed to ensure he had the requisite self-control to handle it.

While everyone else was occupied, a single woman strode straight up to the king—and slammed her fist into his face.

"Wha?!" Carl cried out, too surprised to restrain himself.

Noelle stood there, shoulders heaving, her breath erratic. The holy king lay crumpled at her feet, groaning.

"I absolutely *hate* guys like you, always thinking you can look down your nose at everything and everyone else!" Too furious to control her volume, Noelle screamed at the literal top of her lungs. "How *dare* you treat people like they're

expendable! Just who the hell do you think you are, huh?!"

"Unruly brat! I'm the Holy King of Rachel!" he spat.

It was pretty pathetic that he thought he could intimidate her with his title at this point.

"Yeah? So what?" Noelle balled her hands into fists again. "I'm Noelle—just Noelle, for the record, no fancy titles, no nothing. Don't think you can keep acting all high and mighty just because you're some king!" She threw herself at him, pummeling his face again.

Inside, Carl pumped his fists, proud of the girl for doing what the rest of them hadn't. What an impressive right hook!

As Noelle clobbered the poor king, Angie and Livia swiftly returned to their senses and peeled her off of him.

Carl's gaze turned to the ceiling, his face shrouded in the shadow of his hat. Now then, Scumbag Knight, how will you react?

An enormous flower bloomed at the bottom of the lake. Its petals were an earthen color, and cracks ran all through it. At its center rested the Demonic Suit, which stood about six meters tall. Combined with the flower itself, it was probably over thirty meters altogether. The vine-like tentacles protruded from its base, jutting all the way up and out of the water.

The Demonic Suit had maintained its original form, although its surface was littered with scratches and gashes. It was obvious where Rachel's people had sawed off shards for other uses. A number of submarines, more pristine and intact than the one I had seen earlier, lay scattered around the flower on the lake bed. They were of primitive design, and despite the lack of wear, they bore significant damage.

What really made my stomach curdle were the innumerable faces that lined the surface of the Demonic Suit, all of which seemed to be moving and contorted in anguish. I swallowed my nausea, liable to vomit if I didn't.

"The Demonic Suit's roots extend into the ground," Luxion said upon

completing his analysis.

"So the plant is part of it then."

"They likely pushed it into a berserk state by sacrificing dozens of lives."

I released my grip on the control sticks and cracked my knuckles. *Do these people have even a drop of human compassion?* I was starting to doubt it.

"Let's finish this quickly," I said.

"Yes, I believe that would be the most prudent course of action. Granted, I lack sufficient subaquatic battle data. All I can say is that this will not be the same as an airborne battle, so please exercise caution."

"I'm a total noob here. Lower your expectations."

I pressed my feet to the pedals, increasing Arroganz's acceleration through the water. Lifting my speargun, I took aim and fired, unleashing one Luxion's specially crafted metal arrows. I followed up with a couple more shots, and all three found their targets—embedding in the ivy-like tentacles. Only after they had sustained injury did they recognize me as an enemy and flock toward Arroganz.

"Too little too late. You should've come at me the moment I entered the water."

Luxion was quick to correct me. "Regardless of their timing, the result would be largely unchanged."

I dodged one of the incoming attacks, after which the viny tentacles began to undergo some sort of transformation. The arrows I'd stuck them with were imbued with magic, and from the spots where they protruded, the vines' color rapidly shifted. The tentacles squirmed as if in agony. Whatever was causing this abrupt change spread to the rest of the plant. Soon, the Demonic Suit at the center of the flower writhed as well.

I glanced at Luxion. "What exactly did you do to those arrows?"

"Since this is a plant, I decided to test some poison."

"Poison?!"

"Herbicide," he clarified. "I actually prepared several different varieties. It seems to be most effective." The fact that he'd managed to come up with this so rapidly after discovering our enemy was a plant was kind of disconcerting.

I haphazardly fired more arrows. "No real need to take aim if that's the case!"

"I do not expect any manner of precision from you, Master. Be my guest."

I choked. "Do you really have to be so mean and sarcastic in every conversation we have? I wish you'd take a page outta Brave's book."

"That is entirely unnecessary."

My magazine ran out of ammunition while I squabbled with Luxion. I quickly reloaded, maneuvering the control sticks to help me get some distance from the Demonic Suit.

The thrashing tentacles finally came crashing down, smashing through the underwater city. Sand and debris went flying, clouding the water even further. Once again, my vision was severely reduced.

"Fighting when I can't see squat? You gotta be kidding me."

"This would have been easier had we finished it off sooner," Luxion agreed. "Alas, it seems this battle will not be so simple."

When the herbicide had first entered the plant's system, the tentacles turned a haunting purple, only to brown and shrivel. Once they were unable to move, the flower itself began to crumble. The Demonic Suit, having lost its perch, moved its arms. One suddenly swelled, growing enormous.

Demonic Suits were unable to maintain their humanoid shape once they spun out of control. Typically, they instead took on a monstrous form.

I continued piloting Arroganz through the water while sneaking in shots from my spear gun. The arrows buried themselves in the Demonic Suit, but its color remained the same, suggesting the poison was ineffective.

"It seems it has already developed some resistance, despite the short span of time," Luxion observed.

"What about trying a new poison?"

"Even assuming that would prove effective for a time, it would be mostly pointless. The Demonic Suit would merely develop a new resistance just as quickly."

"In that case..." I stored the speargun, leaving Arroganz's hands completely empty. "We'll just have to overpower it the way we always do."

"Yes, barbarism does appear to suit you best, Master."

"You know what? I'm gonna remember that." He was treating me like I was some kind of savage.

With only one gargantuan arm at its disposal, the Demonic Suit charged. Fins unfolded across its body, allowing it to move freely in the water. However, its unwieldy shape left it unbalanced, so its movements were wild and unpredictable. It looked to me like it was floundering. I narrowly managed to dodge when it lunged, though, and used the opportunity to grab hold.

"Latch successful."

"Now blow it to pieces!" I commanded, thrusting the open palm of Arroganz's hand against the enemy suit's chassis.

Luxion's lens glimmered. "Impact."

The surface of the Demonic Suit glowed red as our attack hit, but the next instant, I found myself hurtling through the water.

"What the?!"

In the same instant we unleashed our shock wave, the recoil knocked us back.

"Why're you so calm about this?!" I balled my fists around the control sticks, glowering at Luxion.

"The potency of the attack is reduced underwater. We were unable to damage it to the degree required for its destruction."

His monotone was really grating on my nerves, though admittedly less so than the persistence of our enemy. I swallowed the urge to curse and surveyed the damage. We'd managed to blow off a piece of our opponent, but the suit was still perfectly functional. And of course, it could simply regenerate what it had lost, though that left its distorted and uncanny proportions looking even more

sinister.

Whatever. The main issue is that no one told me my biggest weapon would be ineffective down here!

"Dammit! I'm really sick of fighting underwater. How about we just yank it outta here and go airborne? Is the *Einhorn* ready to go fishing?"

Luxion glanced at me sidelong, an impressive feat for an AI. "Master, you continue to underestimate Arroganz's performance at a most basic level."

"Seriously? Is this really the time to whine about that?"

"It is a most troubling matter, so yes. Even with your lackluster piloting aptitude, you need only rely on Arroganz's impressive specs to gain the advantage."

I scowled. "Y'know, you don't have to be such a jerk about it!"

The whole time we were discussing things—or arguing, really—I had to dodge the enemy's continuous onslaught. But I might as well have just stood there. The Demonic Suit had been optimized for subaquatic battle. In a competition of speed, I was completely outmatched. Ironically, the more its shape warped and changed, the more it adapted to its environment; at some point, it had even lost its legs for a fish tail. The entity had, all in all, assumed the appearance of something akin to a cursed mermaid.

I ran a check on what weapons Arroganz still had and noticed Luxion had prepared some torpedoes. Perfect. I launched them immediately. Four torpedoes shot out, chasing the Demonic Suit. It swung its enlarged arm, firing what appeared to be needles, which collided with the torpedoes. Explosions rocked the lake.

"So that's not gonna work either, huh?"

I was back to racking my brain, trying to come up with some other way to fight this thing.

"It isn't as though Cleare and I have idled away since our last battle with Demonic Suits," said Luxion. "In particular, we began making improvements to Arroganz after Brave's appearance."

I was too busy dodging the enemy to respond to Luxion.

"Master, use the anchor."

Without a moment to lose, I did as advised. The anchor flew forward, piercing the Demonic Suit. A retractable wire connected it to the rear container, so once it was hooked, the malformed mermaid began dragging me along with it.

I gritted my teeth. "It's totally overpowering me."

"Brace your legs."

Once again, I did as Luxion said and hunkered down, landing on the floor of the lake. I dropped my hips, and finally, the creature jerked to a standstill. The moment Arroganz had made contact with a solid surface, spikes extended from the soles of its feet to lock it in place.

"Did that do it?" I asked hopefully.

"Now increase output."

The low whir of a machine echoed through the cockpit, and the resistance in the control sticks and foot pedals shifted. They had grown more sensitive; the slightest touch produced a faster reaction than I'd ever seen. Stepping on the foot pedals even a little made the meter shoot up.

"It's gonna be hard to pilot like this."

"Do your best," Luxion directed, unconcerned with my struggles.

I didn't really have the wherewithal to argue at this point. My attention was totally fixed on piloting.

The Demonic Suit didn't seem to comprehend what was happening. Since the surprise of the anchor, it had begun to thrash. I grabbed the retractable wire and yanked it toward me. No longer able to overpower Arroganz, the suit was swept along, helpless to resist.

"You can't get away from me!"

"Let's weaken it," Luxion suggested.

A few more torpedoes launched from Arroganz's rear container. Now that the Demonic Suit was powerless to negate them, they found their mark. More

explosions ripped through the water, and an inky black liquid billowed from the impact site. The wire grew slack. Seems like that did the trick.

"Up we go, Arroganz!"

I slammed my feet on the pedals, pushing them as far as they would go to accelerate toward the surface. Arroganz rocketed up at top speed. Even though its current loadout wasn't ideal for aerial battle, it managed to take to the skies—albeit with considerably reduced maneuverability. I yanked the Demonic Suit out of the lake along with me. It wriggled and squirmed on the line like a fish on a hook.

"We're gonna finish this on land," I said, putting Arroganz into a spin. I wasn't about to give the Demonic Suit the advantage by letting this fight fall back underwater.

"A wise decision."

The Demonic Suit whirled through the air violently, Arroganz at the center of its arc. I used this momentum and released the anchor, slinging the Demonic Suit à la track-and-field hammer throw. It whizzed through the air and crashed violently into the ivory castle.

The outer walls shattered, debris flying everywhere as the interior of the castle was left exposed. The castle was famous for its ivory hue, but I could see now that the color was achieved with paint, and there were no natural, ivorycolored stones in sight. *Man, it looked so radiant at first, but now I feel like I was wearing beer goggles.*

The Demonic Suit thrashed further, even more like a literal fish, worsening the damage to the castle with every spasm.

I purged Arroganz's rear container and slowly drifted toward the Demonic Suit. Spines had manifested on its surface. Many of them jutted out in an attempt to impale Arroganz, but they shattered against my Armor's outer plating on impact.

"It may have put up a more impressive fight with an actual pilot," Luxion said, likely considering this battle in terms of our previous encounters. "While I imagine the intent was to flee while this thing ran rampant, it was a rash

decision. The king seems to have no compunction about the lives of his people. Had we not been here, the suit would have razed the entire capital."

"Seems like the holy king is the real scumbag here."

