

As The Villainess, I Reject These Happy Bad Endings!

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As The Villainess, I Reject These Happy-Bad Endings!

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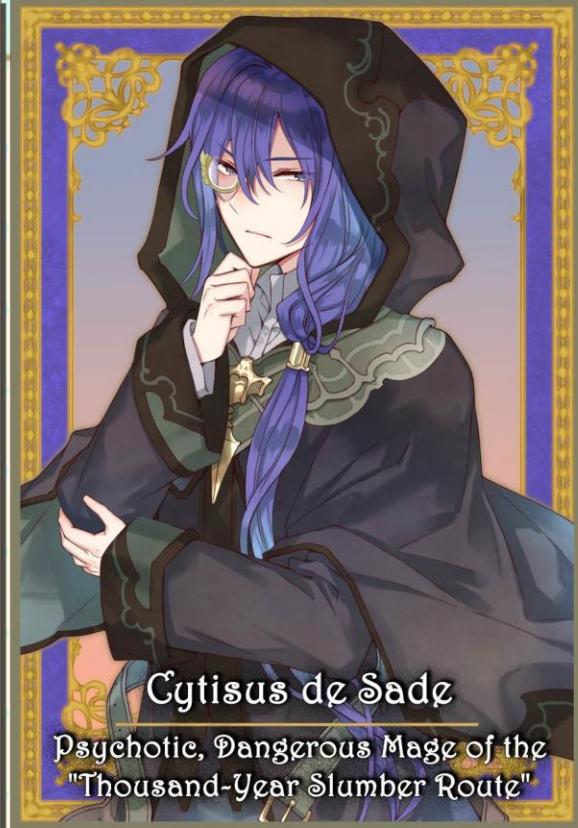
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Chapter 1: A Happy-Bad World

BEFORE me, a sea of flames engulfed the royal capital. The palace, the academy, the church—even the nobles' mansions had burned down. At this rate, the fire would spread, and the innocent people in the city outskirts would suffer, too. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid at all costs.

My beloved gazed out at the wreckage, his navy-blue hair glowing faintly in the firelight. Our love was forbidden but ardent nonetheless. I called out to him, and he turned to look at me, his eyes shining proudly in the darkness. Behind him, a flaming pillar shot up into the sky like the ascent of a dragon. To me, it was beautiful. But it was my sinfulness that created this scarlet inferno.

He reached out to me.

“Now nothing will ever come between us.”

He was mad with grief and only I could save him. Only I could save this city.

I leaped into his arms...and plunged my double-bladed ceremonial dagger, imbued with the power of the Holy Maiden, deep into his chest.

“Even you betray me?”

As his smile twisted in pain, I wrapped my arms around him.

“No...I’m coming with you.”

The other end of the gilded dagger pierced my skin, my blood mingling with his as threads of light enveloped us like a cocoon.

“If this world forbids our love, then let us awaken at the dawn of the new millennium.”

“Is this...the magic of the Holy Maiden...?”

"Yes. With this, we'll sleep for a thousand years."

"Together..."

There inside the holy cocoon, the two of us drifted to sleep in each other's arms.

—After the aristocracy was wiped out, the world regained its former prosperity, and the two lovers were worshipped as the Gods of Flame.

Then, after a thousand years passed, they awoke there on that very hill, gazed into each other's eyes, and smiled...

~Fin~

...YOU'RE joking, right?! How is THAT a happy ending?!

Iris bolted upright in bed, sweat dripping down her back as she shivered. She'd just had the most tragically beautiful dream—excessively dramatic, yet, for some strange reason, it didn't strike her as unrealistic. For a moment, she wasn't sure where the dream ended and reality began. Wrapping her arms around her trembling body, she felt the warmth of her own skin and realized, at last, that she was free from the nightmare.

You call that "dramatic violence?" I call it DOMESTIC violence!

Bad joke, I know, but I wasn't the one who marketed the game as "cutting-edge dramatic violence" right on the back of the box!

As Iris regained her composure, she slowly looked around. A giant four-poster bed...plush bedding embroidered with lace...a silk nightgown that rustled against her skin with the slightest motion...
Wait a minute...

Her heart thumped in her chest. This was Iris's room—she knew that very well—and yet something about it felt wrong. As she jumped out of bed, she heard the tinkle of a bell just under her chin. Startled, she reached up and clutched at her neck. There, she found

soft velvet and the cold metal of a little charm. She didn't even need to look at it to know it was an iris—the family crest as well as her namesake.

A chill ran down her spine. Why was she still wearing this thing? Iris hurried over to the mirror. With every step, her bell jingled obnoxiously.

Then Iris saw her reflection and froze.

Standing there was a thirteen-year-old girl with a beautiful face reminiscent of an ice sculpture. Thick, glossy hair hung in a loose ponytail all the way to her waist, in a shade of mint green that wouldn't look out of place in a video game, the tips curled into loose ringlets. Beneath her pencil-thin eyebrows, a pair of upturned eyes stared back at her—the color of jade, though they'd lost their shine.

Wait... Hold on... Isn't that Iris?!

Iris stared, dumbfounded. Standing there in the mirror was none other than Iris du Chevalier from an otome game called *HanaKoro: When the Pale Petals Fall*.

Hastily, she yanked up the sleeve on her left arm. Hideous pitted scars ran from the back of her hand up to her elbow—the result of a virus known as soilpox.

Soilpox had been a raging epidemic throughout the land. Not only did it have a high mortality rate, but those who managed to survive it were scarred permanently. Iris had contracted it at the end of last summer, and although she had fortunately recovered, she was now left with extremely visible scars on her arm. As a result, she had chosen to hole up in her room for months. Now it was nearly spring, and she still hadn't set one foot outside the house.

Iris's parents didn't hold it against her, however. After all, soilpox survivors faced harsh social stigma, and as the daughter of an aristocratic family, appearances were everything. Her position in

fashionable society was now tenuous at best. Flawless beauty was a must for someone seeking to preserve—or even improve—her status through marriage.

But although soilpox was contagious, it didn't spread easily, and only a handful of people contracted it at any one time. As a result, it was considered "God's punishment." Likewise, soilpox scars were seen as a sinner's mark; thus, everyone kept them covered.

There's no doubt about it—I'm looking at Iris, the villainess from HanaKoro. I remember reading that she had grown up feeling inferior due to her soilpox scars. And the dream I'd just had was one of the game's endings! It was so sublime, it brought back memories of her past life!

In Iris's previous life, she was a twenty-eight-year-old gamer otaku—just your average laid-back adult woman. "Laid-back? More like apathetic!" her friends used to say, but that's beside the point.

She first fell in love with the character "Iris" when she played *HanaKoro*, an otome game set at a prestigious academy in a magical Western fantasy world where the Holy Maiden's mana was on the verge of running out. The protagonist's goal: to be chosen as the next Holy Maiden. And with the help of a few eligible bachelors, she could make it happen.

Although it was set in some faux-European country, it was still a Japanese-made game, and as such, all the familiar aspects of Japanese culture were present and accounted for. There was no ongoing war, and while the story featured royalty, there was no overly strict etiquette. Thus, the low-born protagonist was free to go on casual dates with all the aristocrat boys.

But *HanaKoro: When the Pale Petals Fall* was no ordinary otome game. Sure, it had all the stock romance options: the prince, the knight, and the mage. But what truly set *HanaKoro* apart was its "happy-bad" endings. No matter which love interest the protagonist

ended up with, the outcome was always bittersweet—at some point, their love for each other turned dark. Hence “happy-bad.”

Oh, and if the player failed to end up with their chosen suitor over the course of his route, the protagonist would inevitably be stabbed to death in the resulting bad ending. No friendship endings, either. If you earned an equal amount of affection points with all the love interests, you’d be rewarded with a “harem bad ending” that featured the protagonist getting stabbed by *all of them* at the same time. So yeah, the options were either happy-bad or just plain bad. *No butterflies and sparkles here*, Iris thought to herself wearily.

But because the art was so exquisite, the game acquired a massive cult following among hardcore otome gamers who preferred dark stories. Naturally, in her past life, Iris had been one of them. The endings were so tragically, horrifically beautiful, as was the villainess every time the protagonist outwitted her. The controlling *yandere* prince; the sadistic, verbally abusive knight; the psychotic, dangerous mage—she ate it up. She was tired of the same cliché happy endings where the good guys always won.

Her dream had been her mentally replaying the Thousand-Year Slumber—the “true route” players reached after completing all the others. It took a lot of effort to unlock it, so she remembered it well. She also remembered screaming, “What part of this is *happy*?!” as the credits rolled. But to be clear, she had no real complaints about the game. At the time, she enjoyed the story quite a lot; she could remember arguing online about how the happy-bad endings were actually *more* romantic because “the ultimate true love is never rewarded.”

So yeah, Iris liked happy-bad endings...as long as they were *fictional*. She enjoyed shedding a sympathetic tear for *fictional* characters whose *fictional* lives were worse than hers.

So why the hell would I want to experience it in real life?!

She tugged on one of her mint green ringlets. Likewise, the Iris in the mirror tugged on one of her mint green ringlets. When she let go, it bounced back like a spring.

I have been reincarnated as Iris du Chevalier, and HanaKoro's dramatic violence is now my reality.

Chapter 2: Love Interest #1

IRIS couldn't believe it.

Of all the characters, I've turned into Iris?!

Iris du Chevalier was the daughter of the noble House of Chevalier, Marquisate of the kingdom of Floraison, hailing from a long line of valiant knights. She was also the main villainess of *HanaKoro* and the rival character competing for the title of Holy Maiden.

In the bad endings, Iris was usually tasked with stabbing the heroine, Camille. But in bringing harm to the Holy Maiden, she provoked the wrath of the gods, casting the kingdom into an era of darkness. Then, to atone for her sins, she was sealed inside a magical artifact that would steadily drain her life force and convert it into holy power. And after she died, another Chevalier was required to take her place, passing down the burden from one generation to the next for the rest of eternity.

Iris clutched her head. *Iris* was the one who always stabbed the protagonist in the bad endings, no matter what route she was on...and when *she* played this game during her past life, she got a *lot* of bad endings. The game didn't have many female characters—possibly a cost-saving measure to offset the god-tier art—so they gave Iris every villainous trait under the sun. As a result, there were never any happy endings for her. Like the protagonist, she was doomed to either a happy-bad ending or a fully-bad ending.

Why did she keep stabbing Camille, anyway? She was supposed to be a proper lady, so why did she carry a dagger at all?! But then it hit Iris: as the daughter of a knight, she was expected to attend sword training. Of course she would know how to stab someone—

she'd spent her whole life practicing! *Oh god, and I'm good at it, too!*
How could you turn your innocent little girl into a murder machine,
Father?!

Iris grabbed a pillow and flung it as hard as she could. It hit the window with a *WHHMPH* as the glass rattled in its frame. Still, she knew throwing a tantrum wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Iris?"

Just then, a voice rang out from the other side of the window—they must have seen the pillow. Iris hurried to the window, opened it, and peered down at the ground far below. A chilly late-winter breeze rolled in, rustling the curtains. Though her mind was gloomy, the weather outside was bright and sunny.

There stood her brother Nigel, waving up at her. Smiling stiffly, Iris waved back.

"What was that strange sound just now?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Are you sure? I'll come up." And with that, he raced off.

They were identical twins, except his hair and eyes were darker than hers—a much-needed splash of forest green color amid the drab winter garden. *The color of a true hero*, as their family liked to say. *Evergreen, the color of hope itself.*

Wait, but...isn't he...?

The next thing Iris knew, there came a knock at her bedroom door, and then it opened.

"Iris? Are you feeling better now?"

Sure enough, she recognized his firm, clear voice. Her head slowly turned to face him as she willed her uncooperative body to move.

Standing there was Nigel du Chevalier, Iris's twin brother...and the love interest in *HanaKoro*'s "Chains of Love" route. His glossy leaf-green hair framed his face in elegant waves, affording him a more approachable air than Iris's perfectly coiled ringlets. His large, round eyes glittered like emeralds. Though he looked cute and innocent at first glance, he regularly accompanied their father to the royal palace to practice sword fighting with the young princes. As a result, he was on good terms with the royal family, and his future career as a knight was practically gift-wrapped for him.

To think that in just a few short years, he'll brand Camille with a tattoo and walk around chained to her! Yikes!

Born to a family of chivalrous warriors, Nigel was given a strict upbringing and taught that a knight must always protect his lady. When Camille entered the picture with all the free-spirited sensibilities of a commoner, she would inevitably catch his eye. The more reckless she behaved, the more he would slowly grow convinced that he was the only man who could keep her safe...and from there, they would fall in love.

But the nature of her duties as Holy Maiden meant Camille would naturally come into contact with plenty of other men. In retaliation, Nigel would tattoo his own personal brand on her skin, then chain her to him. But Camille *wanted* these shackles. And so, the two would live happily ever after...according to the game, anyway.

All things considered, it was one of the tamer endings. But then there was Iris, the villainess. In Nigel's bad ending, Iris would declare Camille unfit to be with her brother then stab her. Conversely, during the happy-bad ending, Nigel would become so infuriated with Iris for trying to sabotage his relationship that he'd tie her up in layer after layer of heavy chains, drown her in the fountain, then tell everyone it

was a suicide. No funeral. It'd been a miracle this game avoided an M rating.

The CG for that ending was so sexy, too. She could remember Iris's pallid face, her eyes widened in despair as she sank...

The villainess's many, varied death scenes was actually one of the big reasons people bought *HanaKoro*. The art was just so gorgeous! Iris's death CGs had more detail than half of the CGs with the protagonist! This was actually fairly uncommon for an otome game, and as a result, the game had a sizeable male fanbase, too. Iris shuddered thinking about those stinky nerds swooning over her merch... Never mind the fact that she was totally swooning over it herself at the time...

But now that I'm Iris, I don't want ANYONE swooning over my death!

Nigel noticed Iris shivering and peered into her eyes. "You still look a bit pale. Don't overexert yourself, okay?"

Her heart ached as his gemstone eyes gazed at her in concern. The poor kid had no idea what sort of fate this world had in store for him. To think this sweet young boy would grow up to be a sadistic bully... It was heartbreaking.

At the very least, the "happy-bad" ending was still "happy" from the heroine's perspective. *I have nothing against her personally—I wish her all the best—but I don't want to die.* And the "Thousand-Year Slumber" route in particular was an outright massacre.

Wait a minute...I'm the villainess! Isn't it only natural, then, that I try to hinder the protagonist's happy endings? If I'm a VILLAINESS, then all I have to do is act like one! To hell with the heroine's happiness—I reject these happy-bad endings!

And so, Iris made a vow: she would obstruct *HanaKoro*'s pre-established endings, keep Nigel from going to the dark side...and of

course, avoid her own untimely demise. Breathing heavily, she clenched her fist. “Nigel, I’ve made up my mind!”

“Iris? What are you talking about?”

“I reject these happy-bad endings!”

He stared at her in confusion. “What?”

At this, Iris snapped back to her senses. She wasn’t supposed to say that part out loud! “Oh, er... What I mean is, I’m done hiding away in my room!” she corrected herself hastily.

“You mean it? That’s wonderful news!” Beaming from ear to ear, he gave her a big hug. “Oh, Iris, I’ve been ever so bored without you around to spar with me!”

Iris’s smile stiffened. *Yes, Iris du Chevalier is a knight-in-training in her own right...but will I be able to handle it?*

“G-Go easy on me, okay?”

“Of course, silly! You’re still recovering, after all. Feeling up for a little walk?”

His smile put Iris at ease. “Sure thing,” she replied.

“Okay then, let’s start by walking around the mansion!”

He took Iris by the hand and led her to the door. With each step, her bell jingled. Then, for the first time in several months, Iris left her bedroom.

The chilly hallway air tickled her cheek. She squeezed Nigel’s hand; he glanced over his shoulder at her and squeezed back. She never wanted to see his smile lose its radiance... For the sake of his future happiness, Iris was going to *do* something about those happy-bad endings!

Chapter 3: The Terrifying Tea Party

SPRING had sprung out in the courtyard of the Chevalier estate. Streams of water danced around the porcelain goddess statue in the brand-new fountain.

Oh god, it's the same fountain from the game! The one Iris drowns in! Iris froze as images from *HanaKoro* flashed vividly through her mind. Back then, she had squealed with delight when she saw the utter despair on *Iris*'s face, but that didn't mean she wanted to experience that despair herself!

"Isn't it wonderful? Father and I wanted to cheer you up with something nice. Oh, and I'm told it's nearly time for the elusive black irises to bloom," Nigel explained cheerfully. His grin brought Iris to her senses.

With a small sigh, she donned the best smile she could manage, though she could tell it was stiff and unnatural.

"Iris?"

"It's...it's lovely. Really."

Frankly, it was a miracle her voice didn't crack. *Do I really have to drink my tea right next to my final resting place?!*

Meanwhile, the slightest movement made her choker bell jingle, and she felt like a pet cat. But, for as much as it annoyed her today, she would have to hold her tongue.

Iris's father had made her wear this choker from an early age. Likewise, he'd given her mother a luxurious one of her own, which she wore with pride as a token of his love. And with parents like these, it was easy to see why Iris had happily agreed to wear hers. She'd never thought about it before, but...it almost felt like a mark of

ownership in a way. Of course, her mother thought it was romantic, but now that Iris had awakened to her past life's modern sensibilities, it struck her as far too controlling. *No wonder Nigel put chains on his beloved in his ending. There's being possessive, and then there's that.*

"Iris, my dear, you're looking much better these days," her mother, Lady Chevalier, announced in a jovial voice. Her decadent choker sparkled just above her voluptuous chest, and her iris charm, unlike Iris's, was embedded with sapphires and diamonds.

"Yes, Mother."

"I take it you're able to attend the tea party, then?"

"Tea party, you say?"

"Why, yes. The royal tea party, hosted by the second crown prince at the palace."

Iris gasped.

At age thirteen, young nobles were expected to make their social debut at the royal tea party. Then, at age fifteen, they were formally invited to enroll at the academy. Prior to Iris's smallpox infection, she'd always dreamed of attending the royal tea party someday, but now things were different. Why? Because the palace was home to *HanaKoro's* second love interest.

I'll pass, thank you! I already have to deal with Nigel's route since he's my brother—I don't have room for more problems on my plate! I'm better off never meeting that boy in the first place!

"Must I go, Mother?"

She smiled gently. "You have nothing to fear, my darling. Your brother will be with you, and as you know, he's already close friends with the young prince. There's no reason you won't be able to get along with him, too."

Iris's face stiffened. She knew her mother was only trying to reassure her, but unfortunately, her words had the opposite effect.
“But...I’m still recovering...”

“Are you? I hear you’ve been getting your exercise as of late.”

Like any proper young lady, Iris had resumed her self-defense training in an attempt to regain her physical stamina, but now it had come back to bite her.

“But...but I’m ever so embarrassed to be seen with my scars...”

“Lucky for us, they’re not on your face! Arms can easily be covered, my dear. Why, I’ll fashion you some stylish opera gloves.”

Her mother was *not* good at listening. Iris had no choice but to give up.

“Thank you, Mother,” Iris replied in a small voice as she hung her head.



IT was the day of the royal tea party. Iris was wearing intricately designed white lace gloves up to her elbows and a dress in her father’s favorite shade of dark-blue. Around her neck was a thick black velvet ribbon with a bell and an iris charm; likewise, another big ribbon adorned her half-ponytail. Her mother had dressed her but in accordance with her father’s tastes. Pleasing him was her main priority.

“Iris, I want you to have this,” her father told her as they were about to leave. He handed her a dagger with their family’s iris emblem engraved in the hilt. For self-defense, presumably.

Iris froze. *Wait, but...that’s the same dagger I use to stab Camille!*
THIS is how I get it?! Moving a little quickly, don’t you think?!

"You are the daughter of the noble House of Chevalier. If anyone should threaten to bring disgrace upon you, you must protect yourself at all costs."

What kind of "disgrace" was he expecting to happen at a little tea party? Surely, Iris wouldn't need to perform any beheadings...not that a dagger was even capable of such a thing. *Though I could probably cut some arteries...* Iris shook her head. What was she thinking? Why did her brain always jump straight to violence? And why was she pausing to consider exactly how much damage she was capable of?!

"Father, don't you think it a bit too much for a royal tea party?"

"It is exactly enough. What do you think all that training was for? You need to be able to use it when the time calls for it. Think of it as a daily precaution."

Lord Chevalier looked over at his wife, who smiled.

"Your father's right, Iris. I carry one, too, you know. It keeps you safe."

And so, Iris reluctantly accepted the dagger.

It's not a weapon—it's for self-defense, she told herself. I just have to be careful about how I use it...and that means no unnecessary stabbing of ANYONE!



IRIS traveled to the palace by horse-drawn carriage. Beside her, Nigel was wearing a plain gray suit—no gloves, no bells. Oh, how she envied him. Iris let out a sigh.

Today, she would meet the second love interest of *HanaKoro*: Prince Reseda of the "Caged Love" route. Thus far, she'd ensured she wouldn't encounter him, but she would inevitably have to speak to him because he was hosting this tea party. Not only that, but her

parents were expecting her to cozy up to him! They really seemed convinced that Iris would do great. Parental bias, if she had to guess.

In the game, Iris and Prince Reseda were engaged to be wed, and there was a chance things would turn out that way for her too. But in the game, Iris was so terrified of losing her fiancé to Camille that she bullied the poor girl mercilessly, outright stabbing her in the bad endings.

The second prince, Reseda de Geyer, was a handsome boy with flamingo-pink hair and eyes to match. He was always seen with a charming smile on his face, and he treated everyone with kindness; in the game, he tolerated Iris's selfish demands with such grace that Iris's past-life-self wanted to scream, "How could she talk like that to a literal prince?!" In-universe, he received a lot of female attention—actually kind of a womanizer, if anything. The girls all went nuts for the chivalrous gentleman type.

But Reseda's behavior was the result of a hole in his heart. He was smart enough to know that the masses only fawned on him because he was royalty, so in a desperate attempt to be loved, he acted nice to earn their approval. Then, following the death of his older brother, he would become Crown Prince of the kingdom, and everyone's attitudes toward him would change practically overnight. As a result, he would find himself unable to fully trust the people around him—including his own fiancée.

Enter Camille, a commoner who didn't care about social status. She was an enigma Reseda couldn't parse, and after seeing the way this Holy Maiden treated all people equally, he would find himself drawn to her. Likewise, the young prince would offer shelter from the harsh realities of aristocratic society, and Camille would feel safe and secure with him.

In his happy-bad ending, Reseda would ask her to pledge her life to Floraison as the kingdom's Holy Maiden. She would serve him as

his wife, and after that, she would never again set foot outside the Tower of Prayer—imprisonment in all but name.

But it would cause a scandal if word got out that the Holy Maiden had stolen the prince from his fiancée: therefore, Camille would never be formally recognized as queen. Instead, a now-voiceless Iris would serve as a puppet queen in her place. This was the only ending in which Iris avoided death...as a silent queen who sat and waited for a husband that would never return to her...watching him and his true love with reproachful eyes as tears streamed down her face... Beautiful, really.

However!

I don't want this happening to me, thank you! I don't want to stab anyone, and I really don't want to lose my voice! Our engagement will surely spell my doom. No fiancé for me, no sir!

The game never depicted how Iris and Reseda got engaged to begin with, but His Highness never seemed all that interested in her—they were practically strangers. Maybe it was arranged by their parents, or maybe Iris herself talked him into it...

Sorry, Father, but after today, he's not going to like me!

Iris's plan was as follows: if she could make him hate her, then he would surely never agree to be her fiancé. And since the prince's feelings would take priority, the engagement would never come to pass. *Problem solved!*

Chapter 4: Love Interest #2

THE tea party was held at the palace garden, a spacious area reserved exclusively for special events. The land was flat and a sweeping vista extended as far as the eye could see. At the center was a large pond, surrounded on all sides by carefully placed shrubs, a babbling brook, and even a little man-made waterfall—symmetrical and beautiful to an exact degree, like a formal French garden.

The spring sun shone down through the leafy tree branches, highlighting the fields of bright white flowers at Iris's feet, probably in reference to *HanaKoro*'s subtitle: *When the Pale Petals Fall*.

How thematically appropriate.

Iris found Prince Reseda surrounded by a coterie of high-born young ladies. As Iris and Nigel approached, the girls all scrutinized her as if assessing her threat level. As for her brother, he was the handsome heir to a long legacy of knights, so it came as no surprise that they were interested in him, too.

Amazing! It's just like the game! Iris had never experienced anything like this in her past life, and part of her was thrilled.

"Hey there, Nigel."

"Allow me to introduce my twin sister, Iris."

Reseda and Nigel were peers in sword training; their informal rapport had all the girls staring. And since Iris was standing right next to them, their eyes all bored into her as well.

They want a villainess? I'll give them a villainess! The girls watched in disgust as Iris performed a flawless curtsy. Then she smiled despite herself. It was all so cliché... Apparently Iris was born with a talent for villainy. And it was actually kind of fun!

As Reseda stood there, surrounded by noble girls on all sides, he smiled brightly. Sure enough, he was nice to anyone and everyone, just like in the game...and knowing what Iris knew, it was downright frightening.

"It's truly a pleasure to meet you, Lady Iris. Nigel has told me all about you. How are you feeling on this fine day?" he asked, his smile unwavering.

"Terribly grateful for your concern, Your Highness. I imagine Nigel has told you everything you could possibly need to know, so I won't waste your time by repeating it."

Just like that, Iris brought the conversation to a screeching halt. All the other girls were scandalized by her impropriety, but she paid them no mind—Iris needed him to hate her as much as possible, but without doing anything that would constitute a punishable offense. And thanks to her memories of *HanaKoro*, she knew this level of rudeness was something Reseda was willing to tolerate. Still, her heart thumped in her chest.

As Iris turned to make her exit, one of the girls standing behind Reseda called out to her, her mouth concealed behind a fan. Before Iris contracted soipox, she had met with this girl at tea parties a handful of times in the past, but naturally, once Iris got sick, she never heard from the girl again.

"My, what stunning gloves you're wearing. I'd love to see them up close."

At this, all the girls giggled and Iris knew why. In her elbow-length opera gloves, she was conspicuously overdressed for the occasion. They must have intuited that Iris was hiding her soipox scars, and now, they were having a laugh at her expense. Scowling internally, Iris instead donned a soft smile.

"Certainly, by all means."

Iris gracefully offered the girl her left hand. The girl hesitated for a moment. Then she reluctantly pinched the tip of the glove between her fingers, using the fabric as a shield to avoid touching any part of Iris's body, as if suggesting she was unclean.

This was the sort of hostile treatment Iris had endured prior to *HanaKoro*'s start. *She must have used Camille as an outlet for her own insecurities.*

Rage welled up within Iris. Now that her symptoms were gone and she had recovered, she was no longer contagious. Didn't the girl know that? Or was she treating Iris like a germ on purpose? Either way, it was incredibly cruel.

Iris pulled her left arm out of the glove, leaving it to fall from the girl's fingers. The other girls shrieked as Iris's smallpox scars came into view.



Iris pulled off her right glove and held it out, sneering defiantly like the villainess she was. “If you find them so charming, you may keep them. I’ve no real use for them myself.”

The girl flung Iris’s right glove to the ground and stormed off. Likewise, the other girls awkwardly shuffled away, some of them chasing after their angry friend.

“Hmph,” Iris scoffed. *That was an impressively villainous display just now, if I do say so myself.* High-handed arrogance came naturally to her, it seemed.

A young maid ran over and picked up Iris’s gloves.

“I’ll have this servant wash them and return them to you posthaste,” Reseda declared.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. You may simply dispose of them,” Iris told her.

The maid stared at her in shock. Iris smiled at her. It was an understandable reaction, considering what the gloves were worth.

“Or I’ll give them to you instead, if you would be interested. Perhaps you have no use for gloves, but surely you could make something of the fabric? I assure you, you won’t get sick from touching them...but if the thought frightens you, by all means, throw them in the fire.”

“N-No, my lady, I’m not frightened in the least!” The maid eagerly clutched the gloves to her chest.

“I sincerely apologize for the scandal I’ve caused, Your Highness,” Iris said to Reseda.

“It’s fine.”

He smiled back at her so sweetly, it made Iris recoil. Smiles as charming as his were lethal weapons in their own right. *Uh-oh...is he mad at me?*

Iris had figured she was fine, seeing as he never got upset with “Iris” in *HanaKoro*, but maybe he only let her off the hook because she was his fiancée... If so, then she had possibly just earned herself a scathing rebuke. After all, nothing could possibly be more shameful than making a scene at the royal palace!

Oh god, oh god, oh god! What if I get myself killed way before any of the game's routes ever have the opportunity?!

With one final apology, Iris hastily retreated to a bench near the pond. Her brother came running after her. “Iris, are you all right?”

“G-Good question...” Iris started to worry that they might charge her with lese-majesty.

“I’ll have a servant bring you some new gloves.”

“Oh, you mean this? It might bother other people, but it doesn’t bother me,” Iris replied, waving her left arm around. After the scandal she caused, there was no point in trying to hide it any longer. Instead, she was going to lean into it. “Do you think Father will be terribly upset?”

“If it doesn’t bother you, I don’t think it will bother him.” Nigel shrugged.

“What about you? If it shames you to see that your sister’s been punished by God, I’ll gladly hide it again.”

“No, I don’t mind it.” Smiling, he took her scarred left hand. “I’m just happy you survived.”

Awwww! Nigel, you little cinnamon roll! How could they give a sweetheart like you such a horrible, cruel ending?! Don’t you worry—I’m going to protect you!

“Thank you, Nigel.”

“Besides, it’ll work like bug repellent,” he continued with an impish grin.

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it: anyone who’d take issue with your scars will stay far, far away.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re completely right! Oh, Nigel, you’re a genius!”

Surely, Reseda must have seen her ugly scars during that exchange. Starting today, everyone would decide that Iris was “damaged goods” unworthy of His Highness. Suffice it to say, any hope she had of engagement to the prince was now snuffed out! YES!!!

In HanaKoro, Iris’s scars were her greatest flaw, but for me, they’re the ultimate weapon. Iris cackled in delight. Nigel shot her a weird look.

“But Iris...shouldn’t you be trying to win over Prince Reseda?” he asked stiffly.

“*Father* wants that, not me. But with scars like these, no royal family member would take me!” she exclaimed, holding up her left arm.

“You sound pretty happy about that,” Nigel snickered.

Neither of them noticed the young prince watching them as he stood surrounded by girls.

Chapter 5: Another Royal Tea Party

“IRIS! Iris! Prince Reseda says he wants to meet with you!” Iris’s father, Lord Chevalier, shouted excitedly as he barged into her bedroom.

Iris could scarcely believe it. She hadn’t seen His Highness at all since she caused a scene at his tea party, and she expected he would want nothing to do with her after that. *Why on Earth would he want to see me again?*

“Surely, there must be some mistake.”

“No, it’s very plainly written. One week from now, there will be a tea party at the palace, and he’s asked for you to attend.”

“Tell him I decline,” she replied without batting an eye.

“Hahaha! Funny joke, my dear. You know you can’t possibly refuse. Now go and buy whatever you may need to prepare! Anything you desire!” he proclaimed jovially as he sauntered from the room.

“Good grief. He barely let me get a word in edgewise,” Iris muttered, and one of the maids giggled into her hand.



AT last, it was the day of the tea party. Reluctantly, Iris boarded the carriage. After a great deal of whining and complaining, she had managed to convince her father to send Nigel with her.

Her hair was curled in ringlets and tied up in a half-ponytail with an oversized ribbon—her father’s favorite style. She told him she didn’t need any fancy gloves this time, but he gave her some nonetheless. Ultimately, however, Iris decided to leave them behind

in the carriage. After all, her plan was to flaunt her unsightly disfigurement and make His Highness despise her for good.

“Ugh, I hate this...I’m so miserable,” Iris sighed quietly.

“I don’t blame you,” Nigel laughed. “Not like you have anything to say to him.”

Unlike her brother, Iris had no hobbies in common with Prince Reseda. They weren’t friends. She was a stranger to him.



AT the palace, Iris and Nigel were escorted to a little greenhouse filled with daisies. Inside, they found the two young princes waiting for them: His Highness Prince Reseda, as well as eighteen-year-old Crown Prince Bleuet, Reseda’s older brother by five years. Iris had only ever seen him from a distance, so this was her first time speaking to him directly.

“Lady Iris, I presume. And Nigel, of course. Thank you for coming.”

“Iris du Chevalier.” Iris curtsied to him.

“No need for formalities. Nigel’s a good friend of ours.”

Bleuet smiled amiably. His pale, pinkish-purple hair looked silky soft, and there was a faint blush upon his smooth porcelain cheeks. For a man, he seemed rather delicate, and Iris was captivated by his beauty.

“I hear last week’s tea party was highly entertaining. I wish I could have been there myself,” he continued with a chuckle.

“Entertaining, my lord?” Iris wasn’t sure what he could be referring to.

“I heard all about your little showdown.”

“Bleuet!” Reseda hissed frantically.

Iris felt her face flush and averted her gaze to the floor. He had to be talking about the incident with the gloves. *You're telling me the CROWN PRINCE OF FLORAISON knows about it? Just kill me now!!!*

"After the party, I noticed my little brother seemed to be in unusually high spirits, so I asked him about it. And do you know what he said?"

"*Bleuet!*"

"He said a 'fascinating girl' had come to visit—"

"BLEUET! ENOUGH! I ask that you depart at once!"

At this, Bleuet laughed himself into a coughing fit.

"...I shouldn't have shouted at you, dear brother. Please forgive me," Reseda apologized. "But you must understand, you're not well enough to be on your feet. Now go and get some rest."

Bleuet smiled faintly. "You're very kind, Reseda. In that case, I shall take my leave of you. Nigel, would you escort me?"

At the behest of the Crown Prince, Nigel put an arm around his shoulders for support. Together, the two walked out of the greenhouse, Bleuet coughing all the way. *Was he always this sickly? Come to think of it, at the start of HanaKoro, his death had made Reseda the new Crown Prince.*

Does that mean...something's going to happen to him?

Now that Iris thought about it, that wasn't the only backstory death. The third love interest, Cytisus, lost his beloved to some sort of disease prior to the start of the game. Was it just a coincidence, or...was another epidemic going to hit the royal capital? Iris shuddered. Hopefully, she was wrong! Even if she were to inquire after Bleuet's health, chances were high she would only get a vague answer. And even if they did tell her the full details, it wasn't like she could do anything about it...

"Lady Iris, I...I sincerely apologize for my brother's impropriety," Reseda stammered awkwardly, and Iris snapped back to her senses.

"Oh, er...no apology necessary, Your Highness."

"Why don't you have a seat over here?"

At his prompting, Iris sat down at a round white table. Silence fell between them—so quiet you could hear a pin drop—and she had no idea what to do about it. She didn't know why he summoned her in the first place, and now Nigel was gone... All Iris knew was that there was supposed to be a "tea party," and she had expected there to be more guests!

The silence hung over them.

Ugh, I can practically hear the air itself! But I don't have anything to say to him! I don't even want to get to know him!

More silence.

Can I go home now?!

"Well, Your Highness, I can't imagine this is a productive use of your time, so I think I'll be on my way."

"No!" Reseda immediately shot back. Then his eyes widened, as if he'd startled himself. "I mean, er...I apologize for shouting."

"Certainly, my lord."

Even more silence.

I really can't think of anything to talk about. If he wants to spend time with Nigel, then maybe I'll just go home without him... Yes, that sounds like a plan! I'll go straight home and send a carriage for Nigel later!

"Were you hoping to speak to Nigel? I'll send him over on my way out."

"Lady Iris?!"

He looked at her in alarm, but she wasn't bothered. Iris wanted nothing more than to get out of there.

"I, um... Would you care for another cup of tea?"

"I haven't finished my first, thank you." Iris had only just sat down, and she hadn't even taken her first sip.

"We also have a selection of cakes! You're welcome to have as much as you like!"

At this, a maid walked over, pushing a rolling cart—the same maid from Iris's last visit. In the time since Iris had last seen her, the maid had added two little lace ribbons to her headdress, plainly made from the fabric of Iris's gloves.

"Let me know what you'd like, and I'll serve it to you, my lady."

"Oh my!"

The cart was filled with cakes of every color. Sweet summer strawberry tarts, dense white cheesecakes, fluffy chiffon cakes, Bundt cakes...they all looked heavenly!

"My personal favorite is the strawberry tart," said Reseda.

"Then that's what I'll have, too," she replied. As the maid served her dessert, Iris continued, "I see you decided to repurpose the gloves. I'm flattered."

Iris wouldn't have held it against her if she'd decided it was safer to dispose of the fabric altogether, but instead, she was willing to wear it. To Iris, it was a touching gesture. Blushing beet-red, the maid curtsied to her in thanks; meanwhile, Reseda watched them with a smile on his face. Iris noticed him looking, and their eyes met.

"What is it, my lord?"

He hastily averted his gaze. “Well, you see...I thought you might have had a dreadful time at the tea party last week, so I wanted to make it up to you. That’s why I invited you here today.”

Just like in *HanaKoro*, Reseda was a kind and thoughtful person...to anyone and everyone. *But in the game, Iris never realized that last part.*

“You needn’t worry about my feelings, Your Highness.”

“Surely any young woman would feel terrible if her blemishes were revealed to the world.”

“No, really, I’m quite fine. Talking to Nigel made me realize that this will serve as a screening process for unqualified suitors.” Iris raised her left arm to indicate her scars.

Reseda smiled hesitantly. “You’re a strong girl, Lady Iris.”

“Oh, that’s not true at all. I just don’t think it’s worth agonizing over. What matters is that I survived my sickness.”

It was the honest truth of how Iris felt, but it didn’t truly occur to her until that conversation she’d had with Nigel when he told her he was grateful that she survived. Iris could have died, but instead, she made it out with a handful of scars. Her life wasn’t over—far from it. In a certain sense, the scars made everything easier.

As the Prince took a bite of his tart, Iris followed suit. The tangy little strawberries paired perfectly with the sweetness of the cream. Truly, this was the taste of summer itself. *Nothing but the best here at the royal palace! Last week’s sweets were top-notch, and these desserts are divine, too!*

As Iris squirmed with delight, Reseda snickered. “Big fan of dessert, are you?”

“I am.”

“Glad to hear it.”

If only I could read his true intentions from behind that bright smile.

Chapter 6: Love Interest #3

“**YOU** see, I’ve invited a royal mage to join us today.”

“A mage, you say?”

Iris wasn’t sure how to react. After all, she couldn’t imagine why such a thing was deemed necessary.

“Cytisus.”

At the prince’s call, Cytisus de Sade revealed himself, wearing the signature black robes of a royal mage. His navy-blue hair hung in a long, loose ponytail that descended down to his waist. Behind his black-rimmed monocle sat a pair of gentle eyes that sparkled like sapphires. At twenty-three, Cytisus was a full ten years older than Reseda and Iris. He was the heir to the House of Sade, an earldom that boasted a long legacy of mages.

Oh god, it’s him! Cytisus from the true route—“The Thousand-Year Slumber!”

This was the third love interest, whose happy-bad ending was visited upon Iris in a nightmare that ultimately led her to remember her past life. Cytisus’s route was the most destructive in the entire game; hence, it was considered the “true ending” by the fans. In his route, he and Camille fell in love, blissfully ignorant of the revelation that they were, in fact, half-siblings.

At the start of the game, gifted mage Cytisus was utterly bored of the world. First, he had lost his mother at an early age; next, his wetnurse had suddenly vanished; then, lastly, his beloved had died of an illness. With no one left in his life who loved him, he dedicated himself solely to his work. But everything changed once the Holy Maiden Camille entered the picture.

Her mana couldn't compete with his, and yet he found her endlessly charming. Though she was ten years younger than him, she showed him a world he never knew. She was the one source of light in his life. As for Camille, she'd never known a father's love, and Cytisus's patient, forgiving nature drew her to him.

And yet, tragically, the two lovers were related by blood. They couldn't be together; society would never permit it. And so, in his despair, Cytisus used his mana to engulf the royal capital in a sea of flames. *Eeegh! Somebody get this guy some therapy!*

Iris froze, staring at Cytisus. He stared back, frowning in annoyance.

"Cytisus de Sade, at your service," he said in a low, husky voice that carried all the sex appeal of a grown man. A shiver ran down Iris's spine.

Oh god, it's the same voice! It was already plenty sexy when I listened to it with headphones... I can't take it in real life!

Iris hastily introduced herself in kind, lest he become even more displeased with her. "Likewise, I am Iris du Chevalier." Then she looked at Reseda. "P-Pray tell, Your Highness, for what purpose have you invited this mage?"

"I thought I'd ask him to examine your scars," Reseda replied kindly.

Then, suddenly, she remembered: in *HanaKoro*, Iris used her family's influence to coerce Cytisus into doing her bidding. One of his tasks was to use his magic to conceal her scars. When Camille criticized her for doing this, Iris became so resentful, she ultimately ended up stabbing her. Alternatively, in the happy-bad ending, Cytisus trapped Iris inside a cage of fire. Her green hair made such an exquisite contrast against the scarlet flames as she ran around in a futile attempt to escape from her impending demise...

Oh god, but I can't let the "Thousand-Year Slumber" happen in real life! The whole city will burn to ash, and then Camille will stab Cytisus, and they'll both drift off to sleep with no guarantee that they'll find happiness when they wake up! And today might be where it all starts! WHY?! I never asked for this! Is this that "game rebalancing" I've heard so much about?! Well, no thank you! I reject this route!!!

"Your Highness, I dearly appreciate your thoughtfulness, but I sense that even magic cannot undo soilpox scars."

"Why is that?"

"Because the wounds have already healed. Perhaps magic could have been of assistance while the healing process was still underway, but there's nothing to be done now that the wounds have closed up."

"Yes, Cytisus said the same. But surely we won't know until we try!"

"It's simply not going to work, my lord. Just as magic cannot regrow a lost arm, neither can it reheat what has already healed," Iris explained with a smile.

Cytisus watched their exchange with widened eyes. Before now, he was under the impression he had been summoned here to humor the whims of some selfish girl making absurd demands of the prince. Personally, he'd no interest in doing it, but he didn't want to endanger his job with the royal family. Now, however, he could see that he had been mistaken. *For a girl of her age, she's actually rather sensible*, he thought.

"I'm afraid Lady Iris is correct, Your Highness," Cytisus chimed in. "That being said, there *is* a spell that could temporarily conceal the scars from sight."

At this, Reseda's eyes lit up. "Let's do that, then!"

"We mustn't, my lord," Iris answered flatly.

This caught Cytisus by surprise. He was expecting Iris to leap at this proposal. After all, there was a heavy social stigma associated with smallpox scars. Besides, it was only human nature to want to conceal one's flaws, be they large or small—and Iris's scars were *very* apparent. If nothing was done, it could easily have negative repercussions over the course of her entire life.

"Lord Cytisus, how long would this concealment spell last?" Iris asked.

"Well, let's see... By my estimation, the effects would remain intact for about two weeks."

"That's not very long at all. Why, I'd have to spend my whole life terrified of the spell breaking!"

And in *HanaKoro*, Iris was indeed afraid of that very thing; hence, she wore gloves at all times. When Camille learned about her secret meetings with Cytisus, she began to suspect that something was going on between them. Instead, Iris's dark secret was revealed, and the concealment spell was taken away from her. But when Camille tried to convince Iris to do the right thing, it only made her more furious.

"All you'd have to do is have it recast before the end of the second week, right? There's nothing to fear," Reseda reassured her gently. But Iris shook her head.

"I couldn't possibly ask a royal mage to go to all that trouble for me."

"But Lady Iris—"

"Besides, it would be improper for us to meet in private so frequently," Iris cut in. "Especially if Lord Cytisus is already spoken for, which I suspect he is."

Wouldn't want her to think I'm trying to steal her boyfriend... I mean, she IS still alive, right? Oh god, please be alive!

Iris shot him an inquiring look, but he averted his gaze. Reseda whipped his head around to look at him. "You have a lover, Cytisus?"

Uh-oh. Was it a secret?

Blushing faintly, Cytisus cleared his throat. "Back to the subject at hand, if you please. I agree that it may be inappropriate for someone of Lady Iris's social standing to meet in private with the opposite sex."

AHA! He didn't deny it! Surely she must still be alive, or else his reaction would have been quite different. Perfect! You two go and live happily ever after—and stay far, FAR away from Camille!!!

Iris did a fist-pump under the table. Then she noticed them looking at her dubiously, and she hastily donned a smile more befitting of nobility.

"Er... As I was saying, Your Highness, your concern means ever so much to me. However, I'm afraid I mustn't entertain such notions. No matter how I may try to hide my scars from the public, the fact is, they're there. I wouldn't want to lie to myself."

Reseda stared back wordlessly. Iris turned to Cytisus.

"I apologize for making you come all this way. Really, there's no need to worry."

"I must say, you're quite level-headed, Lady Iris," he replied. "You're wise to reject the allure of temporary beauty. In that case, what say you come by the Temple of Magic to do a bit of research? That way, we'll avoid sullying your reputation with the impropriety of a private meeting. The Temple has a great number of books regarding a variety of subjects, including homeopathic remedies, so it's possible you may learn of a different way to minimize your scars." He turned to Reseda. "Would that work for you, Your Highness?"

Rather than having her depend upon my magic, why don't we help her look for an independent solution?"

Over the course of this conversation, Cytisus realized that the young prince was trying to win Iris's affection—he wanted to use the concealment spell as a convenient excuse to summon her to the palace. Thus, Cytisus decided to support Reseda's little crush. After all, it couldn't hurt to curry favor with the royal family. Besides, he'd taken a liking to Iris himself. His mother had long since died of soilpox, but if she'd survived, he couldn't help but wonder if she would have had the same positive outlook Iris had. His conclusion: probably not. And so, he decided he wanted to help Iris.

Meanwhile, Iris had no idea about any of that. She was just *thrilled* to be invited to the Temple of Magic! It was a special place where few were permitted entry, and back when she played *HanaKoro*, it was her absolute favorite in-game location. She could recall Cytisus's sprite art behind the text box, surrounded by bookshelves and flitting fairies... Oh, how she'd always wished she could go there in real life!

"You mean it?!" Iris looked from Cytisus to Reseda, her eyes sparkling.

"If that is what you desire, so be it."

"Please, Your Highness!" Iris lowered her head humbly.

"You really don't mind, Cytisus?" Reseda asked.

"It would be my pleasure," Cytisus reassured him.

At this, Iris sprang up in her seat, and the others chuckled as her mint-green ringlets bounced all over the place.

Chapter 7: Keeping Tabs on the Protagonist

AS spring ended and summer began, Iris spent her days looking into the present whereabouts of *HanaKoro*'s protagonist, Camille. In the game, she and Cytisus fell in love without realizing they were brother and sister, but surely this wouldn't happen if they knew about it beforehand. Take Iris, for example—as handsome as she knew Nigel to be, she couldn't possibly see him *that* way. Thus, she decided to make sure Camille and Cytisus were both made aware of their secret sibling as early as possible.

Sorry, but as the villainess, I reject your forbidden incest!

First, Iris did some preliminary research to make sure the information from the game still applied here. Sure enough, Camille's mother had died when she was young, and she was raised by her aunt and uncle—just like in *HanaKoro*. Meanwhile, Cytisus's father had been sending her family financial support while keeping his identity hidden. Iris couldn't understand why anyone would have a child out of wedlock in the first place, but at least, he was taking responsibility for his illegitimate daughter.

Next, Iris traveled into town to visit the place where Camille worked—a small cosmetics store run by her aunt and uncle. Rumor had it that their camellia seed oil—sold under the name “Camille’s Camellia”—helped reduce the appearance of scars. In *HanaKoro*, it was imbued with Camille’s holy magic and sped up the healing process. Personally, Iris was always interested in the product itself.

I mean, it's made by Camille! Who wouldn't want to try it?!

Iris only had a vague idea of Camille’s life prior to the start of *HanaKoro*—just the basic gist as explained to her in the game—so

she was curious to see what she was up to at this point in time. Although Iris was accompanied by a maid, she made sure to wear her most unassuming dress, and since her green ringlets would attract too much attention, she tucked her hair into a headscarf. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough, surely.

Camille's family store was rather drab, lined with shelves full of unmarked containers—whatever they happened to have handy, by the looks of it. Apparently, they sold their products by weight, so Iris went to the counter and ordered some of Camille's Camellia. If it worked like the game claimed, then all she had to do was rub it onto her arm like a lotion, and hopefully, her scars would fade a bit. Yes, Iris had declined Cytisus's concealment magic, but that didn't mean her scars didn't bother her. Surely any young lady in her position would take steps to reduce her flaws.

