INTERLUDE

MARIBEL

Maribel had been resurrected as an otherworlder. She had memories of being a ruler in Europe. In her previous life, she had all the finances she wanted; to her, war was just another pawn for her to use.

Her glory was built on misfortune. A battlefield, bullets flying. Kill or be killed; a vivid hellscape bathed in blood. Burnt homes, lost families, wailing people. And she never held any remorse about it. Maribel’s life was a happy one, all the way to the end of her natural life span.

And now she was here, born as a princess in the small Kingdom of Seltrozzo.

Her family was in the ruling class, the people calling the shots in the Western Nations. In this world filled with monsters and chaos, nations couldn’t afford to squabble with one another; it was natural that something like the Council of the West would be formed. That council was built hundreds of years ago by Granville Rozzo, the great founder of the Rozzo family and a mysterious, seemingly ageless figure.

He was the oldest among the Five Elders who held actual power in the Council, while still serving as head of the Rozzos, who had taken root in the Western Nations. Even a princess directly related to Granville wouldn’t have so much as a chance to see him. Maribel’s own brothers, in fact, had never even met the Five Elders before. But Maribel was different. Her memories, and her will, were things Granville couldn’t afford to ignore.

The advance of civilization would have been impossible without the existence of money. People advanced from using crops like rice and wheat as currency to a money-based economy, pushing society forward by leaps and bounds thanks to the scale money allows.

The value of money could also change. Gold and silver coins were made of metals with intrinsic value, guaranteeing that the money itself would have similar value. But now we were in an era where things like receipts and bonds in business transactions could serve as substitutes for money—the start of a paper-based economy. This would lead to the creation of banks, outposts indispensable to free exchange. You gave banks money; they gave you receipts as they diverted the money to other things, lending it to those without cash and earning interest from them.

That was the business model people eventually came up with, and it was a kind of magic more insidious than alchemy. Money, in the form of interest, seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Comparing the amount of cash circulating in the world and the total amount of receipts generated, there was clearly going to be a substantial amount of irrecoverable funds—as well as people in deep trouble after not being able to pay up.

If you lent money and charged interest, you would always have that problem. The shift from coinage to paper currency only sped up the process.

People collected money from the rich, dangling interest payments as bait. They invested it to create even more money. Business exchanges began to take place on a worldwide scale, beyond national borders. Limits on the production of paper money were removed, under the pat promise that the nation would be good for it all. Combine that with exchange controls caused by power differences between nations, and the scale of the economy blew up to dozens of times its original size—and Maribel was even factoring the amount of currency produced into her calculations as she controlled the market.

Much of it was a fiction, far removed from the actual economy. A bubble that was bound to pop sooner or later.

In her past life as well, Maribel blew the bubble up as much as she could. Any debts she couldn’t recover, she shunted off on the weaker nations and disposed of—in other words, waging wars to balance her accounts. The weaker nations thus fell, and the rich got richer. The parties being harvested for everything they had went from individuals to whole nations, but the basic process was the same.

Maribel was a seasoned master at this. She was a golden child of finance in her previous life, and she had both her memories from that and the intensely powerful greed of a ruler. This manifested itself in her unique skill Avarice, a sinful skill based on one of humankind’s core vices. If a unique skill was a set of emotions and desires that took corporeal form, those based on a cardinal sin like greed were treated as special cases among uniques.

In the case of Maribel, the strongest member of the Rozzo family since the day she was born, that truth was obvious. The Avarice skill let her hold sway over people’s desires—she could literally see them, and the bigger the desire, the easier she found it to rule over them. Everyone had desires, of course, and stoking those desires let Maribel control them any way she wanted. And, little by little, she used that to slowly build her audience of sympathizers.

There was no urgent need to act. Observing the people around her, she could tell that the standards of civilization in this world were pretty low. There was a money-driven economy but still a single currency that circulated across the whole of it. There were no language barriers; everything was different from the last world, but in a way, the environment was perfect for her to take advantage of. To Maribel, the whole world seemed like a sandbox, ready for her to play in.

Yes… Yes. I am destined to descend upon this world as its rightful ruler.

Ruling this world, to Maribel, was a natural goal to have. Once she was older and had the right to speak up, the world was hers for the taking—but until then, she thought, the fewer people who knew about her ambitions, the better.

Ever so carefully, she made sure no one could guess her true nature from her behavior. And when she was three years old, she had her first audience with Granville.

“So you’re Maribel?”

“Yes, Grandfather. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

It wasn’t a three-year-old’s usual way to greet someone, but Maribel had accounted for that in her calculations. Granville wasn’t like the other rabble skulking around the palace; to her, even her father, the king, was just another pawn. Her brothers, her wet nurse, her servants, and everyone else—as she read their desires, she methodically brought them under her rule.

But Granville was different. He was above all that.

“Why didn’t you try to control me?” Granville asked, seeing that Maribel had promptly dropped the act. There was no familial kindness to it. All that existed was the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. It was then that Maribel learned her instincts were correct. If she had tried to deceive Granville, she likely would’ve been killed on the spot. Not even Maribel’s Avarice skill was omnipotent. It could be resisted. After repeated, gradual attempts, it might’ve been possible to bring Granville under her rule, but he wasn’t the kind of man to allow that.

Maribel was confident of that, so she decided to be honest. No matter how things played out, she would need partners—and along those lines, Granville could potentially be the greatest partner she’d ever have.

“I can see people’s desires. I mean literally see them. And prodding them allows me to make them do my bidding. But you’re not like the others, Grandfather. You have a greater ambition than anyone else, but you’ve also got a will strong enough to bottle it up. So…”

“Hmm. So you’ve seen that far, little girl—or should I call you Maribel? Who are you anyway?”

“Me? I’m Maribel. Maribel the Greedy.”

“Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I like it. Declaring your very presence before me, are you?!”

The head of the Rozzo family liked Maribel. In time, they opened up to each other, sharing in the secrets they knew. Granville knew about the politics surrounding the Western Nations, as well as the demon lords who ruled the world. Maribel knew about her previous world, as well as the Avarice skill she acquired in this one. To her, this was the gamble of a lifetime.

Her brain was one thing, but her body was still that of a three-year-old. As she saw it, it’d be difficult to survive all on her own.

No matter what it takes—no matter what—I need to firm up my position. And to do that…

To do that, she needed to prove to Granville Rozzo, the local kingpin, that she was useful. Instinctively, she understood that was the best thing she could do right now to set herself up as ruler.

And the gamble paid off.

“Maribel, if something happens to me, I want you to inherit my ambitions. What I seek in this world is peace. We must reach a world of universal equality, under the rule of the Rozzo family.”

“Yes. Yes, Grandfather, I understand. I promise I will provide you with my full cooperation.”

Thus, this unlikely pair forged a bond that none other could enjoy. The family founder and the little girl—the alliance between a former Hero and one whose avarice knew no bounds.

Granville spent the next several years guiding Maribel, instructing her on the full array of Rozzo holdings and coconspirators. He also revealed the true identity of the god Luminus, as well as his own secrets—the underground dealings he engaged in to protect his seat in the Seven Days Clergy, as well as how the demon lord Luminus’s power was what truly kept the Western Nations safe.

He told her everything. And now, at the age of ten, Maribel was second only to Granville in power, using her skills to the fullest to take action against Rimuru.