The Demonic Suit was still struggling, so I bashed my fist into it, then slammed my open palm down, pinning it in place.

"Impact."

Arroganz emitted a shock wave that rippled through the creature. It writhed in anguish, its insides swelling even further. By the time it had fully ballooned, I had launched myself in the sky to gain some distance. Unable to take the strain any longer, the Demonic Suit imploded, spraying inky black goop over every inch of the previously ivory castle.

Ah well, I thought. As long as no one asks me to cover the property damage, we're good.

"Phew, it's over. Finally."

This whole thing had left a bad taste in my mouth. It always did. Few were the battles that left me feeling genuinely victorious. Instead, I always seemed to be plagued by lingering reservations.

Luxion studied me, reading the emotions on my face. "Rachel is at fault for these unnecessary sacrifices, Master, not you," he said soothingly—a rare gesture from him. "You are by no means responsible for those losses."

"Except that none of this would've happened if I hadn't come here." Rachel would have had no reason to resort to such measures were it not for me.

Luxion moved his lens from side to side, as if shaking his head in exasperation. "Master, if you had not fought them here on their soil, Holfort and her people would have been the ones to suffer. After that, the devastation would likely have spread to other nations. By doing this, you kept the loss of life to a minimum. Can you not take comfort in that perspective? It seems to me you suffer from a tragically inflexible mind."

He was no doubt trying to antagonize me in the hope of lifting my spirits. That was his way of being kind. He got like this after a fight.

"We won, but it just feels so hollow," I muttered, leaning my head back.

At some point, while I was lost in thought, the five idiots and Finn had gathered around me.

"Splendid work, Lord Leon," said Julius—or the masked knight, as he insisted on being known. "You truly live up to your heroic reputation."

"Uh, yeah..."

This whole masked knight thing still bugged the hell out of me. Firstly, it was a total farce on Julius's part. Secondly, and this bit really puzzled me, was that none of his friends ever acted like they knew it was him. They *had* to be entirely aware and were just pretending for his sake, right? But I hesitated to point it out, because they seemed *genuinely* oblivious.

Let's assume for a moment they were just playing along, and I said, "Hey, guys, that masked dude is actually Julius." How would they react? They'd all give me dirty looks and say, "We *know* that. We're just letting him have his fun. Read the room for once."

It wasn't like I needed to worry about the idiot brigade. But I still had to wonder if they really were this clueless or if they were just getting carried away with the charade. I really wasn't sure.

Frankly, it kinda pissed me off that I had been playing along this whole time and never said a thing. I was also pretty irked at their behavior—I absolutely could not tell whether they'd caught on, which left me trapped in this silent limbo. I just wished someone would put a stop to it already!

Brave clapped a hand on Arroganz's shoulder. "That was a pretty showy way to end it," said Finn over a private transmission. I supposed he didn't want the others to hear.

I shrugged. "I couldn't finish it off in the water. I'll have to get Luxion to design a weapon that can pulverize my opponents down there too."

"The best course of action would be to avoid subaquatic battles altogether. Digressions aside, the *Licorne* has the holy king in its custody."

So Cleare and the girls managed to take him in. Good. That meant we'd

managed to clear most of our objectives so far.

Relieved, I breathed a small sigh.

"Don't let your guard down yet," Finn warned. "That old codger may be a total pushover when it comes to Mia, but when politics are involved, he doesn't cut corners." The way he described Mr. Carl suggested the emperor wouldn't give us special consideration for any friendly feelings. This would be pure business—or politics, to be precise.

"Got it. All that's left are the negotiations. Miss Mylene'll take care of those."

I had no intention of involving myself, since I would only step on Miss Mylene's toes by trying. But Finn didn't seem too pleased by my shiftless approach.

"You're seriously going to leave the most important part to someone else?"

"Duh. It's *because* it's so important that Miss Mylene's the best person to handle it. She's pretty amazing, you know. Incredibly intelligent and super capable—but more than that, she's an absolute knockout. If she wasn't the queen, I'd be on my knees begging for her hand."

I was just messing around now that the battle was over, but Finn seemed to take me seriously. "Now it all makes sense. You like older women. I always wondered why you seemed so cold to your fiancées. I see, I see."

"Hey, you take that back!" I shot up in my seat. "When was I ever cold to the girls?!"

Luxion averted his gaze as he floated by my shoulder. "Indeed, the fact that you don't remember is indicative of the problem."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?!" I demanded, whipping my head around.

"You always seem so much happier when you're interacting with Her Majesty," Finn went on.

"Enough with the false accusations! The real question is whether *you've* made up your mind about what you're gonna say to Mia!"

"That has nothing to do with this!"

I shook my head vehemently. "It sure as hell does! You wanna talk about girls and stuff? Well, have at you, *sir*!"

"Don't act like we're on the same page!"

As we bickered, the *Einhorn* and *Licorne* made their approach.

Chapter 11: Roland's Secret Strategy

ONCE THE BATTLE WAS OVER, Rachel's warships were powered down and left to float adrift on the lake's surface. All their remaining Armors were lined up on their decks, and the soldiers were forced to disembark. Brad took up a position overhead to keep an eye out and make sure no one made any feeble attempts at resistance.

Strangely, the city folk gazed up at his suit reverently, offering ardent prayers. Had they mistaken him for some kind of divine intervention? Being the narcissist he was, I assumed Brad would be delighted, but to my surprise, he wasn't.

"They're worshipping me. I don't know what to do. Why is this happening?" he said.

Even Brad was bewildered. I mean, it wasn't surprising that people were grateful after all the effort he'd put into saving their lives. In times like these, it would also be understandable if they resented us as foreign invaders. Perhaps the silver lining was that we'd avoided the worst-case scenario. If they hated our guts, it would have made diplomatic negotiation way more difficult.

I listened to Brad's anxious mumblings through a remote transmitter, but I didn't bother responding. I had work to do. And by work, I meant sitting in on talks with the holy king.

Having changed into more comfortable attire, I made my way to the *Licorne*'s meeting room. The moment I walked through the doors, everyone's eyes were on me. The holy king was on deck, as was another Rachel official. Miss Mylene was representing Holfort, along with me and Angie. Someone else was supposed to join, but they weren't here quite yet.

"That was awfully fast. Why didn't you rest a bit before joining us?" Angie asked, worried.

I plopped down in my seat. "Figured I'd get this over with quickly so I can actually relax afterward. Anyhow, how far have you gotten in your chat with His Holy Whateverness?"

The holy king had been released from his handcuffs and was perched on his seat with his arms folded firmly over his chest. He scowled, angling his chin up so he could stare down his nose at me. As far as first impressions went, this was about rock bottom.

"So you're the Scumbag Knight, I take it." The man shook his head. "Holfort really has sunk to a new low, touting such a brat as their champion."

I snorted. "And whose kingdom just lost to that champion, hmm?"

His face went red with rage.

See, this is what makes guys with thin skin so pathetic. He was happy to pick a fight, but he couldn't take what he dished out. Instigating wasn't really an effective tactic if you lost your temper first.

The moment was interrupted when Julius belatedly strolled in. He took only one glance at the holy king's face before turning to me. "You said something again, I see."

"Just a little small talk is all."

Although Julius looked like he wanted to respond, he kept his mouth shut and took his seat.

Beside the holy king, whose petulant attitude remained unchanged even in defeat, was a man whose arm seemed to have been injured, since it was tucked in a sling. He seemed to be some kind of aristocrat and looked *way* more nervous than his monarch.

"Is everyone here?" the official asked.

Miss Mylene smiled. "Yes, this is everyone, Prime Minister. Let us commence with negotiations and see an end to this conflict once and for all."

As her words indicated, a war wasn't truly over once someone achieved victory on the field. There was always the diplomacy and negotiations that followed. The losing side would be at a disadvantage when discussing terms,

but fortunately, Holfort was the clear victor.

Miss Mylene looked to be savoring the moment. It was probably euphoria from the long-awaited defeat of an archnemesis, as well as getting to see the conquered foe in person. Strangely, one might have expected the holy king to be a bit more reserved, given the difficult position we'd put him in, but a brazen smile was plastered across his face instead.

"Celebrate for now," he said, "but the true victor is determined not by a single battle but by the war. Do not assume this modest achievement means you in any way stand above me."

Miss Mylene continued smiling, her eyes narrowing into slits. His attitude was getting under her skin. Beside me, Angie's face twisted in open contempt.

"In light of your current defeat, that hardly seems a fitting attitude to take for this discussion," Angie said.

"Holfort Kingdom is a nation founded by losers who once fled Rachel. What need is there for someone of my standing to show *civility* toward such a country or its people?"

While the holy king ignored Angie's advice in favor of more condescension, the prime minister grew increasingly pale. His silence and refusal to admonish the king, however, suggested that he didn't necessarily disagree.

Cleare hovered over my left shoulder, studying the holy king with intense interest. "This is prime entertainment right here. I mean, you're saying you think the distant past is of some benefit to you now, right? But in the present, you've lost, utterly and completely. You got steamrolled by my master and his buddies. I'd *love* to see how clinging to past glory pans out into a win. What're you waiting for? Go on, then!"

I figured her interest was probably earnest, but the way she phrased it only served to piss off the king. He snapped his mouth shut, though his face was an even uglier shade of red than before.

"If wars could be won by virtue of past glories, the world would be a much simpler place," said Luxion. He seemed to be admonishing Cleare at first, but his real target became rapidly apparent. "All he's doing is trying to delude himself.

Based on the utter lack of responsibility he has thus far demonstrated, he will make for a poor negotiator in the forthcoming proceedings. Why don't we demand a more levelheaded replacement?"

I can't with you guys. What awful behavior. Where the hell did you learn this from?

Unable to hold it in, Angie burst out laughing. Miss Mylene also erupted into a fit of giggles. The holy king seemed even more affronted by the laughter of these women. He slammed his fist on the table.

"Y-you dare mock me?! I speak only truth. Your past is that of the losing side." His voice lost momentum as he retracted his fist, which he tenderly massaged.

"I must concur. This is an alarming breach of decorum," said the prime minister.

Part of me wanted to argue that we hadn't been the first ones to breach decorum here, but who had the time to waste on petty squabbles?

"A fair point," Miss Mylene conceded, sharing my sentiment. It was time to move on. "My apologies. Now then, let us wrap up these discussions with all due haste. We will begin by having Rachel dismantle the Armed Defense Concordat."

The holy king and prime minister sat quietly, waiting for her to go on.

"Next, you will pay reparations to Holfort for the troubles you've caused. I believe we should also put restrictions on your military." She moved through the list of our conditions—or perhaps more accurately, demands—rather quickly, giving them little time to comment. Our victory had been overwhelming enough to entitle her to that.

Curiously, the more she said, the higher the prime minister's lips curled.

"Does this not sit well with you?" Miss Mylene asked, quirking a brow.

"Oh, I simply wondered for a moment if you really were the woman once feared as the Devious Princess. Pardon me, I suppose you're a queen now, aren't you?"

That wasn't a very flattering nickname.

Miss Mylene smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Are you insinuating I am an impostor?"

"Your vision is just so narrow—you fail to see the bigger picture. In fact, we're the ones who will be demanding financial compensation from Holfort Kingdom."

"Come again?"

I was just as surprised as Miss Mylene; I'd never dreamed they would make such an outlandish request.

"You are the ones who invaded our lands and inflicted innumerable damages upon the White Capital," the prime minister continued. "Not to mention the atrocious state of our ivory castle. You can expect an astronomically high quote when we submit our receipt for reparation."

The holy king folded his arms and nodded eagerly. "Yes, well said."

"It seems you still fail to comprehend your position," Miss Mylene said with a deep sigh.