Camille wasn't around; during the day, she went to the local church to study and teach the younger children how to read and write, or so Iris was told. As for Iris, she decided to check the place out. As she soon discovered, it was a small, modest building with beautiful white lilacs blooming out front; the overpowering fragrance threatened to make her head spin.

Come to think of it, white lilacs were featured heavily in *HanaKoro*'s gorgeous opening cinematic, with heart-shaped white petals raining down over the portraits of each love interest. A *classy choice for a grimdark otome game*, Iris snarked silently. Since white lilacs were a symbol of tragic romance between a commoner and a noble, the game's theme was basically one big metaphor right from the start.

Camille walked out of the church, her sky-blue hair striking a stark contrast with the white petals that surrounded her on both sides. She looked even younger than she had at the start of *HanaKoro*. Unlike Cytisus, her bright-blue eyes were much softer;

that said, she had the same nose and the same pointy chin. It was all so obvious to Iris—how on earth did Cytisus fail to realize they were related? Or did he fall for her *because* she looked like him? *What a narcissist.*

Iris asked her maid to wait for her at the front gates, then called out to Camille. “Pardon me, but could I ask you to show me around this church?”

Iris’s choker bell tinkled as she spoke. Camille looked at it in surprise, then looked at Iris’s left arm—at her scars. Then she looked back at Iris and smiled.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

A gust of wind kicked up, sending the lilac petals scattering all over the place, including Iris’s headscarf. As she moved to brush them away, Camille suddenly reached out to her.

“A five-petal lilac!”

She beamed; Iris looked at her in confusion.

“Oh, haven’t you heard? A lilac usually has four petals, so if you find a five-petal lilac, you’re supposed to put it in your mouth and swallow it without another word. That way, you and your beloved will be together for all eternity! Can I have this one?”

She wore the giddy expression of a romance-obsessed young girl. Meanwhile, Iris stared at her in horror. *Together for ALL ETERNITY?! What, like in the “Thousand-Year Slumber?!” Is this foreshadowing?! No, it can’t be! The game hasn’t even started yet! I REFUSE to let her go down that route!*

“W-Well...you’re welcome to the lilac, of course, but...weren’t you supposed to swallow it *without another word*? Isn’t it a bit too late?”

At this, she slumped her shoulders. “Ugh, you’re completely right! Of all the flowers that bloom here, I’ve never found a five-petal lilac until today, and I was so excited, I started gushing... Well, at least now I know for sure that they exist. I’m sure I’ll find another one someday.” She nodded to herself with a smile.

“You needn’t put so much stock in that old wives’ tale, you know.”

Oops. That came out a little harsh. For whatever reason—probably because Iris was a villainess—anything she said had the tendency to come off as arrogant, even when she was trying her hardest to be nice. Fortunately, Camille didn’t seem bothered.

“*Hee hee hee!* I guess you’re right!”

Still smiling, she lifted the five-petal lilac to her lips and gave it a little kiss. *AAAGH! Are you kidding me?! How can you be so ADORABLE?!*

Just like that, she obliterated Iris with her charm.



FROM there, Camille dutifully walked Iris through the church. She was friendly, energetic, and good with people, possibly from all the customer service work.

As they walked, Camille even taught Iris about the stained glass windows inside the chapel. It was a small church, and these windows were far from extravagant, but the light they cast over the stone floor was gentle and serene. Beneath the rainbow of colors, Camille truly looked the part of a Holy Maiden. *No wonder everyone falls in love with her,* Iris thought.

“Are you happy with your life?” Iris asked.

She nodded without missing a beat. Quietly, Iris cursed herself for forcing such an unpleasant conversation on this pure, innocent girl.

“I see... Tell me, do you know your father?”

At this, she smiled stiffly. “Well, no...but why do you ask? Is there some sort of rumor going around town?”

“No rumors, no. But I believe I know who your father might be.”

Her eyes grew so wide, they threatened to pop out of their sockets. “Are you saying my father is alive?”

This Iris couldn’t answer. Instead, she asked, “Surely you must have some memento of your mother’s, do you not?”

In the game, Camille carried a little pouch that was once her mother’s. This item proved her true heritage.

“Huh? W-Well, yes...”

Sure enough, she held up the pouch hanging around her neck, its drawstrings pulled taut. In the second half of Cytisus’s route in *HanaKoro*, she and the player would discover what was inside: an amulet bearing the House of Sade’s eagle crest plus a lock of her father’s navy-blue hair.

That’s the same pouch, all right! Camille and Cytisus must really be siblings!

The pouch stuck in Iris’s memory after all the times Camille was depicted as clutching it. Plus, there was that one scene where Iris threw it in the pond. Poor Nigel searched and searched for it until he was covered in mud, that little saint. Though Iris was relieved to have confirmed her suspicions, she was a bit disappointed to be proven right. *Sorry, but this happy-bad ending isn’t going to happen!*

“Now I’m sure of it. You have a brother who’s ten years older than you.”

“I do?”

“Yes. A handsome man with dark-blue hair.”

The blood drained from Camille’s complexion. It pained Iris to see it, really. The discovery of a secret sibling would make her realize precisely what sort of complicated man her father was. But now that she knew she had an older brother with blue hair, she was sure to regard any older blue-haired man with a hint of suspicion. This would prevent her from tripping headfirst into any incest routes!

Sorry, but the “Thousand-Year Slumber” would get us all killed. This is the one route I absolutely cannot abide! As the villainess, I reject this happy-bad ending!

“Then that means...my mother was a homewrecker...?”

Camille’s lips trembled, and Iris’s heart ached.

“It’s not important, my dear.”

“But...what if I’m not *meant* to have this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what if... What if it’s disrespectful to my father’s wife...?”

“I’m afraid his wife passed away before you were ever born.”

Her jaw dropped. Tears welled in her eyes until they glistened with the light of the stained-glass windows. *Truly a beautiful sight.*

“Was my birth a sin?”

“That’s not for me to decide, unfortunately.”

“All my life, I thought I was a mistake... My mother always loved me, and my aunt and uncle seem to care for me, but...they all refused to tell me about my father, so I figured I was an illegitimate child...”

She stared at the floor, sniffling. Beneath all that sparkle, she was really just a scared little girl like anyone else. With her mother dead and her father out of the picture, she feared that she was little more than a burden to her relatives. That suspicion had laid roots in her heart, rendering her unable to truly love another person...and unable to accept it in return. She wasn't just "good with people"—she was desperate to be liked, so she was willing to give anything others asked of her. She wanted to be *needed*.

Meanwhile, Iris wasn't quite sure how to respond to this display of vulnerability. She *did* want to console her...but at the same time, she knew she was better off not getting involved with Camille...but she looked so sad and forlorn... *Ugh, what choice do I have?!* Iris gave Camille her handkerchief to wipe her tears.

"You've done nothing wrong, my dear. Your birth was not a sin. Your mother simply wanted you so badly, she gave up many things in exchange."

"Thank you, dear sister..."

Iris gave her a funny look. "Er... 'sister'?"

"Well, I can't address you by name, right?"

"...Good point. For the time being, you're better off not learning my name."

"Then please, let me call you my sister. Okay?"

Her smile was so radiant, she clearly deserved the title of protagonist.

And as it turned out, her camellia seed oil was really nice, too. The game was probably right about it being imbued with holy magic, because slathering it on put Iris in *such* a good mood. So naturally, Iris went back to that store several more times, each time making sure to visit while Camille was off at church. According to the

shopkeepers, the camellia seed oil was the one thing she helped make. With a smile, they told Iris how Camille would always try her absolute best to press all the oil out of the seeds.

Sure enough, Camille was a Holy Maiden in the making.

Chapter 8: The Temple of Magic

AT long last, Iris had arrived at the Temple of Magic. Today, she wore a thin, long-sleeved blouse with a flared skirt—a plain, no-frills outfit. As for her hair, she had tied it in a simple over-the-shoulder ponytail with a single silver band; her ringlets bounced at her waist as she walked. Since she had come here to study, she figured she should dress down for the occasion. Fortunately, Cytisus seemed to approve of her modest attire.

The Temple of Magic was an old, weathered, yet dignified brick building located on the palace grounds—a pentagonal building filled with science and magic and all kinds of knowledge. The mere thought made Iris's heart race. But because the Temple had no doors or windows, entry was strictly limited to only a chosen few.

Iris looked at Cytisus. He smirked at her from behind his monocle. Then he pulled a wand from his pocket and drew a magic circle on the temple wall. Once he was finished, the wall began to glow.

“Allow me to borrow your hand.”

At his request, Iris offered her hand to him. He took it, then pressed his other hand to the magic circle. Instantly, the world around Iris began to warp and twist.

“Gyaah!”

Iris let out an ungainly yelp, and her choker bell jangled. It felt like she was falling—like the magic circle was sucking her in! *OH GOD, I HATE THIS! MAKE IT STOOOOP!!!* She squeezed her eyes shut.

“You can open your eyes now, Lady Iris. It appears you have passed the test.”

“What test?”

“Those who are deemed unworthy are repelled by the magic barrier.”

Timidly, Iris opened her eyes...and found herself standing in a grassy field beneath a clear blue sky. There were little white tables, white chairs, white benches, and even a pleasant breeze, almost as if she'd dropped in on someone's garden party—except, of course, for the doors floating unassisted in midair.

This...is...AWESOME!!!

Iris shot an excited look at Cytisus, who chuckled.

“It’s easy to get lost here, so keep your wits about you,” he warned. “As long as we stick together, you’ll be fine. But if you should ever lose sight of me, just look for a blue door and you’ll find me again.”

“Look for a blue door. Got it.”

“The white doors will only open to certified mages. They lead to the common areas, like the library, or this courtyard here.”

“Understood.”

“Now then, allow me to escort you to the library.”

Together, they passed through a white door into a dimly lit hallway full of even *more* floating color-coded doors. It was eerily quiet; reflexively, Iris grabbed her bell to stop it from jingling. For some reason, she instinctively wanted to avoid making any noise.

All around her, she could see little winged humanoid creatures flitting to and fro. Their wings were iridescent and shiny, like those of a dragonfly. She recognized them as the fairies from *HanaKoro*, usually seen hovering around Camille.

"Isn't it peculiar?" they whispered to each other. "Isn't it strange?"

What are they talking about? Iris wondered. Frankly, she was tempted to ask them outright but wasn't sure if such a thing was permitted. But since Cytisus seemed to be ignoring them, she decided to follow his lead.

"What should we do?"

"It's not right."

"What's going on?"

"She doesn't have any mana!"

"Doesn't she?"

"It's strange..."

"So strange!"

As Iris and Cytisus walked, the fairies flew up to her face and peered at her curiously. Then a fairy with translucent purple wings tugged on Iris's ribbon, yanking out a single strand of her mint-green hair and causing her silver hairband to come undone. Naturally, her ringlets went everywhere.

"Ow!"

At this, Cytisus looked over his shoulder at Iris. He noticed the fairy holding her hairband and blinked in surprise. "What mischief is this, little fairy?"

In response, the fairies all started tugging on her hair.

"Well, it's just so strange. Why have you brought this one here?" one of them asked, louder than a whisper this time.

"What's strange about it?"

"Well, she's the daughter of a knight."

“Yeah! She’s the daughter of a knight!”

“And she has a sword.”

“Yeah! She has a sword!”

Cytisus shot Iris a look. “You have a sword?”

She nodded. Her father had instructed her to carry her dagger on her person any time she left the house, and today was no exception.

“And yet she passed through the barrier.”

“She passed through the barrier!”

“And she can *see* us.”

“And she can *hear* us.”

Iris blinked. “What, so most people can’t?”

“Most people can’t see us.”

“Most people can’t hear us.”

Holding his monocle, Cytisus scrutinized Iris carefully. “Lady Iris, the existence of these fairies is a well-kept secret. Most are kept within the Temple of Magic for protective purposes. But even when it comes to those living outside the Temple, humans cannot see them unless their mana is on par with the average royal mage.”

This made sense to Iris since she’d never glimpsed one until today. Furthermore, no one ever spoke of them; her only knowledge of the fairies came from *HanaKoro* itself.

“I hadn’t pegged you for the mana-bearing sort.”

“And you would be correct, sir. Loath as I am to admit it, very little mana runs in our family.”

“Then how...?” He paused to contemplate this. “Would it be all right with you if I examined your blade?”

At his request, Iris promptly handed him her dagger. The hilt and scabbard were all papered over.

“What is the meaning of this binding?”

“To make sure I can only use it when absolutely necessary. That way, I’ll remind myself that it’s just for self-defense.”

“Ah, that explains it.” He nodded in understanding. “That must be how you passed through the barrier—because your blade was perceived to be a form of defense rather than a weapon. You see, we of the Temple dislike conflict, and because of that, we generally cannot permit knights to enter. Granted, today I expressly invited you, but obviously, I wasn’t expecting you to come armed... This is quite the surprise.”

Yeah, well, I wasn’t expecting YOU to set the whole city on fire at the end of your route, so I guess we’re BOTH full of surprises! Or do you mean to tell me you “dislike conflict” so much that you had to kill everyone to make sure there wouldn’t be any??? Iris stared at him dubiously.

“It’s strange to me that you can see the fairies, but I suppose there are exceptions to every rule.”

If Iris had to guess, it was probably a matter of mindset. After all, she already knew there would be fairies here, thanks to her memories of *HanaKoro*. But she couldn’t tell him that, of course. Instead, she laughed vaguely.

“I...I can’t say I was expecting this, either... Oh ho ho ho...”

“Iris! Iris! Can we have this?” asked the fairy who was holding her silver hairband.

“Consider it yours. But what in the world will you use it for?”

“It’s cute, so we’ll make it into ribbons!”

“It’s pretty, so we’ll make it into ribbons!”

“Why, thank you. I’m glad you like it. Be sure to share it with the others.”

“Thank you, Iris!”

“You’re very kind, Iris!”

“Who wants a ribbon?”

“Me!” the other fairies chorused in unison, raising their hands.

“Well, Iris said to share!”

The purple-winged fairy gave the hairband a tug, and it started glowing. Then, with a POP, it magically split into a handful of perfectly even pieces. One by one, the fairies took a piece, then flew up and kissed Iris’s head as thanks. It was all very ticklish.

“Lady Iris?”

At Cytisus’s voice, she snapped back to attention.

“I think perhaps you should do some research on the fairies.”

“Can I? Isn’t it all a big secret?!”

“It is. But given the sheer number of fairies who have seen fit to give you their blessings, you may as well educate yourself.”

“Blessings, you say?” Iris cocked her head in puzzlement. Then the last fairy came up to plant a kiss on her head.

“Blessings!”

And with that, it flew away.

“Wait, what?! *That’s* a blessing?!”

“Blessings! Blessings!”

“I gave Iris my blessing!”

“I gave it, too!”

Cytisus shook his head and laughed. “Even I’ve never received that many.”

“Really?”

“It’s quite uncommon.”

“Goodness, I don’t know what to say... Well, thank you all very much! I’m flattered!” Iris said to the fairies, who beamed in response.

“Now then, let us be on our way to the library.”



IRIS looked up at the library’s vaulted ceiling and quietly wondered how in the world they could have possibly constructed such a large space within the Temple. *The power of magic, I suppose.* It was a mezzanine-style library, with shelves of books covering every inch of the balcony-style walkways, which were connected by stairs. Ladders were provided to enable access to the highest shelves. Meanwhile, dozens of fairies flitted from book to book.

“Oh, it’s so wonderful!” Iris swooned. Her bell tinkled with the motion, but she quickly reached up to silence it.

“What do you want to learn about, Iris?” one of the fairies asked.

Lately, Iris had been thinking a lot about Cytisus’s lover and Reseda’s older brother, both of whom were slated to die at some point over the next two years. Surely, it couldn’t be a coincidence, right? Sure, maybe these things were only ever a plot convenience for the story of *HanaKoro*, but nevertheless, the power of the Holy Maiden was waning. Something must have caused those deaths—like a war or natural disaster—but then, why did the city appear untouched during the game?

That left one last possibility: a plague. And the first highly fatal virus Iris could think of was the very same one that had left these

scars on her arm: soilpox. But their kingdom hadn't seen a soilpox epidemic in over a hundred years, so naturally, they had no established cure or preventative measures...

"I'd like to learn about the history of soilpox."

"Okay!"

The fairies flew off in all different directions. Meanwhile, Cytisus looked at Iris in surprise. "I thought you wanted to learn how to heal your scars."

"W-Well, obviously I'd like to look into that, too!" she blurted out. "I just thought...perhaps if I could learn what causes it, or discover a way to prevent it, I could spare the other high-born girls from suffering the same fate as me."

At this, Cytisus smirked. The rest of the world had given up on ever curing soilpox, choosing instead to simply quarantine the infected. This was how he had been separated from his mother at a young age—one day, he woke up and wasn't allowed to see her anymore. Then she passed away, and he wasn't even permitted to see her face during the funeral. Everyone told him it was just the way things were done.

No one in this kingdom had ever given any thought to preventing the deaths. They all shrugged it off as divine punishment from God...all except for Iris, that was. And although it was by no means an easy problem to solve, Cytisus encouraged her efforts. "That sounds like a fantastic idea," he told her. "Allow me to offer my assistance."

This delighted Iris very much.

In a blink, the fairies returned, each of them carrying a book by the spine. Just like that, Iris was presented with a veritable avalanche of books in all sorts of subjects: national history, legends,

homeopathic medicine, curses, and more, all stacked up for her on a nearby table.



"Th-That's quite enough now, thank you!" Iris told them. "I won't be able to read all this in a single day!"

"She can't?"

"What do we do?"

"But there's so many more!"

They all frowned at her.

"Not to worry—I'll just have to come back again. Can you hold onto them for me until then?"

"You'll come back?"

"You have to come back!"

"She said she's coming back!"

Satisfied, the fairies disappeared off to the bookshelves. Meanwhile, Cytisus looked at her stack of books and laughed.

From there, he taught Iris the rules of the library, as well as how to find any additional books she might be looking for. Then she checked out a few of the books—the ones that weren't restricted to the premises, anyway—and left the Temple.

Chapter 9: I'm NOT the Holy Maiden!

“**LADY** Iris, why don’t we pay a brief visit to Prince Reseda?” Cytisus suggested.

Iris frowned. “What for?”

“*What for?* Well, this excursion was originally at *his* request, was it not? I’ve agreed to report back to him periodically.”

“Oh. *Hmm.* I wasn’t expecting that,” she muttered to herself.

“What do you mean?”

“W-Well, if I’d known how much hassle it was going to create for His Highness, I wouldn’t have made such a presumptuous request in the first place, that’s all,” Iris stammered hastily. “And...and my attire is completely unbefitting of the occasion!”

“I’m sure he’ll be quite happy to see you,” Cytisus grinned.

Her expression stiffened. “*Happy?*”

“Besides, I must inform him of the fairies’ blessings.”

And so, Iris was left with no choice but to accompany him to a meeting with Reseda.

As it turned out, leaving the Temple was easy; there was a large white door that connected to the palace grounds just outside. From there, they headed back to the same greenhouse where they’d met up for tea a few days prior. Inside, Reseda tended to the flowers while the maid from last time set the table for them.

As light streamed in through the greenhouse glass, the flowers sparkled, but the prince sparkled even brighter, his glossy pink hair like dewy petals that framed his smooth ceramic skin. When he noticed Iris, he smiled so brightly that he threatened to make the

flowers bloom around him. To her, it felt like *HanaKoro*'s artist had conspired to make him as terrifyingly beautiful as possible, like the human incarnation of a rose...but frankly, he was so flawless, not even the King of Flowers could compete.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Lady Iris.”

He was so absurdly handsome, Iris couldn’t help but feel dizzy. As she staggered, her choker bell jingled, and she reached up to silence it.

“Thank you for going to all this trouble for my sake,” Iris told him sincerely. After all, her visit to the Temple of Magic had been so much fun.

“I’m glad you liked it. Please, have a seat.”

He escorted her to the little white table. Flummoxed, she sat down as requested. Then the maid poured them some tea. Whatever it was, it smelled heavenly.

Unlike last time, the conversation proceeded smoothly—possibly because Cytisus was with her or because they actually had something to talk about. When the topic of the fairies’ blessings came up, Reseda’s eyes widened.

“She received the fairies’ blessings?”

Cytisus nodded quietly.

“And she can see them?”

“She can.”

“But I haven’t seen any!” Reseda frowned bitterly. “How is this possible?”

“It is very, very rare, though with a few notable exceptions, like the Holy Maiden.”

They looked at Iris. Even the maid looked at her. Iris recoiled in her chair. *Surely you must be joking!*

"So...you're saying Iris could be the future Holy Maiden?" Reseda asked, confused.

"No, I'm afraid not! That's simply not possible! My family lineage is not endowed with mana of any sort!" Iris declared sharply. As she shook her head, her ringlets bounced from left to right—and a tiny voice said "I'm dizzy," though Iris didn't notice.

"At present, I have yet to sense any mana from Lady Iris. That said, the possibility still exists. We won't know until she undergoes the formal evaluation at sixteen."

Right as Cytisus finished speaking, one of Iris's curls sprang up of its own accord. Startled, she looked at it—and realized one of the fairies from earlier had concealed itself inside. The same mischievous fairy who had yanked on her hairband, in fact. It poked its head out from the tip of the ringlet and grinned at Iris.

"You don't have any mana, Iris, but you have a holy scent!" it whispered.

"A *holy* scent?" Iris repeated, baffled. At this, Reseda and Cytisus looked at her dubiously.

"What's this about a holy scent?" Cytisus asked, his eyes glinting from behind his monocle.

"Well...it appears one of the fairies smuggled itself out of the Temple..."

Timidly, Iris held up her ringlet for him to see. He leaned in closely, peering at her hair. Meanwhile, Reseda scowled, since he wasn't able to see the fairy for himself.

As he registered the fairy in her hair, Cytisus let out an exasperated sigh. The fairy flew out of Iris's ringlet and trailed along

her left arm, rustling her sleeve. “It’s the scent of the Holy Maiden. It’s coming from here!” it explained.

“Lady Iris, may I examine your left arm?”

“You may.”

With Iris’s consent, Cytisus took her arm, rolled up her sleeve, and scrutinized her scars. Then he leaned in and took a big whiff of her skin.

“Wha?!”

It was so uncouth, Iris couldn’t help but feel alarmed. Scars or no scars, she didn’t want anyone ogling her body, much less *sniffing* it! Clearly, he saw her as nothing more than a child. Not that she expected anything different, of course, but the shame of it still made her blush beet-red.

“Cytisus, that’s crossing a line, and you know it,” Reseda reprimanded him. This seemed to bring Cytisus back to his senses.

“I apologize, Lady Iris. That said, I cannot detect anything beyond a pleasant fragrance.”

Iris’s face was practically turning purple by this point. Not only did he smell her, but he saw fit to comment upon what he smelled! *Where is your tact?! Just do your job!!! I may be ten years younger than you, but I’m still a delicate young woman!*

Cytisus shot a confused look at the fairy, who pouted. “I’m not lying!” it insisted.

Iris thought for a moment, then suggested, “Perhaps it’s referring to the topical oil I’ve been using.” Camille made it herself, after all. In *HanaKoro*, it was said to be imbued with the power of the Holy Maiden.

“What sort of oil?”

"Camellia seed oil. Rumors say it's supposed to help reduce scars, so I've been applying it to my arm. Perhaps the person who makes it has some special power."

This was the perfect opportunity to alert them about Camille. By suggesting she might be a potential Holy Maiden, Cytisus would surely try to dig up information about her. Then he'd find out that she was his sister, thereby crushing any possibility of a romance between them. And if Iris could get Reseda to meet Camille this early, then their engagement would surely never come to pass. The two of them could go off and get married, and Iris would get to keep her voice! *Please, I'm begging you!*

Cytisus's monocle glinted in the light. "Could you tell me more?"

"There's a store that sells this oil downtown. They have a girl working there who's about my age, and I'm told she helps with the refinement process. Strangely enough, it's the one product they sell that seems to be wildly effective."

He put a hand to his chin in contemplation. "But...if she's a commoner, then she can't possibly be a Holy Maiden candidate."

Thus far, only those of noble descent had ever been selected as a Holy Maiden. Following a rigorous screening process, a limited number of candidates were invited to enroll at the Academy, where they were further evaluated. She who scored highest would then receive the title.

Of course, in reality, Camille wasn't a commoner at all. Like Cytisus, she was an heir to the House of Sade, which meant she was surely gifted with a bountiful mana supply. Thus, she was all but guaranteed to be nominated as a Holy Maiden candidate.

It all comes down to this! This is the moment that decides my fate!

"I spoke to her once, actually. She's a pretty girl with blue hair. Actually, come to think of it, something about her reminded me of you, Lord Cytisus... I don't suppose you have any distant relatives living in the city, do you? I was told she doesn't know who her father is."

Iris knew it might offend him, but she went ahead and said it regardless. She couldn't take any chances. *Go ahead and hate me if you must, but as the villainess, I'm not letting you set my city on fire!!!*

Unsurprisingly, Cytisus frowned at her.

"Could you tell me the name of this establishment? I would like to see it for myself."

"Gladly!"

He believed me! Oh, thank goodness!

Chapter 10: Prince Reseda Makes His Move

“SO, just how long are you two going to hold hands?” Reseda growled.

Brought back to her senses, Iris hastily pulled away from Cytisus. Her collar bell jingled; she reached up to silence it.

“Also, is there something wrong with your bell? You keep touching it,” Reseda continued, his eerily perfect smile unwavering.

“I...I apologize, Your Highness,” she stammered, trying to think straight. “I got into the habit of doing this while I was at the Temple of Magic. It’s a terribly grating sound, wouldn’t you say?”

“Is it? Personally, I like it. I associate it with you.”

Contrary to last time, Reseda was much more forward this time around, and frankly, it was unnerving. Iris averted her gaze. “I see. Well, I don’t much care for it.”

“Oh. Then why do you wear it?”

“Because my father wants me to. No other reason.”

At this, Reseda laughed quietly, his eyes sparkling. “Well, in that case—”

Out of nowhere, he reached for her throat. In the blink of an eye, Iris slapped his hand away, grabbed him by the wrist, and twisted his arm around, all purely on autopilot.

“Aagh! Uh...Lady Iris? Could you let go of me?!” Reseda asked, grimacing.

Oh god, I just twisted the Prince’s arm on REFLEX! Gasping, Iris quickly let go. But it was entirely *his* fault for reaching for her jugular!

Still, he was a prince... If she aired her complaints, her whole family would pay the price!

"I...I sincerely apologize!"

"No, I shouldn't have startled you like that. I see the House of Chevalier trained their daughter just as well as their son! Your reflexes are first-rate," he sighed, mildly embarrassed. He must have realized that Iris was stronger than he was, and it wounded his royal ego. *Or his male ego, I suppose.*

But he wasn't the only one feeling embarrassed at the moment. Iris hung her head. "Please forgive me."

"Yes, of course, but allow me to explain myself in return. Seeing as you don't care for your bell, I thought I'd take it myself."

"But why?"

"Well, if you tell Lord Chevalier that I don't like your bell, he won't force you to wear one anymore, right?" He grinned impishly—a genuine boyish reaction, unlike his usual forced smiles.

"I...I suppose you're right..."

"See? So, I'll remove your bell. Would that be all right with you?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly ask you to—"

"I *want* to do it. After all, it'll be even more effective if you tell him I personally removed it, right?"

His smile informed Iris that he wasn't going to take no for an answer. *Well, he has a point, I suppose.* Reluctantly, she nodded her assent. He walked around behind her. Meanwhile, the fairy stared at him with a scowl.

Reseda pushed Iris's hair away from her neck, exposing the black velvet against her porcelain skin. The beauty of it left him speechless, and his heart raced like never before. Every breath he took felt too

heavy, so he held it instead. As he took the ends of the ribbon in each of his hands, his fingers faintly brushed against her skin, and she squirmed slightly. For some reason, Reseda found this pleased him.

To him, the ribbon's tight knot seemed to represent Lord Chevalier's hold over his daughter. Part of Reseda resented it, but at the same time, part of him envied it, too. He pulled the knot undone, and just like that, the ribbon collar fell right off.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I finally feel free."

Iris's gratitude delighted him. In some small way, he felt as though he'd rescued his princess from a tower. As he held the ribbon in his hand, he decided to ask something he couldn't possibly bear to ask while looking her in the eye: "Can I call you Iris?"

His sudden question made her eyes widen. In the game, Reseda only ever referred to Iris as "Lady Iris." The same was true for all the other noble girls. The only person he ever addressed by first name only was Camille.

Wh-What's going on? Why does he want to call me by name? Iris couldn't begin to imagine what sort of expression was on his face as he stood behind her. But she couldn't exactly say no, of course, so she nodded reluctantly.

"Great. You can call me Reseda."

"Oh, no, my lord. I couldn't possibly address you as my equal."

"Call me Reseda," he insisted more firmly, and Iris could feel the pressure from behind her.

What kind of trap is this? Is he trying to trick me into being rude so he can punish me?! Surely that must be it! Panicked, Iris shot Cytisus an imploring look.

"Your Highness, Lady Iris may need some time before she can acquiesce to that request," Cytisus explained with a smile. "She is a

proper high-born girl, so it's only natural that she dreads the thought of offending you. What need is there to rush? You have all the time in the world."

Reluctantly, Reseda conceded. "Very well. But Iris, I hope you'll warm up to the idea before long."

Iris was utterly at a loss. *What's going on? Why did he change his tune out of nowhere? Somebody help me!* He seemed like a completely different person compared to the Reseda she spoke to last time. Reflexively, she turned back to look at him...but that would soon prove to be her undoing. *Oh god, his handsome face is so close to mine!!!*

Hastily, Iris turned back to the table and stared down at her drink. She could feel herself blushing all the way down to her neck.

"Er...Your Highness..."

"Reseda."

"...Prince Reseda... Do you have a twin?"

"You and Nigel are the only twins I know of."

He laughed amiably. This only made her even *more* confused.

"Let me guess: you've noticed that I'm nothing like how I was last time. Well, that was merely my outward façade. But now that you've gone and *twisted* my arm, I can tell I don't need to put on airs with you."

Oh god, he's still mad about that?! And now he's making fun of me?! Embarrassed, Iris stared at her lap.

But on the other hand, it felt like a weight had been lifted from her neck.



WHEN Iris returned home, sure enough, her parents went nuts about her missing choker. But when she told them Prince Reseda had wanted to keep it, they were suddenly overjoyed.

“Iris, my girl, I knew you could do it!”

“We should celebrate!”

One minute you’re furious at me, and now this? Well, knowing when to concede is a knightly trait to have, I suppose, Iris thought wearily.

Meanwhile, Nigel looked at her with sympathy in his eyes. “You really let him take it from you?”

Evidently, he was operating under the assumption that she’d liked her choker.

“Don’t tell Father, but...I always hated wearing that thing,” Iris whispered back. “I was more than happy to let His Highness take it off me.”

“Really?” He looked sincerely surprised to hear it.

“Yes, really. It was so tight and constricting, it felt like I was wearing a pet collar—like I was Father’s property. But now I’m free!” Iris explained with a bright smile.

Her brother, however, looked like he was on the verge of tears.

“What’s wrong, Nigel?”

“I’m so sorry, Iris. I didn’t realize you felt that way, and...when Father first gave it to you, I admit, I was jealous that *you* got a special symbol, and *I* didn’t.”

This time, it was her turn to be surprised. But frankly, Iris should have known Nigel would have already developed possessive desires by now. She played his route, after all.

Wait, but...just now, he made it sound like he wants someone else to tie HIM down. Did he want to wear a choker or something? I mean, even in his ending, he put a chain on himself...

“Er, Nigel... Should I ask Prince Reseda to give you my choker instead?”

“No, that’s not it. So, did he give you a replacement necklace or something?”

“Of course not! I only just got rid of this one—the last thing I need is another!” Iris declared flatly.

Nigel smiled stiffly. “I guess you really like your freedom.”

“Any girl would! Don’t you go putting chains on your future girlfriend, you hear me?” It was the perfect opportunity to warn him about such things, so she went for it.

“But Mother seems to like it...”

“...Well, all right, I suppose there are a few girls who do. But just remember—as long as your hearts are connected, you don’t *need* any physical ties.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes, I’m positive! If you need a literal chain to feel connected to her, then it’ll make you look *painfully* insecure. It’s simply outdated.”

“Oh, I see. Yeah, maybe it *is* a little old-fashioned,” Nigel mused to himself.

Iris was relieved to hear it. *I mean, branding tattoos? Chains? Yikes! Please just have a normal relationship, dear brother!* Perhaps she would have to teach him some common sense about romance from now on.

“Still, I’m jealous you got to visit the Temple of Magic.”

“As well you should be! But I’m afraid you won’t be able to go in. Supposedly the barrier rejects all knights.”

“Then how did *you* get in?”

“I’m not a knight, silly! I’m a damsel!”

“Oh, right. For some reason, I keep forgetting that part...”

Chapter 11: Sauge, the Fairy Leader

AFTER that, Iris started to visit the Temple of Magic on a regular basis to learn more about soilpox. And fairies, too. After all, she was still finding fairies hiding in her ringlets. Apparently, they had used her hairband to create a portal in her hair.

As a result, Iris was permitted to enter the Temple's common areas without Cytisus's direct supervision. After all, the fairies were guardians of the Temple in their own right.

Through her research, Iris learned that fairy blessings were quite rare, and the average mage would consider themselves lucky to receive the blessing of just one. Only veteran mages, or the Holy Maiden herself, ever received multiple blessings. But because Iris lacked any mana whatsoever, she was a glaring exception to that rule. Not only that, but the "sinful" soilpox scars on her arm marked her as a heathen. Someone like Iris was never meant to receive any blessings...but nevertheless, she had. Thus, the other mages decided to help her with her fairy research.



PARTWAY through her studies, the mage assisting Iris was suddenly called away on other business, so Iris decided to ask the fairies something she had wondered for a while.

"Tell me, has there ever been a drug that prevented the transmission of soilpox?"

"*Prevented?* Not cured?"

The more she looked into the history of soilpox, the more she started to notice the similarities between the epidemic of a hundred years ago and the modern day.

“It seems outbreaks are most common during the summer after a particularly warm winter. And every warm winter thus far has been heralded by an especially cool summer. This year’s summer hasn’t been very warm at all... That leads me to believe that an outbreak might occur *next* summer.”

“You’re a genius, Iris!”

“You’ve studied a whole bunch!”

While Iris appreciated their praise, there was little point in predicting an upcoming epidemic if she couldn’t do anything to stop it. If only there was a vaccine, like in her past life... After all, this world’s “soilpox” strongly resembled Earth’s “smallpox.” And, since it was supposedly impossible to contract soilpox twice, surely the human body was capable of building an immunity to the virus. *With a vaccine, we could prevent transmission altogether!*

“Once you catch soilpox, you can’t catch it again, right? So, I’m wondering if there’s a way to safely ‘catch’ the disease. Enough so it’s inside your body, but not enough to get sick.”

“How?”

“Hurting your body on purpose?”

“That’s scary!”

The fairies all looked horrified. Iris didn’t blame them, though. In her past life, the smallpox vaccine was injected through the skin into the bloodstream; this was not something anyone would be excited to try, which would make treatment difficult. And if the vaccine was administered in less-than-sanitary conditions, the patients would be at risk of catching something else entirely. Here in Floraison, it just wasn’t realistic.

“Oh, I know. What if we grind soilpox scabs into powder to be insufflated through the nose?”

Iris remembered reading about a similar technique performed in the old days before the smallpox vaccine back in her past life. She didn't know how effective it was, but it was certainly worth a try.

"Found it! Look here!"

A fairy flew over, carrying a book titled *The Forbidden Arts*.

Where in the world did you get this? It's wrapped up in locks and chains!

"Why did you search the forbidden arts, of all things?"

"Because diseases are poison!" the purple-winged fairy cheerfully informed her.

"Poison...?"

"Are you a witch, Iris? Do you want to kill people?" another fairy asked. Its innocent smile gave Iris pause, and her face stiffened.

"No, I don't want to kill people! The scabs may be poisonous, but if we can nullify the toxins while keeping the antigens intact, we can make a vaccine!"

"What's a vaccine?"

"What're antigens?"

The fairies all looked at her blankly. No surprise there, since this world knew nothing of vaccines.

"Basically, I want to erase all the bad parts of the virus, then put it inside the body so the virus can't strike a second time. That's what a vaccine is!"

"I don't get it!"

They all burst out laughing, and Iris heaved a sigh. They at least seemed to understand that the scabs were unsafe; she just needed to find a way to purify them to create her vaccine. But did such a method exist in this world?

"An interesting idea," said an unfamiliar voice.

Startled, Iris whirled around to find a tall woman standing behind her. Her long white hair was all one length, with no layers or bangs, and she wore what looked to be a cleric's white ankle-length alb. Around her neck hung a long, thin, dark-purple stole with sage plants embroidered in gold thread at the ends. Six large translucent purple wings sprouted from her back, and she had purple eyes to match. Her facial features and tone offered some gender ambiguity, but her build and the pitch of her voice made it clear she was a woman.

Wait... She's a fairy, too?!

As Iris stared in shock, the white-haired woman looked back at her firmly.

"You intend to turn poison into medicine? That won't be easy."

"Why is that?"

"Who in the world would risk their life to gather scabs from the infected? It is a forbidden art only attempted by those truly desperate to kill."

"I'll gather them," Iris declared, holding up her left arm.

At first, the woman looked taken aback; then she scrutinized Iris for a long moment.

"I'm a survivor of the virus, which means I can't contract it again. Therefore, it's safe for me to go and gather them. My problem is, I don't know how to sanitize them while keeping the antigens intact."

"That part is simple—you need only use magic."

Iris frowned. "I wish I could, but I don't have mana."

"In that case, I'll lend you mine. I am Fairy Leader Sauge. Tell me your name, girl," she commanded.

Hastily, Iris curtsied. "I am Iris du Chevalier."

“A word of warning, little knight: courage and recklessness are two very different things. Are you aware of the risk involved?”

“Oh, there’s no risk,” Iris laughed. In a sense, soilpox’s biggest mistake was failing to kill her the first time. “Problem is, I don’t know anyone who’s currently infected. After all, anyone who contracts the disease is quarantined in secret.”

The spread had gone down lately, and Iris hadn’t heard any gossip among the nobles. Anytime someone caught the virus, they generally did everything in their power to conceal it.

In Iris’s case, she was quarantined in the basement of the house. It was furnished with all the necessities, of course, but her family wouldn’t even come to check on her. Instead, they sent maids to deliver her meals, all from a safe distance. Iris could still remember how miserable and lonely she’d felt as she endured her symptoms in solitude... Then, after two weeks, her scabs all fell off, and she was allowed back upstairs.

And if that was what she’d had to endure as an aristocrat, Iris could scarcely imagine what it was like for commoners. Whenever one of *them* was diagnosed with soilpox, they were exiled from the town and sent to live in a cavern with the other infected! It was completely unsafe. But everyone else refused to go anywhere near that cavern, so they couldn’t seek help from anyone, not even their families. Everyone rejected them.

Iris let out a sigh. Truth be told, she was feeling the pressure to take action, fast. For the time being, Prince Bleuet and Cytisus’s beloved were still alive—but by the start of *HanaKoro*, when Camille first arrived at the Academy, they had already long since died. And since the Holy Maiden’s power had plummeted right at the start of the game, perhaps something had happened that drained a great deal of holy magic. Some sort of crisis must have befallen the royal capital.

Normally, each Holy Maiden served for a period of ten years, but at the start of *HanaKoro*, there were still five years left in the current Maiden's term. Nevertheless, her power had run out, forcing the government to find a replacement as fast as possible. Right now, Iris was thirteen; she wouldn't attend the Academy until age fifteen. At some point during the next two years, something big was going to strike the city. And if that something was a soilpox epidemic...

Rgh, I need to prevent it at all costs! But I just don't have enough time!

Meanwhile, Sauge gazed at her probingly.

"Allow me to assist you, little Iris. I shall pay you a visit later tonight, and together, we shall acquire the soilpox scabs. Think long and hard about how you want to use them, for that will grant you power."

And with that, she vanished into thin air.



AND so, as prompted by Sauge, Iris contemplated how to make use of the scabs.

For someone who didn't understand the properties of a virus, gathering soilpox scabs was a formidable task. After all, prior to sanitization, the scabs contained germs. But with a vaccine, she could prevent infection or even lessen the intensity of the disease if she managed to administer it at an early stage.

But even with the knowledge that it was sanitized, no one would want to ingest the scabs of a sick person. Besides, the transmission of soilpox was seemingly affected by the weather; people weren't constantly sick with the disease at all times of the year. But no infected meant no scabs...and yet, at the same time, she couldn't possibly infect someone on purpose *just* to acquire their scabs for a vaccine!

The last smallpox epidemic took place a hundred years ago. Even if she established a cure, it could easily be lost to time after the next hundred years passed. So, first things first, Iris needed to find a way to sanitize the scabs without damaging the antigens. She also needed to think of a way to preserve the vaccine so it would still be around in the future. And how would she cultivate it? How would she test its efficacy? She couldn't use herself as a test subject since she was already immune. How could she convince people to get vaccinated?

In her past life, it took a tremendous amount of time, effort, and hard work to create vaccines, and Iris knew just how hard it was to get society to adopt them. After all, it took *two hundred years* after the advent of the smallpox vaccine for the virus to finally be eradicated. Even in a world with televisions and a high literacy rate, it simply wasn't easy to get people to sign up for a new vaccine.

Nevertheless, Iris needed to do absolutely everything she could within the short time she had. And so, wracking her brain endlessly, she waited for night to fall.

Chapter 12: The Dark Forest

IRIS finished changing into her horse-riding gear right as the sun had fully set beneath the horizon—these clothes covered as much of her skin as possible. Then she added gloves, plus a scarf in place of a face mask. To collect the scabs, she gathered some equipment: a silver knife and spoon, a jar for safekeeping, plus a handful of other things she thought she might need, all packed carefully into her sling bag.

“Aren’t you overdressed?” asked a playful voice.

Iris turned in the direction of the door and found Sauge standing inside her bedroom, glowing faintly. *How did she get in here?! I didn’t even sense her presence, and I’m generally pretty good at that!*

“I thought you weren’t worried about catching soilpox.”

Iris laughed. “And I’m not! But I could still catch any number of other diseases, Lady Sauge. And since I don’t know what your plans are for me, I figured I may as well prepare myself as best I can.”

“A good mindset to have,” she chuckled.

Sauge could tell that she was committed to this undertaking, and yet Iris showed no signs of having a messiah complex. This was something Sauge found interesting about her.

“Before we begin, I must warn you that we fairies are invisible to the average human. Anyone you encounter will think you are alone. Understood?”

“Yes, my lady. But not to worry—I have a dagger, and I know how to use it.” Iris clenched her fist in determination.

“Ah, yes. Daughter of a knight. Well then, allow me to bestow upon you my blessing.”

“Huh?”

Iris stared in surprise as Sauge planted a kiss on her forehead. Then, slowly, panic set in. *Wha?! Another fairy blessing?! W-Well...it was one thing when it was just the little ones, but...when a human-sized fairy does it...I mean, I know we're both girls, but still...!* My eyes widened and my face burned.

Meanwhile, Sauge grinned mischievously. "So long as you are shrouded in light, nothing will harm you, not even germs. Now then, let us be on our way."

"Whoa..."

Iris looked down and found that her body was engulfed in a misty purple glow. The next moment, Sauge grabbed her hand. Instantly, Iris felt weightless. Sauge slid one arm around Iris's waist and scooped her up like a toddler. Startled, Iris clung to her neck.

"Gyah! What's happening?!"

"Hahaha! It would appear you're still capable of feeling fear after all."

"Of course I am!"

"How delightful."

As Sauge laughed, the world warped around them.

"Nngghh...!" I'll never get used to this! Ugh, I feel sick!

Apparently, Iris's knightly lineage was highly incompatible with any form of magic. While this meant she was naturally resistant to most spells, she was also viscerally repulsed by any physical contact with them. Clinging tightly to Sauge, Iris squeezed her eyes shut and waited until...

"It's over now."

At this, Iris timidly opened her eyes. The area around her was pitch-black—far too dark to be illuminated by a faint purple glow. This was the oppressive darkness of a summer night. Somewhere out

there, she could detect a foul odor—the smell of death, mingled with the smell of beasts—and she could hear muffled groans, too. There were people here, though not many.

“Where are we?”

“At the Cavern of Death in the Dark Forest, north of the royal capital.”

“...Looks like we’ll need a light source.”

“Fairies!” Sauge called.

In the next instant, a handful of fairies appeared all around Iris, glowing like fireflies. But of course, other people could only see the light. With the fairies’ soft glow as her light source, Iris squinted in the darkness. Faintly, she could make out a few figures, huddled under dirty, tattered blankets.

“Townspeople who contract the plague are abandoned here. For now, there are only a small number of infected living here.”

Iris swallowed hard. She could see what appeared to be a mother and child, both covered in soipox blisters, groaning in pain. The mother’s blisters were still small, scant, and white, suggesting she was in the early stages of infection; the child had already reached the scabbing stage but appeared limp and lethargic. Judging by their chapped lips, they were severely dehydrated.

How could any of these people possibly recover from their illness out here in the middle of nowhere? Iris kneeled beside them, pulled out her canteen, and poured some water into the lid.

“Here, drink this.”

The mother looked at Iris with trepidation as she offered her the cup. “Please don’t! Kill me if you must, but please, spare my child!” The desperation in her voice pained Iris.

"It's just water with a bit of salt. It's safe to drink," Iris explained. Then she took a sip to prove it to her. "I know you must be parched."

Iris offered her the cup again. Tears fell from the mother's eyes. Tentatively, she took a sip. Then, once she had confirmed that it was safe, she pressed the cup to her child's lips.

"Thank you," the woman whispered.

"Oh, it's no trouble. In exchange, I'd like to take a sample of your child's soilpox scabs. Would that be all right?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "This part here?" She offered Iris her child's hand, which was covered in grisly scabs. Iris could tell the poor thing must've been clawing at them, desperate to relieve the itchiness. It reminded her of her own experience with soilpox.

Iris pulled her gloves off. If Souge was to be believed, she would be safe from germs. Using her sterilized knife, she carefully cut along the edges of each scab, making sure not to nick the skin. Then she used the spoon to scoop them up and transfer them to her collection jar. After she had collected all of them, she rubbed camellia seed oil into the skin to keep it moisturized.

"That feels good," the child sighed happily.

"Is that some sort of special medicine?" the mother asked.

"It's sold at a local cosmetics store under the name 'Camille's Camellia.' It's not very expensive."

"Oh, Camille's oil! Yes, I've heard of it."

She smiled, relieved...and Iris summoned her courage.

"Could I ask you to ingest one of these scabs?"

"What?"

"You're still in the early stages, correct? It's possible we could still save you."

“With a *scab*?”

“I’ll use magic to sanitize it into what’s called a *vaccine*. I haven’t tested it before, so I can’t promise anything, but it’ll prevent the disease from worsening if all goes well. You would be my first trial patient. Of course, you’re well within your rights to decline—I understand the thought is frightening and nauseating. But if you’d be willing, it would mean a lot.” Iris bowed her head.

“Nauseating? I’m a mother. Trust me, I’ve seen worse,” the woman laughed. “The only thing that nauseates me is the thought of what might happen to my child if I die.”

Iris could feel the pain in her eyes as though it were her own. *All the more reason for you to test my vaccine!*

“Right now, my chances of surviving are already low, so I’ll do whatever you ask.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” Iris clasped her hand. “I promise, I’ll do everything I can to make this vaccine a success!”

Silently, Iris asked Sauge to use her magic to transform the scabs into a sanitized vaccine. *Just lift the jar and make your wish*, came the reply. *Think hard about the outcome you desire, and I’ll lend you the power to make it happen.*

“Please! Transform into a sanitized vaccine!”

As Iris held the jar aloft, Sauge put her hands around Iris’s, and the jar began to glow. Then the scabs inside turned into a sparkly silver powder. To anyone who witnessed this, it would look as though Iris had cast the magic herself.



Your wish has been granted.

“Are you the Holy Maiden?” the child asked, too quietly for Iris to hear.

Iris pulled a wheat stem from her sling bag and put it into the powder for use as a straw. Then she gestured for the mother to ingest it nasally; she took a big whiff without batting a lash.

“How are you feeling now?” Iris inquired nervously.

“Not much different. Are you sure it’s working?”

“Well, it takes a while to set in. I’ll come back to check on you.”

“You’ll come back?”

“Hmm? Why, yes, of course.” *Can’t have a medical procedure without a follow-up, after all.* “If you need anything else, I can bring it for you. And I’ll leave the camellia seed oil here, so feel free to use as much as you need.”

At this, the woman let out a sob.

Alarmed, Iris looked up...and realized they were being watched.

Chapter 13: The Cavern of Death

FIGURES shifted in the shadows—men and women, young and old, all covered in blisters. Iris was intimidated at first, but...the more scabs she could get, the better.

“I’m collecting soilpox scabs. Would any of you be willing to cooperate?” Iris called into the darkness.

“What for?” a gruff voice called back.

“To make a preventative treatment called a vaccine,” Iris explained.

Murmurs rose up from the shadows—some dubious, others angry.

“*Preventative?* It’s a little too late now, don’t you think? If you’re going to make medicine, make a *cure!*”

“How much more are you going to take from us? We’ve already lost our jobs, our families...and now, when we’re on the cusp of losing our lives, you want our damn *scabs?*”

“Yes, you’re right. I wasn’t fast enough to save you,” Iris snapped. “But if I can make a vaccine, I can save your families! And if all goes well, I might even be able to save people still in the early stages!”

Iris held up her scarred left arm. The glowing fairies all danced around it.

“Your arm...!”

“I’m a soilpox survivor. Just like every one of you.”

Silence fell. Then a man stepped forward—a brutish-looking man with a scar on his face. Evidently, sheer brawn wasn't enough to fight off a virus.

“If you want my scabs, you can have ‘em.”

“Thank you very much.”

Without missing a beat, Iris took his arm, which was covered not only in blisters but in cuts, too. She gently guided her sterilized blade along the edges of his scabs to scrape them off. Once she'd collected all of them, she applied some camellia seed oil as a token of her gratitude, just as she'd done for the young child.

“Ahhh. That feels a lot better,” the man sighed.

This was what prompted the other soilpox patients to step forward. Iris collected scabs from those in the late stages, then asked those still in the early stages to ingest the powder. She remembered the history books from her past life claiming this was an effective technique for the smallpox vaccine, so if it worked for these people, she could be sure that her vaccine was medically sound.

After she'd collected all the scabs she possibly could, Iris handed out the water and fruit she'd brought with her as a form of payment.

“If only these people had access to clean water at the very least,” she murmured.

“They do,” Sauge replied offhandedly.

“What?”

“Come with me.”

She led Iris out of the cavern to a rock wall a few steps away. There, water trickled out from a crack in the wall.

“What are they supposed to do, lick it from the rock? They need a solid stream to drink from.”

"Then what you require is some sort of long, firm pipe."

Iris paused to think for a moment.

"Oh, I know! What if we use my sheath?" Iris took out her dagger and handed it to Sauge. Her family's iris emblem gleamed gold in the light.

"Are you sure? You'll never get it back, you know," Sauge warned her with a half-smirk.

"Oh, that's all right. I never needed this thing in the first place," Iris replied without batting an eye.

"You're a fascinating girl, you know that? Very well, then. Make your wish, just as you did the last time."

As Sauge held Iris's dagger, Iris placed her hand upon it and prayed: *Please, turn into a spout for a big stream of water!*

With a smile, Sauge broke the paper seal and pulled the dagger out of its sheath. Then she plunged the sheath into the crack in the rock, where it began to glow gold. She finished the job by using the dagger to slice a hole in the other end of the sheath. Lo and behold, water streamed out from it.

"Oh, my!"

Can all Fairy Leaders just...DO that? They're so overpowered! Why weren't they in the game?!

As Iris stared in astonishment, Sauge smirked smugly. "Now then, what shall we do about the blade?"

"I'll wrap it up in a cloth for now."

"In that case, use this." She took off her long purple stole—the one with the sage plants embroidered on it—and handed it to Iris.

"Wait, but...won't that be invisible to the human eye?"

If so, then Iris didn't see much point in using it to conceal her dagger. Nevertheless, she reached out to take the stole—and the moment her fingers touched it, it suddenly gained a palpable weight of its own. Iris flinched in surprise.

"Did it just materialize?!"

Sauge laughed. "Fairies are not *ghosts*, you know. I have a corporeal form."

"I get that, but..."

I swear, I'll never get used to this fantasy world, Iris thought as she set about wrapping up the dagger. The stole was so long that by the time she was done, the blade was nigh-indistinguishable. The sight made Sauge laugh even harder.

"It seems this fabric is a bit too long," Iris remarked.

"Indeed. Let's trim it down," Sauge declared. And with that, she promptly cut the stole in half. As the excess fluttered down to the ground, Iris hastily caught it midair and put it back around Sauge's neck. She chuckled.

"You're simply full of giggles tonight, aren't you, Lady Sauge?" Iris grumbled.

"Go and tell them about the water. The sun will soon rise."

And so, Iris dashed back to the cavern to let the soilpox victims know about the water spout. Meanwhile, the unusually chilly summer sky began to lighten...



AFTER that night, Iris periodically asked Sauge to take her back to the cavern in the Dark Forest. Under the cover of darkness, she would check up on her would-be patients, collect any newly formed scabs, and deliver any necessities.

The patients who'd ingested the powder appeared to be on the path to recovery, which meant her vaccine was a success. In fact, the mother and daughter had recovered enough that they were able to go back to town! Additionally, Camille's Camellia seemed to help prevent the formation of scars.

As more and more of the infected managed to recover, they decided to "pay it forward" by bringing food and camellia seed oil back to the cavern for the sick. This was a concerted effort led by none other than the man with the scar on his face. With his help, the conditions in the cavern improved dramatically.

In truth, he was inspired after seeing Iris risk her life to visit them over and over again, but this was one little fact she would never learn.

Chapter 14: The Prince's Summons

AFTER another long day of studying at the Temple of Magic, Iris was summoned to meet with Prince Reseda...but the whole way there, she found herself distracted with other thoughts. There was just so much she needed to consider—like the magic Sauge used to make the vaccine. It would be ideal if Iris could make it herself, but this was impossible since she couldn't use magic. If she had to guess, the only people who could manage it were those with mana on par with a Fairy Leader, like a veteran mage or the Holy Maiden. But they didn't have soilpox immunity, so she couldn't possibly subject them to the virus unprotected.

Iris asked Sauge if she could keep making the vaccine without her, but she said no. According to her, she was only able to help Iris make it the first time because Iris had wished for it; the only reason her powers turned the scabs into a vaccine was that Iris had quite literally asked for that very thing. And supposedly, it wasn't safe for fairies to make medicine of their own volition, since its effect would vanish once the human who originally wished for it passed away. Iris couldn't really argue with that.

Long story short, Iris would have to establish her own means of production.

"I know the vaccine works. I just need to figure out how to bring it into the mainstream," Iris muttered.

"Vackseen?"

The sudden voice brought her back to her senses, and Iris looked around. Reseda was there, along with Nigel, who had come to the palace for sword training. Hastily, she curtsied. "I sincerely apologize!"

"Relax. No need for formalities between friends," Reseda laughed. "Anyway, what's a 'vackseen'?"

"Oh, er, no... What I said was..."

Iris wracked her brain for something she could substitute. *What about that fancy new cabbage that got imported recently? Close enough, right?!*

"*Bak chee!*"

"...What about it?"

"W-Well, I've never tried it before! I'm eagerly looking forward to cooking with it!"

"What?"

The boys looked at her dubiously. She averted her eyes. "Wh- What about you, Your Highness?"

"*Reseda.*"

"What are you doing here, *Prince Reseda?*"

"You were running late, so I got worried and came to meet you."

The boys took their positions on either side of Iris; Nigel took her arm in his and grinned. "Let's be off, Iris!"

As she hesitated, her brother happily dragged her along. *What's going on? Surely I haven't done anything to make them angry, have I?* Meanwhile, Reseda walked beside her in silence.



WHEN they arrived at the courtyard, they were treated to tea amid the blooming white lilacs. Iris sat down, and once again, the boys sat on either side of her. Nigel was still clutching the back of her blouse.

"Tell me, have you heard about the recent sightings of the Holy Maiden in the Dark Forest?" Reseda asked.

Iris shook her head. She'd spent a fair amount of time there lately, but she hadn't heard anything about her visiting. Next to the table was a rolling cart filled with decadent desserts, and Iris was already distracted, trying to decide which one she wanted. As she played "*eeny, meeny, miny, moe*" with her eyes, a maid set a cup of tea in front of her, its mellow fragrance ever so tempting. *First things first, I need to stay hydrated!*

But right as Iris brought the cup to her lips—

"People say a Holy Maiden with green ringlets has been turning up at the cavern in the Dark Forest late at night. She shows up alone, out of nowhere, bathed in faint light, only to disappear before daybreak."

Wait... Is he referring to ME?! Thankfully, Iris hadn't taken a sip yet, or else she might have reflexively spit it out.

"...That's odd. I thought the Holy Maiden was a blond," she replied, her voice cracking.

"It *is* odd, isn't it?"

"Y-Yes, very. Are you sure these people weren't simply dreaming?" Her eyes darted around nervously.

"Oh, I'm sure of it. For you see, she left evidence at the scene."

"...Evidence, you say?"

"A dagger's sheath...with a very intricate iris emblem."

Oh god, the spout!

"R-Really?"

"And as coincidence would have it, I know a girl who fits that description. A girl with green ringlets and a penchant for mischief."

Reseda went silent. Meanwhile, Iris looked around for a hole she could crawl into.

"Come to think of it, that choker I took from you has an iris emblem, doesn't it? Another coincidence, perhaps?"

His eyes glittered like a cat toying with a mouse. Iris looked to Nigel for help, but he simply smiled and clutched the fabric of her blouse with all the strength of a knight.

"Take out your dagger, Iris."

"Nigel...?"

"Take. It. Out."

Iris recoiled sharply. *Oh god, he's furious!*

Reluctantly, she pulled out the dagger, still wrapped up in Sauge's purple stole, and set it on the table. Reseda took it and slowly unwrapped it...and when he was finished, he was left holding a dagger with no sheath.

Timidly, she looked up at them to find Nigel had buried his face in both hands while Reseda stared down in disbelief.

"Nigel, I think it's safe to say..."

"The sheath is hers," her brother nodded.

Reseda looked at Iris sharply. "Care to explain this, Iris?"

She wasn't going to be able to talk her way out of this. *God, he's terrifying! He never got this angry in the game!*

"If I may speak in my own defense, I never once claimed to be the Holy Maiden. I honestly don't know where that came from."

He let out an exasperated sigh. "That's not what I'm asking. What exactly have you been doing in the forest?"

The anger in his voice was so palpable, she couldn't bear to look him in the eye.

"You may be a knight by birth, but you're still a lady of the aristocracy. It's not safe for you to go there, *especially* not alone at night."

I know that. But knowing you, you wouldn't let me go during the day, either.

"Now, let me ask you again: what have you been doing there, Iris?"

Iris summoned all her courage, took a deep breath, and said: "Collecting soilpox scabs."

"For what purpose?"

"To make a preventative treatment for soilpox."

"Right, I was aware you were studying it. Is Cytisus part of this scheme, then?"

"No! Lord Cytisus has nothing to do with this!" Iris blurted out hastily.

"Send for Cytisus at once. And tell him he has my permission to teleport here directly," Reseda instructed the nearby maid.

"I mean it—Lord Cytisus isn't involved whatsoever!"

"Are you trying to protect him?"

"No, I—!"

"With no mana of your own, there's no way you could have done it alone. You had to have an accomplice—and a very powerful accomplice at that."

The simplest solution would be to ask Sauge to explain, but Iris had no way of summoning her. She arrived and departed on her own schedule and no one else's. Besides, most people couldn't see fairies to begin with—and that included Reseda.

So...what do I do?! I don't want Cytisus getting in trouble for something I did!

"Good grief. This is why I despise children."

All of a sudden, Iris heard Sauge's voice ring out. Startled, she whirled around to find her standing behind her. Sauge wrapped her arms around Iris in a hug.

Instantly, Reseda and Nigel leaped to their feet, their chairs clattering behind them. Glaring, His Highness reluctantly lowered himself to one knee; Nigel took one look at him and hastily followed suit.

Huh? Wait, what's happening? They can see her? And they're kneeling?! Is she a really famous fairy or something?

"You are Reseda, son of the king, correct? This is the first I've seen of you, but it seems you're just a boy. And this is Nigel, the son of a knight?"

"A purple stole with golden sage plants... I've heard of you. Lady Sauge of the Fairy Leaders, I presume?" asked Reseda.

"Yes, that's right. Now rise, both of you. I care not for these formalities."

At this, the two boys stood up.

"Uh, Lady Sauge?" Iris asked, baffled. Sauge laughed amiably.

"Cytisus is on his way. The conversation can wait until then."

Reseda gestured for the maid to bring more tea, then invited Sauge to sit in an empty chair.

"No need. I shall sit right here."

With an impish grin, she scooped Iris up, sat herself down in her chair, then placed Iris in her lap.

Chapter 15: The Vaccine

JUST then, Cytisus teleported to the courtyard. He spotted Sauge sitting at the table and kneeled respectfully.

“Cytisus the mage, correct?”

“It is an honor, Fairy Leader Sauge.”

“Well, hurry up and take your seat so we can get this over with.”

At her prompting, Cytisus timidly pulled out a chair. She was now fully in charge.

“It appears the king’s son suspects you of enabling Iris’s nighttime excursions,” she explained to him.

He looked at Reseda, who defiantly stared back.

“But in fact, *I* was the one who took her to the Dark Forest. Rest assured, your precious Iris isn’t cheating on you, little prince,” Sauge teased.

“I...I wasn’t implying she...”

“That’s right, Lady Sauge! His Highness and I have no such relationship! Frankly, it’s none of his business where I go, or with whom!” Iris chimed in eagerly.

“Well...it’s true that no such relationship exists at present...but I wish you wouldn’t say it’s none of my business,” Reseda mumbled, staring down at his lap.

“That’s strange. I was certain the king’s son was questioning his lover’s fidelity.” Sauge frowned and looked at Iris, puzzled.

“I’m afraid you have the wrong idea about us. We’re not lovers and we *never* will be!” Iris declared flatly.

Reseda fell silent. Cytisus remained stony-faced.

"Well, I have no real interest in such frivolities, but I will say this: don't harass my poor Iris," Sauge warned, stroking Iris's hair affectionately. At this, she pouted slightly. The way Sauge spoke of Iris, you'd think she was her pet.

"But the Dark Forest is dangerous! And worse, she's been going to that cavern full of infected!" Reseda protested, glaring at Sauge. His bravery in the face of a Fairy Leader was commendable, to say the least.

"Relax. I will continue to accompany her. So long as she's with me, nothing can harm her, not even germs."

At this, the others frowned.

"Why would you deign to do such a thing?" Reseda asked.

"Because she wanted me to. I merely granted her wishes. And it was she who made *this*." Sauge took out the jar full of shiny silver powder and gave it a little shake, making its contents rattle.

"What is that?"

"She calls it a vaccine."

"Vaccine... Oh, is *that* what you said earlier?" Reseda looked at Iris for confirmation. "What does it do?"

"It's a preventative treatment against soilpox," she muttered quietly. He didn't respond.

"Well, now that the little misunderstanding has been cleared up, I shall take my leave." And with that, Sauge faded away like an illusion.

"Ack!"

As Iris dropped down onto the newly vacated seat, she hastily reached out and caught the vaccine jar before it fell. Meanwhile, Reseda slumped back in his chair.

"That was my first time seeing a real fairy... Then again, I guess she showed herself to me on purpose," he muttered quietly.

Meanwhile, Cytisus was impressed with Reseda for holding his ground, given it was his first time speaking to a fairy. Perhaps only a member of the royal family would have such unwavering confidence. But he couldn't fathom how a girl like Iris could have *possibly* won the favor of a Fairy Leader.

Reseda and Cytisus both looked at her. Meanwhile, Nigel stared into space like his brain was broken. Iris swallowed hard.

"Lady Iris, could you explain the situation in more detail?" Cytisus asked.

"...You might not believe me, but...there's going to be a soilpox epidemic next summer."

"Based on what evidence?" he asked gently.

"I read a lot of books, and I noticed that past soilpox outbreaks coincided with certain weather trends. And the current weather matches that pattern, so..."

"What does that have to do with soilpox scabs?" Reseda demanded.

"Well, it occurred to me that ingesting a small amount of the virus might lead to immunity. And if I could start a focused effort toward immunizing the population, it might reduce future casualties."

He sighed loudly. "And you decided to do this entirely on your own?"

"Well, Lady Sauge helped too, of course. Since I can't cast any magic." Iris stared down at her lap.

"Look at me, Iris." He reached out and gently took her hand. "Tell me all that you know. What's bothering you? What exactly do you want to accomplish?"

"Will you even believe me?"

Iris looked up at him. He smiled brightly and gave her a firm nod.

"I promise, I'll believe you. Just talk to me about it."

"Thank you so much!"

Iris clasped his hand in both of hers. He looked at her in surprise, his cheeks faintly flushed. Timidly, Nigel tugged on her blouse.

"Iris, I'd like it if you'd open up to me, too..."

"Of course," Iris replied with a nod.

"Could you give us the full story?" Reseda asked.

"Certainly!"

And so, Iris gave them an overview of everything that had happened.

"So that's when you realized you'd need magic to turn the scabs into a vaccine?" Cytisus asked.

"Yes, that's right. And it was Lady Sauge who lent me her mana." She held up the vaccine jar for them to see. "The toxins have been inactivated, so ingesting it won't make you sick."

Cytisus carefully examined the jar. A magic circle appeared over his monocle and began to spin; apparently, he had cast some sort of analysis spell.

"You're right. The toxins have indeed been inactivated." He took the jar from her hand and scrutinized it further.

"But the problem is, if I don't sanitize it all the way, someone could contract soilpox from it...and since I can't cast magic, I don't really have a solution. I mean, none of the mages have immunity to the virus like I do."

As far as Iris was aware, anyway. After all, any noble who caught soilpox was promptly hidden from the public. She was the only one willing to wear it on her sleeve.

Reseda looked at Cytisus. "Could you analyze this magic and recreate the magic circle? That way, we could create an enchanted container for the scabs."

"I just completed my analysis, actually. Let me see... It looks like it was produced through a combination of several complicated spells. Theoretically, I could recreate it. It wouldn't be easy, but it seems like a worthwhile challenge." His monocle glinted.

Iris heaved a sigh of relief. *Now I might actually be able to make some progress with my vaccine!* All that remained was to find a way to make it commonly accepted among the populace. But snorting scab powder would be a hard sell for most people...and her vaccine was as good as useless if she couldn't get everyone to take it. The soilpox patients camped out at the cavern were desperate for any salvation, but would perfectly healthy people be willing to take that risk? Probably not.

When Iris explained this concern to them, Reseda paused to think.

"You said the people in the cavern ingested the vaccine, right?"

"Right."

"Then maybe we should ask their families to be our next trial patients."

Iris looked at him in surprise.

"We can administer the vaccine to any townsperson who wishes to take it at no cost to them. As it stands, it won't be easy to convince the upper crust, but if we can demonstrate its effectiveness among the commoners, they'll have no choice but to sit up and take notice."

"Surely we can't pass it out for free, can we?" Iris asked. After all, it would require a lot of labor from the mages to make those magic circles. It would cost a lot of mana. And even if the mages themselves were willing to do it for free, it would take mana away from other duties in service to the kingdom.

"We'll have the aristocracy pay for it," Reseda grinned mischievously. "First things first, we'll need to get clearance. Cytisus, how long would you need to prepare the magic circles?"

"Ideally, I'd want at least a week for testing purposes," Cytisus answered.

At this, Reseda nodded.

"Say, um...could we agree not to mention my involvement?" Iris asked.

Reseda cocked his head. "Why?"

"Because I'm a soilpox survivor with no mana. They might think I'm trying to spread the disease on purpose."

Nigel let out a bitter sigh. Reseda's expression stiffened.

"Right... It *is* forbidden magic, after all. Someone who recognized that might think you were a danger to the nation," Cytisus responded calmly.

"Forbidden magic?" Reseda looked at her sharply.

"I...I didn't *mean* to do any forbidden magic! It just sort of happened!"

He sighed exasperatedly. “Fine. I’ll be in touch with an update as soon as I can.”

“Thank you so, so much!”

Iris was so happy, she had to fight back the tears. All this time, she never knew Prince Reseda was such a good-hearted person. *Kind AND handsome? He's the most absurdly perfect prince I've ever seen! Then again, I guess the devs designed him that way...*

As Iris gazed at him with misty eyes, he smiled bashfully.

✿✿✿

AFTER that, Iris promptly went and spoke to the people at the cavern, requesting their cooperation for the vaccine effort. Not only would the vaccine itself be free of charge, but they would hire assistants to help them distribute it, too. Only those who had developed soilpox immunity, either through vaccination or prior contraction, would be considered for the task.

The scarred man took charge as the leader, and the mother-child pair lent Iris their aid, too. Apparently, the scarred man had a lot of connections with the seedy underbelly of the town, and his triumph over soilpox had made him something of a legend in that community—the total opposite of fashionable society. But then something truly surprising happened: inspired by the scarred man, all the other small-time criminals lined up to receive the vaccine, purely to flaunt their courage.

Once people started to trust that the vaccine was safe, the patients’ families began to request it in droves, especially since it was provided at no cost. “It’s free, so why not?” they shrugged.

With Reseda’s help, Iris’s vaccine had successfully found a foothold among the townspeople, and for that, she was truly grateful.

Chapter 16: The Prince Comes To Visit

WHY is this happening?

For some inexplicable reason, Prince Reseda was standing inside the Chevalier annex, holding a basket full of *bak chee* and shooting Iris a puzzled look with those sparkly flamingo-pink eyes. Adorable, yes...

HOWEVER!

“...and thus, they decided that I’ll be staying here on your property for the time being. Oh, and here’s that *bak chee* you wanted,” he explained, smiling brightly.

Meanwhile, Iris clutched her head. Admittedly, she had something of a knack for exasperating others, but when the tables were turned back on her, she couldn’t handle it!

“WHY THIS?!” she screamed before she could stop herself.

Reseda recoiled and looked at her in alarm.

*Oops. I shouldn’t let my panic get the better of me...but really, who WOULDN’T panic at a time like this?! Clearing her throat, Iris took the basket of *bak chee* from him and set it on the table.*

“I apologize for shouting, but...*why* did they feel this was necessary, exactly?”



AS promised, Reseda had spoken with the king about the soipox prevention effort. He had brought Cytisus along to provide a demonstration of the magic circles. But the King realized it was forbidden magic and declared it too dangerous.

Right when they seemed to have reached an impasse, however, Reseda decided to prove the vaccine's effectiveness by ingesting it himself right there on the spot. The whole room panicked, and the royal knights formed a wide circle around him. It was then that he told them that he would quarantine himself on Iris's property: "After all, since she already has smallpox immunity, she won't get sick." And so, the second prince of Floraison was sent off to the Chevalier estate in a rickety carriage reserved for servants—the same one that had just brought in a shipment of *bak chee*.

Naturally, Iris's father declared that "As loyal knights of the royal family, we couldn't possibly turn him away." Thus, it was decided that he would be quarantined in the annex a short distance from the main house. Her father didn't feel the need to lock him in the basement since he wasn't showing any symptoms. So their servants scrambled desperately to tidy up the dusty, unused annex...and here they were.



"HOW could you be so *reckless*!?"

Granted, Iris had already confirmed the vaccine's viability in a small number of townspeople. But he was royalty! Never in a million years would she have asked him to be a trial patient!

But the way Reseda saw it, he was essentially stealing Iris's hard work right out from under her, and although she'd essentially asked him to do it, he didn't feel good about it. Thus, he wanted to contribute to the vaccine effort in some way, no matter how small. He thought she'd be happy about it, not angry.

"I wanted to be your partner in crime. Besides, I'm just the spare, anyway. As long as my brother's around, they don't need me," he laughed casually.

This enraged her. "Don't be ridiculous!"

Iris grabbed him by the shoulders. He looked back at her dubiously. *This boy is as clueless as they come! Well, I'm NOT going to let him talk about himself like that!*

"You're not just a spare! No one could *possibly* replace you, Reseda!"

A warm tear trickled down her cheek. He gave her another one of his rosy smiles.

"What are you grinning about?! I'm serious!" Iris growled.

He reached out and wiped her tear away with his fingers. "That's the first time you actually called me by name," he grinned.

Immediately, she leaped backward and curtsied. "Please forgive my insolence!"

"It's not insolent. Keep it up, Iris."

"No, I couldn't possibly!" Iris shook her head vigorously, her ringlets bouncing all over the place as she took another step back.

"What's wrong, Iris? What are you so scared of?"

Chuckling, Reseda moved closer. Iris backed away until she bumped into something solid behind her.

What am I scared of? Are you kidding me?! Have you looked in a mirror lately?! You may be smiling, but I can tell you're furious! And yes, I could fight you off, but then I'll get slapped with the death penalty! Look, I swear I'll never do it again! Somebody save me!!!

"You called, Iris?" asked Sauge.

Reseda's eyes widened in surprise. Then he let out a defeated sigh.

"Oh, am I interrupting something?"

"No, not at all! Your timing is perfect as always!" Iris blurted, desperate to keep her from leaving. Reseda slumped his shoulders.

"I must say, the little prince is quite brave to ingest the vaccine of his own volition. It inspired me to lend you my aid," she continued with a grin.

"How so?"

"I went and spoke with the Orange Fairy Leader just now. And as he is the king's guardian, I imagine he'll put in a good word for you about the vaccine. Isn't that nice?"

As she grinned merrily, Iris stared back in shock. Reseda bowed deeply. "I owe you a debt, Lady Sauge."

"Oh, no need for all that. You humans are an endless source of entertainment. Keep up the good work." And with that, she vanished.

"For a Fairy Leader, she's quite capricious, isn't she?" Iris commented. She was grateful, of course, but a tiny bit exasperated with Sauge as well.

"Your Highness!"

Just then, the door flew open, and Nigel ran in. Reseda clucked his tongue in annoyance. "Nigel, stay right where you are," he commanded sharply.

At this, Iris's brother froze on the spot, grimacing. He was fully prepared to catch soilpox if fate willed it, but he could scarcely defy a direct order from the prince.

"I must sincerely apologize for the inadequate dwelling you've been assigned," Nigel continued.

Reseda laughed weakly. "Oh, it hardly matters. This entire affair is being kept hush-hush, after all. We can't have the citizens knowing their own prince caught soilpox, now can we?"

Nigel and Iris both pursed their lips. If Reseda contracted soilpox, he would be hidden away without any treatment, as if it were merely

a common cold. After all, they wouldn't want anyone to think that a member of the royal family had been punished by God. *How absurd.* Iris let out a small sigh. To the commoners, survivors were heroes.

"Really, don't make such a fuss about it."

"I'm going to take the vaccine, too. That way, I can be by your side to assist you at all times! Doesn't that sound like a good idea? Iris, will you administer the vaccine?"

"Absolutely not, Nigel. You are the heir to the Chevalier name, and as such, it is your duty to protect the family," Reseda declared, pointing at him firmly. Naturally, Nigel had no rebuttal for this; bitterly, he held his tongue.

*"Heir" this, "family" that—these aristocrats have it rough! Not like the House of Chevalier even has **that** much power or influence to begin with. We don't have any mana!* Iris thought with all the flippancy of an outside observer.

"Besides, once we've proven that I'm still healthy, we'll need to convince more aristocrats to take the vaccine...and that's where you'll come in," he continued.

"As you wish, my liege," Nigel replied grudgingly.

"You have nothing to worry about. Iris will be around to protect me—as a knight of the royal family. Isn't that right, Iris?"

His voice snapped her back to her senses, and Iris looked around at them. Reseda was smiling, like always, but Nigel looked apprehensive.

Knight of the royal family, my foot! Don't just throw that title around whenever it's convenient for you! But then again, I don't want you revoking it, either!

"...His Highness is in safe hands with me," Iris responded reluctantly.

Meanwhile, she could feel a heavy weight descend upon her shoulders...

Chapter 17: Quarantine Ever After

AND so, Reseda settled into his new life in the Chevalier annex. Naturally, Iris was assigned to look after him. Every day, a messenger from the palace would come to check on him, then quickly head back. To allay the royal family's concerns, they decided to handle him as though he was potentially infected while proving that he was, in fact, just fine. As for the prince himself, he seemed to be enjoying his quarantine life.

Because he was technically "infected," Iris had to take over all the duties that his royal attendants would've handled otherwise—mealtimes, sword practice, horseback riding, studying, and even the occasional game of chess. Then at bedtime, she helped him change into his pajamas.

As he raised his chin, offering her full access to his shirt buttons, Iris couldn't help but sigh. Granted, at thirteen, he was technically still a child, but surely he could take his own clothes off without assistance! *Aren't you embarrassed to strip down in front of a girl? I know I'm damaged goods, and you're a prince, and you'd never be interested in me like that, but still!* Of course, societal rules dictated that Iris couldn't possibly complain.

Little did she know, Reseda was, in fact, completely capable of dressing himself—he just chose not to mention it. His ulterior motive? This was possibly his one and only opportunity to get her to take his clothes off, and he wanted to make the most of it.

As she grudgingly unbuttoned his shirt, he reached out and gave one of her ringlets a little tug. It sprang back up, bouncing.

Her scowl deepened. "Quit playing with my hair."

"But it's so cute," he protested, smiling, his handsome face mere inches from hers. Flustered, Iris fell silent and averted her eyes. Regardless of how she felt about him, he was still absurdly good-looking.

Meanwhile, he went back to playing with her curls, and Iris gave up trying to stop him. He was probably downright miserable, stuck here in this abandoned annex instead of lounging at the palace. So, if tugging on her ringlets made him feel better, then so be it.

"Okay, I can handle the rest from here," he told her with a grin once she'd finished unbuttoning his shirt in silence. Iris left the room to fetch him some clean clothes.

Her family had agreed to foot the bill for all of Reseda's expenses, and instead of washing his dirty laundry, her father had instructed her to simply throw it all away. *Rich people*, Iris thought with disdain. In her past life, she couldn't even *fathom* that sort of lifestyle. So, instead of being wasteful, she pilfered the least extravagant items, gave them a wash, and snuck them off to the Dark Forest Cavern.



TWO weeks had passed since Reseda first arrived at Iris's house, and the two of them had become fast friends, possibly due to their physical proximity. He seemed to want her around for everything he did, probably because she was the only person allowed within ten feet of him, and over time Iris came to see a new side of him—a bratty, needy side. The poor thing was probably starved for love, stuck at the palace, constantly studying the art of kingcraft or what have you. This was the sort of thing Iris contemplated as she spoon-fed him his *bak chee*.

After breakfast, they did a little studying in the morning—mostly Reseda tutoring Iris in national history, palace operations, highly

specific royal etiquette, and so on. Her formal education had fallen behind after she came down with soilpox, but while she was somewhat versed in history and such, the rest was brand new to her. At first, Iris couldn't understand why anyone would need to learn it, but according to Reseda, this knowledge was required to attend the Academy.

"It'd be fun to enroll together, don't you think?" he suggested, and Iris nodded. Yes, she'd figured she should probably attend—that way, she would have an easier time helping Camille stay on the right track. Besides, she needed to make sure none of the boys turned into *yandere* nutjobs.

Furthermore, Iris was surprised by the sheer breadth of Reseda's knowledge. How was he so well-educated at just thirteen? He must have studied an awful lot. He even taught her some things about fairies.

"There are seven Fairy Leaders in total, each with their own unique wing color. For example, Lady Sauge is the Purple Fairy Leader. There's also an Orange Fairy Leader assigned to protect my father, but I've never met him. They each wear a stole that matches their wings, each with their own unique embroidery, so that's how you can tell them apart."

"Oh, that's right. Lady Sauge's has sage plants."

"Right." Then he told her about all the other Fairy Leaders.

"Am I allowed to know all these things?" Iris inquired.

"I'm making an exception for you, since you've already met one of them."

"Oh! Thank you!"

Iris was excited to learn more. But what he didn't tell her was that this was actually required learning for royal marriage candidates.



AFTER lunch came naptime, and as someone who spent every night traveling downtown or to the Dark Forest Cavern to check on her trial patients, Iris sincerely appreciated Reseda's relaxed afternoon schedule. Likewise, he knew she was busy, so he didn't hold it against her for wanting to catch some shut-eye. In fact, he often jokingly offered to lend her his lap as a pillow.

Stroking her hair as she dozed off was nothing short of pure bliss for Reseda. He would play with her unguarded curls, wrapping the strands around his index finger. While Iris was asleep, there was no danger of her twisting his arm; theoretically, he could get away with anything. But it was the childlike vulnerability he saw in her sleeping form that filled him with affection for her.

Following her afternoon siesta, Iris decided to wake herself up with a little exercise. Reseda and Iris practiced sword fighting every day, and today was no exception. In fact, he had improved so much lately that she was starting to have a harder time against him. Desperate to win, she started lifting weights in secret. After all, she had to make sure she was stronger than him—and Nigel too, for that matter! *In case of yandere-related emergencies!*

Breathing hard, Iris struck back at Reseda, sending his sword flying through the air. It spun in tidy circles, then planted itself blade-first in the grass.

“Well! I see you kids are having a fun time!”

Just then, a voice called out to them. Iris whirled around to find Crown Prince Bleuet standing there, eyebrows raised, accompanied by his knight-guards.

“Bleuet!” Reseda took a few steps in his brother’s direction, then stopped himself. Likewise, Iris curtsied at a distance.

“There’s nothing to fear, you two.”

“Your Highness!”

“You two stay back!”

But despite the knights’ protests, Bleuet held up a hand to silence them. Then he walked right up to Reseda and ruffled his bright-pink hair.

Chapter 18: Let's Go Home

“BLEUET, you can’t!” Reseda hastily stepped back.

“I’ll be fine. With all the energy you clearly have, you can’t possibly be sick.”

“But...”

“I heard all about it from Cytisus. Quite the character, that fellow,” Prince Bleuet continued with a sly smile.

Reseda blinked dubiously. “What do you mean?”

“Well, he claims to have already ingested the vaccine himself.”

“WHAT?!” Iris shrieked. They both whipped their heads around to look at her in alarm. She quickly composed herself.

“According to Cytisus, he tried it himself to make sure of its preventative properties before recreating it. Then, to make sure his magic circles were functioning as intended, he gathered volunteers among the other mages to ingest it as well. We learned of this a short while after your incident, when he reported his actions to us. Naturally, he and the other mages were all sent off to quarantine at home. But then one of the nobles accused the Temple of Magic of being ‘diseased.’ The fairies were so furious, they put the whole Temple on lockdown—it was a nightmare, I tell you. But eventually, the mages’ quarantine came to an end, the Holy Maiden herself stepped in to play mediator, and now the Temple is open again. Oh, and I’m told the Orange Fairy Leader himself made an appearance.”

Bleuet seemed to find all this rather amusing, but Iris certainly didn’t!

“Wh...wha...?!”

Iris bit back the urge to scream. *What were you THINKING, Cytisus?! Why didn't you cast a protection spell or ask the fairies for help?! Look, I get that you needed to make doubly sure, but—but WHY?! And the fairies all went on STRIKE?! Good Lord! If I wasn't thirteen, I'd pour myself a stiff drink!*

“It’s *their* fault for having doubts about something Lady Sauge made!” said the little purple-winged fairy, peeking out from one of Iris’s ringlets.

“Us fairies are pure and good!” said another. “We don’t like yucky stuff, and we don’t do bad stuff! If anything, the *humans* are diseased, not us! They don’t *belong* in the Temple of Magic!”

“Listen, I understand where you’re coming from,” Iris replied, massaging her temple, “but these people can’t do their jobs unless you let them in.”

“We don’t *caaaare*!”

Reseda had warned her that angry fairies were not to be reckoned with. But in her foolishness, she hadn’t taken that warning seriously...until now, that is. Now she understood why even the *royal family* readily bent the knee to a Fairy Leader. Fairies didn’t operate by human logic, and if they were going to coexist with them, they needed to establish an understanding—because humans needed *them* far more than they needed *humans*. This probably explained why the royal family kept the fairies protected.

Powerful little creatures, aren’t they? Reseda and Iris both stood stock-still, their faces ashen in terror.

“Long story short, I’ve come to take you home, little brother,” Bleuet continued.

Reseda snuck a glance at Iris. To him, their happy little quarantine was coming to an end. But from her perspective, it was good news all around.

“Congratulations, Your Highness!” Iris told him brightly. He waited until she looked away, then let out a sigh. But this was not lost on Bleuet, who smiled sadly. He knew full well that his little brother *despised* having to live at the stuffy old palace.

“Before I depart, Lady Iris, might I ingest your vaccine as well?”

“What? The vaccine?”

“I’ve always been of poor constitution, you see, and if I ask Cytisus, he’ll surely refuse. But in my view, it’s those like myself that need this vaccine the most.”

Iris could see the light of determination in his gentle eyes. He had a level-headed outlook of his own condition, and he was clearly trying to do the responsible thing. But as much as she wanted to help him...

Just then, there appeared a fairy with sky-blue wings, a white alb, and a sky-blue stole reminiscent of Sauge’s, though it was embroidered with little daisy-like flowers rather than sage plants. Clearly, this was another Fairy Leader.

“Lady Camomille, the Blue Fairy Leader!” Reseda gasped. Iris immediately straightened her posture. Camomille was Bleuet’s guardian fairy, or so Iris was told.

“I humbly ask for your cooperation on dear Bleuet’s behalf,” Camomille told us.

Iris looked at Reseda; he gave her a nod. So, she went and fetched the jar of vaccine powder, then handed it to Bleuet. “Go ahead and ingest it here, Your Highness. I can only imagine the scandal it would cause if you were to bring it home with you.”

“Right you are. I’d better keep it hush-hush for the time being.”

“Here.” Reseda handed his brother a straw.

Summoning all of his courage, Bleuet let out a deep breath. Then he plunged the straw into the jar and took a big whiff. Instantly, he began to cough. Camomille gently rubbed his back until he had recovered. Then she shot Iris one final smile and, with a curtsy, vanished into thin air.

“Are you all right, Bleuet?”

“Yes, I’m fine. It’s strange, in fact—you’d almost have to wonder if this vaccine has any effect at all.”

“Well, don’t you go testing it!” Reseda declared, pointing firmly. At this, Iris couldn’t help but giggle. He shot her a funny look.

“One wonders whether you have any right to be concerned, given the mischief you get up to yourself, Prince Reseda,” Iris explained.

“An amusing sentiment, coming from the most mischievous girl I know! And I do believe I told you not to call me Prince,” he replied with a sunny smile. Iris averted her gaze, and Bleuet chuckled.

“Come now, Reseda. Let’s go home. I know you enjoy it here, but the family’s waiting for you at the palace.”

At this, Reseda’s eyes widened. He nodded quietly, then turned back to face Iris.

“Thanks, Iris. That day you got angry on my behalf... It meant a lot to me.”

Iris thought back to the time she snapped and told him he wasn’t just a spare. At the time, his bright, genuine smile was breathtaking—as beautiful as a garden of flowers. It delighted her that she had made him so happy... She staggered slightly, then caught herself. Meanwhile, Reseda seemed to be waiting for her to say goodbye.

“Er, Iris? Are you all right?”

"I apologize. I felt a little dizzy just now, that's all. Oh ho ho ho!" Iris let out her most haughty laugh to play it off. "I very much enjoyed our time together, and I hope you'll tutor me again in the future."

She curtsied gracefully. He reached out and gave one final tug on one of her ringlets. "Yes, let's study together sometime soon."

And with that, the two brothers went back to the palace—in a royal carriage this time instead of the shoddy one Reseda had arrived in. *Thank goodness.*

The entire Chevalier estate came out front to see them off; naturally, the maids all swooned over the two handsome princes waving back from the window. And after the carriage disappeared from sight, they promptly started gossiping amongst themselves.

Yes, yes, Prince Reseda is very dreamy indeed—as long as he doesn't turn into a possessive control freak!

Just then, goosebumps pricked up Iris's arms as she realized:

"That day you got angry on my behalf... It meant a lot to me."

The comment he'd made to her just now was *identical* to one of his lines from the game, originally directed at Camille.

Is this some sort of event flag? Wait...but the game hasn't even started yet! Where's the UI?! Where's the choice points?!

Iris clutched at her hair in terror.



AND so, Reseda was welcomed back as a heroic young ruler who put his own life on the line for the good of his people. After it was made clear that Reseda and Cytisus were both still in good health, and with endorsements from multiple Fairy Leaders, the vaccine was made freely available to all.

As promised, Nigel was the first in line to take the vaccine during this phase, helping to promote it among the younger demographic at the palace. From there, the government moved to distribute the vaccine to the commoners as well.

Once it became apparent that more powder would be needed, Iris asked Reseda about the possibility of further developing and preserving the vaccine. In turn, he made a formal proposal, and it was soon decided that the Temple's Specialized Arts Division would take over production of the vaccine.

Chapter 19: Cytisus's Secret Love Life

SOMETIMES later, Iris paid a visit to Cytisus's office at the Temple of Magic. Exceptionally talented mages were given the title of Royal Mage and tasked with maintaining the palace using their mana; as such, they were given their own private office in the Temple, each with its own assigned door. Cytisus's door was blue.

Today, there was something Iris dearly wanted to ask of him: now that Prince Bleuet had ingested the vaccine, she wanted Cytisus to administer it to his special someone. After all, she and Bleuet had both died by the start of *HanaKoro*, and in the game, it was Camille who helped ease the pain of these losses. This was what brought her and her love interest together. But without those emotional scars, neither Cytisus nor Reseda would have any reason to fall in love with Camille. At least, that was Iris's hope!

As the villainess, it was her job to derail the protagonist's romance. While she had no proof that either of them had died from soilpox specifically, she wanted to crush each and every possibility of a happy-bad ending—and to do that, she needed Cytisus's girlfriend to stay alive. The problem was, Iris didn't know who she was. But today, she was going to find out!

Iris sat across the table from Cytisus as a group of fairies carried them tea. When Iris thanked them, they flew down and tugged on her ringlets, then gleefully flew away. *Good heavens, they're so cute.* She had a weakness for these little troublemakers.

“So, what did you wish to discuss?”

His question brought her back to her senses, and Iris straightened up in her chair. “I wish to ask you a personal question, and I thought it best to ask in private.”

“Ask away,” he replied with a smile. To him, Iris was the brilliant girl who had invented a type of medicine no one would have ever dreamed of. Naturally, he was expecting her to confer with him about some other ingenious idea.

However...

“You’re currently courting someone, correct?”

The question was so blunt, it made him sputter. “I...er...!”

“Correct?”

“...Correct.”

Their relationship wasn’t public knowledge; they had never even attended a social gathering together. He couldn’t fathom how Iris might have discovered it. As he faltered, she stared back at him intently.

So, it’s a secret, then? I suppose it’s no surprise, coming from the man behind the “Forbidden Love” route. Maybe this one is a “forbidden lover,” too...but he doesn’t have any other siblings, and his mother’s already passed away...so who is it, then? His father? No, his father was still alive during HanaKoro. It’s not some underage girl, is it? Oh dear, it might be. I mean, Camille’s a whole decade younger than him! If he’s dating someone her age, that’s a crime! Wait, but technically it’s just harmless fiction... No, it’s still a crime!!!

“Lord Cytisus, are you attracted to younger girls?”

“...I suppose I’m not especially opposed to younger women...”

Iris jumped to her feet and leaned across the table. “How much younger are we talking? Two years? Five? Ten?!”

“Er...Lady Iris?”

“You can trust me! I promise, I’ll keep it a secret! A ten-year age gap is kind of creepy, and you should probably go to jail, but as long as you wait until it’s legal, I won’t tell anyone!”

“What are you talking about!?”

Unfortunately, due to poor phrasing on her part, Cytisus was starting to panic, thinking Iris was coming on to him. As flattered as he was, he was already spoken for. Besides, Iris was a mere child...and Prince Reseda would be devastated, too...

“Tell me the truth, Lord Cytisus!” Iris pleaded.

“Yes, I have a lover!” he shot back reflexively. “But she likes her privacy, so she’s asked me to keep it between us!”

At this, Iris silently returned to her seat, and for a moment, Cytisus worried that she was going to start crying. *I’m the adult in this situation. Surely I could have found a nicer way to turn her down,* he thought to himself regretfully as he looked at her.

There was an awkward silence...and then Iris balled her hand into a fist.

“Excellent,” she whispered.

Cytisus looked dumbfounded.

“I have an important request to make. Lord Cytisus, I’d like you to go to her and ask her to take the vaccine.” Iris bowed her head. “People used to think a vaccine was just a homeopathic remedy, but now even high society recognizes it as an effective medicine. Still, I imagine the thought is unpleasant for any well-mannered lady, so she may not seek to ingest it of her own volition. Please, I need you to convince her.”

At this, Cytisus frowned. He didn’t understand why Iris was so invested in the well-being of a woman she’d never met and knew nothing about.

“Why is this so important to you, Lady Iris?”

“Because I don’t want you to get hurt,” Iris replied, looking him dead in the eye.

Cytisus smiled sadly. "You're completely incorrigible, you know that?" He laughed weakly. How silly he was to think Iris was interested in him. "In that case, you'll be delighted to know that she has already ingested it."

Beaming, Iris whipped her head up so fast, her ringlets bounced with the motion. "You mean it?! Thank you so much!" Overjoyed, she raised both hands into the air.

He squinted at her. "I never imagined you would show so much concern for a stranger. You are truly a pure-hearted person, Lady Iris."

"N-No, not at all," Iris demurred awkwardly. After all, she wasn't worried out of the kindness of her heart. But obviously, she couldn't possibly tell him that she was doing this to avoid her own death.

"You know, you really remind me of the Holy Maiden."

He smiled at her; Iris attempted to smile back.

"No, no, no!!! I'm afraid you're simply exaggerating! Please, Lord Cytisus, you mustn't joke about such things!"

Seriously, let's not!!!

Chapter 20: The “Good” News

AT dinner, Iris’s mother and father were in a disgustingly good mood while Nigel looked deeply confused.

“Just between us, Iris, I have some good news for you,” her father said.

Iris’s smile stiffened.

“You’ve been chosen as a Holy Maiden candidate, and—this is very confidential, mind you—His Highness Prince Reseda wishes to ask for your hand.”

Iris looked at him in alarm. “Whatever does he need it for?”

“Hahaha! Funny girl. He’s asking for your hand in *marriage*, obviously!”

“NO! I refuse! I don’t want to die!” she screamed. This was the game rebalancing at work, trying to force her onto a route without her consent! *Stupid game!!!*

Iris’s parents both looked at her, startled by her outburst.
“What’s wrong, Iris?” her mother asked gently.

At this, she snapped to her senses. *Two can play at this game—I’ll just have to fight back!* Iris shot her a tearful look.

“Many will disapprove if I’m chosen as princess consort. It hurts to think I’ll be made into a laughingstock for all of high society.” Iris hung her head in shame.

“If it’s what the prince himself desires, then who would dare criticize him?” Her father shrugged.

“Quite the contrary—my presence would dishonor him in the eyes of the gentry! My smallpox scars are proof that I’ve been

punished by God, and if His Highness were to take someone like me as his wife, they would surely call it sacrilege. The thought pains me, Father!"

Iris buried her face in her hands and sobbed...or rather, pretended to. Everyone at the table froze. This was a topic her family had politely avoided around her, but one that had most certainly come up in private.

"Please...I beg of you, Father, protect me!" Iris beseeched him, her eyes full of tears. "Please, Father...!"

"You have nothing to worry about, my dear," he told her with a sweet, loving smile. "All you have to do is win the title of Holy Maiden."

Aagh, you BLOCKHEAD! This is normalcy bias at work!!!

"Father, no! Surely you realize such a thing would be impossible for me. Our family ancestry has next to no mana! Not *once* have we ever produced a Holy Maiden!"

"So? You'll be the first."

"No, no, no! I really won't!" Iris shot back on reflex, but her father didn't bat a lash.

"As of now, there are only three Holy Maiden candidates, including you."

"...Three?"

Iris frowned. In *HanaKoro*, there were only ever two, so where did this third one come from? Was it someone who, for whatever reason, never managed to enroll at the Academy during the events of the game? *I don't like the sound of that...*

"Keep this between us, but...I'm told one of the candidates is a low-born girl. Poor thing doesn't stand a chance. As for the other,

her father bears the same title as I do, but if worse comes to worst, you can simply overpower her in a duel."

Iris swallowed hard. *Surely, Father didn't have this innocent girl assassinated before the events of HanaKoro, did he?*

"...Are you talking about murder?"

He looked at Iris and smiled softly...a smile that slowly grew into the wicked grin of a hunter cornering his prey.

"Murder? Oh, Iris, how I dearly admire your ambitious streak! But remember, we are a family of knights. A true aristocrat fights fairly, with no foul play. Understood?"