"I'll give you this—you are powerful," the holy king said with a great big grin. "But that strength will net you nothing but even greater foes. You focused too keenly on what lay directly in front of you without considering the broader implications. We're not the only ones feeling threatened by your continued victories." He gave her a pointed look, as if he expected her to catch on.

I tilted my head. "I dunno what you're talking about."

Angie glanced at me and whispered, "Honestly, Leon..."

"As I suspected. Strength is all you have going for you, brat." The holy king shook his head in dismay. "Allow me to enlighten you: The Holy Kingdom of Rachel shares a most amicable relationship with an even greater power—that of the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit."

I shrugged. "Sure, whatever."

"You truly are ignorant," the king grit out, clenching his jaw. "If a superpower like the empire decided to move upon you, Holfort would have no hope of victory. The empire has collected numerous Lost Items over its long history. The

sheer power of their military surpasses human imagination." He leaned back in his chair, triumphantly puffing his chest out. "Well? Do you finally understand which of us will be paying the cost for this war? If you fail to curry favor with me, you will suffer for it."

"Seems like he thinks he can win via name dropping," Cleare observed. "Isn't it kinda incredible that he forgot his humiliating defeat? He's acting all high and mighty now!"

"Well, he certainly makes a valid point," Angie said, snickering.

The holy king eyed her suspiciously.

Julius smiled despite himself. "Indeed, he does. If the empire were to wage war on Holfort, we would suffer defeat."

Miss Mylene lifted her fan to cover the cold, calculating smile that spread across her lips.

"If the empire chose to act, there's no telling what would happen. However, it is foolish to assume we gave that possibility no consideration."

As if on cue, a man stepped through the meeting room doors. Finn followed a step behind him, holding himself with the grace and decorum expected of a knight. As for Mr. Carl, he lifted his hat off his head and pressed it to his chest.



"You're being awfully bold," he said to the holy king. "And just as shrewd as ever, waving around another country's name during a negotiation."

The holy king sneered. "Who is this unsightly old man? Keep this unruly commoner away from me. He is unworthy of my presence."

Although we'd had a good chuckle over his attitude moments prior, we sobered up quick. Was the holy king serious? Mr. Carl told me they'd met faceto-face on numerous occasions.

Finn leaned in toward the emperor. "Your Imperial Majesty, might I recommend altering your appearance? His Eminence seems to be having difficulty recognizing you. I am afraid that if you do nothing, he will remain ignorant of your true status."

"So it seems." Mr. Carl set his hat on the table and removed the glasses he'd used to better disguise himself. "I suppose I should be more conscientious of my appearance."

He tapped his cane on the floor, and light swirled up and around him—a very magical girl transformation sequence, honestly. I could only be thankful we didn't get any fan service. I really didn't need that image burned into my mind.

When the light receded, the emperor stood clad in a radiant imperial affair embellished with gems and gold and silver adornments. It was so opulent and luxurious I couldn't stop thinking about how *expensive* it had to be. To top it all off, he wore a red cape trimmed with white fur.

"Hmph. Is this the part where I ask, 'Have you forgotten my imperial countenance?'" Mr. Carl—err, uh, His Imperial Majesty asked as he stroked his chin. He was referencing a line from an old historical drama that had aired in the seventies and eighties in Japan, one only Finn and I would pick up on.

Now that the emperor had changed his appearance, the holy king and prime minister gaped, their mouths hanging open.

"Emperor Carl?" the holy king stammered in disbelief, a tremor running through his voice. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

His Imperial Majesty knitted his brows, glaring. "I came to determine for

myself what kind of man this 'Scumbag Knight' really is. Thanks to this, I've been granted better insight into your behavior as well. It seems you flaunt our empire's name at your convenience."

Finn narrowed his eyes as he shot a disgruntled look at the emperor. Although he didn't say anything, I could basically read his mind: *You liar. You only came out here to check on Mia. This was just a side job.*

I agreed.

"Your Eminence, we have no way to guarantee this man truly is His Imperial Majesty," the prime minister said, who, despite his show of bravado, was still trembling.

"Y-you're exactly right!"

Sadly for them, the emperor had been prepared for such a response. He snorted with laughter. "If you're so sure, then send a distress call to the Empire. That will be our test: whether they respond to your plight or not. Granted..." He edged closer to the holy king, gaze ice-cold as he stared him down. "If you do so, I shall have you appropriately punished for misappropriating our name."

The emperor continued. "Incidentally, there is also the matter of the Demonic Suit we sent you as a symbol of our goodwill, which was just destroyed. I do hope you comprehend how we might feel to see you fail to treat it with proper respect and care."

The holy king and prime minister shook in their seats, their bluster all but vanished. Was this man really the emperor? Or wasn't he? They struggled to decide.

"It seems they're here," the emperor remarked, glancing out the window. An airship flying the imperial emblem was approaching the *Licorne*. Unbeknownst to me, it seemed Mr. Carl had contacted his homeland.

The holy king and prime minister turned to jelly, slipping right out of their seats and onto the floor. Finn winked at me. He was probably cheering our victory internally. I lifted a hand to wave back, signaling my thanks for the part he'd played.

The emperor turned his gaze to me. "This was a bit—no, it was extremely

messy, but I've awarded you passing marks."

"I am deeply grateful for your magnanimity," I said, standing so that I could give him a proper bow.

From his spot on the floor, the holy king looked between the two of us. He shook his head in disbelief. "Th-this can't be... You made contact with the emperor and set this up without our knowing?!"

In truth, this arrangement had rather conveniently fallen into my lap. I didn't really have the time to spend secretly consorting with a foreign power. I still took my moment to gloat, though, flashing a grin at His Eminence. Oh, and I made sure it was a malicious one—the kind that generally belonged on the face of a supervillain.

"If you wanna win, isn't it only natural to go the whole nine yards?" I didn't say it aloud, but the implicit message was clear: It's your own fault for being too arrogant to do the same.

"You brat..." This time the holy king trembled with quiet fury. "You're exactly like that eccentric Roland! Wait..."

My face twisted upon mention of that swine.

His Eminence studied me closely. His probing gaze was so uncomfortable that I scowled at him, but he only nodded. "The malicious handiwork, the snide remarks...I see it now! You're Roland's bastard!"

"Wha?"

The words didn't really sink in at first. Roland's bastard? Like his kid? *Me?* As in, a world where that scum lord was my father? Oh *hell* no. *Absolutely* not.

Alas, His Eminence had already convinced himself. "I always found it strange. Regardless of however impressive your accomplishments might have been, the way you climbed the ranks was so unusual—and all the way to a dukedom! Not to mention, the royal family entrusted you with total authority again and again. But if you put in context—that you're his illegitimate son—it all makes sense. I never imagined I would lose to that madman's child..."

My hands fisted, trembling with uncontained rage. "If you're trying to piss me

off, you—"

"I can't believe it. You're my older brother, Leon?!" Julius shot out of his chair and turned to me, looking entirely too earnest to be joking.

Does this idiot even hear himself?

"You're gonna take *his* word as gospel?" I snapped as I stomped toward him and jabbed a finger into his chest. "What in the world would make you think I'm really your brother—let alone the *older* one? You got anything worth keeping between those ears?"

Julius was still gobsmacked. He stumbled back a few steps, stammering, "I-I didn't... I mean, knowing my father, it's perfectly possible."

"The hell it is!"

"But think about it. If you were my elder brother, you'd be a prince. Right? So basically...you could be the next king. In fact, wouldn't it be better for the whole kingdom if we just went along with the story, even if we're not actually blood related?"

"No! That's a *terrible* idea! Why are these words even coming out of your goddamn princely mouth!"

"But it's a good idea."

Despite my vehement denial of the holy king's accusation, the rest of the room actually sank into thought as they considered the plausibility.

Mr. Carl and Finn exchanged looks, whispering.

"What do you think?" asked Mr. Carl. "From what I know of Roland, it's not a stretch."

"With all due respect to Leon, Holfort's king is quite the philanderer," Finn responded, suggesting he also found it credible.

I whipped around to face Angie, hoping that at least she would be a voice of reason. "Angie, you've gotta... A-Angie?"

Angie's hand cupped her chin as she turned the thought over in her mind, mumbling to herself. "It is certainly *possible*. Given how readily His Majesty

moves Leon up the ranks, it seems foolish to dismiss the idea out of hand. Was he perhaps attempting to grant Leon proper status in high society?"

Oh crap. She's gone off the deep end too.

"Open your eyes, Angie! My old man is *Balcus*, an ordinary, run-of-the-mill backwater baron! There's no way I could be the king's illegitimate child. You know that. Besides, that douchebag is the last man in the world I'd want to be my dad!"

Hypothetically speaking—and assuming this was even true—I would never acknowledge Roland as my father.

I turned to Miss Mylene next only to find she had slapped her hands over her face and was openly sobbing. "Oh, Leon, never in my dreams did I imagine you were the son of such a useless slimeball."

"Miss Mylene!" I cried, desperate. "Please come to your senses. My mom isn't the type to cheat on her husband!" If nothing else, I had to make that clear—for my mom's honor.

Meanwhile, Luxion and Cleare were being their usual unhelpful selves.

"This entire situation could be easily rectified by a DNA test," said Luxion.

"Yeah, okay, but imagine the look on Roland's face when he hears this." Cleare shivered with anticipation. "Now that'll be a sight to see!"

You guys are totally useless! You should be actively helping me clear my name! Or my mom's name, anyway.

"Roland, you wicked cretin. Does your scheming know no bounds? I could never have foreseen that you would use your own illegitimate son as a weapon," His Eminence muttered to himself, fully convinced of his own theory, regardless of my protestations.

So, face devoid of emotion, I marched over to the king...and swung my fist.

Several weeks later, Holfort's nobles gathered in the royal palace for a meeting. They had come to hear of the conclusion of the war with Rachel. Duke Redgrave had arrived at the throne room to sit in on the assembly as well.

At this point, word of Leon's invasion of Rachel's capital and subsequent successful capture of the holy king had spread. They had come to hear the specific details. Some were relieved the crisis was over, while others were more anxious than before. The latter group largely had connections with enemy nations and had been prepared to turn traitor. None of them had anticipated Leon bringing Rachel to its knees.

Even I couldn't have predicted that awful brat would pull the emperor out of his sleeve like that. I guess I should give him some genuine praise for his accomplishments this time around, Roland thought. Making contact with the emperor and discussing his aims beforehand had allowed Leon to avoid the risk of the empire joining the war. Roland was truly impressed on that mark.

The bureaucrat who had officially assessed the situation in Rachel finally entered the throne room. He took a knee before the king, and as he spoke, his voice rose with unrestrained excitement for the news he was sharing.

"Rejoice, Your Majesty! Duke Bartfort has brought down the hammer of judgment upon the Holy Kingdom of Rachel and dismantled our foes, the Armed Defense Concordat. Her Majesty also reassures us that the empire has no plans to take up arms against us."

Impressed, the aristocrats shouted out to share their sentiments.

"Duke Bartfort is as reliable as ever, I see!"

"Yet another notable accomplishment to his name."

"The king can offer him no greater title for his deeds. Surely they will reward him in some other fashion."

Duke Redgrave maintained a scowl throughout. Leon had severed all ties with him, so his further accomplishments left Vince feeling conflicted, to say the least.

Roland lifted himself from the throne and brought his hands together, applauding Leon. "Duke Bartfort's deeds are most certainly praiseworthy. I am compelled to send him words of gratitude. Yet his accomplishments thus far eclipse the legacy of any hero in our nation's history. Perhaps we ought to reward him with the title of *arch*duke?"

At one point, House Fanoss had been granted the title of archduke, and they had been referred to as the Archduchy of Fanoss until they seceded from the kingdom. No archduke had been named since, but now, Roland proposed bestowing the prestigious title on Leon.

I meant it when I said he warranted sincere recognition. But the reward is an entirely separate matter. Since you worked so hard, brat, why don't I raise you even further, hmm? Roland snickered inwardly. Just imagining the look on Leon's face when he heard of his new title brought the king immense joy. Leon would absolutely hate it.

In some ways, Roland knew Leon better than anyone.

The bureaucrat who had reported the news gaped at the king, looking even more awestruck than the audience. There seemed to be something on his mind.

"What is it?" Roland narrowed his eyes. "What else is there to report?"

"N-no. Nothing you need pay any mind to, Your Majesty."

But the bureaucrat's choice of words suggested there was indeed *some* manner of information, and that it was most likely scandalous in nature. Roland's first thought was, of course, that something had happened between Leon and Mylene.

That snot-nosed little brat. Don't tell me he actually made a move on her! Come on, now, that's crossing the line—I can't even tease him about something like that. Yeah, I figured he'd sink that far eventually, but at this critical juncture? Horrible timing.

If the queen and duke engaged in an illicit relationship, as Roland now suspected, the traditional punishment would be execution. Though Roland was planning a different approach.

I'd be in a real bind without him, so I can't actually let him die. Instead, when the aristocrats call for his head, I'll be the bigger man and show mercy. My reputation might suffer, but that's a small price to pay for this kind of leverage.

It was a great embarrassment for a high society man to be cuckolded. This scenario had been rampant among the lower noble houses until recently, but Roland was a *king*. If his name were tarnished, the entire nation was disgraced.

The nobles would surely demand Leon's death.

Roland ran the scenario through his mind. Heh heh, this is the end for you, you little jerk! You'll be kowtowing to me for the rest of your life after this. I bet your fiancées are already giving you hell for daring to cheat. I can't wait until you get back to the capital.

Roland couldn't imagine Angie—or Livia or Noelle, for that matter—sitting idly by if they caught wind of Leon's adultery with the queen. Picturing it made him practically euphoric. Ahh, I wish I could summon him right this instant so I could mock him in his misery.

"My curiosity is piqued," Roland told the bureaucrat after long contemplation. "Speak. Tell me everything, and spare no details."

The bureaucrat couldn't refuse a direct command. As he spoke, his gaze wandered, looking everywhere but at the king. "Th-this information is yet to be substantiated. It's merely a rumor making the rounds in Rachel. I humbly ask that you keep that in mind, Your Majesty."

His preamble was taking too long. He was incredibly hesitant to give voice to whatever he knew.

"Enough. Get to the point," Roland commanded, taking his seat once more. I already know it's about that brat and Mylene. Whether their liaisons have been confirmed is irrelevant. The fact that word is already spreading elsewhere is what counts. He fidgeted on the throne, anxious to hear it all said aloud.

"Very well. I beg you excuse my discourtesy in advance. A rumor is spreading in the Holy Kingdom of Rachel...that Duke Bartfort is actually Your Majesty's illegitimate child!"

Roland had already folded his arms and nodded along, having anticipated something entirely different to come out of the bureaucrat's mouth. "Yes, Leon is my illegitimate—what?" His head jerked up.

The nobles were deathly silent.

"N-nothing has substantiated the rumor, as I said," the bureaucrat continued nervously. "But it is still making the rounds. I hear the holy king himself was the one who first suggested it, during the negotiations following Rachel's defeat—

at which point Duke Bartfort lost his temper and struck the king with his fist."

This framing seemed to provide more legitimacy to the rumor—that Leon had become enraged when the holy king discovered the truth. In Rachel, the people were convinced that Leon was indeed Roland's illegitimate child.

A cold sweat trickled down Roland's face, and he shook with rage. "E-enough! I'll...I'll not hear of such nonsense! That ungrateful little heathen, my child? There is nothing remotely funny about such a suggestion! Who proposed this? The holy king, you say? Bring him before me at once. I'll have his head on a pike and mount it in the center of the White Capital!"

Being the philanderer that he was, Roland had been the subject of many rumors of illicit progeny, but never had he erupted with fury like this. Neither were the nobles accustomed to seeing him express anything with such emotion. Whispers spread throughout the crowd.

"His Majesty is shaken. Could it be true then?"

"I suppose Duke Bartfort is of an age with Prince Julius."

"Yes, I suppose that would be reason to conceal his birth, wouldn't it?"

All those years ago, Prince Julius had been named crown prince by virtue of being Roland's firstborn son to his queen consort. An illegitimate son of royal birth would have thrown the court into chaos. Some would have thrown in their lot to support Leon's claim instead. This, they reasoned, would have been sufficient motive for Roland to hide the truth.

"N-no," Roland stuttered, vigorously shaking his head. "Think about this, all of you. He doesn't resemble me in the least, does he?" Despite his protestations, his voice was so feeble that no one heard him.

Vince turned to Minister Bernard, who was at his side, expression solemn. "Is this true? Don't tell me you knew and hid it from me?"

"N-no, of course not."

"But when Duke Bartfort was only a baron, you pulled strings to ensure he rose to greater heights."

"That was only because I thought he would be a more fitting match for my

daughter if he held greater rank," Bernard protested. "There was no deeper meaning to my actions. Besides, you supported him as well, right?"

"Hmm, true enough. I did back him at the time."

They were referring to Leon's second term as a first-year student, when he vanquished a band of air pirates. Bernard had been impressed with Leon after he stepped in to help Bernard's daughter, Clarice, recover from a broken heart. That was why he'd gone to such lengths to have Leon promoted. At first, that looked suspicious in Vince's eyes—as though Bernard had known the truth of Leon's birth all this time.

"If you really didn't know, then are the rumors untrue after all?" Vince wondered, stroking his chin.

Bernard dabbed at the sweat profusely dribbling down his forehead with a white handkerchief. "We can't completely rule out the possibility."

"We can't?"

"At the time of Duke Bartfort's conception, His Majesty was involved with a number of different women—which means there's a distinct chance it's true. Besides, he's snuck out of the palace to visit the kingdom's rural territories countless times."

Vince's face twisted. He was now at a loss. What was the truth?

Too many nobles were also arguing that the rumor was perfectly viable; the situation had grown out of control.

"You wretched brat!" Roland howled, throwing his head back as if to wail to the heavens. His voice echoed throughout the throne room. "How dare you spread such brazen lies!"

Chapter 12: Soulmates

AN IMPERIAL AIRSHIP arrived in Rachel's harbor. Knights disembarked, forming a line leading up to the gangway. They were waiting for the emperor to board.

Alas, Mr. Carl was a fair distance away, busy chatting with me. He had once again donned his unassuming getup to disguise his identity.

"So it's been fifty years since you reincarnated here?" I asked.

"That's right," he said, eyes full of nostalgia. "At first, I never imagined I'd actually been reincarnated in the world of the otome game my little sister had been playing."

"So your situation involved a little sister too, huh?"

"I admit, I was speechless when I heard your story. It was pretty absurd. You pulled an all-nighter playing the first installment only to take a tumble down some stairs? And you expect me to believe you were a full-fledged adult with a proper job?"

Oof. I couldn't even argue. I had been pretty irresponsible. "Well, uh...y'know. There were circumstances."

"Mm-hmm, I think I understand. What you're trying to say is you're not merely an idiot but a complete fool besides, yes? Makes me feel pathetic thinking of all the counter-strategy meetings we had about you in the Empire. Pay me back for all that time I wasted, wouldja?"

He really wasn't holding back.

"What about you?" I sneered. "You got all chummy with your sister playing this game, right? That's the part I can't believe." It was a weak jab, but it was all the ammunition I had.

Mr. Carl shook his head. "I knew my sister was playing it, and I remembered the title. I didn't know anything specific about the game itself."

"What?"

"My sister played the third installment—the, uh...what was it called again? The special edition? A re-release of the original."

"Oh, the kind with additional content? Or a remake or something?"

"Yeah, one of those! Seems I've grown pretty forgetful over the years."

There was a smile on Mr. Carl's face, but his eyes were filled with sorrow as he recalled his past. I imagined those years had been filled with both joy and hardship.

"We used to fight a lot, but our parents had a rule that we could only play on consoles in the living room. I often watched her play while I waited for my turn." Mr. Carl sighed. "But to think I'd reincarnated into a period well before the beginning of the first game. At first, I only thought the world seemed a bit similar, but that was all."

And on top of that, Mr. Carl had reincarnated as a member of the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit's imperial family.

"Being born into that position, I found myself swept up in the power struggle to determine my father's successor. It was life or death, and I had no choice but to participate. At some point, I entirely forgot about that otome game and wound up emperor. When I had to execute my younger brother for treason, I honestly wondered why I had been reincarnated here at all."

That question weighed on my mind too. It was a complex thing to contemplate—as complex as philosophizing about the meaning of life itself. Perhaps there was no deeper reason. I still couldn't help thinking about it occasionally, though. At those times, I'd wonder, *Is it really okay for me to be doing all this? Here, in this world?* Knowing Mr. Carl harbored the same anxieties made me feel connected to him.

"Then," he said, "when I snuck out of the palace one time, I met my soulmate."

"Hmm?" I had a feeling the conversation had taken a strange turn, and it seemed my intuition had hit the mark. This was just the prelude to Mr. Carl gushing about the love of his life.

"I fell madly in love with a commoner. With her, I felt like a young man again. I had been forced into a loveless political marriage, but the person with whom I really felt connected, body and soul, was that girl."

"Hey, hold up."

I tried to stop him, but to no avail. Mr. Carl ignored me. The practiced rhythm of this speech suggested he'd told the story dozens of times before. Perhaps this was why Finn had elected not to accompany us. He'd known this was coming.

"Mia was the daughter she bore me," Mr. Carl went on, hanging his head.

"That was the moment I realized exactly what world I'd been reincarnated into. I recognized Mia as the protagonist of the third installment. I knew she was supposedly the emperor's illegitimate child, but I never imagined she would be my daughter."

For all that, he sounded genuinely happy.

Meanwhile, I had lost every ounce of empathy I had felt earlier and resigned myself to listening to this spiel with a blank face.

"Anyway, that about sums it up. She's the daughter of the only woman I ever truly loved—and that's why you'd better make sure she's cured. Because if you fail, I will raze Holfort Kingdom to the ground. Same thing goes if you try anything funny with her." Those words, at least, he said with a grave expression.

I snorted. "Yeah, this from the married guy who gushed about the only woman he ever loved—who he cheated with?"

"I told you, it was a political union."

The morality of marriage in this world definitely differed from what we'd been used to in Japan, at least when it came to the upper class. We'd been raised to consider a marriage to be a team, a union that served both people. In this world, though, marriage was a legal means by which to establish ties between houses. A person's individual happiness wasn't a factor. Having lived here for so many years, Mr. Carl had adapted to the local values.

"So, if you don't want to be annihilated, take good care of Mia."

"Oh, come on, you could be nicer about it. If you want me to take care of her, ask properly."

He sniffed. "I've got a reputation to maintain. Oh, and one more thing..." His face darkened. "If that pathetic excuse for a knight tries anything with my Mia, eliminate him. I grant you leave to do so as emperor."

Uh, no. There's no way I could do that.

With that, Mr. Carl spun around and started toward his ship.

The *Licorne's* medical bay was fully furnished with all manner of equipment, but most conspicuous were the two human-sized capsules. The lids were open, displaying the translucent, faintly glowing, green liquid that filled them. Mia and Erica stood nearby, dressed in medical gowns.