He spoke to Iris as though the whole thing was *her* idea, and it made her dizzy. *Why are you lecturing ME about this? And for that matter, you should know that none of the other high-born girls stand a chance against me in single combat! I'm the only one with any formal training! What part of that is a "fair fight" to you?!*

"I can't possibly duel her, Father!"

"Well now, I'm glad to see you're in high spirits again! Let us finish our meal!"

Iris sank into despair. *Ugh, this crafty old weasel is never going to listen to me! Oh well. At least now I know my family won't try to assassinate anyone. Wait, but...perhaps it's precisely that sort of attitude that led Iris to stab Camille in the game!*

After that, Iris ate her duck confit in silence.

Meanwhile, Nigel felt conflicted. From the moment the twins were born, he had spent his whole life right by Iris's side, and now it felt like she was going to leave him behind. Technically, Iris was the older sibling by a few minutes, but Nigel had been taught to look out for her because she was a girl. To him, it was his sworn duty...and yet now, his only choice was to sit there and listen.

Lately, Iris had grown close to Prince Reseda, earned the favor of a Fairy Leader, won the respect of a royal mage, gained access to the Temple of Magic...and most recently, she had developed a vaccine. She was accomplishing things Nigel never would have dreamed of. Overcome with an inexplicable sense of panic, he balled his hands into fists under the table. He had known all along that they couldn't stay together forever—that girls were married off earlier than boys. But he wasn't ready for it to happen so soon. Once Iris was married, the distance between them would grow. Fortunately, the fact that she was opposed to said marriage offered him some small relief.

Quietly, he wished he could be her only knight for just a little longer.



AFTER dinner, Iris tied her hair up in a ponytail, donned her horse-riding gear, and headed out to the stables. This was her last resort—she would just have to negotiate with Reseda directly, under the cover of night. But as she painstakingly tied the saddle to her horse, she sensed a presence directly behind her.

Oh no!

Iris crouched down and prepared to deliver a headbutt to her mystery assailant. They saw it coming and backed away. Iris grabbed her dagger, still wrapped in cloth, and whirled around—

“...Nigel?”

“Are you *sure* you’re a proper lady, Iris?”

“A lady of the House of Chevalier, I’m afraid.”

Nigel raised both hands in utter defeat—a show of surrender, in other words.

“Oh, Nigel, I’m so glad it’s you. You know, if I wasn’t your sister, you might have successfully snuck up on me.”

“And if I wasn’t your brother, you might have successfully slammed your skull into my jaw.”

He smiled softly as she gazed at him. Only Iris could go toe-to-toe with him.

“Did you come here to stop me?”

“I mean, surely you realize how reckless it is, right? Are you really going to sneak into the palace in the middle of the night? If they catch you, they might punish our whole family.”

“Then I’ll just have to make sure I don’t get caught.”

“Good grief. You sound like Father,” Nigel muttered weakly. Indeed, their father was a stubborn man who would go to great lengths to achieve his ends. But the thought gave her pause. Iris wasn’t *trying* to be like him at all.

“Well, I don’t have any other choice. I’ll never be the Holy Maiden, and I don’t want to be the princess consort, either...but at this rate, they’ll try to force me.”

“Do you detest His Highness that strongly?”

“I wouldn’t say that I detest him, but I’m certainly not in love with him.”

“That’s just how it goes in high society,” he argued, though her response pleased him a tiny bit.

“Maybe so, but even then, I see no reason to rush into marriage.”

Iris bit her lip. She knew Reseda was just going to fall in love with Camille anyway, so she needed to avoid the topic of betrothal until the two of them had the chance to meet.

"Iris, let's put it off for tonight," Nigel pleaded. He wanted to stop the engagement just as badly as Iris did, but they were in an all-around disadvantageous position.

"This is the only chance I'll get. I need to turn Prince Reseda down before Father meets with him tomorrow. Otherwise, the two of them will set it in stone."

"Calm down, Iris. Father won't be meeting with His Highness until the afternoon. You could meet with him tomorrow morning instead, couldn't you?"

"...Tomorrow morning?"

"We'll follow proper procedure and send a messenger. I'll even come with you! Okay?"

Iris nodded. "Very well... You've really grown into a reliable young man, you know that?" she remarked fondly, looking back over the years.

"You overstate me, truly," Nigel replied.

But his pained expression was hidden from view by the shadow of night.



BACK in her bedroom, Iris called out to the fairies; one poked its head out from inside a ringlet. She hadn't yet told Nigel or her parents that her hair was a magical portal.

"I'd like you to go and see Prince Reseda."

"How come?"

"I absolutely must speak with him first thing tomorrow morning. Could I ask you to deliver a letter to him?"

"Sure thing!"

Iris wrote a short message onto a sheet of white stationery and entrusted it to the fairy, who disappeared into the darkness. Admittedly, she could have sent one of the servants as a messenger, but she couldn't risk her father putting a stop to it.

Sure enough, her suspicions were proven correct the very next morning, when Nigel came to apologize to her. He had tried his best, but he couldn't possibly supersede their father's orders. But Iris had seen this coming, so she thanked him nonetheless.

And so, Iris decided to go to the palace alone.

Chapter 21: A Rendezvous with the Prince

THAT morning, Prince Reseda was on cloud nine. Last night, a letter had been slipped under his bedroom door—a single sheet of white stationery with an iris emblem stamped onto it and blue ink that smelled faintly of irises. It must have been delivered by a fairy, and while not just any fairy was permitted to enter the palace, exceptions were made if the palace guardian fairies deemed it safe. Reseda found this surprise letter very entertaining, if only because he could think of only one person who might have sent it: Iris du Chevalier.

I need to speak with you tomorrow morning. It's important.

The previous day, he'd had a private discussion with Lord Chevalier about taking Iris's hand in marriage, and now, he was convinced she was coming to give him her answer in person. *Surely, she'll happily accept*, he thought. He hugged the letter to his chest. As his body heat warmed the paper, her fragrance wafted up to his nose, and he let out a dreamy sigh.

Whenever Iris came to study at the Temple of Magic, she always wore modest attire, which he approved of very much. Unlike her dresses, her plain blouses and long skirts covered a lot of skin, and the more discreet the outfit, the more it highlighted her natural beauty. For someone like Reseda, who was perpetually surrounded by glitz and glamour, it was a refreshing sight.

Furthermore, the time they spent together at the Chevalier annex was pure bliss for him. At no point was he obligated to conduct himself like a prince, and Iris often indulged his need for attention. Plus, whenever they sparred, she showed him no hesitation. With Iris, he could just be himself.

He instructed the maids to show Iris to the courtyard gazebo as soon as she arrived. Then he gave himself one last look in the mirror. His soft pink hair, so often likened to a rose, was flawless. His starched shirt was neither gaudy nor dowdy; best not to overdress for the occasion, lest he come off too eager. It was a casual get-together, not a black-tie affair.

Would she be flattered if I brewed the tea myself? He had been taught that husbands were expected to do so for their wives. Admittedly, it was much too early, but since they would be sharing their lives together sooner or later, he figured Iris would forgive his enthusiasm. And so, Reseda hurried off to the gazebo to wait for her...



IN addition to the carefully manicured garden where special events were held, there was a small courtyard inside the palace reserved for use by the royal family. This was where the gazebo was located. The courtyard was outfitted with a small pond, and the gazebo was a convenient place to gaze out at the waterfowl.

Iris sat there, staring out at the water, wearing the same unsophisticated clothes she usually wore to the Temple of Magic. *Perhaps she told her parents that's where she was going,* Reseda thought, delighting in their secret rendezvous. Unable to wipe the smirk from his face, he jogged over to her, even though it flew in the face of royal etiquette to do so.

“Iris!”

At his voice, she hastily rose to her feet, and the whole flock of birds flew off.

“I apologize for disturbing you so early in the morning, Your Highness, but I urgently wished to speak with you before you meet with my father today.”

"No, no, it's no trouble at all. Though I'll need you to drop the 'Your Highness' part."

He smiled at Iris, but she didn't return it. Naturally, this wasn't the reaction he was expecting.

"I ask that you please retract your request," she declared bluntly.

"...What request?"

"The engagement."

This caught him off-guard. "May I ask why?"

"It's much too early. You are the second prince of Floraison, and your elder brother already has a fiancée of his own. I believe you should wait until after you enroll in the Academy and meet more people. I'm sure you'll find a more suitable candidate among them."

"Noble girls marry early. The longer I twiddle my thumbs, the more likely someone else will lay claim to you, and I can't have that."

"I assure you, that won't happen. No one will want to marry me," she laughed.

Reseda looked at Iris in disbelief. "You're not just making excuses, are you?"

"Your Highness—"

"*Reseda*."

"...Prince Reseda, I believe there is someone better out there for you; you simply haven't met her yet," she insisted. "You needn't feel obligated to marry me just because we've spent some time together. Give it some more thought."

"But you're just—"

"I'll say it as many times as it takes: I'll never get married."

Iris rolled up the sleeve of her blouse and revealed the grisly smallpox scars on her left arm. Their color had faded, but they were still very pronounced, and chances were slim they would ever recede. To this day, only a small number of people were willing to touch her body without hesitation; everyone else, while still polite to her face, had put up a metaphorical wall between themselves and her. Only Reseda and Cytisus were fully comfortable touching her.

“I have been punished by God.”

Her words hit him like a ton of bricks. It was the very same sentiment shared by everyone with whom he had discussed the engagement: *she’s a heretic who will bring disaster on the royal family*. But he never once imagined Iris would echo it herself. That said, he had opposed this line of thinking at every turn.

“If you were truly punished, then you would’ve died, don’t you think? Those scars are proof of God’s love,” Reseda countered.

The words made her jaw drop, and she looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. Admittedly, Iris always appreciated that he never treated her like she was diseased—some days, it was the only thing that kept her going. Still, she never dreamed he would say such a thing, and it meant a lot to her. She covered her mouth and stared down at her lap.

Alas, this only proved her point further.

“Thank you very much. Truly, it’s...it’s very kind of you to say. But I’m afraid the rest of the world won’t see it that way.”

“So we’ll tell them they’re wrong.”

“The upper crust won’t accept it. And even if they did, they would never truly have a change of heart,” she shot back. Reseda knew this as well as she did. “I don’t want to give them any reason to degrade you. I don’t want to be the fly in your ointment. Please understand.”

Iris bowed her head. It wasn't just an excuse—she meant every word. For the sake of Reseda's future reputation, this betrothal could never be.

Chapter 22: Rejection

RESEDA looked at Iris's bowed head and let out a heavy sigh. "So, according to you, it's for my own good?"

"No, it's for *my* own good. I'm afraid I simply don't have the emotional fortitude required to be with you."

"You think I'll hurt you?"

"No, I refer to the vicious insults that will surely be hurled my way." Iris stared down at her lap.

"Iris, you've been nominated as a Holy Maiden candidate."

"A position for which I am unworthy."

"But if you become the Holy Maiden, then no one would dare complain! It would prove God chose you!"

"He won't choose me."

Both God and Reseda would ultimately choose Camille. Iris knew this for a fact. After all, she was the villainess.

"You're far too modest."

"I speak only the truth."

Realizing his attempts were futile, Reseda sighed. "Look at me, Iris. I have heard your opinion as the eldest daughter of the Marquis—but now, I ask to hear your personal feelings as my friend."

Timidly, Iris looked up at him.

"How do you feel about me?" he asked.

His pink eyes sparkled as he fixed her with a puppy-dog look. Coming from a handsome prince, the move was super effective, and Iris reeled. She was already a huge fan of *HanaKoro*'s character

designs. Even when he was acting like a *yandere*, he was still charming—so one could imagine how much power a younger, non-*yandere* version would have over her! It just wasn't fair!

"W-Well, I...I don't especially dislike you..."

"So you like me, then?"

"Nngh...well...if it's between those two options, then...yes..."

Reseda grinned. "Okay then, what's the problem?"

"I can't! No, no, no, no, *noooo way!*"

As the blood drained from her face, Iris thrust out both hands and waved them dismissively, proper manners be damned.

Reseda shrugged his shoulders. As a prince, he could always use his royal authority to make it happen against her will, but he didn't want that. He didn't just want Iris—he wanted her love and attention. And if he had to force her to be around him, then there was no point.

He took a deep breath, then exhaled. His only option was to give up...for now.

"Very well, Iris. I'll retract my request."

"Thank you so much!" Iris shouted, nearly jumping out of her seat with joy. He grimaced.

"However," he continued sharply, freezing her in place, "the moment you are crowned the Holy Maiden, I will formally ask for your hand in marriage. That's final."

He had concluded that he would simply have to make her fall for him within that timeframe. As for Iris, she was overjoyed. Sure, a formal marriage proposal from a member of the royal family was nigh-inescapable—but she would *never* be crowned the Holy

Maiden. Once Camille was given the title, he would probably propose to her instead.

“It won’t happen. Now then, if you’ll excuse me, I must be going.” Beaming, Iris rose to her feet.

He glared at her sulkily. “That reminds me, I forgot to mention something.”

Blinking, Iris looked at him. He offered his hand to escort her; without thinking, she took it and started walking. As they left the gazebo, he looked at her with his peach-colored eyes, his lashes sparkling in the morning sun. Reflexively, Iris let out a sigh. He was truly beautiful.

Their eyes suddenly met. Startled, Iris tried to pull away—a little too hard. When she lost her balance, he caught her by the arm, brought it to his lips, and planted a kiss on her scars. The ugliest, most grisly part, too.



“I’m in love with you, Iris, even if you’re not in love with me.”

Frightened, Iris shoved him as hard as she could. Knocked off-balance, they both fell to the ground. They looked at each other, their faces beet-red.

“I...I...”

Iris tried to explain herself but couldn’t find the words. She knew she had committed a grave transgression, but it was kind of his fault for making a move on her, so really, it was just self-defense!

Then he started snickering. “I’m not offended, you know. We’re friends, after all.”

“Friends...?”

He smirked. “For now, at least.”

Iris quickly rose to her feet, said her goodbyes, and dashed away from the gazebo. Her face was on fire. *What just happened back there?!*

“*I’m in love with you, even if you’re not in love with me.*”

That was another line ripped from *HanaKoro*—specifically, from the scene where Reseda confessed his love for Camille despite having a fiancée. That was the response he gave when she rebuked him as unfaithful. The words had a devastating effect on her because she was in love with him, too, even though she knew it could never be.

So why would Reseda say it to me? As far as Iris knew, the game hadn’t even started yet. A line like that would work on just about anyone, protagonist or not! But while part of Iris was frustrated with him for toying with her, another part of her was pleased... *If I’m not interested in him, then why in the world did it make me so happy?*

It was just a line from a script; the game was simply forcing him to say it. Looking at it that way made it a little easier to swallow. But

even then, Iris wanted to believe that he sincerely didn't think of her as tarnished.

Iris ran and ran, willing her brain to stop thinking. Behind her, Reseda watched her go with a soft sigh.



IN the end, Reseda backed off and told Lord Chevalier that his original proposal was a bit premature. Instead, the two decided to team up to ensure there would be no obstacles to the engagement in the future. As Nigel watched this exchange, he *did* feel sorry for Iris, but he thought it best not to inform her. He didn't know how she had managed to repel the Prince, and until he could figure it out, he was terrified of letting her run loose.

I'll be the one to protect her, he quietly vowed.

Chapter 23: The End of Childhood

WHY is this HAPPENING?! Iris resisted the urge to scream. After she went and spoke with Reseda directly, by all accounts, he and her father were supposed to understand that this engagement was not going to happen. And yet there he was right next to her, smiling away! *Is this not awkward to you?! Because it's awkward for me!!!*

They were visiting the Specialized Arts Division at the Temple of Magic, a branch dedicated to researching ancient spells and the development of new ones. This division had recently been put in charge of producing Iris's vaccine as well as exploring new preventative medicines. Incidentally, they had made her an honorary member of the team, though this wasn't public knowledge.

The mage in charge of the Specialized Arts Division was a young woman named Pavot, the chief examiner. She wore thick black-rimmed glasses and was always staring at the floor, hiding her face beneath the hood of her black royal mage robes. Few had managed to get a good look at her.

As a savant of all things magical, Pavot had taken an interest in Iris, since she'd somehow won the favor of the fairies without having any mana. After she heard through the grapevine that Iris was the vaccine's original developer, Pavot was the one who formally invited her to the team. Here, Iris was able to ask as many questions as she needed while she continued to study soipox and fairies. For that, she was eternally grateful to Pavot...but at the same time, Iris didn't understand why Reseda was invited, too.

"Whatever might you be doing here, Your Highness?"

"Reseda."

"Why are you here, Prince Reseda?"

“Well, I’m the public face of the vaccine, remember? It’s only natural that I keep abreast of future developments.”

He had a point.

“From now on, I hope you’ll permit me to take part in your studies whenever I have time.”

Iris was a little relieved to see that he was acting as if the betrothal conversation had never happened. After all, she *did* want to stay friends with him, if possible. If someone asked her how she felt about him, she would say that she liked him: he was a reliable, respectable comrade. Plus, he had taken charge of the public awareness effort, which was of crucial importance if Iris wanted the populace to actually *take* the vaccine. In that sense, he was her teammate.

That being said, he was also a terrifying *yandere*! Iris didn’t want him to lock her up, nor did she want a crushed larynx! *I’m sorry, but please don’t make me marry you!*

“Welcome aboard,” Iris replied casually, with a polite curtsy.

After that, Reseda and Iris met up at the Temple of Magic fairly often.

In addition to supervising the vaccine, Iris began researching other preventative medicines too. Apparently, penicillium could potentially be used to make antibiotics. But while antibiotics were an effective treatment for bacterial infections, they didn’t work on viruses. Now Iris was starting to contemplate the possibility of creating a direct treatment for soilpox.

And so, Iris and Reseda spent their days together at the Specialized Arts Division, taking breaks together, going to the library together, and even recommending books to each other. Every now and then, they’d accompany one of the mages to town to discreetly

observe the commoners. And it was in this way that they kindled a friendship beyond the walls of the palace.



SUMMER rolled around, and sure enough, the royal capital was ravaged by a soilpox outbreak. Those who had taken the vaccine were fine, but everyone else was dropping like flies. The advancements in medicine hadn't happened fast enough, and Iris had yet to develop a cure for soilpox.

She accompanied the mages into town to administer the vaccine to anyone who was either uninfected or still in the early stages. If they needed medicine to alleviate their symptoms, they gave it to them. The man with the scar on his face came to help, too.

The vaccine hadn't been popular with the daughters of the upper crust, and as such, a handful of high-born young ladies had already died. As Iris suspected, they couldn't bring themselves to ingest something that was made from soilpox scabs. There was also a political element to it: those who staunchly supported the crown prince were opposed to his younger brother's activism, including vocal support of the vaccine, and as such, they refused to take it as a form of protest. The royal family had purposely chosen not to divulge that Prince Bleuet had himself ingested the vaccine, and now, it had come back to bite them.

The vaccine had no side effects, just as Iris had hoped...but as it turned out, magic couldn't solve everything. In a fantasy story, perhaps, there'd be a priestess who could recite a single incantation and bring all the infected back from the brink, but this world's magic was not that perfect. To convert their mana into an actual spell, the caster needed to fully envision the outcome they wanted. But even then, if they didn't have enough mana, it wouldn't work. Furthermore, magic could not make the impossible happen; you

could cast a spell to close a wound, but a dead person would never come back to life, no matter how intricately you pictured it.

Iris also learned that the other high-born Holy Maiden candidate had died of soilpox, too. *If I'd known she would catch it, I would've tried to get her to take the vaccine*, she thought. Then she shook her head. *No, she wouldn't have listened to me*. As a soilpox survivor, Iris was a heretic. *But was there any other way I could have saved her? If I could have cast magic myself, could I have erased the virus from her body somehow?*

Only a mage would have enough mana to heal a sick person—but even then, it still wasn't enough to cure an entire town. Besides, those blessed with high mana were a precious resource too valuable to be exposed to a virus like soilpox, and Iris didn't have the authority to demand otherwise.

Iris sat in the middle of the grassy field inside the Temple, her knees tucked up to her chin, feeling sorry for herself. According to the Specialized Arts Division, the number of infected was winding down, and tomorrow, they would make a formal proclamation announcing the end of the crisis. But while everyone else was ecstatic that the outbreak had been safely contained before it could grow into an epidemic, Iris couldn't quite bring herself to celebrate.

Back in her past life, it had taken two hundred years to eradicate smallpox, so perhaps it was greedy to expect anything more. But this was a world of magic, and there was still so much she had hoped to accomplish.

As she was thinking about these things, someone suddenly plopped down beside her.

“Iris.”

It was Prince Reseda. His gentle voice soothed her.

"I knew I wasn't going to be able to save everyone, but I feel so powerless... I just wish I could cast magic myself," she muttered.

Quietly, he put an arm around her shoulders. "Well, you *did* save my brother. And me. And Cytisus. And his girlfriend."

"But I could have saved so many more!"

Iris looked up at him. He cupped her face in his hands and stared directly into her tear-blurred green eyes, now darkened with despair. His heart ached at the sight.

"We only have two hands, and we can only hold so much at once. Don't mourn the things that slipped through your fingers—just try to cherish what you still possess."

His pink eyes shone with the light of determination, and Iris could tell from the sound of his voice that he was trying to convince not just her but himself, too. She wasn't the only one who knew pain—he had endured far worse than she had. If they'd used his royal authority, they could have disseminated the vaccine sooner. But they were afraid of the political repercussions, so instead, they played it safe.

Furthermore, it was Reseda, Cytisus, and the rest of the development team at the Temple of Magic who bore the brunt of the vitriol from noble families who had lost relatives to the virus. When Nigel first told Iris, she was *outraged*. Reseda and Cytisus had *warned them* to take preventative measures! Even Nigel had encouraged it! Those who didn't listen only had themselves to blame—it was *their* fault for refusing help! *But instead of being proactive about their own health, they criticized us!*

That said, Iris was too hung up on the past; no amount of wishful thinking would change it now. The future, however, was still within reach. She balled her hands into fists.

"Prince Reseda?"

"Yeah?" he answered softly, smiling at her. The light had returned to her eyes.

"From now on, I'm going to focus on the future."

Iris grinned at him just as a single fat tear rolled down her cheek. He reached out and wiped it away with his fingers. Her eyes were so green, he'd half-expected her tears to be green, too. But they weren't, of course. Then, on impulse, he brought his fingers to his lips.

Iris let out a hideous screech. "Wha-Wha-Whaaaa?!"

She slammed her hands into his chest, pushing him away. Rolling onto the grass, he started coughing and laughing.

"I'm sorry! Really sorry! But that was just..." *Completely inappropriate!!!* Iris's face burned scarlet. He laughed harder.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! You haven't changed a bit, have you?"

He rolled onto his back and looked up at the sky. It wasn't the *real* sky, of course; the Temple's ceiling was under there somewhere. But it was every bit as bright and blue.

He laid an arm over his eyes. He was glad to see Iris in better spirits, but at the same time, her hair-trigger rejection stung. After all the time they'd spent together, she still didn't return his feelings...

He took a deep breath, then exhaled. Then he felt her flop down beside him, and it reminded him of the time they shared back at the Chevalier annex. The breeze tickled his cheek and rustled his hair. Why did he feel like crying? He didn't understand. He knew he was happy being around Iris, but at the same time, he still felt alone.

"I'm so glad you're here with me, Prince Reseda."

Her words struck a chord with him. He appreciated hearing it and appreciated her for saying it, and yet she still refused to be his. It was agonizing.

“Are you? Is that why you shoved me to the ground?”

Rubbing his eyes roughly with one arm, he laughed and looked at her. Iris looked back at him, their faces mere inches apart. Her mint-green ringlets were covered in bits of grass, making her look like some sort of forest fairy. Anxiously, he wondered if his eyes looked puffy.

“Well, you’re my partner in crime,” Iris replied with an impish giggle. At this, he realized her intent to shoulder all the blame previously directed at him.

“You’re evil. This is all *your* fault, I hope you know,” he laughed, though admittedly, “partner in crime” had a nice ring to it. “Listen, Iris—let’s both work hard to make it into the Academy. That way, we can get up to even more trouble together.”

“A prince shouldn’t be causing trouble in the first place,” Iris said in a scolding tone. Then she grinned. “But it *does* sound fun.”

Chapter 24: The Game Begins, Part 1

IT was the first day of a new school year at Chrysanthème Academy, which officially marked the start of *HanaKoro*'s plot. With no knowledge of who her biological father was, Camille was adopted by a baron and sent to enroll at Chrysanthème, just like in the game. The academy was founded on the pretext of giving shelter to Floraison royal subjects with especially high mana, most of whom were noble by birth. As a result, the student body was entirely high-born; no commoners ever attended.

The students were each given their own private room so that even the most spoiled of rich kids could learn some semblance of self-reliance. Chrysanthème was also where potential Holy Maiden candidates were gathered, educated, and ultimately subjected to a formal test. She who passed this test would be deemed worthy.

A Holy Maiden's term started from age eighteen and lasted approximately ten years, though this was subject to change depending on various factors. While one viable Holy Maiden candidate was chosen per year, there was no guarantee that they would be appointed to the role. For that reason, the kingdom currently found itself without a replacement on standby.

Of course, the mere act of being named as a potential candidate was in itself a status symbol. Candidates were guaranteed a future career as a mage, and many married into families with higher social standing. Indeed, Prince Bleuet's fiancée was one such former candidate.

This year, there were two candidates, just like in the game; after the recent soilpox outbreak wiped out many of the daughters of the aristocracy, the pickings were slim. Worse still, the current Holy

Maiden had used up much of her mana trying to keep the outbreak contained, so a replacement was urgently needed.

Unfortunately, this year's favored candidate had died of soilpox. Thus, they reluctantly opened the candidacy to a commoner girl: Camille, the game's protagonist. Now *everyone* was gossiping about the candidate who hailed from a barony.

Likewise, Iris was also nominated as a Holy Maiden candidate. In the game, it was an open secret that Iris had survived soilpox, but as the fiancée of the second prince, she had forced her way in, just as her father had taught her. She was probably hoping that the role of Holy Maiden would counteract the stigma of being a soilpox survivor.

In the real Iris's case, however, she didn't force her way in at all... Everyone at the Temple of Magic knew about her fairy blessings and her work on the vaccine, so *that* was what led to her nomination instead. Another example of game rebalancing.

Having accepted her fate, Iris trudged through the school gates with Nigel at her side. What she saw there perfectly matched the game's opening cinematic: white lilac petals raining down from the clear blue sky as students in uniform talked and laughed. Honestly, she half-expected the title logo to flash up.

On impulse, Iris pressed her hands together in prayer: *Please don't let me die here!!!*

"What's wrong, Iris?" Nigel asked dubiously. In this world, they didn't really do the whole "clasp hands in prayer" thing.

"Oh, I just thought I felt someone's gaze all of a sudden," she answered vaguely.

In the opening cinematic, it would pan to each character in turn: first Camille, then Nigel, then Reseda, then Cytisus, then back to Camille. *Honestly, why would Cytisus even be here?* Then, with a gasp of realization, Iris looked over her shoulder.

OH GOD, HE IS!

She clutched at her head in confusion. “Why...?!”

“Why what?” Nigel asked, puzzled.

Iris pointed at Cytisus. “Why would a *royal mage* be here at the academy?!”

“Oh, I heard the Temple sent him to guard the Holy Maiden candidates.”

“Nobody told me about this!”

Iris had gone to the Temple of Magic often for studying purposes, yet she hadn’t heard a word about it. *Did they avoid telling me because I was a candidate?*

Just then, the murmur of hushed voices rose up behind Iris at the gates. Camille had arrived, her blue hair engulfed in a cascade of petals. As protagonist and target of everyone’s envy and longing, this future Holy Maiden gracefully walked onto school grounds. Fairies flew over to her as soon as they spotted her; she blinked at them in surprise, then smiled slightly.

It was such a stunning sight, Iris could hardly stand upright.
“Look at all the little fairies gathered around her! *Totes adorbs!*”

At this, the fairies in Iris’s ringlets all popped out to look at her, little scowls on their faces. Some used her hair as a slide, while others bounced on it like a trampoline.

“Iris has more of us!”

“Iris is *more* adorbs!”

“Yes, yes, I hear you. Now, could you please stop tugging on my hair? Anyone who can’t see fairies is going to think it has a mind of its own,” Iris explained with a stiff smile. Apparently, fairies could be quite competitive.

To those who couldn't see fairies, Iris's hair appeared to sparkle. But she was completely unaware of just how eye-catching her sparkly mint-green hair was when showered with lilac petals. Surrounded by cute little fairies, Iris felt like she was walking on clouds...but then, she overheard some particularly loud voices.

"Oh dear, *that's* her?"

"The girl everyone's been talking about—the daughter of the baron!"

"*Adopted* daughter, I think you mean."

"Good heavens. Don't tell me she's low-born!"

"A commoner at *our* academy?"

Unable to see the fairies, the other students were all gossiping about Camille—and loudly, too, as if they *wanted* her to hear it. Nigel frowned, and the conflict-averse fairies all disappeared. Not wanting any part of it, Iris turned away from the group and started walking.

Just then, she sensed someone approaching from behind at high speed and whirled around. Iris felt a hand on her shoulder; startled, she shook it off. Her blue-haired assailant stumbled forward. Iris grabbed her arm and twisted it up.

"Sister?!"

It was Camille. The blood drained from Iris's face as she hastily relinquished her grip. *Why must I have such violent spinal reflexes?! Nothing says "villainess" quite like the high-born candidate practically assaulting the low-born candidate!*

Then, at the worst possible time, Reseda and Cytisus showed up, possibly in response to the commotion or just to get a good look at Camille for themselves. It felt like the game had conspired to gather all the love interests at the same time... Iris started to tremble.

"It's really you, isn't it, dear sister? Oh, how I've longed to see you again...!" Camille choked—not because of any pain Iris inflicted, but from her own emotional response. But Iris pushed her away.

"Whatever do you mean? I haven't the slightest idea who you are."

Iris hadn't told Nigel about Camille, and furthermore, they'd only ever spoken that one time at the church. Of course, Iris had gone back to Camille's family's store several times to ask about her and buy more camellia oil, but only while she was away; Iris was very careful to avoid her. But more importantly, Iris only ever went into town in disguise.

So how in the world did she recognize me?

Chapter 25: The Game Begins, Part 2

“I know it’s you, sister,” Camille continued. “Your bright-green ringlets! Your cold, clear eyes! My uncle told me you would always come by the store, and judging from your mannerisms, he pegged you as an aristocrat.”

“Perhaps you’ve mistaken me for someone else,” Iris shrugged, turning away dismissively. Apparently, her “disguise” wasn’t much of a disguise after all. *How embarrassing...*

“And lots of people came to the store after you, claiming a Holy Maiden with green ringlets told them that our camellia oil worked on soipox scars. You helped them, didn’t you?”

“That merely speaks to the efficacy of Camille’s Camellia. It has nothing to do with me.” Haughtily, Iris turned her face away, refusing to make eye contact...but that didn’t stop Camille’s sparkly protagonist aura from affecting her, of course. *I’m so dizzy!*

Then, with a forlorn frown, Camille pulled out a handkerchief—the same one Iris had given her to wipe her tears that day at the church. She’d forgotten all about it.

“Is it impertinent of a commoner to speak to you? You see, I just wanted to return this handkerchief. That’s why I came to this academy. I knew it was above my station, but I really hoped to see you again.”

Nigel examined the handkerchief. It was made of white fabric with a pale purple lace hem and irises embroidered along the edges. “This is Iris’s, all right.” Then he looked at Iris. She had no choice but to admit it, so she nodded reluctantly.

“Your name is Lady Iris?” Camille asked.

Defeated, Iris nodded again. This girl had zero tact, didn't listen, and didn't read body language—a classic otome protagonist.

"At long last, I finally know your name!" she exclaimed, gazing at Iris happily.

This irked Nigel. "Have you no manners?" he demanded brusquely. Honestly, if anyone here lacked manners, it was probably Iris for twisting her arm, but he seemed to ignore this.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not well-versed in proper etiquette..." Camille backed away from Iris and curtsied politely, giving her just enough time to compose herself.

"I am Iris du Chevalier, and this is my brother Nigel. I apologize for reacting on reflex just now."

Camille struggled to think of the proper response. "I, er...I just became Camille du Pont."

Iris let out a sigh. *You don't have to give me that much information!* Granted, everyone was already gossiping that she was adopted, but the rumors would fade eventually if she just kept her mouth shut. Admitting it outright, however, was like handing them a loaded gun.

"Lady Camille, I would advise that you keep such details to yourself when possible."

"But it's not a secret to you, dear sister."

"Now listen here—you're going to defeat the entire purpose of me going to your store in disguise. Don't give people more information than they need, Lady Camille," Iris scolded her.

"But why would I hide it from you when you already know? And...you don't have to address me so formally..."

She looked at Iris with teary eyes. They had only met once before, and to be blunt, they were total strangers, but Iris was utterly weak to Camille's charm.

"I see you're already fast friends with Miss Camille here," Reseda commented, scrutinizing Camille.

"Miss Camille, I must warn you to be mindful of how you conduct yourself," Cytisus reprimanded her.

Under the critical stares of three different men, Camille shrank into herself. It was almost as if they were my villain posse, bullying the innocent heroine. *Wait a minute... This isn't right!*

"Stop this, all of you. It was I who originally acted out of turn. Besides, Lady Camille deserves some time to get acclimated to her new environment."

Honestly, what am I thinking? What sort of villainess would advocate for her own rival?

"Sister...!"

"And stop calling me that. You know my name now."

"...Lady Iris?"

Iris nodded.

"In that case, I'd like it very much if you would call me Camille."

"I believe I already did, Lady Camille."

"No, just Camille!"

She fixed Iris with those puppy-dog eyes again, and Iris faltered. Camille was nearly as pushy as Reseda.

"Miss Camille, then. At any rate, you needn't return the handkerchief. For that matter, you still need to get settled in, correct? Run along to the reception hall."

“Right! Thank you very much!”

Camille gave Iris another curtsy, then set off...only to come to a stop a few steps later. Puzzled, she glanced around, then looked over her shoulder at Iris.

Gah! I forgot she's terrible with directions!

“The reception hall is *that way*, my dear!” Iris called, pointing.

With a big smile, she waved goodbye, then headed in the direction Iris indicated. Just then, a girl with brown pigtail buns walked up to Camille. At this, Iris felt a rush of relief...but a beat later, she did a double-take.

Those tight buns! The big, round glasses! The freckles! It was Mégane, the side character from *HanaKoro!* *I never knew she was a student here...* This was a shocking revelation. *Well, at least now Camille's got a side character to help her out,* Iris reassured herself.

“So, care to explain yourself, Iris?” Reseda demanded, smiling darkly. Iris felt a cold sweat trickle down her back. But really, she couldn’t risk having this conversation in public.

“Yes, of course, Your Highness. But perhaps somewhere more private.”

“I’m not Your Highness.”

“We are at school right now, Your Highness.”

“I’m not Your Highness.”

“...Prince Reseda.”

Like Camille, Reseda was very particular about how he wanted to be addressed. And in the end, Iris caved.

“Then I shall arrange a meeting place,” said Cytisus offhandedly. “After the opening ceremony is over and the day is done, come by the common room.”

Iris looked at him reproachfully; he ignored it and smiled back at her. *Ugh, this has turned into such an ordeal...* She let out a sigh. Then Nigel cheerfully took her by the arm.

“Shall we be off, *dear sister?*”

And so began their first day of school.

Chapter 26: The Aptitude Test

THE students all gathered in the entrance hall for the opening ceremony. Iris glanced around. The newly enrolled students were all lined up; standing near the back was Camille du Pont, chatting happily with her new friend.

For a commoner, she was a naturally pretty girl, but she lacked refinement—she seemed oblivious to the fact that her sky-blue hair was sticking up all over the place like a bad case of bedhead. Here among the strictly disciplined daughters of nobility, she was visibly unpolished. That said, others could tell she was a diamond in the rough, and she still attracted her fair share of attention. Iris could see several people shooting furtive glances in Camille's direction.

Next, it was time for the student council president to give a speech, representing the existing student body. Likewise, representing the incoming freshmen was none other than the second prince, Reseda du Geyer. The girls all swooned as he walked onstage.

As for Iris, everyone seemed to be keeping their distance, probably because she had a naturally unfriendly face befitting a villainess. Plus, they all knew she was a smallpox survivor. Iris let out a quiet sigh. Would she be able to make *any* friends here? How was she supposed to speak to these nobles? She didn't know how to break the ice without talking about otome games. And obviously, video games didn't exist here. "*Read any good books lately?*" or *something, perhaps?*

Near the end of the ceremony, each new student would be called by name to perform an aptitude test right there on the spot. Similar to the physical fitness exam from Iris's past life, it involved a

handful of measurements: memory, judgment, strength, agility, stamina, mana, and charm.

Ability was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, with 3 being average. Based on these measurements, students were categorized as scholars, warriors, or mages. And in the event that you scored equally high in the warrior and mage categories, for example, you could study to become a mage-knight.

The objective of the academy's curriculum was to bring every student's aptitude scores up to a 3.5 across the board prior to graduation. These scores were announced publicly at the start of each school year. And for those aiming to become the Holy Maiden or a royal mage, naturally, aptitude in the mage category was mandatory.

Each student placed their hand in a bowl of magical water, then pressed their wet palm to a stone slab called the Aptitude Stone. The droplets from their palm would rise into the air, displaying their stats for all to see before they were absorbed into the record books.

Iris's heart thumped in her chest as she waited. This was the moment she would almost certainly be disqualified from Holy Maiden candidacy. *Honestly, how did Iris make it through this part of the game if she couldn't use magic?* It was a total mystery. In *HanaKoro*, Camille was the only person present for this scene.

The first to be summoned was Reseda. He walked boldly forward, dipped his hand into the water, then pressed his palm to the stone. Moments later, his stats rose up into the air, tinged pink with tiny flecks of gold.

[Memory—4; Judgment—4; Strength—3; Agility—4; Stamina—3; Mana—4; Charm—5; Aptitude—Almighty]

No surprise there. He's practically perfect already, Iris thought. Next, it was Nigel's turn. His stats were emerald green, like his hair—the color of a true hero.

[Memory—3; Judgment—3; Strength—5; Agility—4; Stamina—4; Mana—2; Charm—4; Aptitude—Warrior]

Iris was surprised to learn his mana stat wasn't a zero. *Maybe I have more than I thought? I still don't think I could cast anything, though,* she mused silently. She was his twin, after all. Surely they would have the same aptitude.

A short time later, Camille's turn rolled around. Her stats were an iridescent white color, provoking a murmur of surprise from the teachers; evidently, this was not so common.

[Memory—4; Judgment—2; Strength—2; Agility—2; Stamina—4; Mana—5; Charm—4; Aptitude—Scholar/Mage]

Her stamina score was probably a direct reflection of her determination and spirit, and as the protagonist, she naturally scored high in charm and mana, too. This caused something of a stir. She was categorized as both a scholar and a mage, which meant she met the benchmarks required for a Holy Maiden, just like in *HanaKoro*.

She really is the Holy Maiden, Iris nodded to herself. Meanwhile, everyone else was grumbling in disbelief that a mere commoner could score so high. Even Camille was having trouble believing it. "Really?" she whispered to herself, looking around the room incredulously.

"Hmmm," Reseda murmured, intrigued. Likewise, Nigel looked at Camille with curiosity.

Then, lastly, it was Iris's turn. Swallowing hard, she summoned all her courage and plunged her hand into the water. A chill ran up her arm and down her spine. Then, without thinking, she slammed her palm down on the Aptitude Stone.

There was a low, rumbling sound as a crack formed on its surface. A bright light shot out from the crack, jumbling all the transparent letters and numbers together.

“Wait, what? Huh? What’s happening?”

As Iris panicked, Reseda grabbed her by the arm and pulled her close. Cytisus moved in front of the stone and cast a magic circle over it as a shield. Between them, Nigel stood with his sword at the ready.



Then, with a dry *POP*, the stone broke clean in two.

The entrance hall went deathly silent. Everyone looked at Iris as Reseda held her in his arms. Blinking, she forced a polite smile.

Oh no, oh no, oh no. What do I do? High-born girls don't prostrate themselves, do they? So, what do I say?! Quick, think of someone I could imitate!

Iris thought of all the noble girls in all the media she'd consumed in her past life—but all she knew were snobby villainesses!

“I beg your pardon, but this thing appears to be broken. Shall I pay to have it replaced?”

At this, the entire room froze over. Then Reseda burst out laughing, Nigel fell to his knees, and Cytisus shook his head.

Chapter 27: The Lecture

AFTER the aptitude test, they led Iris off to a conference room, where *HanaKoro*'s three love interests all looked at her dubiously. Because of her, the opening ceremony was completely derailed. Not only that, but they'd discovered that she'd already met their beloved protagonist Camille. All in all, they probably had a lot on their minds.

So...which one of them will start yelling first? That stone wasn't some irreplaceable artifact or something, was it? Good grief, it's only my first day here, and I've already screwed everything up! Kill me now! Iris stared absently up at the ceiling as her brain attempted to escape reality. *Wow, the wallpaper here is really fancy. I like the flowers-and-vines pattern, especially how it's all interconnected.*

Cytisus looked at her and sighed. "First of all, we will have the Aptitude Stone repaired back at the Temple of Magic, so no monetary compensation will be required."

"Oh, that's wonderful news! Thank you! Thank you so much!" Iris bowed her head so quickly, her forehead slammed into the table, and her curls bounced everywhere.

"We will need to investigate what caused it to break, and I know at least one mage in particular who is very eager to do so."

The image of Pavot, the mage in charge of the Specialized Arts Division, rose to the forefront of her mind. Iris smiled stiffly. "But...didn't I cause it to break? By slamming my hand down too hard?" she asked, staring at the table.

"You really think you're strong enough to shatter stone with your bare hands?" Nigel scoffed.

"I'm stronger than *you*, at least!" Iris shot back.

"Well, you shouldn't be! You're supposed to be a proper lady!"

Sorry, but I have to be! Worst-case scenario, I'll have to fight you all off myself!

"So, you're saying brute force *isn't* the cause of the fracture?" Reseda asked.

Cytisus nodded. "We plan to look into it."

"B-But...it couldn't be my *mana* that caused it, surely!" Iris exclaimed.

He looked back at her. A magic circle lit up within his monocle; he scrutinized Iris for a moment, then let out another sigh. "Indeed, you don't appear to have much mana. I imagine it would be on par with Nigel's, if that."

"Which means I'll be categorized as a warrior, right? Not a mage? So, I have no chance of becoming the Holy Maiden?" she pressed.

At this, he donned a soft smile. But right as she breathed a sigh of relief—

"I'd say the possibility has grown stronger."

That was not the answer I was expecting. Iris recoiled sharply.

"This is the first time in recorded history that anyone has broken the Aptitude Stone."

"I'm telling you, I simply struck it too hard!"

Are you kidding me?! If I'd known this would have happened, I would have caressed it like a lover instead of slapping it like the Enter key at the end of a twelve-hour shift at the office!

This accident must have happened in the game, too. That would explain how Iris kept her position as a Holy Maiden candidate despite being completely unqualified.

"As soon as the stone has been repaired, we will ask you to retry the aptitude test," Cytisus explained.

Wait, what? If so, then won't I just get disqualified on the spot? Or was the Aptitude Stone just never successfully repaired in the game? Cytisus and Pavot seem more than talented enough to fix it, though... Iris couldn't think of an explanation, so she decided to put this mystery on the back burner for the time being.

"Now then, shall we move on to the main topic of discussion?" Reseda suggested, smiling brightly.

Oh god, there's more? Iris averted her eyes.

"I was aware that the two of you knew each other, but you appear to be rather close. Just how much time were you spending with her in town?" he asked.

Cytisus looked at Iris expectantly.

"Who *is* she, Iris?" Nigel grumbled.

"She's a girl from the store that sells the camellia oil I use on my scars," Iris explained. "I only ever spoke to her once. Trust me, I was just as surprised as you were."

They had exactly one conversation two full years ago, during which Iris was wearing what she thought was a fairly foolproof disguise, and at no point did she reveal her name or social standing...but somehow Camille managed to recognize her regardless! From Iris's perspective, the game had to be cheating!

Alas, the truth was, her scheme just hadn't worked as well as she'd hoped.

"Then why was she calling you *her* sister? You're *my* sister!"

Was that why Nigel was sulking? Oh, you precious thing. You just love your sister to bits, don't you? I couldn't be happier.

“Of course I’m your sister, silly. I didn’t give her my name, so she must have simply defaulted to calling me that. I promise, I’m not going to replace you with her.”

At this, he meekly nodded his assent.

“Do you know that girl’s family lineage, Miss Iris?” Cytisus asked, and Iris faltered. Given that Nigel and Reseda were both present, it didn’t feel like a good time to reveal that she was actually the illegitimate daughter of the House of Sade.

“No, I don’t. I only met her once,” Iris answered quietly, staring at her lap.

Cytisus had taken an interest in Camille ever since Iris mentioned her to him. After a little digging, he had learned that her mother was a former maid in the employ of the Sade family—a maid who used to look after him, in fact, until one day she simply disappeared. He hadn’t spoken to anyone about this matter, but he sensed that his father had to be involved somehow. That being said, because it wasn’t public knowledge, his only option was to stay quiet.

“I see...” He shrugged lightly. An awkward silence followed.

“Oh, Iris, you’re such a troublemaker. I wish I could just *lock* you up somewhere,” Reseda sighed.

A chill ran down her spine. This was Reseda of the “Caged Love” route talking! His deep-seated thirst for confinement was patently obvious!

“Your Highness, ladies are not objects you can *chain* down as you please,” Nigel chided him.

Iris couldn’t believe it. Here sat Nigel of the “Chains of Love” route, discouraging said chains! At this rate, perhaps he could safely date Camille after all!

"That's exactly right! Spoken like a true gentleman, my dear brother!" Iris exclaimed gleefully, gazing at him with her eyes sparkling as she praised his emotional maturity.

He smiled, blushing. "Of course."

Iris was so touched, she pressed a hand to her mouth. Meanwhile, Reseda scowled.

"Besides, there's nothing to worry about. I shall keep my sister safe, Your Highness," Nigel continued.

"I don't think she really needs to be protected," Cytisus remarked with a smile. "After all, she's bold enough to twist a prince's arm on palace grounds...and *now*, she's a potential Holy Maiden."

At this, Reseda and Nigel both stared into space in defeat. As for Iris, she was so embarrassed, she wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Chapter 28: Academy Life

AND so, Iris's new life at Chrysanthème Academy finally began. Like in *HanaKoro*, Reseda and Camille were assigned to the same homeroom class, as were Nigel and Mégane, while Iris was the odd one out.

As it turned out, Mégane was actually the daughter of the baron who'd adopted Camille. Now that they shared the same surname, the two of them had become good friends, but whenever Camille was with someone else, Mégane kept her distance, possibly out of shyness. Part of Iris wished she would stick around to protect Camille from the other noble girls, but perhaps this was asking too much. Mégane wasn't strong-willed and catty like they were, after all.

These days, Iris's only concern was keeping Camille locked out of the "Thousand-Year Slumber" route. And since Cytisus still had a girlfriend this time around, she couldn't see him hooking up with Camille anytime soon. Other than that, she had no interest in derailing Camille's love life, nor was she engaged to Reseda.

Frankly, if the future Holy Maiden paired up with the prince of the kingdom, they would make the perfect couple... Alternatively, now that Nigel had lost interest in chains, he was an option, too. Iris didn't see an issue either way.



IRIS stood in front of the campus bulletin board, staring up at the entrance exam results posted there.

Noooooooo!!!

First was the practical sword-fighting exam—Iris was confident she would do well in that one, and sure enough, she ranked first. Any less and she'd be in trouble. In the worst-case scenario, she needed

to be able to overpower a prince, a mage, and a knight, then run away to safety! So, Iris entered the school tournament and mowed down the boys left and right until it was just her and Nigel. Then, when she defeated him, she was gloriously crowned the tournament winner. She raised her practice sword high in the air, and naturally, all the girls squealed.

Next, there was the magic exam...and Iris came in dead last. Of course. She *knew* she was going to. It made sense. She couldn't cast a single thing. Even Nigel managed to summon a faint breeze, but not Iris. The fairies got so worried, they flew out of her hair and offered to help, but of course, she told them not to. That would be cheating, after all. While she was at it, Iris asked them not to enter school grounds, but they got mad and started tugging on her hair in protest. So, they settled on a compromise: no helping her with magic at school. After all, it was nice to have them around to talk to, since they were so very cute.