"All right. We're going to have you two go to sleep inside these capsules," Cleare explained. "While you're in there, we'll perform in-depth exams of your physical conditions."

Erica nodded. "I leave this work in your hands."

"Yep, no need to worry with me in charge," said Cleare. "Have you both said your farewells to everybody you care about?"

"I wouldn't really call them *farewells*. Didn't you say this would only take a few days? But yes, I spoke with everyone."

"Rie too?" Cleare asked.

Erica dropped her gaze, smiling. "Yes. I spoke with her."

Cleare turned to Mia, who was fidgeting nervously. "How about you, Mia?"

"Y-yes!" she stuttered, pressing a fist to her chest as her cheeks heated.

"Don't worry," Erica said softly. "We'll be out of these capsules in just a few days. You'll see everyone again in no time."

Mia tilted her head. At first, she didn't quite understand what Erica was getting at. As it sank in, she realized Erica had misread her reaction.

"I-I'm not worried!" Mia insisted, waving her hands frantically in front of her.

"Mr. Knight said that if it means getting better, I should definitely go through with this. Uncle agreed with him too."

"Then what's the matter?" This time, Erica was the one cocking her head.

Embarrassed, Mia averted her gaze. "Just a moment ago, when I was with Mr. Knight..."

"Kurosuke, did I make the right choice?"

"You're still worried, Partner? Even though you just gave Mia your answer?"

Finn stood on the *Licorne's* deck, leaning against the deck railing as he angsted. He'd finally given Mia his reply. On the one hand, he didn't feel like he'd made the right call, but on the other, he didn't feel like it was wrong either.

"I'm still willing to sacrifice my life for her if needed, but I still don't think this is quite right. But all that matters is that she's happy."

"Partner, your love is a little suffocating." Brave shook his head—or rather, his body.

Finn frowned. "That's not true. It's perfectly normal."

"I don't think so. Look at Leon and Marie. They were siblings in their past lives, and all they do is bicker." As far as Brave was concerned, that was normal.

Finn poked Brave's forehead. "You don't get it. Those two aren't as estranged as they try to make it seem. In fact, Leon positively dotes on her."

"You sure you're reading this right?" Brave eyed his partner skeptically, eye half-lidded.

"He just isn't honest about his feelings. I will admit, the endless squabbling is a little weird." But despite his exasperation, Finn chuckled.

Marie paced in the *Licorne's* common room as the vessel made its way back to Holfort Kingdom. Kyle and Carla watched her from their seats on the couch.

"Lady Marie, it will be a few days before we see results," Carla reminded her

gently. "If you keep this up the entire time, you'll only wear yourself out."

Kyle nodded. "She's right. Please sit down, Mistress. Cleare assured us that everything would be all right, didn't she?"

Marie spun around, finger thrust at them. "Don't take her words at face value! Have you forgotten what she is? She turned Aaron into Erin!"

Leon had given Cleare authority while he was away in the Republic, and she had capitalized on the opportunity by—of all things—performing a sex change on one of the third game's love interests. She'd gone completely rogue. Marie wanted to believe her when she said things would be okay, but some part of her couldn't just trust the AI.

"Well, it is pretty incredible she was able to do so such a thing," Carla admitted, smile straining. "Lost Items like her really make you wonder just how advanced that ancient civilization really was."

The ancients, the humanity of old, had produced both Luxion and Cleare. Carla was understandably awed by the sophistication of their scientific technology. It was probably hard for her to really imagine that the civilization of old had been more advanced than their present one.

Kyle folded his arms behind his head. "I can hardly believe it either. I mean, if they really were that incredible, how'd they get wiped out? Seems awfully strange, doesn't it?"

Carla nodded in agreement.

As Marie listened, she remembered something. Both she and Leon were somehow endowed with characteristics of the old humans. That was why Luxion and Cleare obeyed Leon, in fact.

But it's new humanity who can do magic, right? So then how do Big Bro and I even have characteristics of the old humans? Leon said it's probably because we're reincarnators who aren't naturally of this world, but is that really it? Marie couldn't help but wonder and doubt. Oh well. It's not like racking my brain is gonna produce the answer, and even if I figure something out, what would I do with that knowledge? For now, I should spend my time praying that Erica comes out of this whole and hale.

Marie was deeply concerned for her daughter and about the mysterious illness that yet plagued her. Erica had once claimed she was cured, but obviously, that wasn't entirely true. There were moments when her face contorted in intense pain, and Marie's heart ached every time she saw it. All she could do was hope Cleare could deal with the issue.

As a mother, Marie wanted to see her daughter happy and healthy more than anything.

Once the plates were cleared after lunch in the *Einhorn*'s dining hall, I sat back down, my head in my hands.

"This has to be some kinda sick joke. I did everything I could to tell everyone that the illegitimate kid nonsense was just that—a load of crap. So how come people seem even more convinced? The more I deny it, the more they believe it."

I had been drowning in work during our stay in Rachel—namely, with intimidating Rachel's military and keeping a close eye on them. I'd tried to deny the rumors swirling around throughout it all, but my efforts had only reinforced the whispers.

"If you recall, I warned that excessive denial would work against you. You are entirely to blame for failing to heed my advice," Luxion said.

"Give me a break already! How could I sit on my hands for even a second knowing people are saying that I'm that scum lord's bastard?" I shouted so loud that my voice carried through the dining hall.

"Even some of your inner circle believe it." Livia sighed, setting down her spoon. She was enjoying some flan Luxion had made just for her.

Noelle was enjoying the same dessert. Spoon in mouth, she shot a glance at one of the other tables. "Yeah, those guys are having a field day," she said.

The table she was eyeing was peopled by the idiot brigade, who were reflecting on the events of the mission. Such meetings were typically held at night with alcohol, but these boys had opted to follow the girls' lead and indulge in flan.

"That masked knight showed up again," Chris said between bites. "He really manages to weasel his way in out of nowhere every time."

"Well, strictly speaking, his assistance on the battlefield was quite helpful,"
Jilk admitted bitterly, stroking his chin. "The mask does make him seem pretty
fishy, but having fought alongside him multiple times now, I can't deny his skill."

Julius grinned, savoring his flan.

Are these guys really that clueless? Have they really not figured it out? "I'd like to meet this masked knight at some point," Julius said.

Greg slurped down the last of his dessert before slamming the empty container on the table. "Well, I still don't like him. He may be strong, but every time he shows up, he's got that cocky look on his face. That just proves to me there's something up with him."

If he was wearing a mask, how did Greg know if he was wearing any look whatsoever? The more I listened in on their conversation, the more I could feel a headache coming on.

"All right, but listen, you guys," Brad sighed. Rose and Mary sat at his side, and he offered them food as he spoke. "The people of Rachel are worshipping me for some reason. They keep referring to me as 'the purple knight who descended from the heavens' and asking for my autograph. It's an utter nightmare. I so wish they'd stop." He leaned his head back, hand on his forehead.

For all Brad's theatrics, everyone could see he was enjoying it. He was only pretending to be bothered so he could humblebrag. The other four regarded him coldly. The celebrity treatment he was enjoying probably pissed them off, since they'd worked just as hard to protect the citizens.

Jilk glanced my way before returning his attention to the others. "By the way, I hear a truly ridiculous rumor is making its way around Rachel. They say Leon is, in fact, the king's illegitimate son."

Julius froze in his seat.

Chris narrowed his eyes, studying the prince's reaction. "It seems to hold

water when you consider Leon's prestigious ascent. People naturally assume His Majesty favors him. The truth doesn't really matter at this stage if the possibility can't be entirely ruled out."

Brad stroked Rose and Mary, pulling a face. "His Majesty is a ladies' man, after all."

By "ladies' man," he of course meant that Roland had slept around. Roland's own behavior had heightened the general belief that I was his bastard.

When I see that jerk again, I'm gonna clock him.

"I don't think it's true," Greg said, stealing another glance at me. "I really don't, but...I mean, if he actually is the king's son, then what?"

"Then he would become the best candidate for heir apparent," Julius said, finally breaking his silence. "Mother would readily support my elder brother—Leon, I mean—as would the court. Then the title would be officially bestowed upon him. If he were set to inherit the throne, peace in the kingdom would be all but guaranteed for decades to come."

Where the hell does he get off calling me his "elder brother"? That just causes even more misunderstandings! It made me consider punching him in the face just like I planned to do to his father.

Angie finished her dessert and smirked at me mischievously. "Personally," she said, "I'd rather not doubt my mother-in-law's fidelity, but I did get a good laugh out of the notion."

"Angie!" I protested.

Angie hid her mouth with her hand, snickering. "If you didn't get so indignant, people wouldn't tease you as much." She turned to Julius and said loudly, "Your Highness, you ought to stop fooling around as well."

Julius's friends turned to him, scrutinizing his face. As Angie implied, he was fighting back a smile.

"All right, I was only kidding," he said.

Jilk scowled. "A little more discretion, I beg you. This isn't the sort of thing one jokes about." He probably had some more choice words he'd like to use, but

Julius was his prince, so he held back. "We honestly believed you for a moment there."

You did?! Is something wrong with your brains?!

Chris expelled a long, heavy sigh. "And for goodness' sake, don't say such things in the palace. You'll only be kicking the hornet's nest."

"Seriously?" Greg folded his arms behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "So it was all just a prank?"

"Hmm, I'm not so sure it will remain so," Brad said with a snicker. "Someone will inevitably want to make fact out of fiction. It would be wise to curry favor with Leon while we can. We'll have an easier time of climbing the social ladder later."

Greg jerked his head up. "What? You mean you want a noble title and all that?"

"Surely you jest. I enjoy my life as it is—and as long as I have Marie at my side, that's all I need."

"Yeah! That's the spirit."

The five of them chuckled among themselves.

Wish they'd stop and think of my feelings for a second here. They're basically saying they want me to keep pampering them while they get it on with Marie.

I pulled a face, my mood thoroughly blackened.

"I feel bad for Rie," Noelle said, giving the boys a cold look. "She's gotta look after five guys with no ambition *or* any ability to take care of themselves. Then again, I guess you're the one looking after Rie, huh, Leon?"

I was willing to give Julius a modest—extremely modest—passing grade, but the others were all miserable failures in the School of Hard Knocks.

Livia frowned, likely having her own misgivings, though she glanced at Angie, more concerned with how *she* felt. "Miss Marie got herself into this situation."

"You're just so popular, aren't you?" Angie smiled, giving me a meaningful look.

"What, is that sarcasm I sense? That's new, coming from you," I said. To be honest, I was pretty happy to have Angie poking fun at me like Luxion always did. It was proof we'd crossed a new bridge.

"Nah, I'm just teasing."

Livia pouted at us as we bantered. "You guys aren't being fair." She didn't explain further, though.

Angie cupped Livia's chin, forcing Livia's gaze to meet hers. "It's adorable when you sulk, but personally, I prefer my usual Livia."

"You're just trying to distract me, like always," Livia complained, blushing. "You've gotten to be even more like Mr. Leon lately."

Was she trying to say she thought I played everything off without confronting the underlying issues? I wanted to deny it, but I really couldn't. There were a lot of things I still hadn't told my fiancées.

Noelle left her seat, plopping down on my other side and clinging to my arm. "It's not fair for you to give Angie special attention and ignore the rest of us. When we get back to the capital, take me on a date. Okay?"

I flinched. I hadn't expected her to be the one to invite me, let alone so directly. "You'll have to wait until I finish my work."

"That's fine. It's still summer break, after all. It'd be a shame not to make the most of it. I know we got to see all the sights in Frazer and Rachel, but it didn't feel like *real* sightseeing."

"True. The moment summer break started, we were headed to the Frazers' territory." Angie's eyes glazed over. "There were a few opportunities to enjoy the scenery, but most of our time was taken up with the war."

Livia dropped her gaze, her eyes filled with sadness. "This is our last summer break at the academy. It's a bit depressing we had to spend it like this."

"How many days do we have left?" I asked, glancing at Luxion. He'd been silent this entire time.

"Twelve."

Thanks to Rachel's misbehavior, we'd lost most of our summer break. Maybe I

should have hit the holy king a few more times. *Oh well, what's done is done.* I preoccupied myself with calculating how much time we had left and how much fun we could squeeze into it.

"When we get back, we'll have to have an audience with the king and meetings and whatnot, right? I'd like to visit home before the break ends too. And really I want to enjoy what little time we've got left."

"If we subtract the days reserved for travel and factor in the time required for work, I am afraid you will have only three days of true free time," Luxion said.

"That's it?!" I shrieked.

"Moreover, you were given additional homework from the academy, were you not? You have yet to make any notable progress on it, so if you intend to finish on time, you'll need to allocate eight hours a day starting today. This is, of course, assuming you plan to dedicate those three free days entirely to homework as well."

Just when things couldn't get any worse, he hammered the nails into my coffin.

This was all because, since my first year, my schoolwork had suffered delay after delay thanks to all the, you know, conflicts and war and stuff. The academy had assigned me extra homework to make up for it.

Angie narrowed her eyes. "Is that true? You really haven't finished your assignments?"

If my remaining time was completely dedicated to slogging through it all, I wouldn't be able to have fun with the girls.

"No way, this is the pits!" Noelle complained, dropping my arm. She slid away from me, her excitement evaporated. "Guess we can't do anything together after all."

"Wait, wait! Hold on just a sec. Are you telling me that even though we were super busy this whole time, you guys finished your homework?" I scanned their faces, incredulous. I had been convinced that we were all in the same boat—that we'd been too preoccupied with other matters to pay attention to schoolwork.

Angie nodded. "We've been chipping away at it every day since break started. That should go without saying."

"I'm a running a *teeny* bit behind, but I'll finish in time." Noelle pushed a finger into her cheek, creating a dimple in her skin. "But what's with you? Not even halfway done? Jeez."

Hesitantly, I chanced a glance in Livia's direction. She beamed back at me. "I finished all of mine right at the start."

Urk! Livia's was the final blow that put an end to my pitiful existence. My shoulders slumped.

"We'll help you get through it," Livia assured me. "So let's finish it together, Mr. Leon."

"Yeah..."

After all that hard work to end a war, I still had to spend my summer break doing *homework*. Why did the world have to be so cruel? Wasn't I supposed to be a high-ranking duke? Couldn't the world—or even just Holfort, at the very least—be an eensy bit nicer to me?

I wanted to say as much out loud, but if I did, Angie would tell me off. Better bottle that one, Bartfort...

Chapter 13: Awakening

ONCE WE ARRIVED in the capital and I was safely back in my dorm room, I summoned Cleare to get a report on Erica and Mia's physical exams. Luxion was, of course, with us as well.

"Long story short, I don't have specifics, since I haven't finished analyzing the results."

"Seriously? You acted so confident about this, and now you're gonna tell me you didn't figure anything out?" I shook my head, disappointed.

Incensed, Cleare snapped back, "Save your commentary until I've finished the report! For the *moment*, I confirmed that consuming demonic essence can help stabilize Mia's condition. If provided a regular supply, she should see the end of those sudden painful attacks."

"I dunno. I was expecting something a little more profound. I mean, Finn and Brave have already been giving her Demonic Essence."

"That's not very nice when I've done all this work to find a more effective treatment for her! But whatever, I'm continuing to process the results from her exam and expect that a complete cure will become evident soon enough."

I shrugged. "Your results thus far don't inspire much confidence."

"Aw, you're not being fair! But I do have one other thing to note: Remember all that talk about her 'awakening event'? I think it'd be worth triggering it."

"Really? You sure it won't just make her condition worse?"

"Master, must you be so cold? Have a little more faith."

I folded my arms. I couldn't shake my disappointment in the results.

"Anyway, Mia aside, I got some incredible info out of this!" Cleare said. "It seems Erica's just like you and Rie. She's got some of the same characteristics as the old humans."

I stared. That hardly seemed impressive to me.

"Is this true?" Luxion perked up, far more interested than I was. "Allow me to confirm the data. Transmit it to me later."

"Done and done. Anyway, if Master could just breed with Rie and Erica, we might seriously be able to restore old humanity!"

"That is indeed cause for celebration!"

I grimaced, not least of which because Cleare used the term "breed," but also because what little morals I had screamed in dismay at the idea of having such relations with either girl. What kind of person would I be if I did such a thing?

"Absolutely not. In case you two knuckleheads have completely blanked on this fact, let me remind you: In my last life, Marie was my sister, and Erica was my niece. I refuse."

"Okay, but in this world, you're total genetic strangers, right?" said Cleare. "So come on, Master. Give me your DNA. I'll take care of everything."

"Like hell! You should know better!"

She was essentially suggesting she'd take my genes and pop a kid in her horrible science oven. I knew it! These AI really don't have a moral compass.

"When Finn and Mia began dating, you celebrated the occasion, did you not?" Luxion said.

"Sure I did. I'm glad he finally plucked up the courage to face her feelings."

"To think you would comment on the courage of others or lack thereof. But I digress. Finn accepted Mia as a partner despite her resemblance to his younger sister. You're willing to cheer him on, yet you refuse to give the same chance to Erica and Marie. Pure hypocrisy."

What the hell is wrong with you two?! Why're you so eager to pair us up? You're creeping me out.

"I already told you no, and that's that. This conversation is over."

"Oh, fine," Cleare said, her blue lens giving off an eerie glow. "I'll just have to perform a follow-up examination on whatever children you do have. If their old

human characteristics are even stronger, then there won't be an issue."

"Indeed," Luxion agreed. "Cleare, if you require any assistance in the course of your follow-up examination, do not hesitate to alert me. I offer my full support."

"Hey, you're not planning to do anything weird to my kids, are you? I don't even have any yet."

Admittedly, it was kinda funny to see them counting all these eggs before I'd even gotten hitched to the chicken.

"The resurgence of old humanity is my first priority—it trumps everything else. I'm gonna pour all of my effort into this!" Cleare said to herself after Leon and Luxion had left. She was about to follow through and continue with her analysis when she was interrupted by an unexpected visitor.

"Miss Cleare?" Erica called out to her.

"Oh, Eri! You should've told me you were coming. I'd have sent Luxion to escort you."

Since discovering Erica possessed many characteristics of the old humans, Cleare had become even friendlier with her.

Erica smiled awkwardly. "I was hoping to discuss something with you."

"Oh? You can talk to me about anything. Go on, spill!"

"Actually, it's about Mia's awakening event... Is it really necessary to go through with it?" Erica's sober expression spoke to the seriousness of her question.

Cleare couldn't even begin to guess what was going through Erica's head, so she answered honestly—though her technical explanation was less medical than it was gamified. "Her awakening will boost her physical stats, so yeah. I think it's necessary."

Erica nodded. "I see. So she does need it after all."

"At the moment, all we can do is improve her condition. So if we're ever going

to cure her, I think she really needs that awakening. Master grumbled that my findings were underwhelming, but the fact that I figured out the awakening will be to her benefit is pretty impressive, don't you think? I really worked hard on these analyses."

"Thank you, Miss Cleare. Your words have helped me make up my mind."

"Really? Uh, make up your mind about what, though?"

Erica held her index finger to her mouth. "That's a secret."

"Aww, c'mon. Tell me! I'd do anything for you, Eri!"

The Bartfort barony had its own lake, and though its majesty paled in comparison to the Frazers', it was still beautiful, quiet, and surrounded by greenery. The *Licorne* floated just over the lake's surface.

Our family had a tradition of visiting the lake every summer, and this year, my fiancées were joining us. My sister-in-law, Miss Dorothea, had decided to join us as well, as had Finn, who had nothing better to do while the academy was on break.

Mia, who wore a modest one-piece swimsuit and sported a lifesaver around her waist, raced down the *Licorne's* deck and plunged into the lake below.

"Mia, that's dangerous! No jumping!" Finn wore swim trunks and clung to the railing as he shouted down at Mia, scolding her.

Below, Mia bobbed in the water, safe in her lifesaver. "Hurry up and join me, Mr. Knight."

"Honestly..." Finn shook his head, but all his frustration vanished upon seeing how much she was enjoying herself.

"Her condition has really stabilized the past few days," Brave observed.

"Yeah. It's a real relief."

A ghost of a smile crossed Finn's face, suggesting he was actually quite happy to see her play so energetically. The image probably overlapped with that of his sister from his previous life. I only hoped that whatever lingering regrets he still held would be resolved.

Anyway, them aside, Livia was standing on the deck in a light jacket to hide the bikini she'd donned. She tugged at the hem, trying to obscure her lower half as well.

"Mr. Leon, are you *sure* this is a swimsuit?" she asked. "It's kind of uncomfortable. There just doesn't seem to be enough fabric to properly cover my body."

I gave her a thumbs-up, nodding eagerly. "Yep, definitely sure. Luxion made it himself, after all, so no mistakes there."

"I happen to think there's nothing but mistakes," Livia grumbled.

"In fact," Luxion interjected, "Master was the one who insisted your swimsuits be bikinis."

My jaw dropped. "Hold up! You promised you wouldn't say anything!"
"I do not recall *agreeing* to any such promises."

As soon as my fiancées learned that I was the one responsible for their swimsuits, they skewered me with annoyed looks. My family was dressed far more conservatively; my mom was in a summer dress while Finley had on a basic one-piece.

"Girls these days certainly are confident," my mom said as she pressed a hand to her cheek, flabbergasted by the bikinis. "I couldn't imagine shimmying into one of those."

Finley sneered. "They're basically underwear. My brother's a real pervert."

"Excuse you. These'll be all the rage in the next few years, you'll see," I said. That was mostly wishful thinking on my part. Bikinis had eventually dominated the beach scene in Japan, so with any luck, they would ascend here too.

While Livia tried to hide her figure, Angie stood confidently with her hands on her hips, not looking the least bit ashamed of showing off her body.

"Take off that jacket," she told Livia. "It's less embarrassing if you put it all out there."

"But I'm not like you. My tummy's got more flab..." Tears sprung to Livia's eyes.

Angie pressed her hand to her forehead. "This is why I told you to increase your workouts. Oh well. It's cute seeing you blush and fidget."

Noelle gave them a sidelong glance as they blushed over each other. She, too, wore a light jacket, though hers was left hanging open.

"Having a barbecue on an airship just feels so bougie," she said. Alzer apparently had no traditions like this, so to her, it looked like a pastime of the well-to-do.

"We normally have the barbecue by the lakeside," my old man explained. Like Finn and me, he sported swim trunks. "Leon just pulled out his airship for us to use this time around." He was busy setting up everything we needed for the barbecue and lighting the coals. Nicks was right beside him, in trunks and a T-shirt, helping out.

"Leon, you help too," Nicks snapped.

"I handle the ship, you handle the cooking. Sound good?"

"No, it doesn't 'sound good.' If you want any of this meat, you get your butt moving."

"Fiiine." I trudged over to lend a hand.

Colin grabbed a drink and carried it over to Miss Dorothea, who was lounging under a parasol. "Here you go, Dot!"