Lastly, there was a written exam. Here was her real problem: she had ranked first on this one as well. Iris should've let Camille beat her at this one, since she aced the magic exam. Iris remembered all the hours she'd spent playing *Hanakoro*, painstakingly grinding her stats so she could reach the top of the board... This was a critical moment for the game's narrative. If Camille scored high, she would attract the attention of her chosen love interest. But while she ranked first on the magic exam, she was only second on the written exam.

Ugh, I haven't broken her romance flags, have I?

On second thought, it was probably fine. While Iris wasn't out to ruin her every opportunity to go on a date, it would certainly make the happy-bad endings easier to avoid if none of the main three were interested in her. Besides, she was pretty enough to attract plenty of *other* boys, right? So, Iris shrugged it off as a necessary evil.

Most of the exam questions were about things Reseda had previously taught her, and Iris recognized almost all of them from the game, so really, she just got lucky. But while she knew that there was no crime in having memorized random game facts, she couldn't help but feel like she'd cheated. At the same time, however, it would have been wrong of her to mess up the answers on purpose...

Iris could feel other people's eyes stabbing into her. She was the infamous first-year who had broken the Aptitude Stone, after all. No matter how hard she tried to explain that she'd merely slammed it too hard, no one believed a delicate high-born girl was capable of such a thing. Instead, they decided she was being modest!

Well, at least now these exam results made one thing clear: Iris had zero aptitude for magic, and she was unfit to be a Holy Maiden. Her future career was as a soldier and nothing more. Now everyone would accept that Iris had shattered the stone with brute strength alone!

"Very impressive, Iris," Reseda called out to her. He had ranked second in magic, third on the written exam, and third in sword fighting, right below Nigel.

"I couldn't have done it without your tutoring, Your Highness," she replied, still feeling guilty.

"*Reseda*."

"...*Prince Reseda*."

"This isn't why I tutored you, though," he muttered quietly. But Iris didn't understand what he meant by that, so she just stared at him blankly.

Nigel suddenly took her by the arm and pulled her away from Reseda. "You know, I wasn't enthusiastic about you beating me in the tournament, but now, I see you ranked first on the written test, too. You've earned it, Iris. I'll just have to catch up to you."

"No, no, I just got lucky. You very nearly won that tournament," Iris denied hastily. She did *not* want Nigel trying any harder than he already was. It was a very close competition, and truth be told, she almost lost. "Come to think of it, Nigel, you seemed unfocused while we were dueling. Without that distraction, you would have beaten me."

He smiled stiffly. The "distraction" she spoke of was actually just him noticing how beautifully Iris fought when she was desperate, but he would sooner die than tell her that.

"No, it was precisely that lack of focus that makes me the lesser fighter. You deserved to beat me."

He meant it, too. But if *Iris* was his biggest weakness, then he would never stand a chance against her one-on-one. He would simply have to work on building up his mental fortitude; after all, he couldn't bear to let his sister beat him over and over.

Just then, Iris heard a commotion and looked over her shoulder. Camille and Mégane were standing at the bulletin board. Camille spotted Iris and her eyes lit up. *Oh, good heavens, look at that perfect smile!* Reflexively, Iris took a step back.

"Congratulations, Lady Iris! I expected nothing less from you!" She dashed over to Iris while Mégane watched her go.

"Likewise, you performed superbly as well, Miss Camille."

"I worked really hard!"

Behind her, Iris could hear people whispering loudly:

"She's so full of herself."

"She has no manners."

At this, Camille flinched. "I...I apologize for my rudeness, Lady Iris."

Must be hard to be a protagonist, Iris thought with a heavy sigh. Then she announced in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear: “You truly seem to lack etiquette, don’t you, Miss Camille?”

“Urk...I...I’m sorry...” She shrank down into herself.

“I’ll simply have to teach you myself. I do hope you’re prepared, my dear.”

With a sneer, Iris cast her gaze around at everyone else. They all instinctively stepped back, including Mégane. *Uh-oh. Am I overdoing the villainess thing?*

The dense, pushy heroine suddenly grabbed Iris’s hand in delight. “Thank you so much, Lady Iris!”

Wait, what? But I’m supposed to be the villain here...

Though Iris was confused by her reaction, at the very least, she found she was relieved—and oddly excited—to have an excuse to give this girl some proper training.

First things first, we’ll start with the basics—like fixing that awful bedhead. I’ll make a lady out of you yet!

Chapter 29: Totes Adorbs, Part 1

STANDING at the window of the second-floor hallway, Reseda let out a heavy sigh.

On the north side of campus, out behind the school building, there was a dark and dreary backyard with a single drab picnic table that no one ever used. Possibly its entire purpose there was to justify calling that place a “backyard.” But right now, Iris and Camille were sitting there.

Despite their dimly lit surroundings, the two girls seemed to glow faintly—*probably from fairies*, Reseda figured, though it was hard to tell at such a distance. Camille was endowed with a lot of mana, and as such, she could see fairies. Conversely, because she could see them, they liked to gather around her. As for Iris, she had received the fairies’ blessings, and she played with them on a near-daily basis. But although they were a normal part of life to her, most of the other students couldn’t see them at all. Instead, they probably thought the *girls* were sparkling.

After school, the two girls were struggling to finish an assignment. For the first time ever, Camille had asked Reseda for help, since he was the only student whose talent at magic and schoolwork exceeded hers. But he refused, and for one simple reason: he didn’t want Iris to get the wrong idea about it. As for Iris, however, she found it needlessly mean of him to refuse to help Camille.

From his point of view, it felt like a false accusation. As a prince, if he were to spend private time with a young lady, it would surely create future misunderstandings. Thus, he was right to avoid it. But at the same time, he still regretted it.

“Perhaps I made the wrong choice...”

Another aggravated sigh escaped his peachy-pink lips. All around him, the girls swooned. Sensing their gazes, he looked around and discovered that a handful of other students had gathered at the few north-facing windows. Like him, they gazed out at the backyard.

If I'd known this would happen, I would have gone with them, he thought, exhaling slightly.

“Even you’re spying on them, Your Highness? Reprehensible behavior for a prince,” Nigel scowled, scanning the hallway as he stood beside Reseda. Meanwhile, in the distance, Camille and Iris had leaned in close and shared a giggle.

“I’d like you to warn Iris not to do such things in public.”

“What things?”

“Everyone’s going to realize how cute she is!” Reseda hissed, eyeing the other students pressed up against the windows.

“Not her fault she’s been cute since the day she was born.”

“As if you can even *remember* the day you two were born!”

“I remember it in my soul.”

Reseda let out an annoyed sigh. Nigel was a gallant knight and a good friend, but his obsession with his sister was downright obnoxious. He was criticizing Reseda for doing the exact same thing he was doing!

Today’s assignment: roll up a magic scroll and seal it shut with a braided cord. This assignment would be graded on two points: whether it was done using the right spells and whether it looked professional. The cord could be braided to look like flowers, butterflies, or other auspicious patterns—difficult to achieve, but the end result was gorgeous.

Among the aristocracy, secret or important letters were always sealed with a braided cord, and each noble house had its own signature cord and braiding pattern. This way, it would become immediately apparent if someone else opened and resealed the letter; the cord and braiding pattern wouldn't match. Love letters, in particular, were usually sealed in this fashion.

But because commoners had no such braiding traditions, naturally, Camille knew nothing about it. Unlike the other students, she would first have to invent her own unique braiding style before she could do anything else. But that was where Iris came in.

The House of Chevalier used a mint-green cord woven with metallic purple stripes—a luxurious design fit for nobility. Naturally, it was braided in the shape of an iris. Camille didn't have her own unique cord yet, so she used the white cord reserved for braiding practice. Right now, she was trying to learn how to braid it in the shape of a camellia. She gleefully showed Iris her latest attempt, and Iris smiled encouragingly, all while Reseda watched from the school building.

“That smile belongs to me alone,” he muttered.

“No, it doesn’t, Your Highness,” Nigel shot back.

“My future wife is so cute...”

“She’s not going to marry you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

Naturally, Iris couldn’t hear a word of this conversation.

She pulled out a small box wrapped up in string. Inside was the scroll her teacher had enchanted with magic. Likewise, the string was enchanted to seal the box. As soon as the box was opened, the scroll

would start jumping around, and it was up to the girls to stop it with magic, roll it up into a tube shape, and seal it with their braided cord.

Camille and Iris exchanged a look...and then Iris ripped the string off her box. When she lifted the lid, sure enough, the scroll came floating up. At this point, Iris was supposed to freeze its movements with magic. She pointed her wand and recited the incantation—but nothing happened. Instead, the scroll jumped off the picnic table.

In a panic, she threw her wand. It pierced straight through the paper and pinned it to the ground. Then she grabbed the scroll with her bare hands and rolled it up manually. Naturally, it flailed in protest.

“She’s *criminally* cute,” Reseda whispered as he watched all this unfold from the window. The flailing scroll reminded him of a freshly caught fish flopping on land.

Iris took the stupid thing and slammed it down on the table. Camille and the other students all watched in shock as the scroll went limp. Beaming from ear to ear, Iris braided her cord around it to seal it shut, then crossed her arms proudly.

“*Totes adorbs...!*” Reseda wheezed.

Nigel clutched his head in confusion. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know—Iris was saying it earlier. It’s probably commoner slang.”

Nigel shook his head in disbelief. What sort of prince would try to use commoner slang? He was starting to think Reseda had tunnel vision for Iris. After all, nothing that had transpired just now could possibly be categorized as cute—even Nigel could see that. If anything, it was utterly idiotic.

Chapter 30: Totes Adorbs, Part 2

IT was Camille's turn next. Timidly, she opened her box, and her scroll fluttered up to greet her. Then she cast her spell, and the paper promptly dropped to the table. She rolled it up with ease; Iris praised her, and Camille smiled bashfully. From there, she seemed to struggle with the braiding section, so Iris took her by the hand and walked her through it, step by step. After that, she had officially sealed her scroll.

But right as the girls were celebrating, Iris's scroll started flopping around again. Hastily, she snatched it up and slammed it on the table a few more times. The poor thing twitched pathetically. Truth be told, it was impossible to overpower a magic spell with brute force; after enough time, it would start flailing again.

"And there it goes again," Reseda laughed, watching as the scroll writhed in her grip. It slipped out of her hand and fell to the ground.

How can you laugh at her? Nigel thought reproachfully.

Meanwhile, Camille hastily cast a spell on Iris's scroll, stopping it for good. But as Iris beamed at her, Reseda frowned.

"Nigel, have you heard the rumors?"

"What rumors?"

"The rumors that Iris has been bullying Miss Camille in private, under the pretense of tutoring her."

Nigel sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Right, that. Some girls came and told me about it, actually. But what part of *this* is bullying?"

"Beats me," Reseda replied absently. "But we'll need to quash the rumors, so I want you to talk to her. Tell her that whenever she

wants to meet up with Miss Camille, she should do so in a conference room where I'm present."

Nigel looked back at him skeptically. Reseda claimed to have a good reason for doing this, but in actuality, he just didn't want anyone else to see Iris smiling.

"Tell her yourself, milord."

"I don't want her to get mad at me."

"The royal family will never accept her, you know," Nigel warned him quietly.

At this, Reseda faltered and looked at him. Despite the awkwardness, Nigel held his ground. He cared about both Iris *and* Reseda, which was precisely why he had to come out and say it. He couldn't support Reseda's doomed crush.

"Not with her soilpox scars."

Because of her scars, Iris still didn't have a fiancé, though many of her peers did.

"Surely no one cares about such trivial details anymore."

"That's not all. Do you see that? Iris has *no mana*. She can't finish a single assignment the way she's supposed to."

"What about you?"

"I can cast spells, at the very least."

He showed Reseda his scroll—perfectly immobile, tied with a glossy emerald green cord with diagonal purple and gold stripes, braided in the shape of an iris flower. It matched Iris's almost exactly, just as one might expect from her twin.

"Yep, your spell worked, all right. I guess she's even worse than you."

"Which means she can never be the Holy Maiden."

Camille's mana was tremendous, and it still had the potential to grow. A score of 5 was not the upper limit of her aptitude; it simply indicated that she excelled in that category, with no precise measurement.

As for Iris, their father was right—she'd have to become the Holy Maiden if she wanted to stand a chance of marrying into the royal family. Was Reseda really prepared to fight for her if she failed? If not, then Nigel wanted him to back off. Otherwise, if Iris got her hopes up, she'd only get hurt in the end...and he didn't want to see that happen to her.

"There are upsides to not having any mana, you know," Reseda replied unexpectedly. "She's very resistant to any magic cast upon her. That's a useful trait to have, is it not?"

At this, Nigel blinked in surprise. Reseda had a way of always looking on the bright side—something Nigel sincerely admired about him.

"Take my charm amplification spell, for example. It doesn't work on her at all," he continued, chuckling mischievously.

"Excuse me? You've been casting magic to boost your own sex appeal?! On school grounds?!"

"Well, I *tried*. But it didn't work."

"Never do that again!"

"Why? It doesn't break the rules. Besides, everyone does it. Who wouldn't want to look good in front of the opposite sex?"

Nigel rolled his eyes. "Insecure much?"

"Now then, I think it's time I went down there. If Iris submits a scroll with Miss Camille's magic on it, I can only imagine what the teacher will say."

Reseda whipped out his wand and began to cast a spell on himself.

“Your Highness!”

Reseda knew it would have no effect, but he couldn’t help but try regardless. Once his charm was boosted an additional twenty percent, he set off strolling down the hall.

Then he met up with Iris and opened the small box containing her scroll. A magic circle had been affixed to it, trapping it inside.

“Iris, if you submit this scroll, it’ll count as cheating,” he explained.

Camille and Iris exchanged an alarmed look.

“Retract your spell, Miss Camille. And Iris, just submit the entire box when you turn it in.”

“Oh, of course! That way, it won’t flop around! Thank you for the helpful advice, Your Highness!” Iris told him, beaming.

I’m not Your Highness, he thought. But he didn’t want to ruin the moment.

After Iris put the scroll in the box, he picked it up. “Now I’ll do this.”

He tied the box with his own braiding cord in the shape of a cherry blossom. The teacher would see it and understand its meaning: that he’d decided she had completed the assignment to the best of her ability while unable to cast magic.

“Thank you so much! Now maybe I won’t get yelled at!”

Iris grinned at him, and he blushed shyly.

Chapter 31: The Retest

IRIS accompanied Cytisus to a private room at the Temple of Magic. There, Specialized Arts Division supervisor Pavot sat alone, waiting for them. On the table in front of her was the Aptitude Stone, all back to normal. *Perhaps they need me to pay for the damages after all... I just hope it's an amount my family can afford...* Nervous, Iris looked at Cytisus, and he nodded firmly back. She gulped.

"In the near future, you will be asked to undergo a formal re-evaluation back at the academy, but first, we'd like to run a preliminary test on you, Miss Iris."

Iris blinked in confusion. "Whatever for?"

"I hate to say this, but...it's possible the results won't be too impressive, so I felt you might like to know about it ahead of time."

"So my aptitude is...bad...?"

Worried, Iris looked from Cytisus to Pavot. Cytisus looked conflicted, while Pavot gazed at her with unabashed excitement. From what Iris could see beneath her hood, Pavot looked rather young.

Yep, I'm screwed.

"Lady Iris, will you please place your hand into the water?" Pavot asked in her high-pitched voice.

Iris slid her hand into the vessel of water sitting beside the stone. Like last time, a chill shot down her spine. But this time, she wasn't going to panic! She took a deep breath, suppressing the visceral disgust she felt.

"Next, Lord Cytisus, take her hand and imbue it with mana before setting it on the stone," Pavot commanded.

As he took Iris by the wrist, her hand started to glow faintly blue.
“Now, to the stone.”



As Cytisus continued to hold her wrist, Iris gingerly pressed her palm against the Aptitude Stone. This time, the stats that rose up weren't transparent but navy blue.

[Memory—3; Judgment—3; Strength—4; Agility—4; Stamina—3; Mana—3; Charm—4; Aptitude—Warrior]

Iris let out a sigh of relief. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Stay still for a moment, Lady Iris. Now, Lord Cytisus, reduce your mana output."

The blue glow dimmed, and the navy blue mana stat lowered to a 2.

Breathing heavily, Pavot looked at Cytisus. "Ooh... Impressive as always, Lord Cytisus... Can you go lower than that? You *can*, can't you?"

As Cytisus sighed in exasperation, Iris cringed slightly. She recognized that look on Pavot's face—the look of an otome gamer fangirling over her best boy! Then the blue glow faded even further, and the mana stat dropped to 1, slowly turning transparent.

"Aah! Yes! That's incredible, Lord Cytisus! You're the only man I know with such strong control over his mana!"

"This is as far as we go." Right as he spoke, the stone slab began to vibrate. "Miss Iris, remove your hand!"

He yanked Iris's hand back, and the stats instantly vanished. Pavot looked at Iris, panting. "I knew it! The stats reflect the color of your mana! But as we suspected, you have none!"

"None?" Iris looked back at her in surprise.

"Zero. Here's what we've learned from our most recent analysis: the Aptitude Stone is designed to rank attributes from 1 to 5, but when you showed up with a 0, it confused the system. That's why I had Lord Cytisus imbue you with his mana just now—to keep the

system stable while it ranked the rest of your aptitude. Then he tried to reduce his mana to the absolute bare minimum...but still not entirely, correct?"

"Indeed," Cytisus nodded.

Oh, so it's just a programming bug... Wait... You mean a GLITCH made the whole thing break in half...?! Iris stared into space. Still, she was glad to know she hadn't broken it.

"Sadly, this stone isn't strong enough to fully measure your aptitude. For now, the Temple of Magic will send your current results back to the school," he continued. Then he looked at her with pity in his eyes. "Try not to take it too hard, Lady Iris."

Iris blinked at him.

"Never in my life have I heard of someone without mana attending Chrysanthème Academy. I imagine you'll struggle considerably."

Though he sounded worried for her, Iris struck a triumphant pose. "YES! This is it! Now I'll never be the Holy Maiden! I can't wait to tell my father!"

Cytisus stared, dumbstruck, as she rejoiced. "You're...*happy*?"

"Of course she is!" Pavot chimed in. Iris looked at her, confused.

"Miss Pavot was once a Holy Maiden candidate herself," Cytisus explained with a sigh. "But although she had the highest mana of them all...she's now the Maiden's Aide instead."

Pavot pulled her hood down over her face. "If you ever have any questions, feel free to ask," she mumbled in a small voice.

"Okay!" Iris never suspected she was a last-generation candidate. "Say, um, seeing as I have no mana, does this mean I'll be expelled from the academy? I'd really rather attend, if possible."

“As long as you do well in your other classes, I don’t see any reason for them to expel you.”

“Oh, good!” Iris replied, relieved. Everything had worked out perfectly! She hopped to her feet. *Time to tell Father and His Highness!*

“Just a moment, Lady Iris,” Pavot called.

Panting, she looked at Iris with feverish eyes. *Eeeek!*

“Lady Iris, may I...touch you?”

“Wha?! No thank you!”

Terrified, Iris ran and hid behind the couch. Who would agree to that when the person asking was practically salivating?!

“Just a little, I promise... Just a tiny bit...”

As Iris backed away, she shook her head and waved her hands dismissively. She was so scared, she could scarcely speak.

“Stop that. You’re frightening her,” Cytisus scolded Pavot.

“But Lord Cytisus, I’ve been waiting for this moment for so very long!”

She crept closer; Iris prepared to make a run for it. Worst-case scenario, she could punch her to escape!

As Pavot reached for her, Iris slapped her hand away, ran to the blue door, and put her hand on the knob...

Chapter 32: The Test Results

“WAIT! Lady Iris! Listen to me! When Lord Cytisus showed me the vaccine you made with Lady Sauge’s mana, I was really impressed! Normally, it’s impossible to get magic to retain so much of a fairy’s wing color, and I kept wondering how you managed it, but now, I finally understand!” Pavot rambled.

She sounded so desperate, Iris stopped short. “Wing color?”

“Yes! The purple wing color!”

Confused, Iris looked at Cytisus.

“When you receive a fairy’s blessing, they will sometimes grant you their mana. Isn’t that how you originally created the vaccine?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, in those instances, the fairy’s mana mixes with that of the blessed person. It’s never purely the fairy’s mana alone.”

Pavot nodded along with his explanation, then launched into one of her own.

“Lady Sauge’s mana is purple with gold flecks, just like her wings. But if she were to mix her mana with Lord Cytisus, for example, a tiny amount of his own mana would mix with hers, resulting in magic that’s tinged blue. So, while they say that a fairy’s mana is the same color as their wings, only the person who received that mana would be able to confirm it because the result always looks slightly different.

“Furthermore, each person’s mana has its own quirks. Sometimes, when it’s converted into magic, it warps and changes color. These little idiosyncrasies are very difficult to remove. But the

vaccine magic didn't have any quirks or impurities at all, and because it was so simple and straightforward, it was that much easier to replicate! All this time, I wondered what the secret was...but now I know!"

Pavot looked at Iris, her eyes sparkling with childish glee from under her hood.

"It's because you don't have *any* mana whatsoever! Oh, Lady Iris, I've never met anyone like you in all my life!"

Iris stared at her, stunned. While her guard was down, Pavot rushed over to Iris and took her by the hand.

"I just can't believe it! People like you really *do* exist! This is truly incredible. Not only that, but you're able to talk to a Fairy Leader—why, it's nothing short of a miracle! I was always taught that those without mana are incapable of seeing fairies at all!" she babbled excitedly.

"Uhhh..."

"Not only that, but any magic performed with you as a conduit is so much easier to analyze! With your help, we might finally start to systematize some of the fairy magic that's eluded us all this time!"

Her enthusiasm was intense. Iris rubbed her temple. It sounded like Pavot wanted to use Iris as a...mana capacitor or something? Iris smiled stiffly. Apparently, she was like a strainer for fairy mana; whenever it passed through Iris, the end product was devoid of imperfections.

"Er, Lady Pavot? I don't think Lady Sauge will agree so readily," Iris protested hesitantly. "I have no mana of my own, and I can't cast anything. I doubt she'll lend me her mana without good reason."

At this, Pavot fell to her knees.

“Ugh, you’re right... Just when I thought we might make some advancements in our magical research, too... *Man*, I wanted to try recreating some ancient spells!”

Ignoring her grumbling, Cytisus gently pushed Iris out of the room. Once he had shut the door behind them, he let out a heavy sigh.

“Lord Cytisus, er...did we break her?”

“Trust me, she’ll get over it,” he replied with a half-smirk.

This comment struck Iris as unusually callous, considering he was generally quite diplomatic. She looked at him dubiously; he let out an embarrassed laugh.

“I suppose I’ll tell you now: *that* is my fiancée.”

“Wha?!”

“When I recreated the vaccine, she was the first lunatic to ingest it,” he sighed.

A smile crept up on Iris’s face. “That’s very sweet. She must trust you a great deal.”

He blinked at her in surprise. Then, after a moment, he nodded. “Thank you. Many struggle to understand her and her distaste for fashionable society, but she means a great deal to me.”

It was so romantic, it made Iris’s cheeks flush.

But on the other hand, now she understood why game-Iris couldn’t step down from the Holy Maiden candidacy...and why she was forced to offer up her life force in the Tower of Prayer. If the Maiden’s Aide, Pavot, had died, then the Holy Maiden’s power would have been at an all-time low. And with no one around to repair the broken Aptitude Stone, Iris would never have had accurate aptitude results.

Then, after Camille died, zero-mana Iris was the only candidate left. The royal palace must have been in such an uproar... The Holy Maiden was required to offer her mana in the Tower of Prayer, but since Iris didn't have any, she could only offer her life force. *Yikes, that's terrifying...*

But at least now she'd managed to avoid all of that! *Now I'll never be crowned the Holy Maiden!* Iris did a secret fist-pump.



A few days later, Iris was summoned to the headmaster's office with her father, Lord Chevalier, to discuss her aptitude results. She eagerly hoped this would be the moment she was formally dropped from the Holy Maiden race.

Unfortunately, the headmaster betrayed her expectations entirely.

"Never before have we had a student with no mana...but of course, that's nothing we need to announce to the public."

Iris's father nodded along happily.

"Wait, but...I can't be the Holy Maiden without any mana, can I?" she asked.

"Not to worry. The aptitude test results only show your current status," the headmaster explained. "If you work hard to improve, that aptitude might very well double."

Spoken like a true teacher. Wait, but two times zero is still zero! And for the record, I have NO intention of improving! Aptitude is something you're born with. Do you really think I can change these things just through hard work alone?! Instead of forcing myself to be something I'm not, I should just be proud of what talents I DO have!

"You have plenty of time, Iris. I know you can do it. You'd never lose to a mere commoner," her father chimed in.

No matter how much they hated Iris, most of the upper crust wanted to see her win—purely to ensure that Camille *wouldn't*. She could only imagine how hard this must have been for game-Iris, with everyone commanding her to take a position she knew she wasn't qualified for. But she never knew she had *zero* mana, so she probably kept trying and trying and trying...and every time she failed, it destroyed her a little more... Her chest ached at the thought. That being said, it still didn't justify her going around bullying and stabbing people, but at the same time...if only she could have escaped it all, maybe she could have had her own happy ending somewhere.

Well, I'm not going to jump through these rich people's hoops! I'm outta here!

And so, Iris decided to go and break the news to Reseda.

Chapter 33: Breaking the News

IRIS availed herself of an empty conference room and invited Reseda to meet her there. Generally speaking, girls were not permitted inside the boys' dorm and vice versa, and since Reseda attracted a lot of attention, there weren't many places on campus where they could speak privately. When he arrived at the conference room, he had a giddy grin on his face.

"I think this is the first time you've ever asked me to meet with you." He quietly shut the door, then walked directly to the chair beside her and sat there. "And it's just the two of us too! I feel special."

You know this attitude of yours is why the game made you into a playboy character, right? Iris let out a small sigh. "There's something I want you to know."

"Me specifically? So I *am* special?" Smiling playfully, he tilted his head.

Iris smiled back. "I have no mana!"

"What? *None*? Not even a little?" He frowned dubiously.

"That's right—not even a little! Zero. Zilch!"

"Oh..."

Iris was so delighted, she didn't notice his tone went flat.

"So, I'll never be the Holy Maiden. I wanted you to know because...well, you may have forgotten by now, but...when we were younger, we had a conversation about you wanting to marry me if I— On second thought, if you don't remember, then don't worry about it. You don't need to remember it!"

"You mean how I said I'd formally propose if you became the Holy Maiden? Of course I remember."

"Well, in that case, you don't have to worry about it any longer! I can't be a Holy Maiden, so just forget about the competition and focus on having fun here at school."

Reseda smiled darkly. "Why are you trying so hard not to be the Holy Maiden?"

"What?" Iris blinked at him, confused. "No, I...physically can't do the job..."

"You're not just making excuses so you can get out of marrying me, are you?" His dark aura melted away as he looked at her with puppy-dog eyes.

"Nngh..." She staggered. *I'm so weak for those eyes! They're too cute!* "L-Listen, I..."

"Yeah?" He cocked his head.

Aagh, he's doing this to me on purpose! Iris averted her gaze. "I'm not...opposed to marrying you. But—"

"You're not?!" He grabbed her hand and fixed her with a smile more radiant than the sun itself. "So you *want* to marry me?!"

"That's not what I—"

"Oh, what a relief! Here I thought you hated me so much, you were planning to lose the Holy Maiden race on purpose just to get away from me!"

At this, Iris pressed a hand to her chest. *Ugh, I feel awful... No, I don't hate you! I just... I don't know... How do I explain it?*

"But I was wrong. Right, Iris?" he pressed.

Iris nodded weakly. "...R-Right."

"Well then, I don't care how much mana you have—or don't have! Because I love you anyway."

His smile was so flawless, Iris could practically see roses blooming all around him. Big, pink roses. *God, he's sparkling... How can you be so sweet and charming?!* It made her stagger all over again.

Somehow he always knew exactly what Iris wanted to hear...but that was precisely why she needed to hold it together. She couldn't let herself fall for him. As the villainess, she needed to reject all the happy-bad endings!

"Do I make myself clear, Iris?"

Wordlessly, she nodded.

Chapter 34: Camille's Affection Meter

DURING lunch break, Iris sat alone in the cafeteria at a table by the windows and stared vacantly out at the scenery. Reseda's class was running late, so the boys weren't there yet, and she had already finished her food. Honestly, she was used to eating alone in her past life as a grown adult, but...now that she was here in the world of *HanaKoro*, she was hoping to make friends, go shopping, and do other fun things like that...

But unbeknownst to Iris, her smallpox scars weren't the only thing keeping her from having friends. First, she broke the Aptitude Stone, then she acted like a villainess at the bulletin board, and to top it off, she spent all her free time in the company of Reseda and Nigel. Interacting with Iris was not for the faint of heart.

She let out a quiet sigh. Meanwhile, the other students observed her loneliness from a distance. To them, Iris was a wild rose, unsafe to approach lest they prick their fingers on her thorns.

As Iris stared out the window, she spotted Reseda and Camille walking side by side like close friends. Their pink and blue hair blended into the sky behind them—truly a beautiful sight. *I can't imagine how much the devs must have paid these artists.*

These days, Camille had learned how to wear her uniform fashionably, and with Iris's help, she was starting to look like a proper lady. Their uniform featured a short tailcoat jacket over a vest, a white blouse, and a ribbon tie. Female students wore a high-waisted, calf-length flared skirt with lace trim, while the male students wore slacks. Additionally, Camille's uniform was pink, signifying her status as the protagonist. Reseda's and Nigel's were blue, with a lot more decorations compared to the other guys. This made it really clear who the main characters were. All the other

students, Iris included, wore wine-red uniforms—except hers was slightly darker.

They're so happy together... You know, it might not be so bad, watching them chase their teenage dreams from the sidelines like an unnamed NPC... Honestly, they're clearly perfect for each other. Just hook up already!

Iris spotted the supporting character, Mégane, standing at the windows a short distance away. She must have come straight to the cafeteria since Camille was with Reseda; she gazed at the two of them, her glasses glinting in the light.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Mégane," Iris greeted her.

Mégane looked at her, startled. "You know my name?"

Iris smiled broadly. Of course I know you, silly! You were a huge help when I played this game! You'd always tell me where to go to encounter each love interest, and what to do to raise their affection meter, and even what dress to wear! I couldn't possibly thank you enough—you're like a best friend to me! Or a platonic soulmate!

"Yes, of course."

"You never cease to amaze, Lady Iris. I never imagined you'd care to know who I was."

After Iris heard that the House of Pont had taken Camille in, she did some research on them. Mégane hailed from a long line of merchants; her father, in particular, was so successful in his career that the king awarded him the title of baron. In other words, they were first-generation nobility. Mégane was sure to feel inferior at this school, considering she recently rose from the rank of commoner.

"My family has done business with the Pont Company in the past, and I've always wanted to get to know you a little better," Iris said with a smile.

Mégane summoned her courage to look up at Iris. “Lady Iris, I have a question for you.” Her voice attracted the attention of everyone in the room.

“And what might that be?” Iris asked. *Oops, did that sound a little too evil?* Mégane flinched and took a step back. *Okay, too evil. Sorry.*

“It’s about Prince Reseda and Miss Camille...”

At this, the entire cafeteria became eerily tense.

“What about them?” Iris tilted her head.

Was this the game’s way of calculating the progress of the affection meter or something? *Oh dear, were you going around asking everyone during my playthrough, too? Bless your heart.* That said, this wasn’t the right place to have this conversation. Talking about it here would only stir up drama.

“Do they seem...especially close lately?”

“Yes, I would say so.”

Iris smiled even more brightly. After all, she didn’t want Mégane to find her scary. Besides, their growing friendship was something to be celebrated—well, unless he was planning to lock both girls up and crush Iris’s vocal cords! But other than that, Camille was free to fall in love with whoever she deemed fit. As long as it didn’t bring grievous bodily harm upon Iris, she was willing to support it.

“...Does it not bother you, Lady Iris?”

“No...? Why would it?”

Mégane took another step back.

Oops, I scared her again.

“I had thought you and His Highness were going steady...”

“Oh my! What a wild and fanciful rumor! I don’t recall Prince Reseda having any sort of girlfriend. I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

Hoping to reassure her, Iris smiled softly. As Camille’s moral support character, Iris wanted Mégane to have all the facts. Plus, she wanted to be friends with Mégane if possible, just like they were when she played *HanaKoro*...

Unfortunately, Mégane and the rest of the students interpreted this as more of a “mind your own business” statement. They were used to aristocrats being more passive-aggressive.

“I...I apologize for wasting your time,” she replied hastily, probably worried about getting on Iris’s bad side. Though Iris wasn’t Reseda’s fiancée, she was still the only girl he addressed by name alone, so everyone figured she was special to him.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. I was curious about it myself. But do remember that there’s a proper time and place for such things—we wouldn’t want to start any rumors.”

Mégane let out a shriek and looked at Iris in horror. What she heard was: *I want your intel, but give it to me in secret*. As the blood drained from her face, she curtsied and hurried away.

Wait! Come back! Don’t go, Mégane! You didn’t get to have lunch yet!!! What could have possibly frightened her off so badly? Iris tilted her head in confusion.

Just then, Reseda and Camille entered the cafeteria together. Now the mood in the room was even *more* awkward; Camille sensed this and started looking around. But Reseda ignored it and made a beeline straight to Iris.

“Hey, Iris. Did you already finish eating?”

“I did indeed. You can have my table.”

"Wait, don't go. Hold it for me while I go get some food."

"Very well."

Iris had started to rise from her chair, but at his request, she lowered back onto it. Then Nigel walked over with his lunch and automatically sat down next to her. She saw Camille walking around with her tray, looking for a spot to sit, but no one was willing to make eye contact with her. Normally, she didn't have this much trouble, but this time her usual lunch buddy, Mégane, was nowhere to be seen.

"Why don't you join us, Camille?" Iris called to her.

At this, her face lit up. But as soon as she sat down across the table from Iris, the whole cafeteria began to buzz with murmurs. When Reseda returned with his food, he looked at her and scowled.

"I was really hoping to look at Iris while I ate," he commented loudly, glancing at her. Hastily, she shot out of her chair.

"I...I'm so sorry, Your Highness!"

Reseda plopped down where she was sitting. Embarrassed, she moved to the chair across from Nigel instead. *Ooh, now maybe the two of them can get to know each other! Nice thinking, Reseda!* Iris grinned.

Now that the protagonist and her love interests were all present, it was time for the wicked villainess to make herself scarce. Not like Nigel would want to flirt in front of his sister, after all! But right as Iris moved to stand up, he grabbed her arm.

"Are you leaving already? I hate that we're in two different classes... It feels like I never get to see you." His gaze sent her reeling—yes, Iris, his own sister.

Chrysanthème Academy was a boarding school, and the dormitories were divided by gender. Though they were siblings, they couldn't see each other as easily as they could back home.

"You make a good point. Would you mind if I intruded a tiny bit?"

"You're not *intruding*. Lunch is the only opportunity we have to see you," Reseda insisted, wearing one of his perfect flowery smiles.

Ever since they started attending the academy, his playboy traits had really leveled up. In *HanaKoro*, he was an "all-around nice guy" sort of playboy, but here in reality, he wasn't *nearly* as aggressively flirty with everyone. Was it because Prince Bleuet was still alive? Iris smiled vaguely.

As they ate their lunch, Iris asked them about their classes. She was curious how high Camille had raised her affection meter with each of the boys. After all, if they were equally in love with her, she would get stabbed by all the love interests simultaneously, and that was an outcome Iris was rather hoping to avoid! If Nigel killed her, their noble house was done for. Then they'd stick Iris in the Tower of Prayer as a replacement...and since she didn't have any mana, she'd have to offer up her life force... Iris shuddered.

So which one of them is she more interested in? If I knew, I'd gladly help her.

As Iris gazed at her, Camille bashfully smiled back, and Iris bit her lip. *Hnng! So cute!*

Chapter 35: Monster Dispatch, Part 1

THE Holy Maiden Evaluation was a series of tests designed to screen each candidate, and it was now officially underway. The first test measured each candidate's knowledge of national history and other pertinent subjects. Next came a monster dispatch mission that tested both sword and magic ability. After that was a popularity contest among the townspeople. Then the evaluation ended with an interview with the current Holy Maiden.

To overcome these trials, *HanaKoro*'s player needed the help of the love interests: Prince Reseda for the knowledge test, Cytisus for magic skills, and Nigel for sword skills. Depending on how the player chose to interact with each character, the outcome of the story changed. For example, after the monster dispatch mission, the game took whoever Camille had the most affection points with and made them her assistant for the popularity contest. Cue the flirty, romance scenes.

The narrative was always presented from Camille's perspective, so the player was only told whether they had outscored Iris or not. But the game wouldn't proceed unless they did, so there was no outcome where Iris won. In every ending, both bad and happy-bad, Camille was always crowned the Holy Maiden. Her relationship would take a big step forward, and Iris was only ever a stepping stone.

My poor Iris... You tried so hard, but you were never good enough...

In the game, Iris was pressured to succeed to regain her place in fashionable society. But her efforts never paid off. In the end, she was just a scarred heretic who was punished by God and unworthy

of being a Holy Maiden. She must have cursed her tragic fate a thousand times...

Me, though? I'm not worried. Everyone already knew Iris was damaged goods, and now both her father *and* Reseda knew she didn't have any mana. Frankly, it was blatantly obvious who was going to win this.

In *HanaKoro*, the player was subjected to a series of mini-games and quests prior to the knowledge test. By helping the students, teachers, and librarians, Camille would learn little facts other students normally wouldn't know. But this time around, Iris wasn't going to take advantage of her meta-knowledge. Instead, in true gamer fashion, she was going to add her *own* handicap to make the game harder! The reason for this was simple: because she knew neither Reseda nor Nigel had offered to help Camille. And while it pained Iris to withhold information she already knew, if Camille didn't have any hints to work off of, then it didn't feel fair for Iris to have that knowledge.

In the end, Camille scored ninety points on the knowledge test, and Iris got seventy. This pleased Iris very much.

For the monster dispatch mission, Iris asked Nigel to train Camille, since she had very little fighting experience. Apparently, Cytisus was too busy with his still-living girlfriend to help, and Iris needed Camille to get assistance from *someone*. So, she chose Nigel, since he was the most trustworthy person she knew. Likewise, he readily accepted, since he was aware of just how deeply Iris did *not* want to be the Holy Maiden.

With his help, Camille was slowly but surely leveling up. Plus, her affection meter with him was rising, too. She never needed sword skills before, but she tried her very best regardless, and her work ethic impressed him.

Iris personally approved of the way things were going. Right now, Nigel had little desire to chain anyone down, so she had no reason to object to a relationship between the two of them. Plus, if Camille chose Nigel, the chances of a happy-bad ending were fairly low.

In *HanaKoro*, the training scenes were so cute and romantic...like the part where Nigel held Camille from behind so he could show her how to hold a sword... *Are they recreating that CG right this very moment? I'm pretty sure there was some accidental fanservice during that scene too... Ugh, I'm so tempted to go spy on them... Hang in there, Nigel! I'm rooting for you!*



ON the day of the monster dispatch mission, the girls wore white horse-riding breeches in place of their uniform skirts, with bastard swords sheathed at their hips and black boots on their feet.

Their midsized target was located in the Dark Forest, past the quarantine cavern, inside the hollow of a large, long-dead camphor tree. Chrysanthème students came here for monster dispatch classes relatively often. Since Iris couldn't use magic, she had to rely entirely on her sword skills to keep her safe. The fairies offered to help her countless times, but she always turned them down.

This time, however, the girls were going farther in. Cytisus and some other adults were stationed throughout the forest in case of an emergency.

“We will now begin the Test of Skill!” the headmaster announced, and a gunshot rang out, signaling the start of the evaluation.

While Iris *did* want Camille to win, she couldn't let her guard down either. There was no telling what might happen in the forest, and she didn't have any mana to protect herself. Even Nigel had

learned to cast shield spells and strengthening spells, but with zero mana, Iris couldn't even do *that* much. All she had were physical attacks.

As the girls progressed through the forest, they competed against each other to defeat as many small monsters as they could. But to Camille, this was no game. She wanted to win.

All this time, she lived her life never knowing who she truly was. Her mother had died when she was very young, and she had never met her father. Of course, her aunt and uncle were very kind people, but deep down, she knew they weren't really her family. Supposedly, her camellia seed oil had special properties, or so the townspeople all said, but she didn't understand why. All she did was press the seeds while silently repeating the words "Get well soon" just like her mother had taught her. She didn't understand how the oil gained its power, and it frightened her.

Then one day, she was informed that she was a candidate for the position of Holy Maiden. Supposedly, she was the first commoner ever chosen. Then she was suddenly adopted by the Baron of Pont and told that noble blood ran in her veins. Now she could never go home to her aunt and uncle again. Meanwhile, all the townspeople gossiped about how they always knew she wasn't one of them.

Even at school, everyone treated her with the same sentiment: *You aren't one of us.* No matter where she went, she didn't fit in anywhere. She had nowhere to belong.

What's so different about me anyway? Camille wondered. *Where am I supposed to go? If I become the Holy Maiden, will they finally accept me? What happens if I fail?*

She loved magic, and she loved to learn, but fighting was scary. The sword at her hip felt heavy, and she didn't want to use it.

If anyone deserves to win, it's Iris, not me, she thought. Everyone knows it, and I know it, too. Maybe I should just give up...but if I do, will I get tossed out like yesterday's trash?

As she thought that, a monster leaped out in front of her, and she froze up. Nigel had done his best to train her in sword fighting, but nevertheless, single combat frightened her. So, for the most part, she fought using magic; that way, she could paralyze her opponent instead of drawing blood. But this time, she didn't have time to cast.

With a roar, the monster slashed its claws in Camille's direction. All she could do was shield her head with her arms. The impact sent her flying, and she landed on her back so hard, it knocked the wind out of her.

Ugh, I'm sick of this! At least if I die, I won't have to do this anymore...

But right as tears welled in Camille's eyes, she saw a lone silhouette standing in front of her, ringlets fluttering in the wake of another roar.

It didn't even faze Iris.

Her silver sword danced through the air as she slashed the monster, wordless and effortless, like drawing breath.

Chapter 36: Monster Dispatch, Part 2

THE monster's crimson blood splattered onto Iris's green curls. She ran a hand through her hair. "I'm *really* going to need a shower after this," she muttered, then looked over her shoulder at Camille. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"Lady...Iris...!" she sputtered, dazed. Iris offered her hand.

"On your feet, now. There's more where that came from."

Camille took Iris's hand, and Iris pulled her up.

Why does she always help me? Camille wondered. We're not on the same side here—we're rivals for the same title! But at school, she always looks out for me... That's exactly why SHE deserves to win!

"Miss Camille, you're going to take down the target monster, and I'm going to help you."

"What? Why?"

"Well, I don't have any mana. And you know as well as I do that physical attacks won't be enough to defeat a midsized monster."

Iris smiled. Goosebumps shot up Camille's arms as she realized: *She doesn't have any mana, yet she came here anyway? She's willing to put herself in danger to help me?*

"Come on now. I want to get this over with so I can change out of these clothes."

With that, Iris led her by the hand. Meanwhile, Camille struggled not to cry. She saw Iris's glove was ripped and that she was bleeding. Camille couldn't sense any mana from Iris, either, proving that she hadn't—or rather, *couldn't*—cast a shield spell.

Camille's shields, on the other hand, were thick and sturdy. She was endowed with a large mana supply, and she worked hard every day to ensure she could control it.

I'll protect her, she thought. There was a *POP*, and then an iridescent white light spread out in a small sphere around Camille. This sphere decimated any small monster that came into contact with it. "Wha?"

"Marvelous work, Miss Camille!" Iris exclaimed, stopping short and raising both hands for a double high-five.

Camille stared blankly for a moment, then shyly obliged. When was the last time anyone had prompted her for a high-five? It was a small gesture, but it meant so much.

"Now let's get going!"

Iris took her hand once more, and as they walked, Camille cast a shield spell on her. A milky white veil descended all around Iris, enveloping her.

"What's this?"

"Let me protect you, Lady Iris," Camille declared, looking straight into Iris's eyes.

Iris smiled brightly. "Very well."

And so the two girls ran hand in hand to the old camphor tree. At the base of the trunk was a lion monster, its fur like scarlet flames. Growling, it bared its teeth at them. Frightened, Camille shrank back; Iris stood in front of her and held her sword at the ready. Thanks to Camille's magic, Iris's body was shining like an iridescent seashell.

Iris wasn't afraid of this thing—she had already defeated it dozens of times while playing *HanaKoro*, and she knew its weak point. She didn't know what level Camille was currently, but Nigel

had trained her in sword skills. Surely the two of them could take it down together.

The monster attacked out of nowhere, slashing at Iris. She swung her blade at its fury body, and Camille's shield magic crackled like electricity. Then the monster's movements synced up with hers, and they became locked in a tight tango, face to face.

Beautiful, Camille thought. Moments ago, she was terrified, but now she was practically entranced. Wait, something's not right. She's having trouble fighting... Oh, because she's trying to shield me at the same time. But then why is the lion doing the same thing?

Then she realized: the monster seemed to be fiercely guarding the camphor tree. Was it...protecting something...? Shakily, she pointed inside the tree.

“Miss Camille?”

The monster suddenly switched to targeting Camille. Hastily, Iris positioned herself between them, and as the beast tried to slash at her, Iris sliced its thick foreleg with her sword. Red fire shot out at her.

“Miss Camille, what are you doing?! You need to be casting attack magic!”

“But Lady Iris—something's not right! I think there's something inside the tree!”

With that, Camille dove into the hollow. Enraged, the monster tried to lunge after her while Iris desperately fought it back. Its flames were white-hot and said heat was currently transmitting down Iris's metal blade right to her palm.

Iris didn't understand what was going on. Camille never went into the tree in the game! She just defeated the monster, and that was it!

“Ouch!”

With a pained whimper, Camille pulled the monster’s cub out of the tree. The little one sported a coat of blue flames, except for its left hind leg, which was red.

“Wait, so...this thing is supposed to be blue?” she murmured.

At this, an epiphany struck Iris. “The red flames might actually be an injury of some kind! I once heard that red fire burns at a much lower temperature than blue... Miss Camille, can you use healing magic?”

“I’ll try!”

Camille raised her hand over the cub’s red flames, and her iridescent light mingled with the scarlet. Silently, she prayed, “Get well soon,” just as her mother had taught her. The flames shot up in protest, licking at her palm and making her protective shield crackle. It was searing hot—but nevertheless, she didn’t pull away.

Meanwhile, the mother monster was starting to overpower Iris. It had already backed her right up against Camille. *Oh no... At this rate, I can’t defeat it!*

In *HanaKoro*, losing this battle meant losing the Holy Maiden race. If Camille wasn’t the Holy Maiden, her love life would never be happy, and she would never be accepted among the nobility—ultimately, the Baron of Pont would just throw her out on the street. So, if it ever looked like Iris was going to lose, she simply reloaded her save.

But there was no restart option in real life.

That was the moment Iris realized: this whole time, she was treating this fight like it was just a game—just another quest to be completed. In *HanaKoro*, no one ever died during this segment, and even if Camille lost, no one got hurt.

But what if that only applied to the game?

Iris sucked in a breath. The monster roared as if it had seen straight through her, right down to her feeble heart. She squeezed her eyes shut. The smell of burnt hair was on the breeze.

It's no use... I'm going to lose... What do I do? I can't protect Camille!

"It's okay!" Camille shouted encouragingly at the little cub. "It's all okay now! I'm going to help you and heal your wounds!"

Iris wasn't the only one flustered by this declaration; it caught the monster's attention, too. And while its guard was down, Iris drove it back with her sword. Meanwhile, Camille turned around to face them, cradling the cub in her arms. Then she offered it to its mother. Its body was now fully blue.

"Your baby was hurt, and you were trying to protect it, weren't you, Mama? ...Or are you the papa? Well, either way, you're a good parent!"

The monster cub made a little trilling sound; Camille set it down on the ground. It waddled up to its mother and trilled again. The mother's flames weakened, pulling away from the girls. Still, it growled threateningly.

"And I bet you're injured, too, aren't you? Because you're supposed to be blue. Can I heal you, too?" Camille asked.

The monster stopped growling and sat down, quietly swishing its tail.

Iris fell to her knees in disbelief.

Chapter 37: Another Fairy

“**WELL** now... Very impressive,” a voice called out from up in the trees. The girls looked up to find a young boy with red eyes, spiky white hair, and six translucent red wings. Over his white alb, he wore a red stole with fuchsia plants embroidered along the edges in gold thread.

“Lord Fuchsia, the Red Fairy Leader!” Iris blurted out on reflex.

He looked at her in surprise. “You know my name? That’s funny. A kid your age is too young to be a mage... Are you royalty, then?”

“N-No...” Iris shook her head.

“Okay, whatever. Moving on. You there, other girl,” he called, addressing Camille. “You don’t have the mana it would take to heal that one...so I will lend you mine. State your name.”

“I...I’m Camille du Pont...”

“Very well then, Camille. I, Fuchsia the Red Fairy Leader, shall grant you my blessing.” With that, he planted a lazy kiss on her forehead. “Now raise up your hand and make your wish.”

She did as he commanded, and he put his hand on top of hers. A faint pink light spread outward, enveloping the monster. In a flash, its scarlet flames turned blue.

“It was a Sacred Beast all along?!” Cytisus shouted in the distance. Camille and Iris stared, wide-eyed, as the teachers rushed out from the depths of the forest to meet them.

Fuchsia laughed. “Yep! Well done, Camille.” With that, he flew off between the trees and vanished.

In a blink, the teachers surrounded Camille and started bombarding her with questions. At her feet, the little blue cub nuzzled up against her leg.

Now that she had won the approval of a Fairy Leader and saved a Sacred Beast, Camille had clearly proved that she was capable of being a Holy Maiden. She had performed superbly.

“The winner is Camille! Now to announce the results to the public!”

At this, Iris let out a sigh of relief. The two girls then stepped into the magic portal back to school grounds.



JUST like in *HanaKoro*, the test results were announced in front of everyone. The two girls stood side by side on the stage in front of the entire student body—Camille, perfectly pristine, and Iris, covered in blood. One look, and it was obvious who had won.

“The winner is...CAMILLE! She has received the blessing of a Fairy Leader and purified a Sacred Beast that had devolved into a monster!” the headmaster declared.

Frowning, Camille snuck a glance at Iris. She was sure she wouldn’t have won without her help, and it didn’t feel right to take all the credit. Her chest ached with guilt.

“I had to let you win once or twice. Otherwise, the race would be ever so dull,” Iris told her with a self-assured smile. This was one of Iris’s best lines from *HanaKoro*—she didn’t have them all memorized, but she wanted to slip in as many as possible, just for fun. *Now THIS is the Iris I remember! Ah, it feels so good to be a little bit evil!*

Everyone looked at her scornfully. Now that Camille had proven her worth, the tides were turning against Iris. But she ignored them

and walked offstage. She was the villainess—everyone was *supposed* to hate her.

“Lady Iris, thank you for saving me! Without you there, I—I!”

“Stop that. I don’t need your pity,” Iris cut in without looking back. A moment later, Camille was surrounded by other students.

“Iris!”

Nigel suddenly ran up and pulled Iris into a hug. *Wait, what?* In the game, the love interest was supposed to praise the protagonist, since they trained together. *Nigel, you’ve got the wrong one! She’s over there!*

“Don’t, Nigel. You’ll get your clothes dirty. Besides, it’s Miss Camille who won.” Gently, Iris pushed him away. After all, her uniform was slick with blood and soot.

“I don’t care.” He held her tighter. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to, silly. The competition was between her and me.”

I swear, he’s so obsessed with me. Softly, reassuringly, she stroked his wavy green hair with her gloved hand. The first-degree burn on her palm stung.

Someone abruptly pulled her hand away from Nigel’s head. Startled, Iris looked over her shoulder to find Reseda standing there, his pink eyes full of tears. Wordlessly, he pressed her dirty hand to his cheek; reflexively, Iris curled her fingers around her palm to shield her wound.

“Open your hand, Iris,” he commanded quietly.

Iris sucked in a breath. He had seen right through her. But she didn’t want to make a scene in front of Camille; it would only make her feel bad. Quietly, Iris shook her head.

Reseda grabbed her hand, wrenched her fingers open, and pulled her glove off.

“Nngh!” Her skin stung as the fabric peeled off, and she grimaced.

“*Iris!*” Reseda hissed, furious. Nigel looked at her hand, and his eyes widened. But right as he opened his mouth to speak, Iris hastily cut in.

“Please, not here. I don’t want to ruin Miss Camille’s happy moment. I’m fine.”

The two boys bit their lips. Then Reseda ran his cheek up her arm to suggest he was checking for any other injuries.

“Er... Your Highness...?”

He looked up at Iris silently, like he wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words. For some reason, it made her chest ache. But she could wager a guess...

“Prince *Reseda*? ”

As Iris called his name, he broke into a broad smile and nuzzled his forehead against her arm. She could feel something hot—tears?

“Prince Reseda, please. I’m fine,” she told him reassuringly. He nodded quietly but refused to let go of her arm.

What am I going to do with you?

Chapter 38: After the Mission

“IF I’d known Fairy Leaders were allowed to intervene, I would have lent you my aid,” said Sauge as she appeared out of nowhere and wrapped her arms around Iris from behind. The teachers recognized her voice and all turned to look at Iris in surprise.

“*Shhhh! Keep it down, Lady Sauge!*”

I swear, this fairy is so fickle. She’s never considerate of my needs!

“Oh, my precious Iris, look what they’ve done to you! This never would have happened if you would stop refusing help from fairies just because you’re at school!” she shouted. “This is an outrage and an insult to your character! If I had been with you—”

Iris pulled Sauge away from Nigel and Reseda and pressed her hand over Sauge’s mouth. “Lady Sauge, stop this! Settle down!” Sauge shot Iris a dubious look, so she got up on her tiptoes and whispered into her ear: “I don’t *want* to be the Holy Maiden!”

“But then you won’t be permitted to marry the prince...”

“I don’t *care*!” Iris told her flatly.

She looked at Iris with sympathy in her eyes. Then, with a heavy sigh, Sauge glared at the teachers.

“Very well. If you insist, I shall hold my tongue. And if you refuse to accept my aid, then go and receive medical treatment posthaste.” With that, Sauge ruffled Iris’s hair, planted a kiss on her forehead, and vanished.

Ugh! Lady Sauge, you’re completely incorrigible!

Iris’s legs gave out, and Reseda hastily caught her before she hit the ground. Everything had turned out completely different from

HanaKoro by this point, though probably not in a bad way. Iris was just so tired... At least Camille managed to win the competition.

"Are you all right, Miss Iris?!" Cytisus asked as he hurried over to her. He saw her hands were covered in cuts and burns. "You're always so reckless!"

"Yes, but Miss Camille protected me with her magic," Iris replied. "She is the true Holy Maiden."

He grimaced. "We were watching you, you know. We saw how you protected Miss Camille. Without you there, she wouldn't have won—but if you had any mana, you would have won instead!"

His frustration was palpable, but Iris simply shook her head. "No...I only thought of slaying the monster. It never occurred to me that there might be another way. That's why I believe Miss Camille deserves the title more."

Cytisus took both of her hands in his. Her already scarred arm was now sporting even more gruesome cuts.

"We need to get you patched up at once! I'll teleport us."

He hoisted her up in his arms *princess-style*, whipped out his wand, and opened a magic circle in the air. Then he carried Iris through the portal.

Hrrrrk! Magic makes me wanna hurl! Iris squeezed her eyes shut, struggling to endure the nausea. She felt the impact as they landed and slowly opened her eyes.

"Lord Cytisus?! And...Lady Iris? Why is she covered in blood?!" Pavot yelped. Apparently, we had come to the Temple of Magic.

"Pavot, please treat Miss Iris. I'm not as good at healing magic as you are."

Her jaw dropped...and then she smiled, blushing. "Okay!" she squeaked. She took Iris's hand, looked at her red, inflamed palm, and winced. "What happened?"

"I was participating in the monster dispatch mission for the Holy Maiden Evaluation... Most of the blood isn't mine, but I got burned..."

Specifically, her palm stung where the heat from the Sacred Beast's fire had transmitted down her metal sword to the hilt. Plus, there were some cuts on her arms.

"They *still* made you take part in that?! Even though you don't have any mana?!"

"The other faculty members were hoping that the crisis would awaken mana within her," Cytisus explained bitterly. "They couldn't accept that someone with no mana would receive so many fairy blessings."

"That's *monstrous!*!" Pavot raged.

"It's all right. The other candidate kept me safe," Iris said with a smile.

Pavot bit her lip. She pressed her forehead to the back of Iris's injured hand, closed her eyes, and began to pray. A silver light engulfed them where their skin touched, spreading outward to envelop Iris's entire body. She could feel her insides shifting.

"*Hrrrrggghh...* I hate this...!"

It felt like the magic was whirling around inside her, and she could scarcely stand it. Iris squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth.

"Do you feel any better now?" Pavot asked.

When Iris opened her eyes, she found that her cuts had mostly closed over, leaving only faint red scratch marks that would probably

fade after a few days at most. Her palm still tingled, but at least no blisters were forming.

“Amazing... Magic is incredible! Thank you so much, Lady Pavot!”

She giggled from beneath her hood. “Oh, it was no trouble at all. I’m glad it worked out.”

“As I said, Pavot’s mana exceeds that of the Holy Maiden herself,” Cytisus explained.

“Yeah, but I don’t like being in front of large crowds!” she laughed.

“Indeed. On the day of the popularity contest, she never showed up.”

At this, she shrank down shyly. “You should have just dropped out yourself, Lady Iris,” she mumbled.

“Aaaagh! You’re absolutely right!!!”

Why hadn’t she just thrown in the towel early on?! Well...truth be told, she was a little worried about how Camille would fare...

“She stayed to assist Lady Camille, who has far less combat experience,” Cytisus explained in her stead.

Pavot fixed Iris with a pitying look. “You don’t really make smart life choices, do you, Lady Iris?”

“You’re one to talk!” Cytisus retorted quickly, and Iris was inclined to agree.

“But I like that,” she continued.

Cytisus and Iris exchanged a look.

“Er...thank you...?”

“So, if you’d let me *touch* you a little more...”

“*No thank you.*”

Iris answered so swiftly, the two of them burst out laughing.

Chapter 39: The Headmaster's Summons

FOLLOWING the monster dispatch mission, the tides had officially turned. Camille had triumphed in two of the tests, and the same students who had previously regarded her with hostility were now starting to consider her a viable candidate for the title. The fact that she had received a blessing from a Fairy Leader helped considerably.

Frankly, it was a shame there were never any Sacred Beasts or Fairy Leaders in *HanaKoro*. With a couple of Fairy Leaders around, maybe some of those happy-bad endings could have been averted—just look at Sauge and her helicopter parenting! *Wait, but...in the game, the monster was defeated without anyone ever realizing its true identity as a Sacred Beast... Maybe that angered the Fairy Leaders...and without their blessings, all the characters were doomed to a tragic fate...*

A chill ran down Iris's spine. Were all the "happy-bad endings" actually a malevolent curse cast by the Sacred Beasts and the fairies?!

Iris silently vowed never to court the wrath of any fantasy creatures.



IRIS was called back to the headmaster's office—probably about the Holy Maiden Evaluation, she figured. After all, Camille had won the trust of a Sacred Beast and the blessing of a Fairy Leader. As for Iris, she'd proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had no mana whatsoever. For all intents and purposes, Camille had essentially won; there was no real point in wasting any more time.

Iris entered the room and greeted the headmaster, who sat at his massive desk, his folded hands resting just below his nose—the “Gendo pose,” if you will. Then he let out a long, heavy sigh.

Well, this is all very intimidating. Surely you could have simply sent a letter to inform me instead, Iris thought from a detached perspective as she stood in front of the desk and waited for him to speak.

“Miss Iris, I must ask you: have you received Lady Sauge’s blessing?”

This was not how she expected him to open the conversation, and it caught her off-guard. *Oh boy, here we go. This is exactly why I never told anyone!*

Iris had kept quiet about it on purpose, knowing it would create problems. Not that she was hiding it—okay, fine, she was *totally* hiding it. But the entire royal palace had already flipped out when they heard she’d gotten blessings from the little ones, and she did *not* want this news getting back to her parents! Cytisus and Reseda had probably figured as much by now. But they hadn’t witnessed it with their own two eyes, so she didn’t bother telling *them* outright, either.

“I’m aware that you received fairy blessings in the past, but if the blessings of a Leader are involved, I’m afraid that changes some things. Now answer the question.”

“...Yes, I’ve received Lady Sauge’s blessing.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because...you already knew about the other fairy blessings, and...you didn’t ask...?” Iris averted her eyes. His glasses glinted.

“I see. Well, in light of your severely limited mana—”

“No, sir, you see, I actually have none at all.”

“In light of your *severely limited mana*,” he repeated sternly, “I thought we might need to reconsider your eligibility for the position of Holy Maiden, but...”

Evidently, he refused to acknowledge her utter lack of mana. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this...*

“We have no choice but to continue the Evaluation.”

“What? Why?” she replied reflexively.

The headmaster glared at her, tears of frustration pricking at the corners of his eyes. “*Why* is the question I should be asking *you!* Why did you keep quiet about this?! The Academy can’t possibly disqualify a candidate blessed by Lady Sauge herself!” He was utterly beside himself with terror. “I just... I don’t know what to do...!”

“Um...did Lady Sauge say anything to you, sir?”

“No! And that’s what terrifies me!”

Yeahhhh, I can relate. Iris looked up at the ceiling.

“If only we’d known... Yes, if only we’d known from the start that you were blessed by Lady Sauge, you would have been crowned Holy Maiden by now!”

“What? No thank you!”

“Don’t give me that! Really, what am I supposed to do? I always knew something wasn’t right, ever since I found out you were rubbing elbows with the former candidate who ghosted us at the popularity contest! I was convinced this ‘no mana’ thing had to be a lie you and Sir Cytisus cooked up so you could work at the Temple of Magic instead!

“That’s why we put you in a situation where you’d *need* to cast magic—we thought for sure we’d see what you were truly capable of—but no, as it turned out, you honestly couldn’t cast a thing! Not only that, but it angered Lady Sauge! If Miss Camille is chosen as Holy

Maiden and Lady Sauge refuses to accept it, there's no telling what will happen!"

"And that's *my* fault?"

"Well, how were we supposed to accept that a girl with multiple fairy blessings didn't have any mana? When we learned the Aptitude Stone couldn't measure you, we all thought it meant your aptitude was too *high!*"

"...Okay, well, I'm sorry, but..."

"According to Lady Sauge, the monster dispatch mission results are invalid. That's why the Evaluation must continue. Surely both Lady Sauge and Lord Fuchsia will accept the results of the other tests."

"But I have no mana, sir. Surely, it's all a waste of time..."

"Well, can *you* think of any other solution?" He glowered at her.

"Um...I'll tell her I forfeited of my own free will...?"

"If candidates were allowed to forfeit, Ms. Pavot wouldn't have needed to ghost us in the first place!"

He raised his glasses up onto his head and rubbed his eyes with both hands. Evidently, the memory of Pavot still stressed him out to this day. "I'm begging you, *please* just do as you're told... Please..."

He bowed so low, he pressed his forehead to the desk. Iris couldn't possibly refuse—after all, it was partly her fault for keeping quiet about Sauge's blessing. Besides, she could understand wanting to avoid enraging a Fairy Leader. The mere *thought* of another strike like the one at the Temple of Magic made Iris shudder.

"Very well."

"And please, please, don't ghost us like *she* did!"

"I won't."

“Promise me you’ll really, *really* try, all right?”

“I’ll try.”

With a formal curtsy, Iris left the headmaster’s office. And so, it was decided that the Holy Maiden Evaluation would proceed as planned...

Chapter 40: Preparing for the Pageant

NOW it was time to prepare for the Holy Maiden Popularity Contest—a beauty pageant, in other words. The townspeople would all cast their votes for who they felt was the best Holy Maiden candidate; the winner would then have an interview with the current Holy Maiden. If she deemed the chosen candidate worthy, they would be named the successor to the role, and formal training would begin. The interview stage ultimately screened out a lot of prospective candidates, but at that point, it wasn't considered dishonorable to lose the race. Instead, the failed candidate would receive dozens of marriage proposals and a guaranteed job at the palace.

Camille would be busy for the foreseeable future. After all, there were a lot of story events she needed to get through before the contest, like developing a classy new container for Camille's Camellia and starting a fashion trend in town—but she would need to grind charisma points working part-time if she wanted to clear those quests. Additionally, the popularity contest featured a dance segment, so she'd need to practice with her chosen love interest—in the form of a rhythm game—and design the dress she planned to wear for the occasion. After school, she'd be busy working downtown, improving her popularity with the citizens, and growing closer to her love interest.

Man, that game was so much fun, Iris sighed as she watched Camille hurry off campus. Sometimes the love interests would show up at Camille's workplace, and they'd go on dates after her shift ended. Her dates with Cytisus were always classy; at the end, right when you thought he was going to kiss her, he'd plant a peck on her nose like she was a little kid. But right before you could get mad about it, he'd kiss her for real! The memory made Iris blush.

Of course, here in real life, Cytisus was still happily dating Pavot, so that route wouldn't happen anytime soon. What about the prince, then? Reseda's route was actually a little sad. They'd have secret dates away from the public eye, and there was this one scene where he pinned Camille up against the wall of a building to "hide" from other students who would recognize them. *My god, that CG gave me a nosebleed!*

Each time Camille learned something new about him, she fell for him even harder. Of course, she knew she wasn't supposed to since he had a fiancée, so instead, she kept wishing these moments would last forever. Whenever she looked at him sadly, roses would bloom around him as he reached out and stroked her hair, and it would only make her heart ache... *Oh, my poor, sweet Camille. Reseda clearly has a thing for playing with hair, doesn't he? He's been like that since he was young.*

Compared to the rest, Nigel's route was actually rather lighthearted. They would hold hands all throughout their downtown dates, giggling and flirting. Oh, yes, and there was a scene where they were looking for a lost kitten. As Iris recalled, they picked out a collar together. Then they bought necklaces with matching charms and made each other wear them, and when they parted ways, they would look back at each other over and over again... *Ah, puppy love! Wait, but...those necklaces were totally foreshadowing the chains, weren't they? Come to think of it, there was a cat in the tattoo he gave her, too... Yikes...*

"Iris!"

At the sudden voice, Iris whirled around. *Speak of the devil!*
"Wh-What is it, Nigel?"

"Have you been preparing for the popularity contest?"

"Uhhh..."

She averted her gaze. Truth be told, no. Iris was pretty sure no one liked her, so she was just going to lose anyway. That said, she figured she'd design a dress to wear, at least.

"Y-Yes, more or less. Have you been helping Miss Camille practice her steps?"

"No...? Why would I?"

"Oh, er, I don't know... For some reason, I thought you might..."

"Well, I haven't."

That's strange. In *HanaKoro*, the love interest with the highest affection points automatically became Camille's partner. And considering Nigel had trained her before the monster dispatch mission, Iris figured he was in the lead. Was Camille not interested in him? Even after they spent all that alone time together? Iris fixed him with a pitying look; he blinked at her in confusion.

Just then, Reseda quietly appeared beside Iris.

"Well then, are *you* her dance partner, Your Highness?" she asked him.

"For one, I'm not Your Highness. And for another thing, why would you even think that?"

"Because...you're in the same class together...?"

"Obviously, I'm going to be *your* dance partner," he declared with a grin.

"Oh, no, I don't really need to..."

"You don't need to practice? Even though you're on a losing streak? Are you *trying* to throw the contest? Do you *despise* me that much?"

"Nngh..." His rapid-fire questions made Iris falter. "It's just...Miss Camille doesn't have any experience when it comes to ballroom

dancing. And if no one's there to teach her, she'll be at a tremendous disadvantage. It's simply not fair to her."

"Are you sure about that? I'm told Miss Camille is quite popular with the townsfolk—if anything, *you're* at a disadvantage. I say we go undercover and scope things out for ourselves this weekend. Haven't you ever wanted to get a look at where she works?"

He shot Iris a playful wink, and her heart fluttered. *Oh, Reseda, that sounds like FAR too much fun for me to possibly refuse, you scoundrel!*

"I'd love to!"

"In that case, let's wear disguises like we did way back when. We can pretend it's an enemy recon mission."

"I'm coming too, just so you know," Nigel cut in.

Reseda scowled at him.

"You'll need a bodyguard, Your Highness," he continued smugly.

"What are you talking about? I walk around unaccompanied all the time. Iris and I have done this since we were kids."

"Yeah, but you had those mages with you back then."

"What are you so worried about?"

"I'm worried about *you*, milord."

"Not Iris?"

Nigel faltered; Reseda grinned impishly. "Not to worry—with Iris around, I'm in safe hands. She's stronger than you are, remember?"

"Well, you could use a second bodyguard, just in case!"

"We'd draw too much attention. How about you grow up and stop clinging to your sister?"

Sparks flew between them. But Iris wasn't listening to their argument; she was too distracted thinking about other things.

You could *really* tell this world was originally a video game, since apparently, royal family members could waltz around town with no trouble. Otherwise, Camille would never have had the opportunity to steal Reseda from his fiancée. Not that this was all that surprising, since it *was* an otome game.

These days, Iris had been far too busy with schoolwork to take any trips into town, so she was secretly looking forward to it. *It'll be so nice to see everyone again! I wonder if they'll remember me...*

"...Right, Iris?"

As Reseda turned the focus of the conversation to her, Iris snapped back to reality. "What?"

"You're stronger, right?"

"Oh, er, yes," she replied on reflex with no clue about the context of the question.

Nigel let out a heavy sigh.

"Then it's decided! This weekend we'll go on a date—just the two of us! Now there's a first, eh?"

"You mean the enemy recon mission?"

"Yep! Except now, it'll be more of an enemy recon *date*."

As Reseda beamed at her, Iris realized that she'd walked face-first into a trap.

Chapter 41: The Enemy Recon Date, Part 1

RESEDA was beside himself with glee as he waited outside the girls' dormitory. He had arrived ahead of their scheduled meetup time. A handful of female students peeked through the curtains at him. The prince of Floraison was clearly waiting for *someone*. But who? And he was dressed like a commoner to boot! Anyone would be a tiny bit curious.

Iris walked out wearing her commoner disguise: a plain cotton blouse and skirt with a pair of lace-up boots. She knew her mint-green curls would attract attention, so she wore a headscarf to conceal them like she used to when she was younger. Green strands still peeked out around her face and near the bottom of the headscarf, so it really wasn't concealing much at all. Nevertheless, she stubbornly insisted on it.

Reseda smiled at her, amused by her attempt at a disguise. He was wearing a hat, but otherwise hadn't tried too hard to conceal his identity. Really, he just wanted to go on a date with Iris, but knew she'd say no if he asked too directly, so he invented an excuse. When they were younger, his go-to excuse was always to check on the vaccine; this time, it was to spy on Camille, hence the getup.

"You look great, Iris."

"As do you, Your Highness."

Smiling, they walked off. Iris was completely unaware of the scandal she'd just ignited back at the girls' dorm, but naturally, Reseda let it unfold entirely on purpose.



ARRIVING downtown, they hopped out of the carriage and headed the rest of the way on foot. Iris hadn't come this far into town in a long time. This was the business district: a cluster of shops situated in a circle around the clock tower in the plaza at the center. A handful of new storefronts had sprung up in the time since she started attending school.

Oh, there's the place where Nigel and Camille buy matching necklaces! I hadn't realized it was a new business. Oh, and there's the restaurant Cytisus takes her to. I guess that's new too! Where did she go with Reseda...? Oh, right, that general store. Apparently, that's brand-new as well. Clearly the boys did their research when they were planning their dates... The thought put a derpy smile on her face.

And so, Iris enjoyed going on a tour of all the most famous *HanaKoro* locations. *If only Camille was here to show me around... Can't be too greedy, I suppose.*

"Is there anywhere you want to go in particular?" Reseda asked, grabbing Iris's hand out of nowhere.

"There's just so many new stores now... The whole town looks completely different!"

"Well...the soilpox outbreak forced a lot of people close down their shops, so I guess these are the new stores that have taken over," he explained, gazing out at the town with a hint of melancholy in his eyes.

While it was fun to see all the new developments, those same developments only existed because the things that came before were now gone. The vaccine's distribution hadn't gone perfectly by any means, and while a full-scale epidemic was avoided, the disease had still done considerable damage to the town. The losses were tremendous.

For a moment, Iris thought back to all those she couldn't save...but like Reseda once told her, she couldn't let herself get hung up on it. So, with that thought, she held his hand tightly as she dragged him down the street. He looked at her, startled. Grinning, she pointed at the ice cream stand.

"At least the ice cream stand's still around, right? Let's go!"

And so, Iris took off running, dragging Reseda along behind her. She was just so relieved to see that her favorite store had survived. Meanwhile, he was entertained by her unbridled joy. He, too, was grateful that their special place was still around.

"Well, if it isn't Mint and Cherry!" the ice cream lady called out. Apparently she remembered them. Reseda didn't seem to enjoy his cutesy alias, but Iris wasn't opposed to hers.

Back when they first started distributing the vaccine, they would conceal their identities and help the mages with their work. Since they needed fake names, Pavot renamed them with the first words that sprang to her mind. Not the most creative, Reseda felt. But now those names had stuck.

"Haven't seen you kids since the plague ended! How ya been?"

"Good, good! And yourself?"

"Fit as a fiddle, as you can see!" She gestured to her matronly body and chuckled. "Remind me, what are your favorites? Strawberry and mint chocolate chip?"

"Yes, I'll take strawberry, like always! What about you, Cherry?"

"Yeah, I'll take mint chocolate chip."

"Alrighty! I'll add on a little somethin' extra for ya."

She pressed a little heart-shaped cookie into each of their ice cream cones. *Oh my god, this is just like the ice cream Camille and Reseda had in the game!!! I love this tour!!!* Iris was over the moon.

“These cookies are a real hot commodity right now. You use Camille’s Camellia, right, Mint? Well, these days she’s working at a café making these cookies!”

“The same Camille?”

“The very same! Apparently, she’s going to the local magic academy, but she comes into town on weekends to work part-time! Can you believe it? She’s gone from workin’ class to Holy Maiden!”

Iris breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently Camille’s popularity was spreading among the townspeople, right on schedule.

“So, I’ve been using these cookies as part of my new couples’ menu. It was all Camille’s idea, of course!”

Her signboard was decorated with the words “NEW! Lovebirds’ Dream Cream.”

“Oh, but we’re not loveb—”

“Thank you so much!” Reseda cut in before Iris could finish. Then he whispered, “We shouldn’t make her feel bad for offering.”

Hmm. Good point.

They set off down the street, eating their ice cream, just like old times. Back then, the ice cream was a treat the mages would buy them for doing a good job. *We ate from a lot of the local food stands, come to think of it...*

Then it hit her: *Now that Reseda’s used to eating ice cream cones, have I ruined his future date event with Camille?!*

In the game, Reseda was so unaccustomed to eating while walking, he would get ice cream all over his face; Camille wiped it off with her fingers, then licked them clean. To hide his fluttering heart, he stole her heart-shaped cookie and ate it. Naturally, she was crushed to lose her cookie. But then Reseda would say “Here, I’ll give you *my* heart.”

Eeeee! What a great game! The memory made Iris blush all over again.

Chapter 42: The Enemy Recon Date, Part 2

“KEEP spacing out like that and you know what will happen?” Reseda poked Iris’s nose, then snatched the cookie heart from her ice cream. “I’m gonna devour your heart.” And with that, he took a bite right in front of her.

Iris stared at him in shock. *Wait...is this...?* The blood drained from her face.

“Aww, I’m just messing with you. Here, I’ll give you *my* heart.”

As Iris stood there, frozen, he slid his own cookie past her lips. *Kyaaaa, kill me now! I’m gonna die of shame! Public humiliation! End me!!!*

After that, Reseda went back to eating his own ice cream like nothing had happened. *Why does this feel like such a date?! You can tell he’s a veteran playboy... Good grief. Camille must have a heart of steel to endure all this, because I sure can’t!*

Defeated, Iris chewed the cookie in her mouth. The lightly salty flavor paired nicely with the sugary ice cream.

“After we finish, do you wanna go do that enemy recon?”

“Oh, er, yes, let’s!”

Iris quickly snapped back to her senses. Today, their goal was to check on Camille’s current progress. This was *not* a date!

“See that line of people? That’s the clothing store where Miss Camille works part-time. It’s so popular, they have to limit entry,” Reseda explained. It was yet another new store, and the line was full of people their age.

“It doesn’t look like we’ll be getting in anytime soon,” Iris mused.

“Let’s just peek through the window.”

And so, they looked in through the large display window out front. Because they only allowed so many people inside at a time, the interior wasn’t all that crowded. Iris could see Camille in there, wearing a skirt that hung to her thighs—an unusual fashion among the common people.

Yes, that’s right! In the game, Iris chose to wear a miniskirt and limit entry, too. That was the advice Mégane gave. The goal was to make miniskirts into a popular fashion trend around town.

Some of the people in line were clearly only there to see Camille. Through the window, it felt like they were looking in at a stage performance; all the girls shopping inside were well-dressed, suggesting they were fully conscious of the public eye.

“I like how they’ve staged everything.”

“Apparently, it’s a Pont Company store.”

“Oh, that’s Miss Camille’s family.”

“Yep. These people really know what they’re doing.”

Reseda looked at Camille, looked back at Iris, and blushed. Then she remembered: *Oh, that’s right! That miniskirt raises affection points with the love interests!*

“Oh, Cherry, you dirty boy!” Iris teased him.

“Wha?!”

“You were looking at Miss Camille’s legs, weren’t you?”

And if so, he certainly wasn’t the only one. Camille’s legs were shapely and plump—beautiful and sensual. Anyone would fawn over them. *Trust me, I get it! I would touch them myself if I had the chance!*

“No, I wasn’t!” Reseda hissed.

"You don't have to hide it. She's a *very* pretty girl." Iris nodded.

"No, I was just trying to picture you wearing that," he mumbled, averting his eyes.

"What? Me?" Iris blinked at him.

Summoning all his courage, he looked up at her, his eyes sparkling. "Can I buy it for you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why don't you ever accept any gifts from me?" he asked, pouting his lips.

"That's not true at all! You give me things all the time."

"Liar!"

"Just now, you gave me a lot of free information. Plus, you do things for me that I could never do on my own. At this point, I can't possibly repay you for what you've already given me—so no, I can't accept any additional gifts," Iris declared firmly.

Blushing, he turned away. "That's cheating, you know."

"What is?" She blinked at him again, and he smiled bitterly.

"We're partners in crime, remember?"

He patted her head through her headscarf—his usual "let's move on" signal.

"Let's go to the café that sells those cookies next. We'll probably be able to get in since we've confirmed that Miss Camille won't be there."

"Right!"

Sure enough, they managed to get inside the café without waiting in line. For some reason, the waiter seated them at a table

with a two-person loveseat—the kind of spot you'd seat a well-dressed couple to make the café look good.

Iris ordered a strawberry jam sandwich off the specials menu. It came with one slice of white bread and one slice of pink bread; each slice had a heart-shaped piece cut out of it and swapped with the other. *What is it with otome games and hearts, anyway?* She stared wearily into the distance.

Camille was the one who suggested these loveseats, and the maid-style waitress uniforms were her idea too. Iris knew this because they were options in *HanaKoro*. Apparently, this was yet another Pont Company store—that was probably how she managed to have so many different part-time jobs.

All around town, Iris could see Camille's influence scattered everywhere. Any mention of her was sure to be met with talk that she was “going to be the next Holy Maiden.” Slowly but surely, she was spreading her influence! *That's my girl, Camille! I knew you could do it!*

“I have to wonder, though...does she have some sort of money problem?” Reseda whispered.

At this, something occurred to Iris. In the game, she saved up money from her jobs to make her dress...but if the Pont Company was backing her, then surely they could have made one for her, right? Was it just a plot hole?

In Iris's past life, it was pretty normal for students to work part-time on weekends, so she never questioned it, but Reseda brought up a good point. Among the nobility, part-time jobs were practically unheard of. When Reseda and Iris worked as assistants to help with the vaccine efforts, they concealed their identities to do so; as for the mages, they had full-time careers at the Temple of Magic.

"I don't know... I certainly haven't heard about any money troubles," Iris replied.

"I see," Reseda murmured quietly.

Chapter 43: I Told You, I'm NOT the Holy Maiden!

SURROUNDED by prying eyes, Reseda and Iris finished their lunch and then decided to visit the local clinic. Located right on the border between the town and the Dark Forest, the clinic was formerly an abandoned warehouse that they had cleaned up and refurbished into a medical facility after last summer's soilpox outbreak. It was run by a mage who had retired from the Temple of Magic, and the young mother Iris had met at the Dark Forest Cavern often came in to assist.

Once the virus outbreak died down, it became clear that keeping the infected quarantined in the cavern was an inefficient system. Since symptoms could often be mitigated in the early stages of the virus, they tried to get the vaccine to new patients as fast as possible; however, given the considerable distance, they sometimes arrived too late. Reseda complained about it to the King, and they decided to establish this clinic as a solution. Ideally, they would have set it up sooner, but they were very shorthanded during the height of the outbreak.

After Iris enrolled at the Academy, she spent her free time checking in on behalf of the Temple of Magic. Sometimes Reseda would come with her, and they'd ask for an update on the town's current condition. In exchange for that information, they would provide any additional supplies the clinic needed. Today, they brought in a package of the café cookies as a treat.

"It's Mint and Cherry!" the kids shouted as they ran out to meet them. Though it wasn't officially an orphanage, the clinic gave shelter to all the children who had been orphaned by soilpox, and Iris made an effort to bring things that they would enjoy.

“How has everyone been? No more nasty viruses, I hope?”

“Nope! We’re all okay!”

“We’ve brought cookies. Be sure to share them now.”

As Iris handed over the treats, the children all cheered.

“Camille’s cookies!”

“Don’t forget to wash your hands first. Oh, and let the doctor know we’re here.”

“Ugh, Mint, you *always* say that!”

The kids all ran back into the clinic, and Iris and Reseda followed them inside, where they found the doctor, the young mother, and the scarred man standing gathered with some others.

“Are we interrupting?” Reseda asked.

“If it isn’t Lord Cherry and Lady Mint! No, we’re not on the clock.” The doctor waved them over. “Come, join us.”

As Iris and Reseda sat down on the plain, unsophisticated wooden chairs he offered them, the people standing around the scarred man looked at them in surprise.

“Lady Mint, you say...?”

“The girl rumored to be the Green Holy Maiden? I didn’t know she was so young.”

“When she first appeared at the cavern, they say she was a mere child...”

Confused by all the whispering, Iris looked at the scarred man. He grinned back.

“The Green Holy Maiden doesn’t like to cause a stir. Don’t go tellin’ folks you met her, all right?” he told the group.

From the way he spoke, he made it sound like Iris *was* the Green Holy Maiden. The crowd all kneeled at her feet, clasping their hands in prayer.

"*Huhwha?!*" Iris yelped, drawing her legs up onto the seat of the chair in surprise. "Doctor, what's going on here?"

"These fine people are on a pilgrimage to the Iris Swordfount."

"The *what*?"

"Back when I first transferred the cavern patients to the clinic, I cleared a path on my way there. These days, it's common to see pilgrims following it to the spring located near the cavern entrance."

"What spring?" Iris blinked in confusion.

"He's talking about the thing you did with your sheath," Reseda whispered.

"Oh, that! But...I mean, that was Lady Sauge's doing, not mine..."

Iris stared into the distance. *Wait, but the average person can't see fairies...which means it would have looked like I did it all myself...*

"Look, I swear, I'm not the Holy Maiden! You have the wrong girl!"

The pilgrims all nodded along. "You really are every bit as modest as the rumors claim. Don't worry—we won't tell anyone."

"No, that's not it!"

"We understand completely."

No, you don't!!!

"Well, we'd better be on our way now. Wouldn't wanna interrupt the doctor's business," the scarred man declared. And with that, he led the pilgrims out of the clinic.

Iris slumped back in her chair. "What just happened...?"

“During the soipox outbreak, it became a tradition for those who had recovered to bring supplies to those who were still sick. And in the process, they would collect some of the holy water from the Iris Swordfount to take back with them.”

“Holy water?!”

“Lately, that man’s been running everything himself. He collects participation fees from the pilgrims and donates that money to help feed the kids here. He also sells bottles of holy water for those who can’t go on the pilgrimage.”

With a smile, the doctor showed them the “holy water” stored in an assortment of glass bottles. Apparently, the orphans went out and collected the bottles from trash cans; they were then brought back to the clinic, disinfected, and repurposed. The bottles were then decorated with mint leaves. By giving the kids a job to do, it instilled in them feelings of self-affirmation and self-worth.

“It’s all thanks to you, Lady Mint.”

Iris didn’t know what to say to this. If they were selling the “holy water” to help the orphans, then she couldn’t really find it in her to complain.

“This is great news!” Reseda exclaimed happily.

Iris forced a laugh. “Yes... Wonderful...”

Chapter 44: Contest Prep In...Progress?

WHEN Iris walked up to Camille, Mégane took one look at her and shrieked.

“Are your contest preparations coming along, Miss Camille?”

“Um...yes...?” She smiled nervously—what was she so nervous about?

“Do you have a dress ready?”

“Just barely...”

“I see. What about the dance? Do you have the steps all memorized?”

She let out an awkward laugh and looked away.

“I take it that’s a no, then?”

“...Well, Miss Mégane has been teaching me...”

Mégane was only *first-generation* nobility. There was simply no way she knew enough about ballroom dancing to teach Camille.

In *HanaKoro*, the player was tasked with completing a rhythm mini-game with their chosen love interest, and Mégane wasn’t an option. Therefore, the way things were currently headed, chances were high Camille would make a mistake on the day of the contest. This Iris simply could not abide. She needed Camille to win the competition by a landslide so no one would dare contest the results. Otherwise, it might lead to infighting among the Fairy Leaders.

Iris let out a sigh, and Mégane flinched. She leaned in and whispered in Mégane’s ear: “Miss Mégane, what about Nigel or His Highness the Prince? They haven’t been helping her at all?”

“Eeeek! N-No!” she whimpered.

"Well, that simply won't do," Iris muttered under her breath, and Mégane shrank back. Camille shot Iris a confused look, so she told her, "Come to my room later tonight. I shall teach you *everything* you need to know."

At this, the other girls both blushed.

"L-Lady Iris, what are you *saying*!?" Mégane yelped, flustered.

"Why, I'm going to teach her how to dance, of course."

They both heaved a sigh of relief.

"But Lady Iris, I'm your rival... It wouldn't be right to make you teach me," Camille protested, hanging her head in defeat.

"If you make a fool of yourself at the popularity contest, it'll make me look bad by association. Besides, do you really think I'm going to give you *all* the tips you'll need to outperform me?"

Iris snorted, drunk on her own haughty performance. She was acting like *such* a villain. It was *delightful*! And so, she strolled merrily from the classroom, leaving Camille and Mégane staring after her, their mouths agape.



LATER that night, back in Iris's dorm room, she had pushed her sofa up against the wall to create enough space to dance in. The fairies all gathered around her to help.

Then Camille turned up, wearing a fuzzy nightgown in place of her uniform. This was another outfit Iris recognized from the game. *Ugh, I always hoped the devs would do some sort of collab with a fashion company to make those in real life! They sell them locally?!* *Wait...who am I kidding? Of course they do!* Unfortunately, *HanaKoro* was not a mainstream otome game, so it never got any crossover merch.

"My, I love that nightgown you're wearing. Where can I buy one?" Iris asked before she could stop herself.

Camille smiled bashfully. "They sell them at a clothing store downtown. I work there part-time, so if you'd like, I can pick one up for you. D-Do you...want to match?"

She looked up at Iris with her puppy-dog eyes, and Iris reeled.

"Because they *do* have other colors—"

"*Let's match!!!*" Iris blurted eagerly.

"Oh, but your nightgown is really pretty, too..."

Iris's was made of flower-patterned white silk with a wrap front and a loosely tied ribbon at the waist. It was faintly visible through the sheer dressing gown she was wearing over it.

"Thank you," Iris told her brusquely.

Camille gazed at Iris with admiration in her eyes. A commoner like her would never *dream* of wearing silk every night like it was no big deal. Not only that, but she was flattered that Iris didn't make fun of her ordinary clothes—in fact, she had made it sound as though she genuinely liked them. To Camille, Iris was a role model to aspire to.

And so began their dance practice. The room wasn't large enough to accommodate much twirling, but they could at least go over the basics.

From Camille's perspective, being in Iris's room was like a dream come true. Add in the fact that Iris was in a nightgown with her hand on Camille's waist, and she couldn't quite think straight. She kept tripping over her own two feet...and stepping on Iris's.

"Ack! Sorry!"

"Stay focused."

“R-Right—*gah!*”

Just like that, it was all over in a flash.

“It appears you aren’t quite so perfect after all,” Iris mused with a chuckle. Camille started blushing, so she hastily added, “I apologize—I’m not trying to insult you. It’s just refreshing to learn that you have flaws. Back home, they call that *gap moe*.”

“Gap moe...?” she repeated, perplexed.

Iris realized her mistake and averted her eyes. “What I mean is...it’s a charming contrast.”

“Oh...uh...thank you...” Camille’s face was so hot, you could fry an egg on it.

“Now then, let’s call it a night. Once you’ve got the basics down, I’ll find you a proper partner and a wide, open space. That being said, I don’t have many male friends, so if you have someone in mind already, by all means, ask them.”

At this, Camille looked up. Now was her chance to finally ask...

“Good night, my dear.”

She grabbed Iris’s arm. “Um, Lady Iris!”

“What is it?”

“Are you trying to help me win?” she asked bluntly.

Iris smiled wryly. She’d forgotten Camille was like this—overly bold, overly direct, and overly single-minded. At her question, Iris nodded quietly.

“How come?”

“Surely you understand by now. I have no mana, Lady Camille. I don’t know *how* I was nominated as a candidate, but I would have nothing to offer this kingdom if I were to win. I wouldn’t be capable

of helping the royal subjects. Nevertheless, I'm barred from underperforming, and I'm in no position to forfeit, so here we are."

"But if you can never be the Holy Maiden no matter what, then...then this whole competition is designed to do nothing but hurt you!" Camille protested tearfully.

Smiling, Iris rolled up her left sleeve and showed Camille her scars. "That isn't necessarily true. Holy Maiden candidates are guaranteed a career working at the royal palace, and since I can't expect to get married, I'll need to work to support myself."

"But Lady Iris..."

"Please, just win," Iris cut in sharply. "You have to be the Holy Maiden. I don't want anyone thinking I deserve the title instead."

Iris took Camille by the hand. Regardless of any happy-bad or fully-bad endings, Iris just wasn't fit for the job. If they gave it to her, she'd only create more problems for the people. Thus, she needed someone like Camille with a strong mana supply to fill the role instead.

"Please. Do it for me."

The desperation in Iris's voice made Camille's heart ache.

"Okay...I'll do it. Just you wait—I'll win the title of Holy Maiden!"

"Thank you, Miss Camille!"

And so, the two prospective maidens were in agreement...

Chapter 45: Dancing with Fairies

ONCE Camille had mastered the basic steps, the girls moved to a practice room on campus. Iris had instructed her to bring a partner; she showed up with Fuchsia, the Red Fairy Leader.

“Sorry... I didn’t have anyone else I could ask,” Camille mumbled shyly.

Fuchsia smirked. “Since she needed my help, I decided to give it to her.”

Iris recoiled slightly. This was decidedly *not* what she had expected.

“You know you can’t dance with Lord Fuchsia during the contest, right? Because normal people can’t see fairies?”

She gasped. “Oh, I didn’t think of that!”

“Ah, crap, I totally forgot,” Fuchsia said. “After all, if a no-mana chick like *you* can see me, I figured everyone could.”

“Your entire existence is a royal secret, remember?!” Iris pointed out.

“Oh, right. Forgot about that, too. Eh, don’t worry about it.”

How am I supposed to not worry about it??? It’s a secret so huge, the game never bothered explaining it! Kind of important, if you ask me!

Still, Iris decided not to press the issue any further. It was time to practice.

At first glance, Fuchsia didn’t look like the dancing type, but contrary to Iris’s expectations, his skills were solid. He aggressively swung Camille around the room to a “One, Two, Three” beat, and

she was clearly having trouble keeping up with him. But in her desperation to follow his lead, she seemed to forget the awkward hesitation that always held her back when she practiced with Iris. She really looked like she was enjoying herself.

"Well, well. I see you're all having fun in here," Sauge said, appearing beside Iris out of nowhere with a smile on her face.

"Lady Sauge?! You're not supposed to be here!"

"Neither is Fuchsia and yet here he is," she shot back. Then she took Iris's hand. "Let us join them, shall we?"

"...How does that work when we're both girls?" Iris asked, resigned to her fate.

"Since you're shorter, I shall take the lead."

"And we'll sing for you!"

"And we'll play the instruments!"

Fairies flew out of Iris's ringlets. At this, all the other fairies watching on the sidelines swiftly joined in. Some shook sprays of lily-of-the-valley, making the bell-shaped flowers jingle; some pounded dandelions like drums; some blew rhododendrons like trumpets, and some played hairy fleabane stems like flutes. It was all so surreal, Iris could scarcely believe her eyes.

"It's beautiful...!" she gushed.

Smirking, Sauge led Iris to the dance floor, her long white hair fluttering behind her. Her steps were perfectly controlled—a mirror reflection of her personality. Iris smiled at her, and she smiled back. *Oh, Lady Sauge... For a woman, you're so dreamy...!*

There was a sudden knock at the door, snapping Iris out of her trance.

"Iris? Are you in there?"

It was Reseda. At the sound of his voice, Sauge grinned and slid an arm around Iris's waist. Not willing to be outdone, Fuchsia did the same to Camille. Meanwhile, the little fairies all watched intently, their eyes shining with excitement.

"Yes, I'm here!"

"I'm coming in."

The door opened, and Reseda walked inside. He took one look at Sauge and scowled. Then he realized that another Fairy Leader was present, hastily composed himself, and bent the knee.

Fuchsia grinned in amusement. "The king's son?"

"Lord Fuchsia, I am Reseda, the second prince of Floraison."

"Right, I've heard about you. Anyway, as you were."

Rising to his feet, Reseda looked over at Iris. "What are you doing here, Iris?"

"Why, dance practice, of course," she replied matter-of-factly.

"I do believe I said I would be your dance partner..."

"Did you? Oh ho ho ho!" Iris let out her most villainous laugh.

He sighed heavily. "I should think you'd be better off practicing with the same partner you'll have on the day of the contest," he insisted, ignoring Sauge's smirk.

"I suppose you're right," Iris mused.

She looked over at Camille. Obviously she needed her dear protagonist's blessing before she made any major decisions.

"In that case, I suppose we need to decide on a partner for Miss Camille."

In Reseda's route in *HanaKoro*, Reseda chose to dance with Camille over Iris, thereby forcing her to endure the public humiliation

of dancing with her own brother rather than her fiancé. Conversely, in Nigel's route, Reseda danced with Iris, but only out of obligation. Here in real life, however, he had no such obligation to her.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because she doesn't have one. Obviously, she can't ask Lord Fuchsia to come onstage and dance with her..."

"Sure she can," Fuchsia protested.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Reseda shot back hastily.

"But...if I can't dance with Lord Fuchsia, then who...?" Camille asked timidly.

Iris clapped her hands together. "What if His Highness was your partner? He's standing right here, after all."

"*Call. Me. Reseda.* And for the record, I'm *your* partner!"

"But..."

"Do you have someone else in mind?"

"Well, I could ask Nigel..."

"Brother and sister, dancing together? I don't *think* so. Why don't you ask him to dance with Camille instead? He helped her train for the monster dispatch mission, didn't he?"

Unlike in *HanaKoro*, the real Reseda refused to make Iris dance with her own brother. *If only his 2D version had exhibited that level of consideration... Poor Iris...* While Iris was confused why he would insist on being her partner when they weren't even engaged, she could appreciate that he seemed to have more common sense than his otome game counterpart.

Iris looked over at Camille. "Would you be willing to dance with Nigel, Miss Camille? If so, I can speak to him on your behalf."

"Huhwha?! But...won't that be asking too much of Sir Nigel? I mean, he already went to all the trouble of training me in combat..."

"Did he frighten you? Oh, I'm so sorry. He can be excessively strict at times, so I understand if you'd rather not."

Iris shot a look at Reseda; he scowled. Camille hastily shook her head. It was obvious to her that he wanted to dance with Iris, and she *really* didn't want to get in the way of his wishes.

Admittedly, Nigel's sword training was indeed fairly strict. He had no understanding of how much stamina the average girl could be expected to have, so he treated her as though she was at the same fitness level as *Iris*. Needless to say, he'd run Camille completely ragged, and his aggressive point-blank attacks terrified her. She simply didn't have the energy to swing a bastard sword around for hours at a time.

Partway through, however, he realized the error of his ways and changed up his training style to suit her needs. In addition to her magic, it was thanks to his persistent efforts to teach her how to run and dodge that she ultimately finished the monster dispatch mission entirely unscathed. She was now so grateful to him, she considered him one of her "heroes" along with Iris. And it was for that reason that she didn't want to burden him needlessly.

"It's not that! I just...um... If Sir Nigel wouldn't mind, then..."

She stared hesitantly at the floor, and Iris smirked. *Ohoho... Nigel's route, is it? Not to worry! Your future sister-in-law is more than happy to help you!*

"Well then, I'll go fetch him!" Iris exclaimed.

Reseda smiled. "You sure seem happy."

"Indeed, I am!"

At this, Sauge laughed. "As do you, little prince."

"Yes, I am," he nodded intently.

"Nigel, eh? Well then, let's see what he's made of," Fuchsia muttered devilishly.

A chill ran down Iris's spine. "Er, Lord Fuchsia? Please don't bully my twin, all right?"

He smiled back at her without a word. *I swear, these Fairy Leaders can be terrifying!*

Chapter 46: Nigel and Camille

AND so Nigel arrived at the practice room at Iris's behest to serve as a dance partner for Camille. As another Holy Maiden candidate, she was technically Iris's rival, but he knew his sister didn't want the title. Thus, he wanted to help her in any way he possibly could. After all, despite the discovery that Iris had no mana, their father still seemed determined to carry on...as did Reseda, the second prince of Floraison, standing beside her as if he belonged there.

Ever since they were kids, Reseda had always been interested in Iris. To Nigel, it was obvious that the prince was smitten. But because of Iris's soilkox scars, the more traditional noble families all said she was "punished by God." As things stood, no one would possibly ask for her hand in marriage, least of all the royal family... And the only thing that could overturn the status quo was if Iris became Holy Maiden. The Holy Maiden was *holy*, after all—*beloved* by God. It was the only way to prove that she wasn't a heathen. Not only that, but many Holy Maidens went on to marry into the royal family.

Camille curtsied deeply. "Thank you so much for coming."

You really don't have to thank me, Nigel thought with a wry grin. But she was a commoner who had only recently been adopted into a noble family, so he knew she couldn't be expected to conduct herself with perfect etiquette.

That said, he also knew what the other students were saying behind his back. At Iris's request, he had spent a lot of time with Camille lately to train her for the monster dispatch mission; because of this, the other girls at the academy had taken to spreading false rumors about them.

It must be hard, being the subject of nasty gossip all because you were born with more mana than most.

Nigel and Iris had spent their whole lives together. As a result, he hadn't developed any close female friendships. He based his entire understanding of women on his sister, and thus, his standards were absurdly high. From his perspective, Camille was a weak, ordinary girl who just happened to have a lot of mana. But there was more to her than just a hefty mana supply; it was her good looks and unconventional behavior that provoked these nobodies into badmouthing her. Of course, Nigel had grown up tolerating *Iris's* antics, so naturally, Camille's quirks barely fazed him.

"Likewise, thank you for inviting me." Smiling, he offered his hand to her. Timidly, she took it. The little fairies began their orchestral performance.

If it wasn't for Iris, I would have gone my whole life never seeing any fairies, Nigel mused.

The Chevaliers were a family of knights, and a history of poor mana could be traced back through their ancestry. Even their father admitted he'd never seen any fairies. But because they had such little mana, they were renowned for their ability to resist magic spells. In this era of peace, however, magic ability was starting to take precedence over the sword. Among the upper crust, those with less mana were seen as lesser—the House of Chevalier only received special treatment because their ancestors were famous for great acts of heroism.

Though to be fair, commoners with lots of mana don't have it any easier than nobles with little, Nigel mused as he looked at Camille.

And yet, to her credit, he hadn't heard her complain once. Unlike Iris, she was actually making an effort to win the race; though he had pushed her to her limit during their sword training, she simply gritted her teeth and kept trying, right to the very end. And since *Iris*

approved of her winning, Nigel had decided he wanted to help her, too.

They spun around the floor in time to the fairies' music, and while Camille's steps were still a little stiff, she had it all down pat—proof that Iris had taught her well. Now all that remained was to get her to loosen up.

Nigel thought back to the times when he and Iris had danced together as children. Naturally, the twins were in perfect sync; they could simply enjoy the dance without thinking too hard. And the more Camille kept looking down at her feet, the more frustrated he became.

"Quit looking at your feet and look at me. Just trust me," he told her, in the same tone he always used to scold Iris. Depending on how you interpreted it, it might have sounded like a pickup line, but Nigel didn't realize this, since this was how he always talked with his sister.

Blushing furiously, Camille started to stumble. Nigel tugged on her hand, keeping her upright.

"Don't overthink it."

He gazed at her. Startled, she pushed him away on reflex. Her face was now beet-red, and the way she looked up at him with teary eyes took his breath away. *What just happened? No girl has ever looked at me like that before...*

"Sir Nigel, um...I...I know this might be normal for dancing, but...I'm not used to being so...close," she stammered, embarrassed. And for the first time, Nigel found himself thinking of her as brave. This surprised him, since he thought all girls were like Iris, and in his eyes, his sister wasn't very brave at all—more of the sly, cunning type.

"Sorry about that. Let's keep practicing until you feel more comfortable."

He donned a charming smile; she nodded quietly, staring at the floor. At the very least, she seemed willing to heed his advice.

"Good grief, that brother of mine. I can't believe he said all that with a straight face," Iris groaned as she watched them.

"Like brother, like sister," Reseda sighed wearily. When she looked at him in confusion, however, he merely shrugged. "All right then, shall we get started?"

And so, he led Iris by the hand to the dance floor...

Chapter 47: The Popularity Contest, Part 1

ON the day of the contest, the academy set up a stage in the town plaza. This was where the competition would be held. They passed out flyers detailing the candidates and their accomplishments, inviting citizens of any age, gender, or economic status to cast their vote. After the judges reviewed past test scores and factored in the poll results, the candidate with the highest score would go on to an interview with the current Holy Maiden. And if she approved, they would be crowned the next Holy Maiden.

Camille du Pont had a noble's name, but she was originally a commoner, merely adopted into the aristocracy after being nominated as a Holy Maiden candidate. This made her the first commoner to ever compete for the title—and now she had won two of the three competitions. Not only that, but everyone knew her as the original creator of Camille's Camellia, the salve that helped reduce the appearance of scars. Adding together her knowledge test score and her monster dispatch score, she was up to 190 points.

Then there was Iris du Chevalier, the daughter of a Marquis with a long family legacy of heroic deeds. She had scored seventy points on the knowledge test and zero points during the monster dispatch mission, so she was really lagging behind. While some praised her as awe-inspiringly beautiful, she was still a noblewoman punished by God. Many believed that those who conducted themselves like true aristocrats would never catch soilpox—so if she'd caught it, it had to mean Iris was a wicked girl. And even if she wasn't, they couldn't relate to her anyway. Iris lived in a world they knew nothing about.

The Holy Maiden race was always a hot topic. Each year, people placed bets on who would win...and this year, the favored candidate was rumored to be Camille.



THE first half of the popularity contest involved completing a task set by the academy; the second half was the dance segment, which doubled as a fashion show. The audience would observe these two performances and cast their vote for who they felt was the more fitting candidate. Every year, the contest was treated like a recreational event, with food stands and a huge turnout.

Camille and Iris peered out at the crowd from backstage. Camille was dressed in her regular school uniform, while Iris was wearing her monster dispatch uniform with her hair in a ponytail. She chose this outfit purposely because she knew how the contest was going to play out; after all, she had gone through it several times before—in *HanaKoro*, anyway. As a result, Iris wasn't too nervous. Camille was scared stiff, however.

“And now, this year’s assigned task...” There was a drumroll, followed by the crash of cymbals. “Retrieve the white lily frozen inside a block of ice!” the headmaster declared, his voice echoing across the plaza.

Yep, just like the game! Iris did a little fist-pump. Camille looked at her nervously, so she gave her a firm pat on the back. “If you’re too scared, then allow me to go first.” And with that, Iris walked out onto the stage.

As Iris came into view, the crowd started murmuring in confusion. No surprise there—after all, no candidate in history had ever worn their monster dispatch uniform to the popularity contest. She smiled stiffly.

Little did she know, she was wrong about where their confusion was coming from.

“Iris du Chevalier...? But that’s Mint!”

“What? Mint’s no spoiled rich girl!”

“Yeah, I mean, what kind of rich girl stomps on centipedes?”

“I can’t even picture it!”

Standing in front of the block of ice, Iris took a deep breath. Then she shifted into a fighting stance and threw out a straight punch. The ice cracked and crumbled, glittering beneath the stage lights. She plucked the lily from the remnants, dusted the little ice shavings from its petals, and raised it triumphantly over her head! After that, she walked over and handed it to the headmaster.

The audience was stunned into silence. No candidate in history had ever cleared the assigned task by using brute strength instead of magic, and the crowd was downright perplexed. Unfortunately, it was the only method available to her.

Iris walked offstage, and Camille walked on in her place, carrying her brand-new magic wand. It was a gift from Nigel, who had taken more of an interest in Camille following their dance practice. She was pretty sure he was only nice to her because Iris had asked him to help her win, but a small part of her reveled in his attention.

If I win the race, will Sir Nigel be happy for me? At some point, she had started to daydream about what would happen after she won. *Will he be grateful that I made his sister’s wish come true?*

Originally, Camille only wanted to be the Holy Maiden to have a place to belong. After all, if she couldn’t go back to being a commoner, she wanted to earn her keep as an aristocrat. But now things were different... *If only I could be a good-hearted person who helps people, like Lady Iris, maybe he’d notice me...*

She looked out at the stage, her eyes shimmering. There, amid the sea of people, she could see a boy with glossy green hair. *Oh, Sir Nigel...* The sight of him filled her with relief. Between him and Iris, she was starting to think her lucky color was green.

Nigel looked at her, smiled reassuringly, and mouthed the words: *You can do it!* She couldn't hear him, but she understood. *If he thinks I can do it, then I can!*

Gently, to avoid damaging the lily, Camille cast a magic circle in midair, gathering sunlight particles to melt the ice. Glinting in the sunlight, the ice shards sparkled in all the colors of the rainbow as white steam rose up. In a blink, the ice had fully melted, leaving the lily standing perfectly in place, its petals shining from the moisture.

Camille dutifully lifted the wet flower with both hands, raised it over her head, then bowed in Nigel's direction. The crowd cheered. Timidly, she raised her head and looked out at him; he was smiling and clapping. That was all she needed.

She handed her flower to the headmaster, who nodded approvingly.

Chapter 48: The Popularity Contest, Part 2

IT was time to change into their ball gowns for the dance segment. Iris stared down at her dress in utter despair.

Are you kidding me?! Only a god-tier cosplayer could pull this off!!!

She staggered out of the changing room to where her dance partner was waiting for her, grinning from ear to ear. “I heard you asked a fashion designer to make your dress for you, so I thought I’d surprise you.”

Reseda snickered; she was speechless.

She knew what dress Iris wore during this part of the contest—a run-of-the-mill evening gown. But she didn’t know enough about dressmaking to replicate the same design from the game, so she took all her measurements and put in an order with the most fashionable *haute couture* atelier in town. Reseda must have found out about it through her father... Her throat tightened.

“Er, Your Highness?”

“*Reseda.*”

“*Prince Reseda,* I’m just not sure this design is the most...”

“I’m told that it’s the latest trend among the peasants. And since you’ll need their votes to win the contest, I figured it would appeal to them.”

He beamed; Iris felt her face twitch.

It made no sense. In the game, Iris wore a classy, dark-green, floor-length gown...but the dress she found herself in was nothing

like any evening gown. The top part was light-pink with hot-pink accents, angel sleeves, and open shoulders. It hung down to her ankles, but starting around her belly button, the fabric split down the middle, revealing a sheer mint-green petticoat underneath that transitioned into a wrap skirt starting at the knees. This meant everything from the knees down was faintly visible. If the pink parts were black instead, why...she'd look like a villain from a magical girl show!

Granted, it covered a lot of skin, but the translucent petticoat was titillating, appealing to those who preferred to imagine rather than be shown outright. *Don't get me wrong—I love it in theory! Especially the idea of my beloved Iris wearing it.* But right now, she was Iris!

"You truly look the part of the Holy Maiden," Reseda said with a sunny smile. Iris smiled back stiffly. There was no time to arrange for a different dress, and in a sense, it was at least somewhat her fault for not preparing a dress herself. She had no choice but to roll with it.

"...Thank you," she replied, defeated.

Iris glanced at Camille as she walked out of the changing room. She was wearing a pastel pink dress with puffy sleeves, a frilly mini hoop skirt, and a bright-pink satin corset. Her lower legs were covered in white knee-high socks and cutesy pink Mary Janes with little wings on the heels. If Iris was a Magical Girl *anime* villain, then Camille was the protagonist!

Well, at least I'm not wearing THAT, I guess.

"Miss Camille, er, that dress..." Even Nigel seemed perplexed. His gaze wandered as he struggled not to look at her legs.

“Does it look bad...? Mégane helped me design it,” Camille responded without batting a lash. She seemed right at home wearing it, too. Perhaps she was used to wearing miniskirts by now.

“It doesn’t look bad, but...” Nigel faltered.

“Just tell her she looks pretty!” Iris cut in. Startled, the two of them whipped around to look at her.

“You look truly stunning, Iris. Like a goddess.” Reseda casually put an arm around her waist; she shot him a withering look.

“Ha ha, very funny. It’s not nice to toy with people, you know.” Iris pursed her lips.

He grinned playfully. “Nah, I mean it.”

“Not sure I approve of your fashion sense, Your Highness,” Nigel muttered under his breath.

“...Say, um, do you think this shows too much skin?” Camille asked him timidly.

She knew the upper and lower classes had different sensibilities; the more time she spent with Nigel, the more obvious it became. And the more she was around him, the more she found herself drawn to him...but considering the difference in social status, she knew she couldn’t expect to ever be with him...

As for Nigel, it pained him to see Camille with her confidence in tatters.

“I think you wear it very well,” he told her sincerely. Delighted, she clapped her hands to her cheeks.

On the headmaster’s cue, the four walked out onstage.

Chapter 49: The Popularity Contest, Part 3

THE four of them stood side by side as the headmaster introduced them by name.

“It’s Mint!”

The children from the clinic all pointed at Iris and waved innocently. A commotion was slowly spreading through the crowd, but she kept a straight face and pretended not to see it.

“And Cherry’s with her!”

They pointed at Reseda next; he smiled and waved back.

“Prince Reseda and...the Green Holy Maiden...?”

“So, Mint’s real name is Iris?”

“Weren’t people saying Lady Mint was the Holy Maiden who visited the Cavern of Death? They claimed to have met her at the clinic during a pilgrimage.”

“A prince and a high-born girl would never travel out to the castle town, much less lay their hands on the diseased!”

“But you can’t deny Lady Mint looks like a Holy Maiden in that white dress!”

Some of the older audience members began to pray right on the spot. In the face of this outcry, the headmaster looked at Iris, his complexion ghostly pale. She ignored him. *Oh boy, I can sense another lecture in my future*, she thought, staring wearily into the distance.

With a grin, Reseda looked over at the orchestra. The conductor snapped back to reality and started to wave his baton; the musicians

all followed suit, bringing the music to life. Then, without batting an eye at the audience, Reseda bowed in Iris's direction. She hastily curtsied back.

Defeated, Camille looked out at the crowd. To her, this was proof that *Iris* was the true Holy Maiden, whether she wanted to be or not.

She had tried her best, both for Iris and for herself. She was sure that if she worked hard to be like Iris, she would be worthy of the title. Besides, Nigel, Mégane, and Iris all wanted her to win. But if she lost, she wouldn't really be surprised. Still, she'd feel bad for letting them all down.

But right as Camille slumped her shoulders, Nigel put an arm tightly around her waist. Startled, she looked up at him.

"Keep your eyes on me," he told her, staring deep into her eyes.

She blinked, then looked back at him firmly. After all the time they'd spent practicing, they had established a foundation of trust.

"We're never going to dance better than His Highness, so let's just dance how *we* want to dance," he continued with a grin, and she nodded.

Of course. There was no point in trying to be someone she wasn't... Camille could feel the ice in her chest melting away. Then she took his hand. Right now, the best thing she could do was to dance how she wanted to dance. As Nigel spun her around on the stage, he was relieved to see the light return to her eyes, and a smile form on her lips.

The crowd cheered. In response, Reseda started spinning Iris around, too, like he was trying to compete. And when Camille and Iris locked eyes, they smiled at each other.



In a blink, the fairies had gathered around them, joining in with a dance of their own. Some sat among the orchestra members and chimed in with their little flower instruments. Backstage, Sauge and Fuchsia watched over the performance like proud parents. The whole stage was glittering.

Then the conductor's baton fell still, and the music came to an end. The dance was over. And when the dancers lined up to take a bow, the crowd exploded in cheers.



AT last, they announced the winner of the Holy Maiden Popularity Contest: Iris. When they said her name, Camille started clapping with a genuine smile on her face. But Iris was conflicted. Granted, she had given it her best—partly to avoid incurring the wrath of Sauge and Reseda, but mostly because it would be disrespectful to her hardworking opponent to throw the competition. But she was really expecting that her best wouldn't be enough to win.

"Miss Camille..."

"You earned it, Lady Iris," Camille declared.

Any pity I show her would just hurt her even more, Iris thought.

"Thank you. You performed superbly as well."

With that, Iris offered Camille her hand. She took it and shook it firmly. All around them, applause rang out in celebration of a duel fairly fought.

Next, it was time to announce the overall winner of the Holy Maiden Evaluation.

"The winner of this year's Holy Maiden Evaluation is..."

The headmaster's face went deathly pale.

“...A *tie*...? Both Iris du Chevalier and Camille du Pont have scored an equal number of points, and therefore, both candidates will progress to the in-person interview...”

The crowd went nuts. This outcome was entirely unheard of. Normally, only one person made it to the interview stage!

A cold sweat trickled down Iris’s back.

“You’re kidding me, right?!”

Chapter 50: Nigel's Route

AFTER the popularity contest, Iris figured the headmaster would call her over for a stern talking-to. But instead, he fixed her with a dead-eyed stare and let her go. This was a huge relief. Little did she know, however, that the upper crust had just found out that she was involved in the vaccine efforts, and it had caused a huge uproar.

All this time, the girl they looked down on as “punished by God” was the same girl the peasants called “the Green Holy Maiden.” On top of that, the way Iris danced with the fairies made her look as though she had very strong mana. There was simply no way they could keep pushing the narrative that she was a heretic. Some had changed their tune completely and started to kiss up to her family, while others were furious that she had “hijacked” the title of Holy Maiden.

But Iris was never informed of this. Frankly, the headmaster had given up on worrying about any of it.

Meanwhile, Camille was subjected to blatant harassment. She had been expected to win, but after her rival somehow survived to the final interview, some people decided it was proof that a high-born girl with the blessing of a Fairy Leader was simply better suited for the role. Their classism persisted right to the bitter end.



AS Iris was walking down the school building’s second-floor hall, she heard a loud *SPLASH* outside. She hurried over to the window and saw Camille standing stock-still, watching Nigel flounder around in the school pond.

Wait... Is this the same scene from his route?

Life had deviated from the game's plot so severely, Iris hadn't expected it to return. But on Nigel's route, Iris would steal Camille's memento of her mother and throw it into the pond, causing Nigel to dive in after it. He would instruct Camille to cast a search spell, making the lost item glow in the water. Following the light, Nigel would successfully recover the memento...and by solving the problem together, it would deepen their relationship.

Wait, but...how did this scene trigger when I never stole her memento? Actually, now that I think about it, if I really wanted those two to hook up, maybe I was SUPPOSED to steal it?!

Iris scanned the area and spotted a group of girls fleeing the scene. She let out a sigh. *Of course*. The game must have rebalanced itself. Feeling conflicted, she nevertheless headed out to meet up with Camille.

When Iris arrived, she found Camille preparing to join Nigel in the pond, much to his chagrin. "Just stay on the shore and cast a search spell!" he shouted.

This was an important moment in Nigel's route, and Iris didn't want to spoil it. She hid behind a tree—only to bump into someone who was already standing there. Startled, Iris flinched.

It was Mégane, spying on them just like Iris was. This shocked her, since she hadn't sensed her presence there whatsoever. Mégane started to scream, but Iris hastily clapped a hand over her mouth.

"A search spell...?" Camille asked.

"Put your hand in the water and envision what you've lost," Nigel explained.

Per his instructions, she kneeled down on the shore and started to cast. The pond's surface began to ripple. Then a faint glow rose up from deep in the center.

"There it is." Without hesitation, he waded out to the middle.

"Sir Nigel, no! You don't have to!" she wailed in a teary voice. Regardless, he plunged his arm deep in the muddy water. His uniform was soaked and filthy.

"Is this it?"

Sure enough, he pulled up the little pouch containing her memento. Tearfully, she nodded.

"Good thing we managed to find it," he told her with a smile. His cheeks were streaked with mud, and the pond water had made the waves in his green hair even more prominent.

Once he waded back to the shore, she ran up to him and dabbed the mud off his face with a handkerchief. "Thank you so much!" she whimpered.

"Just doing my job as a knight," he said with a grin. Indeed, a true knight would never quaver in the face of a little dirt. "More importantly, you should probably get this thing cleaned up. It's got something important inside, right?"

"I don't know... I'm not sure I'm supposed to open it. I was told it's a good-luck charm..."

"If you're curious, we could go to the school chapel and open it there. I'll come with you."

This conversation filled Iris with relief. In Nigel's route in *HanaKoro*, they would go to the chapel, cleanse the pouch with holy water, and open it to find proof of Camille's true heritage. All alone in the chapel, the two of them would stare down at the salver of holy water...at the amulet bearing the Earl of Sade's eagle emblem. Then, standing across from each other at the altar like newlyweds, they would slowly look up at each other... The memory made Iris's heart flutter! She started breathing heavily.

“Okay... Thank you...”

Smiling, the two of them walked off. Iris gazed at them, full of emotion. *Nigel and Camille is such a god-tier ship!* She nearly pressed her hands together in prayer, but then she snapped back to her senses. Mégane was still standing right here, staring at the ground awkwardly.

What's the matter? Not a fan of Nigel's route, I take it? Were you hoping for Cytisus's route, since it's considered the true ending?

“I take it Nigel's not your bias?”

“My...bias?” She looked at Iris in palpable confusion.

“Er, I mean...d-do you have feelings for him?” Iris stammered.

Was Mégane even *trying* to help Camille at all? Thinking back, Iris never saw her make any attempt to get the game's plot back on track. And if she was truly acting in Camille's best interests, surely she wouldn't have allowed her to practice dancing with the *villainess*! She was supposed to be helping Camille grind affection points with her chosen love interest so that they'd ask her out. That was what she did in the game, anyway...

Wait a minute. Unless...Camille's chosen love interest is...ME?! No, that can't be! There was never any route for Iris, right?! I played the whole game top to bottom and never found one! And there was never any fandisk content, either! Is Camille going to pursue...ME?!

“Someone like me is utterly unworthy of having feelings for Sir Nigel!” Mégane denied hastily. “And someone like *Camille* isn't worthy of him, either!”

At this, Iris looked at her in alarm. Mégane gasped and bit her lip.

“Where did *that* come from?”

Mégane wasn't acting like her usual self...

Chapter 51: Mégane

“**LADY** Iris, do you think me vile?”

“What, for spying? I’m in precisely the same boat as you.”

“No, I...I knew what they were going to do to Miss Camille’s memento. But I turned a blind eye to it.”

Iris thought about it for a moment. Honestly, would anyone expect *Mégane* to save the day? Probably not. She was just a support character, after all.

“Oh, it’s all right. These things happen,” Iris told her with a bright smile.

“R-Really?” She looked at her anxiously.

“Yes, really,” Iris nodded.

Mégane pulled her glasses off with one hand and pressed the other to her eyes. Quietly, Iris started to panic. Why was she crying all of a sudden?

“I was so jealous of her... That’s why I told those girls how important the memento was to her...”

What? Hold on a minute. That’s not what I thought this was about! So...she has no interest in helping Camille? And she ENCOURAGED the harassment? Why?! I don’t understand! She was so nice in the game! Was she lying to the player the whole time?!

This revelation turned Iris’s whole world upside down.

“Ever since she came to live with us, everyone’s been fawning all over her. My father instructed me to make sure she’ll become the Holy Maiden so she’ll marry above her station, and...”

Aha. Yes, of course. When you're a teen, you're not going to accept someone as your sister right off the bat. Iris stared wearily into the distance.

"And everyone at *school* fawns over her too! They keep complaining about how she's a commoner, yet they don't say a word about me! It's like I don't even *exist*! The only way I can ever get anyone to notice me is to talk about Miss Camille!"

As much as it hurt to be insulted, it hurt just as much to be outright ignored. And Mégane was always watching from the sidelines... Iris was conflicted. She didn't approve of Mégane using Camille's private information just to get attention, but at the same time, Camille never would have made it onto Nigel's route if it hadn't happened. *No use crying over spilled milk, I suppose...and besides, she does seem to feel guilty about it...*

"I know I'm not pretty, and I don't have much mana, and I don't have any special talents... I know I can never hope to marry someone of noble birth..."

"Now, now, you mustn't degrade yourself so. Even if you only helped Camille out of obligation, you still helped her a great deal, and that's very honorable of you. She never would have fit in at this school without you, and she certainly wouldn't have become such a noteworthy figure among the townspeople without the Pont Company's support. Besides, you helped her design that dress, didn't you? *That's* your special talent—making other people shine! The only downside is, well...it can often feel like you're left behind in the shadows."

Even if Mégane never sincerely wanted to help, the fact remained that she had been a tremendous asset thus far, both to Iris in her past life and Camille in reality. Regardless of her intentions, her advice was always on point, and without her, Camille never would've come this far.

Mégane looked up, her face stricken with tears. “What do I do now, Lady Iris?”

“If you feel terribly, then perhaps you ought to apologize.”

“But...she probably won’t forgive me...”

“The purpose of an apology is not to be forgiven—it is to acknowledge your own wrongdoing. And if you truly regret what you’ve done, then you’ll spend the rest of your life striving to be the sort of person who’s worth forgiving.”

She sniffled; Iris handed her a handkerchief. *Déjà vu.* “If you don’t think you can go by yourself, I’m happy to come with you,” Iris continued as she wiped her tears.

“Oh, Lady Iris... You’ve always noticed me, even when no one else did...” She fixed Iris with an impassioned look, and she started to sweat. “No one else can pronounce my name right—they all call me ‘Meh-gain.’ But right from day one, you always pronounced it ‘Meh-gone’ like it’s supposed to be...”

Iris couldn’t possibly tell her it was because she remembered how the voice actors pronounced it in *HanaKoro*.

“Lady Iris, I want to apologize to Miss Camille. Will you please come with me?”

“But of course, my dear.”



THAT evening, after dinner, Iris summoned Mégane and Camille to her room. Much to Camille’s surprise, Mégane apologized for everything she had done—and that was when Iris learned that she had also kept Camille’s allowance money, as the House of Pont had been sending all their care packages to Mégane directly. She claimed she only did it because Camille “never asked for the money,” but it was obviously more mean-spirited than that. However, this directly

resulted in Camille working downtown, boosting her popularity with the locals.

Uhhh...wow, this game is harsh. Mr. Baron, sir, please just send the allowance money separately. You can't assume that your daughters will get along just because they're family... They're not even blood-related...

Mégane handed over all the money she'd kept from Camille and promised that she wouldn't confiscate it ever again. Camille took it with a forced smile.

"Honestly, I don't think I've done anything to deserve an allowance. I'm lucky enough that your family lets me attend this school." Apparently, it never occurred to her that she might receive pocket money, since she was adopted and all. "Besides, I already feel bad that you've been buying me everything I ask for."

She had a good point—even in *HanaKoro*, Mégane would acquire everything she needed, even when she herself forgot she needed it. Looking at it that way, Camille was kind of a mooch.

"From now on, Miss Camille, I think you ought to work on being a little more independent," Iris told her. She slumped her shoulders.

"Um...if you're willing to forgive me, Miss Camille...would you like me to give you a heads-up whenever I go shopping for myself...?" Mégane asked timidly, as part of her apology.

"You mean it?! Yes, please! Thank you, Miss Mégane!"

It warmed Iris's heart to see Camille agree so readily. Most people wouldn't be able to forgive this kind of betrayal—or at least, not immediately—so it was really no wonder that she was the protagonist and the Holy Maiden. Perhaps her heart was innately purer than most... Iris couldn't help but admire her.



NOW that she had warmed to Iris, Mégane started passing on information she'd gleaned from elsewhere. And as a natural-born support character, her whisper network was not to be underestimated.

"You're the talk of the town, Lady Iris. Pont Company has been flooded with inquiries about the dress you wore during the popularity contest—can you tell me who the designer was?" she asked Iris.

"Prince Reseda had it made for me, so I'm afraid I don't know," she told her.

"He did? Oh my! Everyone's been talking about your relationship with him. In fact, the ice cream stand has started selling something called a 'Cherry-Mint Double-Scoop Special.' But oddly enough, the flavors are mint chocolate chip and *strawberry*, not cherry—kind of misleading, if you ask me. Oh, and the Pont Company café has put out a cherry-mint jam."

Iris laughed weakly. Pairing-themed menu items? As a hardcore shipper fangirl, Iris *loved* the concept. *But what I wanted was a Nigel-Camille melon and blue raspberry float, thank you very much!*

"Well, that won't do. We mustn't cause too much trouble for His Highness."

Now that everyone knew Iris was Mint, they had surely connected the dots and realized that Cherry was Reseda. And while he was only the *second* prince, it was still less than ideal for rumors to spread about him and a girl he wasn't engaged to.

"The promotions are centered on *Mint and Cherry*, the mage assistants from the Temple of Magic. If you protest it too much, you'll be admitting that Cherry is the Prince," Mégane cautioned Iris with a mischievous smile.

She laughed wearily. Evidently, this shrewd little information broker was a force to be reckoned with.

Chapter 52: The Final Test, Part 1

TODAY was the day of the final test: the interview with the current Holy Maiden.

Now that Camille and Iris were both sixteen years old, the interview would be held at the tallest tower of the royal palace: the Tower of Prayer. The ground floor was home to the Holy Maiden's office and waiting room, right beneath the ceremony room on the second floor. The spiral staircase continued going up for a few more floors until it reached the Prayer Altar at the very top of the tower.

In Reseda's happy-bad ending, Camille would be locked in there permanently. But in actuality, the Holy Maiden wasn't *meant* to spend every waking moment there. Rather, she visited a few times a week to offer her prayers to the Cage of Light through the glass. Holy Maidens were well within their rights to have a family and a life outside of the Tower—it was just a job, after all.

Incidentally, the Cage of Light was the same magical artifact Iris was sealed inside during *HanaKoro*'s bad endings.



A group of nobles sat chatting in a room in the Tower of Prayer, summoned ahead of the final interview to discuss the Holy Maiden Evaluation.

The purpose of this upcoming interview was for the current Holy Maiden to determine whether the interviewee was fit to be her successor; if the answer was no, then they would not receive the title. But that was fairly common, and as a result, no successor had been chosen over the past five years. The real problem was that this year, two candidates had made it to the interview stage—and it really wasn't designed with multiple interviewees in mind.

“Perhaps we should make the interview more difficult.”

“They both seem like perfectly eligible candidates.”

“But what if she decides they’re both fit for the role?”

“Isn’t it possible she’ll choose *both* of them?”

“No, no. Surely, she’ll only choose one. More than that would invite chaos.”

There were countless things to worry about. One candidate was from a perfectly respectable marquisate, but she was a low-mana soipox victim who had lost twice; the other was a commoner who was merely adopted by a barony but possessed great mana. Both had received the blessing of a Fairy Leader.

“To be fair, there’s never been a low-born Holy Maiden in all of history.”

“If a mere *peasant* were to be chosen over a member of the nobility, it would be an affront to the aristocracy!”

“I’m afraid young Miss Iris is our only option.”

As the nobles all whispered amongst themselves, the Earl of Pont smirked smugly. “We wouldn’t want to nominate a Holy Maiden who’s incapable of completing her tasks. As lovely as Miss Iris is, I’m told she has little in the way of mana.”

Though the Baron of Pont was in a less privileged position, as Camille’s legal guardian, he was allotted a seat at the table of judges. The Marquis of Chevalier looked at him and chuckled quietly, giving goosebumps to everyone else in the room.

“I...I’m told that Miss Iris assisted in the vaccine development efforts at the Temple of Magic, correct? And the commoners refer to her as the ‘Green Holy Maiden?’” one of the other nobles asked the Marquis.

"Where did you hear that? I do believe it was Prince Reseda and Royal Mage Cytisus who first conceived of the vaccine."

At this, all eyes turned to Cytisus's father, the Earl of Sade...but he remained silent and poker-faced.



CAMILLE and Iris were dressed in their school uniforms, standing before the current Holy Maiden, Lyrial, in the ceremony room on the second floor of the Tower of Prayer. Lyrial had gorgeous, long blond hair, and she was wearing an ankle-length white robe, reminiscent of a Fairy Leader. Over the robe was a beige wide-sleeved smock with lilies embroidered in gold thread along the hem.

Standing behind Lyrial was the Maiden's Aide, Pavot, wearing a matching white robe with a slightly less fancy smock. Behind her was a platform where the royal family was seated on their thrones—the king, the queen, Crown Prince Bleuet, and Second Prince Reseda. On either side of the room stood rows of audience members consisting of aristocrats such as the Grand Chancellor, the royal mages, and the academy faculty. Notable among them were Cytisus, the Earl of Sade, the Marquis of Chevalier, and the Baron of Pont.

"We will now begin the final test: the Holy Maiden Interview," Pavot announced. "The candidates' accomplishments will be offered up to God, and from there, a decision will be passed down. Please understand that if you are not chosen for the role, it is not a reflection of your talents and efforts—you might simply lack the right skills."

Lyrial smiled brightly. "Now then, ladies, let's be on our way."

The women traveled up the dimly lit spiral stairs to the top of the tower where the Holy Maiden offered her prayers. Lyrial led the way, followed by Camille, Iris, and Pavot. Behind her, the royal family

trailed after them. They would serve as witnesses for the judging process.

The higher up they went, the sicker Iris started to feel. Each stair was engraved with a word from a prayer, and the girls were instructed to read each word in order out loud as they climbed. By doing so, those with mana would cast a spell. But in Iris's case, well...either it was the lack of mana or just the spiral motion, but she was completely dizzy.

Little did she know, Reseda was watching her with concern.

Then, at last, they reached the very top of the stairs to find...a dead end. This confused Iris. How were they supposed to get to the Cage of Light?

Lyrial moved to the center and started to recite an incantation. Golden light began to shine all around her, spinning and widening until it engulfed Iris and Camille. Iris looked up at the ceiling and spotted a gold magic circle. The girls were drawn up into it and teleported beyond the ceiling to the room just above.

The next thing Iris knew, she was standing in a bright-yellow field. Her head was still spinning, and she wanted to puke. To resist the urge, she took shallow breaths...and slowly looked around.

Where am I?

Everywhere she looked, she saw glistening metal bars the color of gold. Beyond them lay a navy blue sky, reminiscent of Cytisus's hair... A chill ran down her spine, and, in her terror, she staggered, kicking up bright yellow pollen.

Iris was trapped inside a gilded cage.

Chapter 53: The Final Test, Part 2

WHAT looked like a golden cage was, in fact, the Cage of Light at the top of the Tower of Prayer. Once Camille became the Holy Maiden, its design would change to reflect camellias, her signature flower. However, if Iris killed her, it would become a prison cell where she would atone, and the design would then reflect irises. The gold color scheme was a representation of Lyrial, the current Holy Maiden.

Iris couldn't move a muscle—her body was trembling in terror.

In the center floated a translucent pearl; the light gathered from the top of the tower mixed with the Holy Maiden's mana, then shone down across the kingdom. And the instant she realized it was the same magic artifact game—Iris was trapped inside in *HanaKoro*, she was paralyzed with fear. Her breathing grew heavy, and she felt ill.

I'm so scared... I'm gonna puke... Help me!

"Now then, we'll start with Miss Camille."

Lyrial handed Camille a sky-blue scroll containing all of her achievements—her hard work on the knowledge test, her quick thinking and creative use of mana during the monster dispatch mission, and her popularity and public speaking skills during the popularity contest. All of it would be conveyed to God.

Camille offered it up to the floating pearl, where it was quickly absorbed inside. As it melted, an iridescent white light began to shine like a supernova. She shrieked in surprise; Bleuet and Reseda stared in disbelief. Meanwhile, Lyrial and Pavot exchanged a nod, as did the king and queen.

"Next, Miss Iris."

Lyrial handed her a mint-green scroll, and Iris froze. She was too terrified to move a single step. *What do I do? I have to offer it to the pearl! But...what if it absorbs ME along with it?!*

Iris recalled the bad endings. Trapped inside the cage, Iris was kept on life support, fated to exist there in solitude, staring slack-jawed into space, until at last, she was finally drained dry. The look of despair in her empty eyes was truly something beautiful.

But now I'll have to relive it myself? A chill ran down her spine as the subconscious fear of death kicked in. Why is this happening? I thought I avoided the bad endings... Am I just doomed no matter what?!

Iris fell to her knees as her consciousness dimmed.

“IRIS!”

Reseda dashed up in front of her, blocking her view of the gilded cage. As he held her limp, lethargic body, she leaned against his chest and took deep breaths. She didn't remember him being so...*big and strong*.

“Are you okay?”

His voice was so sweet, it made Iris want to cry. Truth be told, she wanted nothing more than to claw her way out of there and leave it all behind...but would he be angry with her? She didn't want him to think she was doing it because she hated him... That's why she worked so hard, right to the very end...

“...Yes, I'm fine... I just...need a little time...”

“Sorry, let me rephrase my question. Can you do this?”

His flamingo-pink eyes gazed at her lovingly, and Iris felt her tear ducts burn. “I...I have to finish the evaluation. I can't back down.”

“You can if you want to, Iris. We can run away together.”

As he spoke, he cast a magic circle over the golden field, engulfing them both.

"Reseda, no!" Iris shouted.

Then he grinned...and the next instant, they fell from the grassy plain to the cold, dark stone tower.



AFTER they landed, they held each other for a long moment.

Whenever Iris was in trouble, whenever she needed help, Reseda was always there. He was always the one who helped her, even if it meant he would get in trouble later. And now here he was again... She clung to him tightly.

"Prince Reseda..."

"Mmm?"

"I'm so sorry... You're probably going to get in so much trouble because of me..."

He had absconded with a Holy Maiden candidate before the final interview could be completed. Surely he wouldn't get off with merely a slap on the wrist... Crying, Iris buried her face into his chest.



"It's not your fault, Iris," he told her, stroking her cheek. "I just didn't want you to have to suffer anymore."

At long last, Reseda had realized that Iris couldn't become the Holy Maiden without any mana. The only reason she was still there was to make sure Camille would win—to make the narrow-minded elites accept her victory. *Is it arrogant to think this might be my fault?* he wondered. After he declared he would propose to Iris if she became the Holy Maiden, she gave it her very best shot...in order to convince him that no amount of hard work would be enough.

Maybe I shouldn't have said that, he thought. He never meant to put her through all this. It was simply a promise he made to himself to get her to fall for him by the age of sixteen. "I'm sorry for being so self-centered, Iris."

Iris nuzzled her forehead against his chest. "You did nothing wrong, Prince Reseda. You always help me, yet I can't protect you from the repercussions... I'm sorry I dragged you into this..."

But they were on two different wavelengths.

"Nah. We're partners in crime, remember?" he told her as he stroked her hair.

A gold magic circle suddenly appeared, and Lyrial and the others returned from the Cage of Light.

"Miss Camille has been crowned the next Holy Maiden," Pavot declared solemnly.

"Miss Iris did not offer up her accomplishments, and therefore, she lacks the power of a Holy Maiden," Lyrial explained. And with that, she headed off down the spiral stairs.

As Pavot passed Iris, she leaned in and whispered: "Nice job!" Then she walked off, wearing a perfect poker face.

"Lady Iris! Are you all right?!" Camille asked, dashing over to her.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just feeling a little sick," Iris replied with a smile.

Prince Bleuet fixed the couple with a sympathetic look as he set a hand on Reseda's head. "Sorry to ask this of you when you're not feeling well, but...we'll need you to be present for just a little longer."

"Of course, Your Highness."

Iris rose to her feet, dusted herself off, and headed down the stairs. Reseda offered her his hand, but she shook her head.

She wanted to be there for the moment Camille was officially given the title. Because Iris knew what was going to happen next...and it was a doozy.

Chapter 54: The Holy Maiden

BACK in the ceremony room, Camille and Iris stood on either side of Lyrail.

“Camille du Pont has been chosen as the next Holy Maiden,” she declared loudly.

The Baron of Pont smirked, the headmaster heaved a sigh of relief, and the other aristocrats all lost their minds...except for Iris’s father, who actually seemed to be taking it well. *What a relief! I was worried he was going to make a scene.*

“But this is unprecedented! She may be the daughter of a baron now, but she is of humble birth, is she not?!” one of the nobles raged, pointing an accusatory finger at Camille, who flinched.

Yes, yes, I heard it all while I was playing the game, thank you! Iris looked over at the Earl of Sade. In Cytisus’s route, this was the part where he announced that he was Camille’s true father, but he wasn’t saying a word.

Guess we’re not on Cytisus’s route, then! Total annihilation: officially rejected! Mentally, Iris did a fist-pump. Now one of the other love interests would reveal her family ties instead.

Meanwhile, the Baron of Pont snorted. “Sometimes new legacies have more value than the old.”

“Do you denounce the House of Chevalier?!” the noble from earlier shot back. Iris’s father, however, remained silent.

Iris scowled. This competition was between her and Camille; she didn’t appreciate them co-opting it into class conflict. The “Holy Maiden” was just a title!

“I, um...” Camille began timidly.

Iris couldn't risk the possibility that she would step down in response to the backlash. She needed to buy time until the mystery of her heritage was brought to light!

"What a fascinating sentiment," Iris declared loudly, for all to hear.

Everyone's eyes turned to her. Iris raised her left arm and rolled up her sleeve, exposing the smallpox scars that still lingered there. The nobles began to murmur, and her father looked at her in alarm.

"In case you've forgotten, I was 'punished by God,' remember?" Iris sneered at the room like an all-knowing witch. The aristocrats recoiled, then started shouting back.

"But I've heard it told that you received the blessing of a Fairy Leader!"

"Precisely! There's no need to revisit that senseless superstition!"

"Everyone should have known it was nonsense from the moment you were named as a Holy Maiden candidate!"

Oh, NOW you want to take my side? Rolling her eyes, Iris looked at her father. He didn't say a word, but he was thrusting his chest out proudly.

Next, she snuck a glance at Lyrial, the Holy Maiden. She was smiling calmly, but Pavot behind her was looking away. Behind them, the royal family all stared at the scene in shock...except for Reseda, whose shoulders shook from suppressed laughter.

"In that case, you ought to know that Miss Camille has been acknowledged not just by a Fairy Leader, but by a Sacred Beast as well!" Iris informed them haughtily.

For a moment, the room went silent.

"B-But...you are the Green Holy Maiden! And she's a commoner!" one of the nobles sputtered.

The ceremony room doors suddenly opened, and light streamed in from outside. There, silhouetted by the light, was Nigel, carrying a salver in front of him. "I apologize for the interruption, but I come bearing proof of Miss Camille's heritage."

"Come this way," Pavot responded.

He strode right up to the Holy Maiden and kneeled before her, offering up the salver. Sitting atop it was a lock of blue hair and the amulet bearing the House of Sade's eagle crest, plus the pouch embroidered with camellias, tied with navy blue string.

After Nigel retrieved the memento from the pond, he had held onto it in Camille's place. When he saw the contents, he realized their significance...and deep down, he was desperate to protect Camille from harm. When he explained all this to Iris, she told him that if there were any complications in the Holy Maiden race, he might need to bring the contents of the pouch to the palace.

"...It can't be..."

At this, the Baron of Pont grew flustered. He never knew Camille possessed any proof of her heritage—otherwise, he wouldn't have tracked her down to adopt her the moment he heard rumors that she would be nominated as a Holy Maiden candidate. He knew her previous family periodically received valuable items as payment for her care, so he bribed the servant who delivered them, then told her family that he had been formally asked to take her in.

The baron figured that if his family could "produce" a Holy Maiden, their first-generation aristocracy would last for years to come. And even if Camille didn't win, she would surely marry into a wealthy family. He envisioned that such material connections would come in handy. Besides, Camille's real father would never take her

in—he had good reason not to—so the chances of him revealing himself were slim. If he was going to admit it, it would probably happen in secret; otherwise, the baron intended to demand gratitude for his noble sacrifice.

Pavot took the salver from Nigel and showed it to Lyrial. She looked at the Earl of Sade. “Lord Sade, I do believe this is your family crest, is it not?”

The Earl took a step forward, pressed a hand to his chest, and bowed. “It is indeed. Camille is my daughter by blood,” he announced solemnly.

This sparked an uproar as all the nobles looked at him. The House of Sade had a long legacy of magic and had produced several Holy Maidens and Maiden’s Aides over the years. If Camille was a Sade, then no one had any room to complain.

“*Father...?*” Camille whispered in shock.

“Your mother refused to live as an aristocrat, so I decided it was best that the two of you live freely in town.”

The Earl glanced over at the Baron of Pont; Cytisus sighed quietly.

“But if you wish to be the Holy Maiden, then I shall gladly lend you my support,” Lord Sade continued. “You are a welcome member of the House of Sade.”

At this, Camille looked over at Iris, who grinned at her. This was her moment. With Iris’s blessing, she looked back at Lord Sade...and nodded firmly.

Smiling, Lyrial looked around the room, which had gone as silent as the grave. “Camille *de Sade* has been chosen as the next Holy Maiden,” she corrected herself.

Chapter 55: I Rejected The Happy-Bad Endings!

IRIS, her father, and Nigel all climbed into a carriage and headed home to the Chevalier estate.

Back in the ceremony room, the Baron of Pont confessed to his crimes and was stripped of his title right then and there. He was ordered to apologize to and compensate both the House of Sade and Camille's foster family, make a considerably large donation to Chrysanthème Academy, and revoke his daughter's enrollment.

In light of this sentence, Camille decided to forgive the House of Pont. Although the baron had deceived her, she felt she would have struggled even worse at school without Mégane and the Pont Company. Frankly, neither Camille nor Iris wanted Mégane to stop attending, but there was nothing much they could do.

“Hah hah hah! Well *done*, Nigel! You’ve made your father proud!”

Lord Chevalier clapped Nigel on the back with a broad smile. His son looked at him in annoyance.

“Thanks to your efforts, the House of Chevalier has revealed the new Holy Maiden’s lineage. Now *this* is an accomplishment befitting our honorable family legacy! As knights, we must always stand for justice!”

Father, will you stop shouting? Iris facepalmed.

“And another thing—I didn’t know you were on such close terms with her. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There’s nothing to tell. I was simply upholding my duty as a knight by coming to the aid of a damsel in distress,” Nigel declared with a straight face.

“Well, invite her to the estate sometime. And as for you, Iris...”

Oh boy, here we go.

“Clearly you possess the strong integrity of a knight yourself. You competed fairly and with honor! As your father, I can’t express how pleased I am!”

Please, just stop shouting! Iris sighed and tuned him out. Whenever he was in a good mood, he liked to hear himself talk. So instead of listening, she gazed out the window.



BACK at the academy, Iris finally had a chance to relax. With a *FWUMP*, she leaped onto her bed and buried her face in her pillow. *Finally! Camille’s the Holy Maiden! I did it!!!* She flailed her legs in giddy delight.

By losing the competition *without* being betrothed to Reseda, she had completely dodged his happy-bad ending. And since Cytisus’s fiancée was still alive, he wasn’t interested in Camille—and Iris wasn’t meeting with him to have magical treatments, either. So that was another happy-bad ending out of the way.

All that remained was Nigel’s route. In *HanaKoro*, Iris refused to accept Camille as her brother’s girlfriend, but this Iris was all in favor of it! At the very least, no fully-bad ending would occur.

From here on, Camille would continue attending classes at the academy while undergoing Holy Maiden training in her spare time. Additionally, she would be further trained as a young heir to the House of Sade. It was only a matter of time until she and Nigel were

official... Fortunately, these days, Iris could trust he wouldn't bring about a happy-bad ending.

Don't you worry, Camille! Worst-case scenario, if I hear he's starting to do kinky stuff with chains, I'll shut him down myself!

"I'm happy for you, Iris," Sauge said suddenly, popping up at Iris's bedside. Little fairies streamed into the room along with her.

"We're happy for you!"

"Happy, happy!"

"Thank you so much! I rejected the happy-bad endings!
WOOHOO!"

Iris shouted so loud, the fairies all looked at her in confusion.
"Happy-bad...?"

At this, Iris snapped back to her senses and hastily cleared her throat. "L-Let's have a party to celebrate!"

"I'll make some tea!"

"Me too!"

"I want some juice!"

"Do we have cookies?"

"Cookies!"

"Yes, we have cookies and juice," Iris reassured them.

Sauge watched them with a smile as they rushed around, getting everything set up. They poured a drink for everyone and clinked their cups together.

"Congratulations, Iris!"

"Congrats!"

Admittedly it did feel a bit strange to have them congratulate her on *losing* the competition, but...she had finally achieved her personal goal. "Thank you all," she told them with a smile.

Sauge reached out and stroked Iris's hair. "I'm glad all your hard work paid off."

"Me too!"

But at the time, Iris never stopped to consider why her father was in such a good mood in spite of his daughter losing the Holy Maiden race. Or why the fairies were so excited. She genuinely thought they were just sharing in her happiness...

Chapter 56: Knight and Damsel

THE next morning, as Iris was walking down the hall in the girls' dormitory, a classmate suddenly flagged her down. She was standing with a group of girls—maybe they'd put her up to it after she lost a game of rock-paper-scissors or something. Iris was mildly surprised, since this had never happened before.

"Lady Iris, um, I realize this is probably a strange and sudden question," she began, fidgeting with her hands, "but is it true that you and Prince Reseda, um...aren't engaged? I'm sorry if this is rude, but they asked me to find out, so..."

As she stared down at the floor, her voice slowly petered out. *Someone in her circle probably has a crush on Reseda, Iris thought. I'd better be careful, so I don't frighten them.*

"Yes, it's true. His Highness and I are not betrothed," Iris told them frankly with a smile. At this, the rest of the group all swarmed her.

"Are you engaged to someone else, then?"

"Don't be silly!" Iris laughed. She hadn't heard anything of that nature for a long time now. *No one would dare propose to me with my scars, anyway.*

"Lady Iris, I'd love it if you'd come to tea at my family's estate."

"I have an older brother, you know!"

"I have a brother, too, but he's a year younger—"

"I have a cousin who works at the Temple of Magic!"

Everyone started shouting all at once. Iris blinked. The girls glared at each other.

“I’m the one who started this conversation!”

“Only because you lost at rock-paper-scissors!”

“Because you said you were too scared to speak to her!”

“Older suitors should get priority, and my cousin’s the oldest!”

Smiling stiffly, Iris stood there as the entire group bickered with each other. At this rate, she was going to be late for class.

“My apologies, but I need to be going now. Once you’ve all come to an agreement, come find me again.” Really, what was all the fuss about? *And here I thought Reseda was the only oddball willing to invite a soilpox survivor to tea.*

Iris left the dorm and headed for the school building. As she walked, the students she passed all turned their heads to look at her. *What’s going on? Is something wrong with my hair?* She ran a hand over it, but it seemed fine.

“Good morning, Miss Iris.”

The sudden voice made her stop in her tracks. Judging from the pin on his uniform, he was an older student, but other than that, she had no idea who he was. “Good morning,” Iris replied.

“I wanted to ask you—is it true you’re not engaged to Prince Reseda?”

It was her second time on the receiving end of this question today. *Is this a hot topic or something?* “Yes, that’s true,” she answered.

Little did she know, the male students in her vicinity were doing fist-pumps and celebrating.

“In that case—”

“LADY IRIIIIS!”

But before he could finish, Camille came dashing into her arms, nearly in tears.

"Goodness, what's the matter, Miss Camille?"

Conflicted, she glanced all around. Several male students were gazing at her ardently. Apparently, they'd been chasing her, trying to get her to walk to school with them. *I should have known the protagonist would be such a hit with the boys.*

Now that it was revealed that she was officially an aristocrat—and the Holy Maiden to boot—these young men could court her without worrying about their parents' approval. *Yep, makes sense,* Iris thought, nodding. And, of course, Camille wasn't prepared for them to get so aggressive with her out of nowhere.

"I'll escort you to your classroom," Iris told her. They bid the older student farewell and started walking.



ONCE they arrived at the classroom, Iris peered inside. Nigel was at his desk, but Reseda was nowhere to be found. "Nigel!" she called.

Instantly, all eyes turned to the girls. Though the Holy Maiden Evaluation results weren't public yet, word had gotten around that Camille had won. *Oh, Camille, your protagonist powers are something else.*

Nigel hurried over to his sister. "What brings you here?"

"Miss Camille was in quite a pickle this morning, so I walked her here," Iris explained, gesturing to Camille, who shrank back guiltily. She lowered her voice. "She was being pursued by some male students."

"Is that so?"

At this, Nigel glanced around, his eyes glinting darkly. All the boys who had been ogling Camille hastily averted their gazes. Even Iris started to sweat. *PLEASE don't turn back into a sadistic bondage knight! Not after we've come so far!*

He straightened up and turned to Camille. "Miss Camille, if you're willing, I'd like you to retain me as your personal knight. That way, I can protect you at all times."

He got down on one knee and took her hand. All the girls in the room squealed.

"S-Sir Nigel?!" Camille blushed furiously as Nigel looked up at her. "I...I, um... Yes, please..."

He kissed the back of her hand. Meanwhile, the entire class exploded at the spontaneous birth of a new couple...but Iris was confused.



Wait, what? That's not how it happened in the game! In the game, he smiles and says, "I'm your ONLY knight. If you even LOOK at anyone else, rest assured, you'll be in deep trouble"! Which was a sexy line, of course, though it was obviously foreshadowing his happy-bad ending... But now he's saying things like "if you're willing"! He's respecting her agency! What a precious cinnamon roll! I'm so proud!

As Iris suppressed her happy tears, Nigel and Camille shot her a funny look. She quickly composed herself.

"Miss Camille, I entrust my brother to you. Oh, and if he tries to chain you up or anything, do let me know." Now that Iris had finally stamped out all the happy-bad endings, she wasn't about to let them pop up again!

Nigel laughed. "I won't chain her up, Iris. I remember what you taught me, and I'm going to trust her."

"Oh, Sir Nigel...!" Camille gazed at him, her eyes sparkling.

"Very well then. I'll be on my way."

With that, Iris left the classroom. *Wouldn't want to be a third wheel, after all.*

Chapter 57: The Chaos Curse?

AS Iris was walking down the hall toward her classroom, she realized she was surrounded by other students—some male, some female, and even some older students.

Wh-What do you want? Are you here to complain that Nigel's laid claim to your precious Camille? Have at thee! Mentally, she braced herself for a fight.

"Do you have business with me?" Iris demanded, her nose in the air as she glared around at them in true villainess fashion.

"Lady Iris, I'd like to eat lunch with you."

"Do you have a special someone?"

"My mother has asked me to invite you to tea."

"Do you have any plans after school today?"

The avalanche of questions threw her for a loop. Apparently, they weren't upset with her... As they slowly closed in around her, Iris took a step back. *Seriously, what's going on today?! Why does it feel like everyone's under some sort of curse?!*

"What brings this on all of a sudden? And why all at once? Not very tactful, I must say. Are you in some sort of trance? Open your eyes!" Iris snapped.

"Our eyes *are* open! That's how we came to discover the secret warmth beneath your icy veneer!"

"That, and your merciful patience in the face of such rudeness!"

"Miss Camille and Miss Mégane always said you treat everyone as your equals!"

"Now I realize we were wrong to put you on a pedestal and assume you were unattainable!"

Ranting and raving, they moved closer and closer...and the further Iris backed away, the tighter the circle closed in. A chill ran down her spine. They all had a deranged look in their eyes...

Eeeek! Someone help me! I can use my brute strength against monsters all I want, but when it comes to fellow students, I'm pretty sure that counts as murder! Why is this happening right when I finally rejected all of the happy-bad endings?!

To Iris, they were out of their minds, but in truth, she was utterly Fuddled herself. She backed away until her back was pressed up against the hallway windows. There was nowhere left for her to run...or was there? She glanced outside. This was the second floor...

"Forgive me!"

Iris whipped the window open and leaped out onto the branch of a nearby tree, her wine-red skirt fluttering. *When you're outnumbered, discretion is the better part of valor!*

"Lady Iris?!"

"Lady Iris!"

Pressed up against the windows, the other students shouted after her.

"Lady Iris, that's not safe! I'll rescue you!"

"Lady Iris, I'll go and call for my brother! Wait right there!"

More students gathered at the base of the tree. *They've all completely gone mad! HELP! There must be some kind of curse at work!* Frightened and trembling, Iris clung to the trunk of the tree, concealing herself. After she composed herself enough, she climbed up to a higher branch.

“What’s all the commotion?”

As Reseda’s voice rang out, the crowd parted to form a path for him. He walked straight to the second-floor window and looked at the tree. For a moment, he stared blankly as he struggled to process what he was seeing. Then he looked around at the crowd, and the other male students all avoided his gaze. This told him everything he needed to know.

After the Holy Maiden Evaluation was settled, the palace authorities had all but invalidated Iris’s status as a heretic. The one thing that had jeopardized her position in high society was gone. All this time, Reseda had plotted to ensure Iris would one day be accepted by the masses—assuming she worked hard enough to deserve it, of course. And now all those days of decrying the soipox taboo had finally paid off.

Given her natural charm, it was really no surprise that everyone would jump at the chance to get to know her, but Iris didn’t realize this. Their sudden change of tune had startled her into a panic.

“This is *exactly* why I wanted to get engaged early on,” he muttered under his breath. But it was too late now, of course. “Iris, what are you doing out there? You look like a kitten that can’t climb down.”

At this, she peeked out from behind the tree trunk. Likewise, little fairies flew out from between the branches.

“It’s the prince! It’s the prince!”

“He’s here to save you!”

Iris was dearly relieved to see Reseda was still his normal self. Apparently, the curse didn’t affect him.

"Listen—everyone's acting extremely strange! It's hard to explain, but...I think some sort of chaos curse must have been cast upon the school!" she shouted back, glancing timidly at the crowds.

"Inviting you to spend time with them?" he asked.

She nodded. He sighed in exasperation.

"How are you surprised by this? If anything, it was stranger that they *weren't* inviting you to things before! If there was ever any curse cast upon this school, then it's been lifted!"

"A curse has been...lifted...?"

"And *you* were the one who lifted it!"

He smiled wryly. Iris stared back at him in confusion. "I'm afraid I don't understand your meaning..."

"Thanks to your hard work, soilpox is no longer a punishment from God. Now everyone's realized that your scars are just scars and nothing more!"

She blinked at him. Could it be? Had they solved the soilpox stigma?

"And while this is great news for our kingdom...personally, I'm conflicted."

"You are?"

"Without that outdated superstition holding everyone back, they've all realized what a great girl you are. Now I have even more competition!"

"Wha...?!" Iris flushed beet red. Did he forget they were in public?!

"You're already a beautiful young woman who hails from a brave and gallant family. And as a former Holy Maiden candidate, anyone would want to marry you."

“What?!”

“Not only that, but you’re loved by fairies *and* a Fairy Leader. You developed a soilpox vaccine, and then you went out to treat patients during an outbreak. The royal subjects admire you greatly.”

“I only achieved those things because of *you*, Prince Reseda. I’m no one special.”

“You’re not special? Take a look around, Iris!”

At his prompting, Iris timidly glanced around. All the students were smiling at her...and the fairies were smiling, too.

Chapter 58: The Prince and Iris

THE blood drained from Iris's face. Nothing had visibly changed about her, and yet, everyone was suddenly looking at her in a whole new light. She wasn't really that happy about it, either; mostly, she felt vaguely alarmed. She clung to the tree trunk.

"Come here, Iris. Homeroom's about to start."

Reseda spread his arms out wide, grinning at her with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes—one she recognized from their childhood together. No matter what they were up to, good or bad, those flamingo-pink eyes always sparkled for her.

"Come on. Hurry back to me."

At this, the girls nearby all shrieked.

"He sounds just like a prince!" the fairies shouted as they flew to and fro. "Come on, Iris, let's go!"

They gave Iris a little push, and she smiled at them. She stood up on the branch and leaped straight into Reseda's arms sticking out through the open window. He caught her and pulled her into the building, and together, they collapsed to the hallway floor.

"I finally caught you. I swear, you're such a tomboy," he laughed.

"I'm so sorry, Prince Reseda!" Iris blurted, flustered. She tried to get off him, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her into a hug. He was much stronger than she remembered.

"I'm just glad you didn't get hurt."

As Iris rested her head on his chest, he let out a sigh of relief. He was so warm, she was half-worried she might get roasted alive.

"Um...Prince Reseda...?"

She pushed against him slightly to prop herself up, and he relinquished his grip. This caught her by surprise, and...it made her a little sad. Iris looked down at him from above, her curls dangling against his cheek.

“What’s wrong?”

Smiling shyly, he tugged on one of her ringlets and released it, making it bounce against her chest.

Wait, what am I DOING?! I’ve got His Highness pinned to the floor!!!

“I-I’m so sorry! I...um...!” Hastily, she got up, blushing all the way to her ears.

Reseda thought back to that day at the royal gazebo and snickered. Back then, Iris was so startled by his confession, she shoved him as hard as she could, and they both fell to the ground. She was the only one who had ever pushed him down...and to him, Iris was the only one who could.

“I’m not offended, you know,” he told her as he sat up.

At this, the memories of that fateful day flared up in her mind:

“I’m in love with you, Iris, even if you’re not in love with me.”

Iris pressed a hand over her mouth and tried to recoil, but he grabbed her arm again. “What’s wrong?” he asked, smiling, and she realized she was being far too self-conscious, getting flustered over an old memory. Besides, as far as she knew, he had only intended to propose to her if she became the Holy Maiden—and she had failed. For some strange reason, the thought made her chest ache.

“Iris, if you go by yourself, this’ll happen all over again,” Reseda cautioned her as the other students crowded around them. He had a point: if Iris tried to make a run for it, they would surely give chase.

“Nnngh...”

She really didn't want that to happen. But because high society had always rejected her, she never had the opportunity to learn how to politely decline such things.

"Take my hand, Iris. I'll escort you to your classroom."

Reseda offered her his hand, and she gingerly accepted it. With a satisfied grin, he slid an arm around her shoulders and glared around at the crowd.

"Now then, I must ask you all to stop chasing her around on campus. For one thing, it's disruptive, and more than that, it's not safe," he chided them. They nodded obediently. With their understanding, he smiled darkly and cast a tiny hint of intimidation magic. "If you hurt her, I won't be happy."

His aura was so threatening, everyone present immediately took a step back.

"Huh...?"

Iris hadn't seen the look on his face, so she had no idea what had just happened. Like most magic, intimidation magic never really worked on her. She looked at Reseda, but he was already back to his normal smile.

"Huh??"

But when Iris looked back at the crowd, they all flinched and hurried away.

"Huh???" She blinked. "What was that?"

She looked at Reseda again. He was still smiling softly, just like always. "It looks like they finally took the hint. Good news for you, eh, Iris?"

As usual, he always managed to effortlessly solve her biggest problems. She beamed back at him. "Thank you so much! I really appreciate it!" she told him sincerely.

Wordlessly, he patted her on the head and chuckled at her utter obliviousness.

Chapter 59: Lots and Lots of Letters

BACK at the Chevalier estate, Iris let out a languid sigh. Across from her sat her mother in a very chipper mood.

Nigel and Iris had come home together to prepare for the Holy Maiden coronation ceremony next month. Since Iris had lost the competition, there was no real reason for her to attend, but the royal family traditionally invited all candidates regardless of whether they won or lost. After the ceremony, a soirée would be held that very night, and all the most prominent noble families were invited, including the House of Chevalier.

"Who will you be taking as your escort?" her mother asked.

"Oh, I'll just go with Nigel," Iris replied matter-of-factly.

"Not this time, sis," Nigel replied casually.

Her jaw dropped. *Oh god, that's right! I forgot he and Camille are together now!* Somewhere deep down, she'd assumed they would always be together, but that simply wasn't the case. His sudden rejection stung.

I bet this is exactly how Iris felt in the game when Camille stole her brother from her. Poor thing... No wonder she tried to kill her... Not that I'm going to kill anyone, of course! After all the work I put in, I'm not about to subject myself to a bad ending in real life! Iris felt tears well in her eyes. *But what will I do without him? I don't have anyone I can invite! Surely you ought to be more considerate of me, Nigel!*

This was her one and only opportunity to attend a soirée. After all, she was damaged goods. No one would ever marry her, and Nigel would inherit the family name, so she figured she would just reject any other invitations she received after this one. Iris had spent years preparing to live a life of solitude.

"This is the only soirée I'll ever attend... You'll have plenty of chances to go on dates with your precious Camille, so can't you do something nice for me just this once?" Iris grumbled, glaring at him. She was so distraught, her inner thoughts were slipping out.

"How about you stop clinging to me for a change?" he shot back. *Stop clinging to me... Stop clinging to me...* His voice echoed in her mind, over and over, destroying her utterly.

"Oh, Iris, I don't think you have anything to worry about," her mother said with a smile as she fanned out a handful of letters on the table. All of them were formal offers to attend the event with Iris. "You can choose whoever you like best from these."

Iris stared blankly. With Reseda's help, things had settled down, for the most part, so she had completely forgotten that people had suddenly started to treat her differently. The way he spoke of it, you'd think it was only natural they all throw themselves at her feet, but she personally couldn't accept it.

"This one is from the Grand Chancellor's son, this is from the Duke's grandson, this is from a royal mage, this is from a knight-captain, this is from a marquis who writes poems, and this one... Well, just have a look inside! I've already disposed of the ones that aren't worth your time."

Iris looked down at the letters and grimaced. "I can't choose any of these people. I don't even know them."

If it was a school acquaintance, she was willing to consider it, but most of these names didn't even ring a bell.

"I had a feeling you'd say that, so I've arranged them in order from most recommended to least recommended. I think the Chancellor's son is probably the best choice, don't you?"

The Chancellor's son was five years older than Iris—a civil officer who worked at the palace. She had seen him in passing on occasion,

but they'd never spoken, and frankly, she wasn't sure he would know who she was if he saw her. Iris could only assume he had sent his offer under pressure from his parents to curry favor with her family, seeing as she was a former Holy Maiden candidate... Iris sighed. The same could be said for all of these invitations.

At last, Iris accepted that her life had changed.

"Just read them, won't you?" her mother insisted.

Iris shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. "Forget it! I'll just leave it to fate! They're all just strangers anyway, so it hardly matters!"

And so, she vowed to choose the person whose letter she grabbed at random. It was just a social obligation anyway; surely they could tolerate each other for one night—

"Would you prefer someone you know?" Nigel asked suddenly.

Iris froze and looked at him.

"The truth is, I have one more letter for you, written by someone you know well. That being said...are you *sure* you're not interested in any of those?" he pressed.

Iris nodded eagerly, and Nigel let out a heavy sigh.

"Then take this."

He handed her a scroll sealed with a luxurious flamingo-pink braided cord in the shape of a cherry blossom. Instantly, she knew who had sent it. She snatched it from him without a moment's delay.

"Thank you so much, Nigel! You could have given me this to start with, you know!" Iris told him, beaming. He smiled stiffly back...because he could tell she didn't realize the significance behind it.

"Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my!" their mother gushed with delight. It was a private letter bound with cord—clearly, it had to be a love letter. "Iris, you'd better go and read it in your room. Go on, now. I'll get rid of these!"

With that, she scooped up all the other letters off the table and left the room.

"What was *that* about?" Iris asked, baffled. Nigel let out a sigh.

Right until that moment, he had agonized over whether or not to give Iris Reseda's letter. He had known about Reseda's feelings for her ever since they were kids, and he was aware of Reseda's secret efforts to overturn the social stigma of soipox scars. Because of that, an engagement between them was no longer unthinkable. In fact, one could say it was *desirable*, as Iris was a former Holy Maiden candidate with the blessing of a Fairy Leader.

But if she chose Reseda, she would no longer be free to choose any other path. After all, no one else would dare court the woman Reseda had chosen to be his princess consort. Thus, Nigel had held back as long as possible. He knew if he had given her Reseda's letter at the start, their parents wouldn't have even bothered showing her the other options, and he felt that wasn't right. He wanted Iris to make an educated decision.

In the end, Iris *did* choose Reseda...but it was clear to Nigel that she didn't understand the weight of this choice. Still, he had no intention of trying to talk her out of it. Her love life was none of his business, after all.

She doesn't even realize she's been ensnared, he thought. This is Reseda we're talking about—the same guy who can make her smile when she's crying. And she hasn't even read the other letters! But...well, perhaps ignorance is bliss.

As Nigel watched Iris leave the room with a look of relief on her face, Nigel quietly decided to send Camille a letter, too.

Chapter 60: The Holy Maiden Coronation

IN contrast to how fancy Reseda's letter looked on the outside, there was only a single sentence written on the inside:

May I take you home with me?

The sentiment read so strangely—the first words strictly formal-sounding while the rest of it was casual and friendly. It made Iris laugh. She sent him a letter back, sealed with a cord bound in the shape of an iris:

I'll be waiting.



AT last, it was the night of the Holy Maiden coronation. After the main ceremony in the Tower of Prayer, everyone moved to the town plaza to present the new Holy Maiden to the commoners. This was a celebration for all the people of Floraison, and tonight, they would all make merry until morning—no class divide between them.

Iris was present at the ceremony, of course. Camille looked positively lovely in her Holy Maiden attire, and everyone swooned over Reseda in his formal white military uniform. Even Iris was entranced by his beauty.

After the ceremony, the current Holy Maiden Lyrial, her Maiden's Aide Pavot, and her successor Camille all took part in a carriage parade that ended at the special plaza stage where they made the formal announcement. After that, the soirée was scheduled to be held back at the palace.

When Reseda and Iris stepped onto the scene, everyone turned to look at them. With his white uniform and bright-pink hair, he looked like a rose personified. Likewise, Iris was clad in a coral-pink

dress with wrist-length gloves—her scars on full display. But these days, no one took her to task for it.

The people who knew of Iris all described her as “the girl with the grisly scars,” or “the girl who came back covered in monster’s blood,” or “the girl with no sense of class.” And while Iris *did* look nice in her dress during the popularity contest, it was more readily described as *strange*. Once again, she had flown in the face of accepted norms. But tonight, now that she was wearing the garb of a proper noblewoman, everyone struggled to reconcile the sight of her with the established image of her in their heads.

“Her ugly scars scarcely matter.”

“If anything, she’s quite stunning.”

“What about her says ‘No class’ to these people?”

“Clearly, the rumors were entirely off-base.”

“Whoever started them must have been jealous...not that I can blame them.”

“The Marquis of Chevalier is a smart man. If I had a daughter as beautiful as her, I wouldn’t want to parade her around in public, either!”

“Perhaps she’s just very sheltered.”

Reseda escorted Iris through the crowd like he was showing her off on purpose.

“Prince Reseda was smart to see through those idle rumors, I’ll give him that.”

“He always said her smallpox scars were proof of God’s blessing.”

“Yes, but I always thought he was simply too kind to speak ill of a friend.”

“Turns out he was right all along!”

At last, they approached the king and queen.

"Mother, Father, I've brought Iris with me," Reseda told them.

At this, Iris's eyes widened. Obvious though it was, she'd temporarily forgotten that Reseda's parents were the king and queen of Floraison. And now he was speaking as their son, casually introducing her to them. Of course, they had met on unofficial terms in the past, but...something about the way he said it, and the time and place...

"Reseda's told me a lot about you lately. I hope you'll continue to treat him well," His Majesty declared in a booming voice that made Iris flinch.

After that, she followed Reseda's lead, socializing here and there. Tonight, the various subjects he had once tutored her in finally proved useful. Then, once it got late, he leaned in and whispered in her ear.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked with an impish grin. Iris nodded.

His harmless mischief was an endless source of amusement for her, just as her secrets had always enraptured him. The two knew almost everything about each other at this point.

Together, they boarded his personal carriage and rode up to the top of a hill on the city outskirts. Once they arrived, Reseda took Iris by the hand and escorted her outside. Here, they were afforded a full view of the royal capital and all its specks of light. The castle, the academy, the church—all the buildings were adorned with festival lanterns. But for as lovely as it was, it was actually Iris's first time there...because she had avoided it on purpose.

This was the same hill from the nightmare that first revived her memories—the very place where Cytisus and Camille had met their end in that happy-bad ending. But tonight, all was at peace. Iris

always thought she would be afraid, but instead, she felt reassured...possibly because Reseda was with her.

He smiled down at the joyous castle town, his pink hair darkened by the shadows of night. When Iris called out to him, he looked over at her, his eyes shimmering like a coral reef as he grinned. A gentle breeze blew from behind him, rustling his soft hair and the cape of his military uniform. He was truly breathtaking.

The wind carried with it the faintest hint of morning.

"Iris, I want you to help me protect this light," Reseda told her.

She blinked at him in confusion.

"I'm in love with you."

At this, Iris braced herself. In *HanaKoro*, this line was followed by "even if you're not in love with me." Was this just the game substituting the villainess in place of the protagonist?

"I want to be with you always, like Mint and Cherry. You'll protect my secrets, and I'll protect yours."

No—his words were different this time. It wasn't the game making him say this. He really, truly meant it.

"Like partners in crime?" Iris asked in a teary voice.

"You and me? We've *always* been partners in crime," he laughed.

"And we always will be," she replied with a smile.

Morning was nearly upon them. The first rays of the sunrise mingled with his hair.

"Look at that."

He pointed at the horizon, where the light of the rising sun had turned the ocean mint green. Meanwhile, the sky was dyed ever so

faintly pink. Together, it felt as though the world itself had given them its blessing.

"It's a green flash!" Iris exclaimed.

"You know, they say anyone who sees one will live happily ever after," Reseda said with a grin. "And I wanted to see it together with you."

"I'm glad you did," she replied softly.



Chapter 61: The Happiest Happy Ending

WHEN Reseda brought Iris back home, her parents practically jumped for joy. They didn't even care that she'd stayed out past her curfew—instead, they invited him in for breakfast. Naturally, he waltzed right in.

“Wh-What’s the big fuss?” Iris asked.

Nigel fixed her with a withering stare, rubbed his temple, and sighed. “Don’t be absurd, Iris. Surely you must realize what it looks like when you stay out with a man until dawn, then bring him home with you.”

“Huh?” Startled, she looked at Reseda, who grinned and nodded.

As far as Iris was concerned, she and Reseda had gone out on secret late-night adventures ever since they were kids. In fact, during the soipox outbreak, they would sometimes work with the royal mages until the next morning. Obviously, she knew spending the night with a man had implications of betrothal, but...really, it felt like any other “Mint and Cherry” excursion.

But when she looked at her father, he looked back at her with a meaningful grin. Iris couldn’t comprehend it. She’d only gone up to the top of a hill—wearing a dress she couldn’t get out of without assistance—and with a carriage driver chaperoning them, too! She began to sweat.

“Prince Reseda, um...I’m so terribly sorry for this misunderstanding!” Iris hastily curtsied to him.

“Not to worry! There’s no misunderstanding here.”

This response confused her even more. As far as Iris knew, they had only agreed to get engaged *if* she became the Holy Maiden, which she certainly hadn't!

"But...I'm not the Holy Maiden..."

"That hardly matters anymore, don't you think?"

"But..."

"Years ago, when you turned me down, you said you didn't want to give high society any reason to degrade me. You didn't want to be the fly in my ointment."

Yes, she remembered that. She knew that she would be a burden to him, and she cared about him enough to do the responsible thing.

"But now there's nothing to worry about. You're no blemish—you're a gem."

Iris fell silent. In front of the royal family, the upper crust had publicly acknowledged that the superstitions about her scars were just that. Plus, Camille had chosen Nigel. Iris no longer had any reason to push Reseda away.

"If it pleases you, Prince Reseda, I gladly offer my daughter's hand in marriage," her father declared, much to her chagrin.

"Her hand is not yours to offer, Lord Chevalier. Besides, it's not her *hand* that I want," Reseda shot back matter-of-factly.

It meant a lot to Iris to hear him say that. As a prince, he could snap his fingers and get whatever he wanted; if he demanded to take her as his wife, she wouldn't have any say in the matter. But unlike the Reseda from *HanaKoro*, who would resort to *any* means to lay claim to Camille, the Reseda in real life respected Iris as her own person. It was *that* version of him that she had come to trust and rely upon.

“Wait, but...I mean...!”

If we get engaged, then that means we’re going to get married and...and all those other things, right?! Iris clutched her head. She honestly couldn’t picture her and him as a married couple!

“Your Highness, you are truly a visionary of your time. Very well—we shall make ourselves scarce. We leave the rest to you.”

With that, Iris’s father, mother, and brother all got up to vacate the room. Right before Nigel could shut the door behind him, however, Iris shot him a pleading look.

“Just admit it, Iris,” he whispered to her.

“What?”

“Think about it. His Highness was the *only* person you wanted to attend the ceremony with. Doesn’t that speak volumes in and of itself?”

Iris faltered.

“Or are you prepared to dig those unread letters out of the trash and choose one to take as your husband? Because that’s what would happen sooner or later.”

“Wh...What?!”

“That’s just how it goes in high society,” he declared flatly. And with that, he shut the door.

Now Iris was well and truly on her own. She stared helplessly at the door for a moment, then looked at Reseda. He grinned.

“You didn’t even *read* the other letters?” His voice was tinged with unconcealed delight.

“W-Well...I mean...it would have been a waste of time! They were all ordinary strangers!” Iris answered indignantly.

Reseda burst out laughing. "You know, that makes it sound an awful lot like I'm special to you."

At this, Iris gasped for breath like a goldfish, her face beet-red. He was right, of course—exactly right. She just never put two and two together until now. Reseda was special to her, and she had taken that fact for granted.

"Besides, didn't you vow to always be my partner in crime?"

His smile was a blossom befitting the King of Flowers. She was so dizzy, she could practically smell its sweet perfume. Her heart thumped in her chest. Yes, she'd said it...because she wanted to stay with him forever. The answer was right there all along.

Timidly, Iris looked up at him. "...Prince Reseda?"

"You really don't have to say the 'Prince' part anymore."

"...Reseda...?" Iris corrected herself hesitantly.

"Better," he nodded with a shy smile.

"I...I want to be your partner in crime forevermore," she told him.

He leaped up, pulled her into his arms, and spun her around in celebration. "YES!"

Startled, Iris let out a tiny shriek.

"So, he finally caught you, eh?" muttered Sauge, who had once again turned up out of nowhere. Reseda scowled and pressed a finger to his lips, but the capricious Fairy Leader merely ignored it.

"What's going on?" Iris asked, and Sauge laughed.

"Am I wrong? For years now, the little prince has worked hard to get the public to accept you as you are. Oh, and for the record, you used a royal carriage when you left the party, so everyone knows

about it. And it would be most improper for two teenagers to spend the night together...unless they were engaged, of course."

"Improper?!"

"Improper, improper!" the little fairies chorused, popping up behind Sauge. They shrieked and flew in circles. "Improper, improper!"

Blushing, Iris glared at Reseda, who looked away. "You set me up!"

"You make me sound like a villain! To be fair, I *did* ask in advance if I could take you home with me."

Indeed, that was what he had written in his letter. And Iris had responded: *I'll be waiting.* But that was about the party, wasn't it...?

"Reseda!" Iris shouted, purely on impulse.

He beamed. "I see you've finally gotten the hang of calling me by my name."

Deflated, she let out a sigh.

"Are you angry at me, Iris?" he asked, shyly peering into her eyes.

"...No, of course not."

As frequently as he frustrated her, he never sincerely angered her. Frankly, Iris should have known Reseda of the "Caged Love" route would box her in like this. He was far too crafty...and yet, for some reason, she was delighted. *Clearly, I must be delusional.*

"Well then, allow me to offer my congratulations." Sauge placed a hand on each of their heads and declared firmly: "May you share a happy future together."

It was rare enough to get a fairy's blessing, but to receive *congratulations* from one was nearly unheard of. The little fairies blew their flower trumpets.

"CONGRATULATIONS!!!"

Was this a happy ending? Or just the lead-up to a happy-bad ending? Iris shook her head. *No, this isn't an "ending" at all. This is only the beginning. If I want a happy ending, I've got my work cut out for me. And as the villainess, I reject all but the HAPPIEST of happy endings!*

Iris looked over at Reseda. "We're going to have a *very* happy future, you hear me?" she declared.

"Just you and me," he nodded.

Iris wrapped her arms around his head, pulled him down, and planted a kiss on his forehead. He blushed, and she giggled impishly. Then, in revenge, he kissed her forehead back. Together, they pledged their love for one another...and to always protect each other.

"Blessings for Iris!"

"Blessings for Reseda!"

"Blessings! Blessings!"

And with the fairies' help, the whole world blossomed.

Side Story: Lovesick

RESEDA de Geyer, the second prince of Floraison, wasn't acting quite like himself. As he sat in history class, he gazed out the window and sighed. His melancholy aura was so contagious, even his male classmates were sighing along with him, to say nothing of the girls.

He was *strikingly* beautiful, after all. His flamingo-pink hair looked as if it were made from flower petals, his eyes sparkled like pink sapphires, and his porcelain skin was smooth and free of blemishes. Physically, he was flawless—more than any living creature had the right to be. Not only that, but he was gifted with high mana, skilled at sword fighting, and knowledgeable in all subjects of study. And there was only one person in the kingdom who could have such a devastating effect on Floraison's perfect prince: Iris du Chevalier, the noble daughter of the Marquis.

Iris was standing outside, taking part in magic practice with the rest of her class. As usual, she was just waving her wand fruitlessly without casting a thing. But she looked so stern and dignified while she was doing it... To Reseda, *she* was truly beautiful.

My fiancée is so precious, he sighed to himself. But his spirits were low. Lately, Iris was avoiding him on purpose, and he didn't understand why.

After many twists and turns, they had finally become formally betrothed, willfully, with the blessing of both their families. Their wedding date was set, and now all that remained was to wait for the big day to roll around. So why was Iris blatantly avoiding him?

Knowing her, this wasn't some tricky mind game. She always wore her heart on her sleeve; some might even describe her as

hotheaded. But this only made him worry all the more. If she sincerely wanted to avoid him, then that was even worse!

They hadn't eaten lunch together for the past few days, either. No matter how long he waited at the cafeteria, Iris never turned up. Then he found out she would send Camille to buy sandwiches, cookies, and other easily portable snacks and bring them out to her in the far corner of the courtyard—hardly fitting of a high-born heiress.

It really hurts that she'd go so far to avoid me. Reseda let out another sigh as he watched his beloved wave her wand. The history teacher's voice went in one ear and out the other.

Just then, Iris looked up at him, and their eyes met. Delighted, Reseda smiled. It felt like forever since she last afforded him a passing glance. But when he waved at her, she abruptly turned away.

...Well, I guess we ARE technically in class right now...or does she despise me that much...? Another sigh left his pale pink lips, stirring the hearts of all those around him.



IRIS du Chevalier, heiress to the noble Marquisate of Chevalier, wasn't acting quite like herself. More specifically, every time she saw her fiancé, Prince Reseda, her heart would start thumping painfully in her chest, and she had become deeply self-conscious of every tiny gesture.

Just now, for example, she caught herself bewitched by the sight of Reseda through the second-floor window. Despite the distance, he stood out to her so sharply, it felt like someone had put zoom lenses in her eyes! Since when was he so...charming and handsome...?

Gah! No! I'm in class! I need to focus! Even if Iris couldn't cast a spell to save her life, she still wanted to make sure she looked good so she wouldn't make a fool of herself if Lady Sauge ever lent her

mana again. Iris concentrated firmly on waving her wand...but then, when she looked up again, she found Reseda looking back at her, and their eyes met.

AAAAGH! Don't give me a heart attack! Oh god, he knows I was looking at him! Kill me now!!!

Hastily, Iris turned away, her green ringlets swinging with the motion.



AFTER school, Iris peered out into the hallway. Once she confirmed that Reseda was nowhere to be seen, she hurried out of the classroom. Yes, she was avoiding him. She knew it wasn't right of her, but she couldn't help it. *I mean...I'm just so...BASHFUL!*

All this time, she'd thought of Reseda as a longtime male friend—her partner in crime. But now that she was suddenly his fiancée, she no longer knew how to conduct herself. After all, with her soilpox scars, she hadn't expected to get married *ever*. In fashionable society, she would only ever face discrimination. And if she couldn't attend social events, then in her opinion, she was unfit to be a noble's wife.

Frankly, she was never that hung up on it. She was just grateful to have survived soilpox at all. And because Reseda had convinced her parents that she was going to marry him, they never bothered to educate her on the subject. After all, Reseda had already given Iris the necessary royal training, and they didn't want to fill her head with conflicting ideas.

But because she had successfully avoided social gatherings, she had no female friends. And partly as a result of that, when her engagement to Reseda was made official, she encountered a problem: she was wholly uneducated when it came to the rules of romantic relationships. And as his future wife, Iris needed to know

the proper etiquette in order to conduct herself properly in public. After all, she didn't want to foster any situations that would result in rumors of her infidelity.

Naturally, Reseda refused to teach her the standard etiquette. He didn't want her to feel obligated to distance herself from him for appearance's sake. But because of that, Iris presently had no frame of reference when it came to the proper social distance between herself and other men. That said, no one had ever approached her regardless of gender, so she was under-socialized in general.

Really, how was I supposed to know that a letter sealed with cord was automatically a love letter?!

When Reseda sent Iris his formal offer regarding the Holy Maiden coronation ceremony, she had snatched the letter out of Nigel's hand. Then, when she wrote back, she had sealed her letter in the same fashion... Did her whole family see this and assume she was sending a love letter of her own...? The realization made her blush. She must have looked like...like she was head over heels for Reseda!

Iris was so embarrassed, she wanted to scream. The memories rose up one after another—like the time they shared their ice creams with each other! At the time she didn't bat a lash, but in hindsight, it was sickeningly cutesy! And the time she accidentally pinned him to the floor in public—she didn't realize the sexual connotations of that *at all!* Iris could practically hear the little fairies calling her “improper” all over again!

She never meant anything by those things...and Reseda himself surely understood that...but at the same time, she couldn't possibly face him! Every time she laid eyes on him, the humiliation overtook her all over again. With his beautiful lips, passionate gaze, and powerful voice, he told her:

“I want to be with you always...”

His mere presence was enough to make it all come rushing back. The faintest whiff of his lingering scent made Iris blush... Honestly, just passing each other in the hallway was enough to put her on cloud nine—heart pounding, body trembling with shame. Even right this very moment, she found herself pressing her hands to her cheeks.

Being here on campus is sheer agony. I need to hurry back to the dorms! Shaking her head, Iris cleared Reseda from her mind. Then, clutching her bookbag to her chest, she hurried out of the school building through the front entrance.

That was where she found Reseda standing stock-still with a dark look on his face. Iris stopped short, spun 180 degrees on her heel, and tried to bolt, but she was too late. He silently grabbed her by the arm. *Gah, I let my guard down!* This always happened whenever she was around him—like her brain instinctively trusted him.

He held her from behind, snaking an arm tightly around her waist. She could feel his forehead against her shoulder, and his hair—his breath—gently brushed against her. *Please, no! I can't take it!* Tearfully, Iris tried to extricate herself from his grasp, but he refused to let go.

How is this possible?! I've always defeated him in any duel!

“Prince Reseda, let go of me!”

“...Reseda.”

“Reseda, please!”

“No. If I let go, you’ll just run away, won’t you?”

His muffled voice carried a hint of teary emotion. Iris sucked in a breath.

"Why are you avoiding me? What did I do wrong? We haven't talked in days, and it's killing me, not knowing the reason. If you're upset with me, then just tell me!"

Her chest ached. "No, I'm just...too jittery and embarrassed," she told him in a tiny voice. Her whole face felt like it was on fire, right up to her ears. But the last thing Iris wanted was for Reseda to mistakenly think she was upset with him.

He looked up at her beet-red face. "Embarrassed? About what?"

"A lot of things! Things I did in the past...er, sort of subconsciously...but looking back, they look like...romantic gestures," Iris mumbled, trying her best to explain while utterly unable to look him in the eye. Now that she had realized she was attracted to him, she didn't know how to handle it.

He burst out laughing. "And *that's* got you all jittery?"

Iris nodded silently.

So, she's been avoiding me...because she's bashful about things that happened years ago? Oh, my dear fiancée, how cute can you possibly be? Reseda thought. His arms tightened around her.

"Prince Reseda..."

As she hesitated, he planted a small kiss on her neck. She gasped.

"R-Reseda!"

"Good grief, Iris. How can you carry out your duty as my fiancée when you're too shy to be around me? There will be plenty of social events we'll have to attend together, you know."

Iris flinched. "About that...I think maybe I'm not a good fit," she replied, her voice wavering with uncertainty.

"Sorry, but I've no intention of marrying anyone but you. You just need a little practice, that's all."

"Practice?" Iris repeated.

He pulled his arms away and leaned over her shoulder, gazing into her green eyes. "When we work together, we can overcome any obstacle, right?"

Iris looked up at him with puffy eyes. The contrast of red and green took his breath away.

"First, let's practice holding hands."

Gently, he laced his fingers with hers. Ashamed, she hung her head. Through the green strands, her neck was faintly visible, flushed bright pink. It looked so soft and vulnerable... Reseda was at once both hesitant to touch it and tempted to steal it for himself.

"Let's hold hands all the way home today...and I'll come pick you up every morning, too."

"Every morning?!"

"Yeah, for practice. We'll hold hands on the way to and from school so you can get used to it, okay?"

"But I...well...okay... Thank you," Iris mumbled in a feeble voice that was entirely unthinkable coming from the same vibrant girl as before. She continued to stare at the ground.

This is a side of her only I know, Reseda thought as the sweat from their palms mingled together. Frankly, this felt like several steps down from all the dance practice they had done in the past, but nevertheless, his heart was now pounding nearly as hard as hers. *We're not just friends anymore...*

Slowly, his face began to burn red as joy welled up in his chest. Reflexively, he pressed his free hand to his mouth. He knew he was probably smiling like an idiot... *Good grief, I'm pathetic.*

Still, he couldn't help but admire the girl who inspired these feelings in him.

After Story: The Clover Crown

AT a clinic on the outskirts of town, the sound of church bells could be heard over the shouts of children playing in the yard, where mint and chamomile plants grew among the clovers and wildflowers. Iris visited this place so often that the local fairies were drawn to live there, breathing color into the land...but only Reseda realized this.

Here, a series of rugs had been laid out, with a plank of wood positioned over four sturdy boxes to create a makeshift table. A plain cotton tablecloth had been placed over the wood, with large plates of food on top. Old, worn cushions surrounded the table on all sides. Even without proper furniture, it was clear they had done their best to prepare a party.

A thin bedsheet hung over the magnolia tree branches to create a shady spot, where more rugs and cushions were placed. It looked like some sort of lounge area, complete with pillows smuggled out from their bedrooms. They had decorated the whole place with paper chains, hearts, and flowers, all made from colored construction paper.

Reseda and Iris smiled at each other. Today, they were dressed in their informal street clothes...but unlike before, they wore rings on their fingers. They were invited there by the clinic's residents in order to celebrate their marriage.

The official ceremony was only a few days ago—smaller than Prince Bleuet's wedding, of course, but a large wedding nonetheless. Iris had hoped for a more modest ceremony, but because Reseda was the second prince and Iris was the newly appointed Maiden's Aide, it turned into a day of celebration for the entire kingdom of Floraison.

The ceremony was held at the biggest church in town; from there, they rode in a carriage parade all the way back to the palace, where a sumptuous banquet was held. As someone who didn't enjoy pageantry in excess, it was utterly exhausting. Today's small-scale party, however, was more in line with her tastes. A heartfelt celebration organized by casual friends was far more meaningful to Iris than any gala event.

"Cherry! Mint! Bend down a little!"

Even after the commoners discovered their true identities, they still affectionately called them by their nicknames. As requested, the couple bent down. Then, as the children placed flower crowns made of clovers onto their heads, little fairies flew out of Iris's ringlets and gathered around the crowns to help with the process. The children couldn't see them, of course, but they could tell that the air around them had grown sacred. They all sighed in admiration at the sight of Iris with her glossy clover crown.

"Mint, you look like the Goddess of the Fairies," Reseda teased her.

"And you look like the King of the Flowers, Cherry," she teased back.

"Okay, now link arms!" a precocious little girl demanded.

Reseda proffered his left arm, and Iris curled her right hand around his bicep. Then a couple of three-year-olds walked up and took their free hands, and...well, it really meant a lot to Iris that the children would so readily touch her skin without a moment's hesitation.

"*Buh-buh-buh-bum, buh-buh-buh-bum, buh-buh-buh-bum-buh-buh-bum-buh-bum!*"

All at once, they started singing the wedding march song. In *HanaKoro* it was only ever a prelude to a happy-bad ending, so it

caught Iris by surprise. Then the kids started tugging on Reseda and Iris's hands.

"Dis way, Minty!"

Led by a toddler with a lisp, Reseda and Iris were dragged to the head of the table, where a homemade cherry pie awaited them. The precocious girl walked over and handed them a knife with a pink ribbon on it. The sight made Iris laugh. *Honestly, does everything have to be so girly just because we live in an otome game?*

"Time to cut the cake!" shouted the man with the scar on his face. *This isn't really a "cake," but oh well—close enough, I suppose.* Together, Reseda and Iris slid the knife into the pie.

"CONGRATULATIONS!!!" everyone shouted in unison.

"Thank you, everyone," Iris replied.

"This really means a lot," Reseda chimed in.

Instantly, the children swarmed them.

"I washed the broccoli!"

"I caught the fish!"

"I picked the flowers!"

"Try some of this!"

"No, eat this first!"

They tugged on their clothes and shouted their demands at the newlyweds while the grown-ups all sighed wearily.

"Good grief. Do they even realize how rude they're being to the Prince of Floraison and the Maiden's Aide...?"

"They're just kids, y'know..."

"And if they were so easily offended, they wouldn't come here..."

“Though if this were a formal occasion, we’d all be in trouble...”

The adults started scolding the children.

“Kids, back up a bit and let them eat their food!”

“I want some cherry pie!”

“Not until you eat your dinner!”

Iris clapped her hands to draw everyone’s attention. “Has everyone washed their hands? Then let’s all dig in!”

Reseda and Iris smiled at each other as the children all started to eat.



AFTER their meal, it was time for a siesta under the magnolia tree. The large white flowers showered the newlyweds in their light fragrance from above while the crisp scent of the mint plants rose up from below. The younger children had gone to take a nap while the older children gathered around the couple.

“Your wedding dress was *soooo* pretty!”

“And Cherry looked like a real prince!”

“Can we see your rings? Pretty please?”

Per their request, they offered the children their left hands. The golden rings were engraved with magic words and embedded with gems that matched their eye colors.

“What do the words say?” one of the children asked, since ordinary people were unable to read magescript.

“*Let us walk side by side,*” Reseda answered, and the girls all slumped their shoulders.

“That’s not romantic at all!”

“That’s something you say to a guy friend!”

"You have to say stuff like 'I'll always protect you' or girls won't like you!"

Reseda smiled stiffly.

"Now, now, that's not true at all," Iris chided. "I like Cherry very much."

At this, he snickered.

"Besides, I want to protect him just as much as he protects me," she continued. He burst out laughing.

"Good grief, must you be so loveable?" Reseda grabbed her by the chin and leaned in.

"Reseda! Not in front of the children!" Iris grabbed a pillow and smacked him with it. A fairy flew out of it and up to the magnolia petals.

Then the children started to tease them. "Reseda and Iris, sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!"

Flustered, Iris glanced around. The adults were all watching with amused smiles; none of them said a word to stop the kids. Even Sauge was grinning at them—when did *she* get there?! Apparently, she wasn't planning to save Iris!

"You may as well resign yourself to your fate," Reseda whispered.

And so, he planted a happy little kiss on her lips.

Afterword

NICE to meet you! My name is Iota AIUE. Thank you for reading my book.

This was my first experience with having my work translated, and it was so much fun. It feels like I've stumbled out of this tiny island nation...and into another world! Thank you so much for the opportunity to expand beyond Japan and to Kuroyuki for the wonderful illustrations.

In this story, the protagonist Iris is reincarnated in another world where she makes new friends and matures as a person. Likewise, I would love to use this opportunity to make new friends all over the globe! If my work has impacted you in any small way, feel free to reach out and let me know.

I hope we'll meet again someday.

Iota AIUE

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