"Oh, why, thank you."

Like my mom, Miss Dorothea wore a simple summer dress. She showed no interest in either jumping in the water or helping out with the barbecue, for that matter. That didn't particularly bother me, but my family insisted on fussing over her.

"Dot, are you feeling all right?" Mom asked her worriedly. "If this is too much for you, just say the word, and Leon will have a room prepared inside."

"Thank you, but I'm quite all right, Mother."

She is the daughter of an earl, I suppose. Guess it's kind of a given my family'd lend her a bit more consideration. Still, it was odd. Dorothea had been more involved before. Either her attitude had taken a sudden shift or this was her usual MO and she'd just finally stopped putting in the effort to make a good impression.

As I eyed my sister-in-law suspiciously, Noelle sidled up to me, following my eyeline. She shot a meaningful grin my way. "Oh, I think I get what's going on with her."

"What? What's going on?"

"You mean you haven't figured it out?" Noelle looked genuinely surprised. "You really are oblivious, huh?"

"Whatever. If you know what's up, tell me."

"Mmm, everyone else is keeping quiet about it, so it'd be a little inconsiderate of me to comment."

Although I wheedled away, trying to get her to divulge whatever secret everyone but me seemed privy to, Noelle wouldn't make a peep. I planned to interrogate her until she finally spilled the beans, but Colin ran up to us and interrupted.

"Nelly, let's go swim together!"

"Sure thing. See ya later, Leon."

Colin dragged Noelle away by the hand. She waved to me as she left.

I shot a glance at Luxion. "Hey, what's everyone hiding from me?"

Luxion turned his red lens toward Miss Dorothea and studied her for several moments. Whatever he discovered in that time, he stayed just as tight-lipped as everyone else.

"I am afraid this is a matter involving great personal privacy, and I am unable to disclose my findings."

"Jeez. You're all being so cold."

Once Erica had returned to the royal palace after summer break, she invited Elijah to join her for some tea.

"It's wonderful to hear your illness looks like it can be cured," he said enthusiastically.

Erica averted her gaze and smiled, her eyes giving away only the smallest glimpse of her inner sadness. Elijah managed to catch it and immediately grew concerned.

"Is something the matter? If anything's troubling you, I would be more than happy to listen. Don't worry! I might not be as capable as the duke, but I'll be here for you." Elijah puffed up his chest, looking to her like a child trying too hard to be an adult. Even so, the fact that he did it for her sake brought her joy. She was glad to see how much he had grown.

"Thank you, but I'm all right. I no longer have any reservations."

"Really?" Elijah sounded suspicious, but he didn't pursue the matter any further.

I'm sorry, Elijah. And I apologize to you too, Uncle. And you, Mom, Erica thought. She gazed out the window, drinking in the scenery beyond the glass.

We only had a few more days of summer break. Upon returning to the capital, I summoned the idiot brigade and began preparing for a dungeon delve. Julius and company were none too pleased about this forced labor, not least because it meant they couldn't share the last little bit of break with Marie, as they'd hoped.

"There's no urgent need to explore this dungeon. Surely it could wait," Julius grumbled, speaking for the group.

I shrugged. "My convenience trumps your opinion."

"But we wanted to spend the last of our break with Marie." Julius huffed as he and the boys turned away from me.

Finn watched this little interaction unfold and leaned in to whisper to me. "Are you sure we need to take them? We'd be fine on our own, wouldn't we?"

"Hey, it's free labor. Not that I mind getting on their nerves. How is it fair that I always have to shoulder the hard stuff?"

Finn sighed. "You are an awful boss."

In truth, I had one more motivation: Marie. She'd come to me whining that she was sick of babysitting her boys from dawn to dusk every single day, so I figured I'd take them on walkies to give her a break. She and Carla were probably out on the town enjoying what entertainment the capital had to offer. If I told Finn as much, he'd probably teasingly accuse me of being a siscon or something, and I sure as hell didn't want anyone saying *that*.

Mia trudged over, hauling a rucksack on her back. "Your Grace, I'm all ready to go!" It was like a breath of fresh air to see her so full of energy.

"Do you see this, morons?" I said, turning back to the nitwit quintet. "This girl's all raring to go while all you whiners can do is mope about. You should learn from Mia's example."

Jilk stared me down. "I suppose I should have expected this. Using a woman is truly underhanded. Our only choice now is to man up. How else could we possibly respond?"

The boys finally found their pep, unwilling to be shown up by a girl younger than they were.

"All right," I said. "Then let's head out."

"Yeah!" Mia readily agreed.

The capital's dungeon was a winding mine with many underground floors. It had once been a simple cave system, but man-made reinforcements were evident everywhere we went. They'd been installed to enable the collection of the magic stones that manifested in these depths. We found tracks and mine carts all over the places as well, allowing us to easily transport our spoils.

There was nothing new about this sight for us, since we'd come here again and again in the course of our studies, but Mia hadn't trudged through it nearly as many times as we had.

"I've been down here a few times for school, but I can't get over how mysterious it is. There are so many magic stones," she said.

The stones grew on the floors, the walls, and even the ceilings, emitting a soft glow that illuminated the tunnels.

"That's just the kind of dungeon this is—a place where we can mine as many magic stones as we need," Julius explained. "I can't say how exactly it works, but after every harvest, they grow right back. The ones at the entrance are mined most regularly, so they're the smallest."

"Huh."

The deeper you went, the purer and higher-quality the stones you could expect to collect. That was why, at least up until Holfort's social shake-up, the boys had delved super far down into the depths. The farther they went, the more money they could earn. This ultimately cut down on total time spent farming for dough to spend on presents for the girls. It had been a pretty sad age for the youth of the time—one spent shedding blood, sweat, and tears.

After traveling deeper for a bit, Mia came to an abrupt stop. I turned to her the moment I noticed she wasn't moving.

"Mia?" Finn asked worriedly. "Aren't you coming?"

Mia was staring at a blank wall. In the dim light, her red eyes seemed almost to glow. "It's calling."

Luxion's lens flashed as he analyzed the scene. "I can confirm a hollow in the wall, Master. However, it is a distinct anomaly. I have accompanied you into this cave and examined it many times, but I have never detected any such area before."

"So it just suddenly appeared?" Part of me wondered if Luxion had just missed it this whole time, but something weird was obviously going on here.

Greg knelt, placing a hand flat on the ground. "Hey, is it just me, or is the floor moving?"

The vibrations rippling beneath us grew gradually stronger.

"This is looking bad," Brad said, alarmed. "We should withdraw for now."

The boys started back toward the exit, but Mia didn't seem to notice. As if pulled by some invisible force, she moved toward the wall she'd been staring at. The moment her fingers brushed the rock, it split right down the middle, giving way to a gaping hole.

Was this how that awakening event was supposed to work? I glanced at Finn, hoping for answers, but he looked utterly flabbergasted, a hand over his gaping mouth. When he realized I was looking at him, Finn whispered, "I don't really know how it's all supposed to play out. All I did was listen to my sister talk about the game."

"Then I guess we've got no choice but to keep going."

"That would be dangerous," Luxion cut in, stopping me. "The anomaly is continuing to expand as we speak."

I shook my head. "Doesn't matter. All we can do is move forward. This is her awakening, after all." At my command, the chump squad reluctantly inched up to join us.

Mia continued forward, her feet unsteady. Finn raced to her side and wrapped an arm around her to offer support. "Mia? Hey, Mia!"

"Mr. Knight, it's calling—it's calling me." She sounded as dazed as she looked.

Chris frowned. "Leon, should we really let her go? It seems dangerous to let this play out."

"Doesn't matter. We're going."

Chris didn't press the point. We continued down the newly opened path. There wasn't a single monster along the way, and since it was a straight trajectory with no forks or turns, it was impossible to get lost. That said, it was pitch-black, so Luxion lit the way. I couldn't say how long we walked after that, but at the end, we came upon an enormous magic stone. It was an immaculately pure crystal that had been carved into a monolith.

The closer Mia got, the brighter her eyes seemed to glow. Her hair even started to billow.

"Mia!" Finn shouted, but she did not react.

"I can't believe it..." Brave's voice cracked. For some reason, he seemed panicked. "Why...?"

His eye was fixed on the monolith. Although it had been featureless to start, letters suddenly appeared across its surface.

"Luxion, what does it say?" I asked.

After a brief analysis, he read it out loud: "Praise to thee for discovering this hallowed place after enduring many long years. Here rests our hope. Gather, O protectors of our long-held aspirations."

I screwed up my face. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I am no less uncertain," he admitted.

A bright light burst from the monolith, at which point the entire thing melted away as if it had fulfilled its purpose and had no more reason to exist. I threw up my arm to my shield my eyes from the blinding light and squinted past it.

Finn threw his arms around Mia, trying to protect her. The idiot brigade were shouting, but I couldn't really make out their voices.

"The local concentration of demonic essence is rapidly increasing," Luxion said, sounding unusually alarmed. "At this rate, its effects will extend beyond the walls of this dungeon."

At about this time, chaos broke out at the royal palace. A pillar of red light had shot up from the capital's dungeon. It rose high into the sky and shone for several long minutes.

Erica gazed at the pillar from her room. As seconds trickled by, her breathing grew more and more strained.

"I knew this was coming," she gasped, clutching her chest. Her legs gave out from under her. "I'm sorry, everyone. I wish I could've told you."

Erica had, in fact, played through the third installment of the otome game trilogy, and she had intimate knowledge of its plot—though she hadn't said a word of this event to either Leon or Marie. She knew that if they learned the truth, they would endanger themselves for her sake. She couldn't allow that.

Erica pressed her back to the wall, trying to regulate her breathing, but the pain was nigh unbearable. "Princess Erica, the villainess... Despite her weak constitution, she was a conniving girl and skilled at deception," she murmured under her breath, recalling the character from the game. "I wasn't able to fill her role, but...I wonder if I at least managed to match her gift for deceit?"

Erica smiled through her agony. Having played through these moments so many times, she'd known what was coming—unlike Finn and Carl, who only had secondhand knowledge via their younger sisters. Nor was she like Marie, who had played only briefly, and even then, not to its conclusion.

"I replayed it so many times." Her mind wandered to the past. "Mom was so busy; she had no time to spend with me. I was always by myself at night. It was so lonely that I spent all that time with this game..."

Marie's working hours had stretched late into the night, so Erica had been forced to occupy herself. She hadn't liked being left alone, but neither could she complain to her mom. Games became her source of emotional support. By playing the otome game her mom so loved, she felt they were connected—like they were playing together. Only when she was lost in the fictional world of the game could she forget her loneliness. It was of no surprise, then, that she'd played it so many times.

During those playthroughs, Erica had learned something: Although Marie had claimed the villainess didn't *really* have a weak constitution—that she was only playing it up for attention—in actuality, she was indeed frail.

"And what precipitates the escalation of her condition is always the protagonist's awakening..."

Some scenes in the game actively depicted the villainess's suffering. They were framed as karmic retribution for her cruel bullying of the main character and gave the player a sense of satisfaction. As the protagonist continued to gain recognition and praise from those around her, the villainess's standing declined. By the end, no one believed her claims, and she was left to suffer by herself.

"Should I have told them to avoid the awakening, after all? But if I had, Mia would never be completely cured. I...have lived long enough."

Erica had been content with her previous life, and if her sacrifice meant Mia

got to live a full, happy life in this world, then she didn't feel it was right to get in the way of her awakening.

Tilting her head back, Erica gazed up at the ceiling, tears trickling down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mom. It looks like this time, I'll be the one saying goodbye first."

As Mia's awakening concluded, something new occurred elsewhere in the world—something...strange. Deep beneath the ocean slept an enormous black orb, two meters in diameter, which began pulsing red. It had been buried beneath sand and rock, and barnacles encrusted its surface. This thing—this Demonic Creature—had only one eye, which suddenly shot open.

As the creature woke, other nearby apparatuses stirred to life. The light they shone illuminated an entity that resembled an enlarged Brave. However, this being's appearance was far more ominous, and its bloodshot eye moved rapidly.

"They're here. No, they've awakened," the creature said with a wide, wide grin. "Our hopes have not been in vain!"

As it cried out its excitement, a massive device whirred to life and raised up from the seabed. It looked something like a set of large discs from which a sizable chunk was missing.

The Demonic Creature cast its restless gaze about. "Where? Where are they? Where is this progeny of new humanity who is to be my master?"

The surface of its body swelled and rippled, producing numerous copies of itself, which bounced across the ocean floor. They soon opened their eyes and floated up to join the original. They had been born imbued with orders from their "parent."

The first Demonic Creature manifested an arm, with which it pointed up. "Go. Search. Investigate. We must find the master we are to serve."

They did as they were bid, fleeing toward the surface to carry out their duties.

Epilogue

"ERICA!" Marie threw open the door with a bang as she rushed into the *Licorne*'s medical bay. Her face relaxed once she saw her daughter, who was sitting upright in one of the beds.

Erica smiled. "What's the matter, Mom?" She greeted Marie like one would an anxious child.

Marie pressed a hand to her chest, relieved, and finally started to get control of her breathing. "I heard you'd collapsed all of a sudden. I was so worried."

"Ah ha ha, I'm sorry to have worried you. It seems I was just a little fatigued, is all."

Marie had sped to the *Licorne* the moment she heard the news. Seeing that Erica wasn't in immediate danger, she dragged herself forward before collapsing onto her butt. Her hand found its way to Erica's.

"Don't worry me like that."

"I told you I was sorry."

Marie slowly pulled herself back to her feet and took Erica's hand in both of hers. As glad as she was to confirm Erica was okay, she was furious with Cleare.

"That worthless AI. She *just* put you in that capsule to conduct 'an exam' or whatever, and now look. She's a quack if I've ever seen one."

"But Miss Cleare was the one who came to my rescue," Erica reminded her. Cleare had flown the *Licorne* straight to the palace to recover her so she could convalesce.

"You don't need to thank her for that or anything. She's Big Bro's minion. It's only natural she'd do that." Marie shook her head. "Anyway, I need you to get better and fast. I heard that since our school trip was called off, they're going to make sure they hold the school festival. That'll make our second term more exciting."

Many of the school's annual events had been canceled due to the threat of war, so this was a small concession on the academy's part. Marie was anxious to enjoy the festivities with Erica.

"Yeah, you're right. I'd love to go with you," Erica said, smiling weakly.

"Right?! You'd better be excited. I'm gonna ask Big Bro to go all out and make sure it's awesome."

Shortly after the beginning of Holfort Academy's second term, a letter from Finn arrived in the empire. Carl's eyes crinkled as he read over the contents and smiled. He nodded to himself several times.

"I see. So Mia managed to awaken without incident, and now her illness is fully cured. Yes, I can see now it was the right decision to send her to study abroad."

In truth, he'd kind of meant it when he threatened to raze the kingdom if Leon failed to save his daughter.

"That brat did a fine job. No, no—I suppose it's Leon I have to thank. I'll have to return the favor."

In fact, Carl had been considering forging a closer relationship with Holfort for a while.

"I feel like I can rely on Leon. This seems as good a time as any to join hands with the kingdom—even with the deep grudges that yet remain between new and old humankind."

There was one more reason that Carl had kept his eye on Leon, one which he hadn't disclosed to Finn. It involved the distant past, when old and new humankind had still been embroiled in a fierce battle. The war had not in fact ended, even now. That was why Carl wanted so badly to dig into Leon and determine his character—to ascertain whether they would be enemies or allies. To know whether he was even *worthy* of being a potential ally. In the end, he'd settled on this: that Leon was a man he could truly trust.

"I should prepare a response at once. This is a matter of grave importance.

Hmm, but where should we discuss this? We'd split the world apart if we were to meet in the open." Carl rambled to himself, nodding again as he turned the question over in his mind. "Hmm, I'd like to check in on Mia and see how she's doing now. I suppose I'll just have to return to the kingdom."

Just as he settled on his course of action, the door to his private chambers flew open. Armed soldiers wielding guns crowded inside, accompanied by the imperial prince and his knights. The prince—the heir to the throne—was fast approaching his thirties by this point. His mustache was finely kept, and his eyes were focused on Carl, though they wavered with uncertainty.

"Father," he said quietly.

Carl already knew what was going on. There was only one reason why his son would kick down his door accompanied by so many heavily armored guards.

"Why now?" Carl asked. "You're already set to become the next emperor.

There's no need for this. Why would you choose to dispose of me at this point?"

His son's position was guaranteed. He didn't need to kill Carl to take it. All he had to do was wait a bit longer and it would be his. In fact, Carl had begun preparations to hand over the reins. When all was said and done, he'd planned to bow out for an early retirement and let his son take the throne.

Only once his gaze wandered did he notice something suspicious hovering behind his son. The sinister entity greatly resembled Brave. Carl's eyes went wide with surprise. The being gazed through the open doorway, smirking.

"Your Imperial Highness, this man is the traitor," the creature said to the prince.

"A Demonic Creature..." Carl muttered in disbelief. Not only that, but one with which he was unfamiliar.

The entity was surrounded by a number of smaller, hovering beings that resembled Brave.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Imperial Majesty. Please, call me Arcadia." Arcadia shifted his gaze to the prince. "Now then, Your Imperial Highness, execute this traitor."

The prince lowered his gaze. He laughed dryly to himself, his voice trembling. "He's right, isn't he, Father? You plan to betray the Empire. You even sent our highest-ranking knight to the kingdom so he could join hands with their champion. You can't deny it, can you?"

Carl rapidly realized that something was off about his son. He glared at Arcadia. "What lies have you filled his head with?"

"I've told him nothing but the truth. You really are a traitor, after all." Arcadia narrows his eye.

"Kill him," The prince lifted his hand and swung it down to signal to his men.

Gunshots echoed. Carl's body was riddled with bullets. He collapsed to the floor, clutching his cane.

"Guh..." he groaned. Blood pooled around him as his strength faded. So this is as far as I go... Miliaris, I...

In his last moments, his thoughts centered on his daughter. Her full name washed through Carl's mind as he thought of what—who—he was leaving behind.

The prince gazed down at his father's corpse, blood draining from his face. "Did it really have to be this way? I-I..." His voice broke.

"You did the right thing," Arcadia reassured him softly. "Your actions are those of a national hero."

Tears trickled down the prince's cheeks as he studied his hands. Behind him, Arcadia watched with hidden glee, though he schooled himself so the prince wouldn't hear his emotions. He was careful to sound gentle.

"Patricide is never easy, of course. This must pain you greatly. For now, you should rest your weary mind. In the meantime, I'll take care of everything."

"Yes, please do. I...will rest," the prince muttered, nodding absently.

The guards watched the prince, but they made no attempts to speak to him.

The prince sank to his knees, cradling his father's body. "Why?" he wept.

"Why did you betray us, Father?!"

Arcadia gazed coldly at the prince. "It's time for you to *rest*, Your Imperial Highness," he said again. "I assure you, you may leave everything else to me. Yes...*everything*."

We were a good way into our second term. Mia had successfully wrapped up her awakening and was running about with all the energy of a roided-up puppy. Finn was delighted by the change, but a new problem had fallen into our lap: Erica had collapsed on campus. Not just once or twice either. The frequency was super concerning, which was why I asked Cleare to perform a second detailed exam.

"How could Erica be having so many episodes? I thought she was better?" I demanded when I heard Cleare's report.

Of course I was worried—my niece had up and passed out. And all of this occurred after Cleare performed that exam during summer break, which hadn't been all that long ago. She'd assured me there was nothing to worry about at the time, so how could I just leave this alone? I wanted to know what the hell was going on!

"C-calm down, Master. Assessing her condition is my top priority," Cleare said.

"As well it should be! If anything were to happen to her, I—no, I mean, *Marie* would be devastated." I dropped my gaze, balling my fists.

"We consider Erica's safety as imperative as yours," said Luxion. "If she should take a turn for the worse, we will instantly focus all of our efforts on her recovery."

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to collect myself. When I was done, I asked, "She'll be all right, won't she?"

Cleare wasn't acting like her usual carefree, peppy self. That seemed as good an indication as any that things were serious. "Her condition has worsened considerably since the last exam," she said.

It was hard for me to really digest those words—to let them sink in.

"But why?!" I yelled. "You said she'd be fine!"

Unintimidated by my fury, Cleare softly responded, "Her numbers just got worse, and suddenly too. I couldn't have predicted this. I mean, by contrast, Mia's all better."

Mia had improved by miles, but now, Erica was suffering.

"Marie's really looking forward to going to the school festival with Erica," I said, covering my face with my hands. "Can you figure out a treatment so she's better by then? If not, I'll tell Marie to hold her horses. But you *can* cure her, right? If I order you guys to cure her, you'll do anything I say...right?"

Desperation leaked through my voice. It was less an order than a frantic plea.

"She'll hold out until then. I'll make sure she does. But if her condition continues to progress this way, she won't see your third term."

I stood speechless, a lump in my throat.

"Master, perhaps we should isolate her, or put her in cryostasis," Luxion suggested. "That would buy her some time. We can think of a countermeasure to combat whatever ails her in the meantime."

I stared numbly at the floor. "What, and you'll find the cure while she's asleep? How many years will that take?"

Cleare hesitated. "A long time ago, a number of old humans went into cryostasis to escape contamination by Demonic Essence. They hoped to sleep so that the concentration would wane over time."

"Answer my question," I spat, glaring. "Why're you telling me this?" My stomach was in knots. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Of those who went into cryostasis, the majority succumbed to contamination. In fact, I don't believe any of them survived. So even if we do put her in stasis, she'll only have a few years at most."

"You're kidding me, right? Luxion?!" I shifted my gaze to him, desperate for better news.

"I confirmed Cleare's analysis myself. Her report is entirely truthful. Additionally, our odds of devising a treatment for Erica during that time are exceedingly low. We will do our utmost, of course, but...I cannot promise we will meet our deadline."

"Ha ha... Ah ha ha ha!" I wailed with laughter.

"Master? Please get ahold of yourself."

When I thought of relaying this to Marie, my chest felt like it was collapsing in on itself. My dumb sister had been so genuinely happy to be reunited with her daughter—to be able to spend time with her.

When was the last time I'd seen her smile so innocently?

My hands shook as I covered my face again, unable to look the world in the eye.

"Why...why is it always one problem after another?"

Afterword

DID YOU ALL ENJOY this volume, which was focused primarily on Mylene? I always wanted to make her the main character of a volume, and I thought this was a prime opportunity. I was happy to fulfill one of my goals.

Mylene has been popular ever since she appeared in the web novel. After publication and her appearance in the novel illustrations, her popularity only increased—accelerated even further by the manga.

This volume is entirely original content, and I think Mylene's probably a lot less extreme than she was in the web novel. If you prefer that sort of depiction, then I invite you to read that version of the story instead.

Also, *Trapped in a Dating Sim* has been confirmed for a second anime season! I never dreamed it would get another. As the original writer for the series, I'm delighted at this news. I have you readers and all your support to thank for this opportunity. Thank you so much. I hope you continue to support me!



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter