



I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS

Written by
INORI

NOVEL

5

Illustrated by
HANAGATA

I'M IN LOVE WITH THE VILLAINESS

– Watashi no Oshi wa Akuyaku Reijou –

- VOLUME 5 -

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[SEVEN SEAS]





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Rae Taylor



Lana Lahna



Eve Nuhn



Philine Nur



Empress Dorothea Nuhn

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Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHI NO OSHI WA AKUYAKU REIJOU 5

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CHAPTER 16

THE INVASION OF THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL

“THE DEMON QUEEN?” I repeated, confused.

What in the world? First demons had started appearing, despite them hardly having a presence in the original game—and now they had a queen? There definitely hadn’t been any mention of that in the game’s reference books.

“Mother, who is this ‘Demon Queen’?” Philine hesitantly asked the very question I was dying to know the answer to. None of her old timidness was evident on her face, but she was clearly unsettled by Dorothea’s words.

Dorothea showed no sign of noticing her daughter’s worry. “The Demon Queen is the ruler of all demons and monsters. I’ve met her once before.”

To my surprise, I could hear a tinge of fear in her voice. What could have made Dorothea, the very picture of arrogance and confidence, feel afraid?

“It was before I usurped the throne...” she began to explain.

Her meeting with the Demon Queen had been a product of sheer chance. Dorothea had just turned seven at the time and had demonstrated a rare talent with the sword. To gain real combat experience, she had joined an expedition into demon territory—although she hadn’t so much “joined” as observed from the rear. No matter how strong she might’ve been, she had still been a member of the imperial family. In fact, she hadn’t been there so much for the experience as she had for the feather it would put in her cap. At any rate, a territory that past intel had suggested was relatively safe was chosen as the battlefield, and she observed the fighting from a safe distance.

That had been when she met her: the Demon Queen.

“I had heard of the demons’ great strength,” Dorothea continued. “But her? She was beyond anything I could imagine. I could’ve handled the Three Great Archdemons alone by myself if they had shown up even then, but I fear I can’t hold a candle to the Demon Queen even as I am now. She isn’t a power any human can hope to defeat but

a cataclysmic force of nature itself."

The expedition team was wiped out in the blink of an eye. Dorothea herself had fought against the Demon Queen, but her efforts were for naught.

"I was prepared for death. Yet for some reason, she spared me, and only me."

Confused, Dorothea had asked: *Why won't you kill me?*

"She answered, 'Killing you will too greatly alter the course of history.' Even now, I don't understand the meaning of her words."

Regardless, Dorothea had been spared and had found a new purpose.

"From then on, I made it my goal to unite all of humanity's forces to face her again."

She had done everything in her power to achieve this. Even her international aggressions had been carried out in pursuit of this goal. Whether that justified her actions or not was up for debate, however.

William asked what was on everyone's mind. "How could such a powerful person exist without anyone but you knowing of her?"

"I have no way of knowing for certain, but I suspect it has to do with what she said about not wanting to alter the course of history," Dorothea said.

"Meaning?"

"Knowledge of her existence would greatly affect the world. She's limited her actions to avoid shifting the course of history."

"Hmm... This all sounds a bit complex, but I get that it doesn't bode well for humanity." William frowned.

"If you were aware of such a threat, why didn't you warn everyone?" Claire scolded Dorothea. "Surely working together would have been more sensible than invading every nation left and right."

"Claire François, you know nothing of politics. In a world where nations have vastly different vested interests, words bear no weight at all."

There were a multitude of frameworks by which one nation could interact with another: by military force, economics, ideology, morality. Of these, Dorothea had believed “sitting down to talk it out” to be the least useful. Personally, I disagreed. But I couldn’t deny that quite a few people had thought like her in modern-day Japan.

“Nonsense,” Claire scolded her further. “If people knew we shared a common enemy who threatened us all, they would listen. Especially if *you* were the one speaking.”

Dorothea shook her head as though exasperated by the fact that Claire couldn’t understand something so simple. “Listen they would, and nothing more. They see no reason to act as long as our empire exists to hold the demons at bay.”

“You could urge them to action, just like Philine did.”

“That only worked because they saw me as a common enemy. As I said, our empire is the one defending the world against invasion from demon territory. Because of that, no other nation perceives the demons as a serious threat.”

She had a point there. I, at the very least, had never considered demons a real threat during my time in Bauer.

“That doesn’t make it right to annex other countries by force!” Claire yelled.

“Indeed. I’ve never once thought it *right*. It was simply my best option. But I’ve failed, thanks to you all,” she said with a self-derisive laugh.

“I understand your motives, Dorothea,” I said. “But why do you believe the demons are coming to attack in full force now, of all times?”

“I assume you’re aware that demons can’t enter the imperial capital?” she asked.

“Because of the barrier, right?”

“Indeed. But all the same, the demons are still able to send human spies—like the one I let flee amidst the fighting moments ago.”

I recalled her earlier glance at an imperial official as they slipped away. That must have been said spy.

“By now, that spy will have reported to the demons that I slaughtered you all, making

this their perfect chance to strike," she continued.

"I see. So when you said you were going to kill us, it was all an act ?" Claire asked.

Personally, if that *had* been an act, I'd have preferred it if she held back a bit more.

"No, I meant every word," Dorothea said. "If you had failed to survive my power, then you wouldn't have lived up to my expectations regardless. If anything, I was ready to be the one killed and leave everything in your hands."

"Philine, your mother's way too hardcore!" I shouted.

"I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry!" Philine incessantly bowed.

"So, now what? It doesn't look like we're in a state to continue this summit." William looked around at the surrounding wreckage. The noncombatants had all returned now that the fighting was over.

"Dorothea, how much time would you say we have until the demons are upon us?" Dole asked.

After thinking for a moment, she answered, "Counting the time it would take for them to break through all the fortifications along the way, I'd say two weeks."

"Two weeks... Might as well be nothing." Dole grimaced. It was doubtful whether two weeks would even be enough time to summon reinforcements from Bauer, the country closest to Nur—much less all of humanity's forces.

"I'm guessing you have something planned, Dorothea? I know you're not one to do something this reckless without a contingency," Manaria said as she appeared.

"Sister!" Claire dove into her arms. "You're healed now?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry I made you worry, Claire."

I felt a twinge of envy but let things slide on account of what had happened to Manaria. Besides, Claire was still mine to hug whenever I wanted!

"I do have something planned," Dorothea answered Manaria. "A massive magical tool is installed in one of the strongholds between demon territory and the capital. If

activated, it'll wipe out both the demons and the stronghold."

According to her, that magical tool was her trump card, created with the empire's latest, greatest, and most cutting-edge technology. It was apparently so powerful that maps would need to be redrawn after its use.

"If you had something like that, why wouldn't you just detonate it in demon territory?" Claire asked.

"We can't just install it anywhere. It needs a volcanic belt ley line to work."

Something clicked in my mind. "Dorothea... Did you use that magical tool to make Mt. Sassal erupt?" I asked.

"You're sharp, Rae Taylor. Indeed, I did. This magic tool is able to agitate the fire and earth essences running along the ley line," she answered without an ounce of guilt.

So that was how it was. The reason the eruption had happened earlier than it did in the original game was because the empire had pulled some strings. Perhaps the empire had been the cause of the eruption in the original game too.

"You fiend!" To my surprise, Thane grabbed Dorothea's collar. His usual melancholic expression was replaced with one of pure rage. "Do you have any idea how many of my citizens suffered because of that eruption?! Even now, many are on the verge of starvation!"

As king, Thane had greatly grieved the suffering his dear subjects had been forced to endure following Mt. Sassal's eruption. To find out the disaster had not been natural but rather man-made was understandably maddening.

"I have no excuse," Dorothea said. "I wished to conquer your country, but I didn't have the luxury of choosing my means."

"You're heartless!" Thane snarled.

"Is that so? What would you have me do, then?"

"There's nothing you can do to make up for what you've done. Go to hell."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, that's not a good move there, Your Majesty," I said. "Let's at least

get an apology and some reparations out of her." While I sympathized on an emotional level, we had to look toward the future.

"I am willing to meet that demand," Dorothea said. "That is, if Philine is willing too."

"Huh? M-me?" Philine said, having not expected her name to be brought up.

"Yes, you, Philine. I abdicate the throne to you."

"Philine? As empress? Are you insane?" I asked Dorothea.

"H-hey, what's that supposed to mean, Rae?!" Philine snapped. "And how come you've suddenly stopped addressing me as 'Lady' Philine?!"

I looked at Dorothea and Philine standing side by side, comparing them. "I know Philine is actually quite capable when she tries, but compared to Dorothea, she's a little... lacking. Oh, and I figured it was about time I dropped some formalities."

"I hate that I can't even rebut that!" Philine complained. "And what's with that random reasoning?!"

Philine was capable, sure. If she weren't, she wouldn't have managed to form the anti-Dorothea alliance so quickly. But I doubted whether she was capable enough to fill Dorothea's shoes. Even when she became empress in the revolution route of the game, her love interests assisted her in her rule. She wasn't like Dorothea, who ruled on her own merits—she was someone whose ability to use others was what made her shine. But given how low her affection levels with the love interests were, I just couldn't see them assisting her now.

"I know, I know," Philine said in defeat. "I can't become like Mother, no matter what I do."

"Indeed, that's true," Dorothea commented.

"Gah?!" Philine's jaw dropped. "Y-you didn't have to agree!"

"Don't jump to conclusions. There's no reason you have to become like me in the first place."

How strange. It was almost like Dorothea was trying to encourage Philine.

"You seem rather insistent Philine becomes empress," I said. "Why?"

"Process of elimination. It'd be outrageous to leave the throne to my other children, who only pandered to me. Philine showed the will to make me abdicate, even if only for a moment. None of my children are more fit for the throne than her."

"Mother, are you praising me?" Philine asked.

"Of course. Would I relinquish the throne if I thought so little of you?"

"O-oh, uh, I suppose not."

I was only now realizing that Dorothea might be a bit of an airhead. I wasn't about to forgive her for what she had done, and I wanted her to be fairly punished, but I also couldn't really bring myself to hate her as a person. I could do without her monstrous strength, however.

"We'll have to postpone your coronation ceremony due to the circumstances," Dorothea said solemnly. "But from this moment on, you are the Empress of Nur, Philine."

Philine straightened her back and met her mother's eyes. "It is an honor," she said. She put her hand over her heart and bowed, her composure earning back some of the adoration I'd felt for her earlier. Just some, though.

I had my doubts as to whether Dorothea's other children would accept this lying down. I didn't think any of them would directly oppose Dorothea's decision, but I expected problems for Philine in the long-term.

Come to think of it, with this, the plan Claire and I had hatched to manipulate the empire had come to a close, and with resounding success! Whew. It had been a long journey, and—well, there wasn't even time to relax, what with the demons hot on our tail. Life was a rollercoaster, all right.

"So, what's the plan, Your Imperial Majesty? How are we fighting the demons?" William asked.

"Huh? Y-you're asking me?!" Philine panicked.

"Naturally," Dole said. "This is the empire. Who knows the lay of a land better than its own people? We don't intend to make you the leader of our alliance, to be sure, but humanity is in danger. We're willing to temporarily entrust command of our forces to you."

I couldn't say I envied her position. It was only her first day on the job and she already had to come up with a battle plan against the demons—and all while handling negotiations with leaders from Sousse, the Alpes, and Bauer, to boot.

"I-I might be able to handle some political and diplomatic matters, but commanding an army is beyond me..." Philine said hesitantly.

Dole smiled. "You don't need to take on everything by yourself. You're the highest authority in the empire, but that really just means you're in charge of assigning the right people to the right jobs. And as luck would have it, there happens to be someone well versed in the art of war right here."

"Oh... I understand now. Then, Mother, can I ask you to lead our forces?" Philine asked.

"I refuse. It would set a bad example for a political loser to take command. If I'm to be assigned anywhere, it should be as a foot soldier on the frontier or on the front line."

"Oh no..." Philine said hopelessly.

C'mon now, I thought. What happened to the cool Philine who boldly declared checkmate against Dorothea only moments ago?

"If you're the loser, then do you not have an obligation to do as the victor commands?" Claire cut in. "What right do you have to act so haughty, especially in such dire straits?"

Yeah, tell her what's up, Miss Claire!

"Humph..." Dorothea frowned.

"Besides," Claire continued, "if someone of your standing was a foot soldier, there would be no order on the battlefield. The front lines would be in chaos."

"But—"

"Just be quiet and accept the position. Philine, feel free to make full use of her."

"Thank you, Claire. Um, I couldn't help but notice you've stopped using 'Lady' to address me as well."

"Would you rather I did?"

"Not at all! I'm more than happy to make an exception for you! It feels like we've gotten closer!"

Uh-oh. Miss Empress was starting to get ahead of herself.

"Like Dole said, this is the empire, so I'm willing to let you take the lead for now," Manaria said. "I assume the stronghold with the magical tool installed is going to play a part in our battle strategy?"

Manaria spoke like she was the actual leader of their newly formed alliance. I supposed this made sense, as Sousse was the second-most powerful country in the alliance behind the empire, as Bauer was still recovering from the aftereffects of the eruption. Of course, the new unified international power she envisioned would be one that would act without a set leader, but that was neither here nor there.

"It should," Dorothea said. "Our strategy will likely involve luring as many demons into its range as possible."

"We need to work out a way to avoid letting our own people get caught in the blast," William said.

"It would be preferable if we could gather intel on the enemy forces," Dole said.

The three of them began a full-on strategy discussion. There was no room for an amateur like me to get a word in.

"It seems like our plan to manipulate the empire has come to fruition," Claire said.

"Miss Claire..."

"We did it, Rae."

"Yes, we did. But we're not out of the woods yet."

"Indeed. A demon assault and a Demon Queen. Neither is something we can readily

ignore."

I gazed at her face in profile as she firmly made this declaration. She looked as noble as ever. I would have fallen for her right then and there if I hadn't already done so long ago.

"Was there any mention of the Demon Queen in your book of prophecies?" she asked.

"Not at all," I said. "There weren't even many mentions of demons."

"I see... The empire doesn't seem to have much information about the Demon Queen either. It would be to our advantage if we had some manner of clue."

"I may not know anything about her, but I think I know someone who might."

"Really? You should've mentioned that sooner. Who is it? Mr. Torrid?"

"While he might know something, I can think of someone else who's far more likely to know."

"Who?"

"We met them when we visited Mr. Torrid, remember? They talked like they knew a great deal more than us."

Moreover, by their choice of words, they seemed to have some kind of tie to Claire and me, just like the demons seemed to.

"You haven't forgotten them already, have you?" I asked. "I'm talking about the apostle."

"You're looking for a way to meet the apostle?"

The day after the summit, Claire and I went to visit Mr. Torrid.

"I do know a way..." he paused, cautious. "But why do you want to meet them?"

"We'd like to learn more about the Demon Queen," Claire said. "Even Dorothea seems

to fear her."

"Of course, we'd like to check whether you know anything too, Mr. Torrid," I added.
"But we figured the apostle was sure to know something."

"I see..." He nodded in understanding. "Unfortunately, yesterday's summit was the first I've heard of this Demon Queen. I'm sorry I can't be of more help there."

"So we have no choice but to ask the apostle, then," Claire said.

"It would seem so. Personally, I would advise against it. The apostle is moved by a different set of values than we humans are."

"What do you mean?" Claire asked.

"As you've heard them admit directly, the apostle isn't human. But the mystery shrouding their existence runs even deeper than that. For one, they seem to not care at all about the lives of individual humans." There was some bitterness in Mr. Torrid's words that he couldn't fully hide.

"Did something happen?" Claire asked.

"The apostle started monitoring me around the moment I lost my daughter," he said after a pause. "I knew from the moment they appeared that they were powerful. They said they had ties to the Spirit God, so I pleaded with them to bring my daughter back to life."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing. They said they didn't care for my daughter's life. But the way they phrased it was strange... something about how it had already happened."

Cryptic as always, that apostle.

"You make me sound heartless," said a voice.

The voice startled me as well. Neither Claire, Mr. Torrid, nor I had noticed the fourth party in the room until just then.

"Apostle!" Mr. Torrid exclaimed.

"Hello, Torrid Magic. So that's how you thought of me? I had no idea I caused you such grief. But I'm sorry to say that bringing a human back from the dead is forbidden to me."

Smiling at us was a nun who I didn't recognize. It appeared Lilly wasn't the only person the apostle could possess, if that was even the right word for what they did.

Putting that aside, I was curious as to how this nun had managed to sneak up on us without a sound. I could understand if it had been Lilly, with her training, but this nun seemed as plain as they came. Was the apostle able to increase the physical, or maybe even magical, attributes of a person when they took over their body? That sounded kind of convenient. *I wouldn't mind having such a skill.*

"Perfect timing," Claire said. "We have some questions for you."

"Please, ask away, Claire François."

"Do you know of the Demon Queen?"

The apostle smiled. "Of course. She's our enemy."

"By 'our' are you referring to the Spiritual Church?"

"Not quite. She's the enemy of the Spiritual Church, yes, but she's also the enemy of all of humanity, including you and Rae Taylor there." Her grin remained plastered in place. "Our interests align, so why don't we work together?"

I didn't trust her one bit.

"Then tell us what you know about the Demon Queen," Claire said.

"Unfortunately, at this point, I do not have the authority to tell you anything."

"What?! But you just said that you wanted us to work together!" Claire countered.

The apostle just sidestepped the issue. "I did, but that doesn't change what I can and can't do."

"Why, you—"

“Please calm down, Miss Claire,” I interrupted. “Apostle, if you don’t have the authority, then please make a request for one of your superiors to help us.”

“That is currently not possible.”

“Currently, huh?”

“Yes, currently.”

In other words, it might be possible later. The problem was *when* this later would be.

“But... I suppose I could give one piece of advice,” the apostle said.

“Yes?” Claire said expectantly.

“Claire François, Rae Taylor—you two must flirt more.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t believe my ears. *Did I hear that right?*

“We have no time for your jokes!” Claire yelled.

“I’m not joking. If you’re to fight the Demon Queen, that is what you must do.”

Huh? She was serious?

“I want nothing more than to flirt with Miss Claire myself,” I said, “but what does that have to do with fighting the Demon Queen?”

“I’m unable to disclose that at this time, but it will be important.”

“Is that right?”

“I’m sorry, but I have my reasons. Oh, and one more thing: Don’t pay any mind to what the Demon Queen says.”

Yet more cryptic words.

The apostle continued, “Defeat her as fast as you can without listening to what she says. If you waste time trying to understand her, you’ll only wind up being defeated instead.”

“Saying that just makes me want to hear her out even more.”

“You’re welcome to, Rae Taylor, but it might cost you your beloved’s life.”

I paused. “You sure know what makes me tick. But I guess I shouldn’t expect any less from the ones controlling the world from behind the scenes.”

“Such kind words. But we do not control the world; we merely adjust it. We’re on the side of humanity, really.”

“I wonder about that.” The apostle’s words might not have been a lie, but I was convinced they weren’t the whole truth.

Claire sighed. “There’s no way we can waste time flirting in such a time of crisis.”

“Even if I were to say the success of the coming battle depended on it?” the apostle said.

“Ngh...” Claire groaned. It seemed the apostle knew just what to say to twist Claire’s arm as well.

“It shouldn’t be that difficult,” the apostle said. “You are already flirting every free moment you have.”

“Nonsense! We are *not!*” Claire insisted.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Mr. Torrid, the apostle, and I shared a look. I, at the very least, was self-aware of how all over each other Claire and I tended to be.

“Torrid Magic,” said the apostle, “go negotiate with Thane Bauer and Dole François to secure these two some more free time.”

Mr. Torrid sighed. “I take it that I have no right to refuse?”

"Whyever would you? This is for the benefit of humanity. Don't you think Emily Magic would have wanted this as well?"

"Please, don't talk like you understand my daughter."

By the sound of it, Emily was the name of Mr. Torrid's late daughter.

"I'll help set the stage as well," said the apostle. "So, Claire François, Rae Taylor, please flirt to your heart's content. For the sake of humanity, of course."

Saying nothing further, the apostle left.

"Uh..."

"Incredible."

Claire and I stood speechless at the sight before us.

We were at an empire-owned resort, one with a log house on the shore of a large lake in the capital. Philine and Thane had given us permission to take some time off. Of course, we couldn't exactly tell them that we needed time to flirt, of all things, so instead we had said we wanted to recuperate after all the hustle and bustle of the last few weeks. Thane and Dole were already opposed to the thought of us taking on any more work in the first place, so they readily agreed to our request. They were a bit more reluctant to agree to our participation in the coming battle against the demons, but they eventually relented, as I had expected they would. While it was a bit immodest to say so myself, there was no way they could choose not to make use of our strength.

Anyway, Claire and I were watching May and Aleah play in the water. The lake had a long stretch of shallow water, so we let them play as much as they liked, as long as they didn't go into the deeper parts. At first, they did normal things like splash water at each other and swim, but they soon got tired of that and began finding new ways to play.

"Ready, Aleah?"

"When you are, May!"

With a wave of her hand, May let out a burst of condensed magic and caused some waves to form. And I didn't mean cute little ripples but waves you might see in a massive wave pool in modern Japan, the kind that could swallow adults with ease.

Aleah, a tree branch in hand, slashed the waves apart as they came. Logically speaking, there was no way a tree branch of all things could make a dent in the giant waves May summoned. And yet Aleah slashed them apart with an intensity that reminded me of Dorothea.



"Um... Miss Claire?" I began.

"Yes, Rae?"

We had set out a table and some chairs on the log house's terrace, from which we watched the children in amazement.

"I was just thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Maybe the girls are already stronger than us?"

"What a coincidence. I was just thinking the same thing."

I had always thought of May and Aleah as gifted, but this was unexpected. From what I could see, May was doing all that with pure, attribute-less magic; and Aleah was, well, using a stick. Claire and I had real fighting experience, so we'd probably still be better off in a fight, but those two were likely ahead of us in terms of raw power. I definitely wouldn't allow such a thing, but hypothetically speaking, they were strong enough to hold their own in a battle.

"It's a little worrying," Claire said.

"Hm? How so?"

"They're still only in elementary school... If things play out poorly, there could be some complications."

"Ah..."

The twins saw their own abilities as normal, but the same couldn't be said for the children around them. For better or for worse, children were wary of those who were different. If the twins were regarded as geniuses by the other children, then all would be well and good, but there was a nonzero chance that they would instead be ostracized for their differences. It was a fact that May had already refused to go to school one day for something similar.

"Interesting. One with four colors and another who's colorless. How rare."

"Whoa?!" Claire was startled by the sudden voice of a third party. I enjoyed my beloved's surprised expression, though I also felt a bit of exasperation.

"Again, apostle?" I said. "How many times do I have to tell you to not sneak up on us like that?"

"Forgive me. I mean nothing by it."

The apostle was possessing one of May and Aleah's two bodyguards. As I've mentioned briefly before, the twins' bodyguards had been hired by Dole. Both were women. The one the apostle was currently possessing was actually my former boss and a familiar face to Claire.

"I see you chose the senior maid today," Claire said.

"It was either her or the other person close by."

Indeed, this bodyguard was actually the François family's senior maid from back when their house was still nobility. I'd known her to be a skilled domestic, but I had only recently discovered that she was also a capable bodyguard. Imagine my surprise when Dole introduced us.

On another note, it appeared members of the Spiritual Church weren't the only people the apostle could possess, as I had assumed. Did that mean they could possess Claire and me as well?

"In fact, we cannot. You two are exceptions. If we could, we wouldn't have so many problems in the first place."

"Could you not read my mind like that?" I asked.

"Oh. Forgive me."

As always, everything the apostle said was cryptically loaded with hidden meaning.

"What did you mean by your comment just now, apostle?" Claire said, her expression stiff. "I can understand May, with her four attributes, but don't think I'll let you off easy if you mock Aleah's lack of magic aptitude."

"No, no, that's not what I meant in the slightest. Aleah Barbet's colorless disposition is

genuinely rare.”

“Huh? I only have more questions now,” Claire said. “Is ‘Barbet’ Aleah’s family name? Do you know Aleah’s background? And what is this ‘colorless disposition’?”

“Allow me to explain.” With that, the apostle left to fetch a chair from inside the log house, returned, and sat down with us. It wasn’t really that big a deal, but for someone who had told us to go flirt, they sure were getting in the way. “Of course we know May and Aleah Barbet’s background. We know the history of all humanity.”

“Is that so? Then do you know of their parents?” Claire asked.

“Yes. They are deceased, as you already knew. The twins have a number of living relatives, but none of them loved the children enough to look after them.”

The way the apostle spoke was so objective and impersonal. I knew it was because it didn’t matter to them, but hearing of May and Aleah’s circumstances again left me wrestling with a surge of anger.

“But they have you now,” the apostle said. “As for your other question, Aleah Barbet’s colorless disposition is the polar opposite of Dorothea Nur’s.”

“Which means?” Claire asked.

“Just as Dorothea Nur’s disposition negates all magic, Aleah Barbet’s colorless disposition allows her to store any magic.”

“And what does *that* mean?” Claire pushed further.

“It would be better to show you than to explain. Please call the twins over.”

Claire and I shared a look, but we saw no reason to say no, so we did just that.

“What is it, Mama Rae? We were just at the good part!” May said.

“It’s not nap time yet, Mothers!” Aleah said.

The girls still seemed full of energy. As their mother, that made me truly happy.

“Miss May, Miss Aleah, your mothers said they would like to see your secret technique,”

the apostle said, pretending to be the senior maid.

Secret technique? I wondered.

“Whaaat? You told them?” May groaned.

“We wanted to practice more before surprising them!” Aleah complained.

“Forgive me, I accidentally let it slip. But your mothers said they would love to see it.”

“Humph... Okaaay,” May said a little grumpily.

“We will demonstrate it, then!”

May and Aleah backed away from the terrace a bit.

“Don’t blink, Mama Rae, Mama Claire! Ready, Aleah?”

“Ready!”

I watched as May created a flame arrow in her hand and fired it at Aleah.

“No!” I yelled.

Claire and I quickly summoned magic bullets to try to knock it down, but the apostle blocked us with their hand. “Please watch.”

Just as I thought the flame arrow would hit Aleah, it disappeared into a red glow around Aleah’s body, as though it had been absorbed.

“Huh...? What was that?” I said.

“That is her colorless disposition at work,” the apostle said. “She cannot use magic on her own, but she can absorb every conceivable kind of magic and use it as her own power instead.”

Huh? Wait, wouldn’t the ability to absorb magic be even stronger than Dorothea’s ability to nullify it?

“Mothers, please watch me! I’m ready, May!”

“Okay!”

This time, May threw a boulder toward Aleah.

“Hiyaah!” With a shout and a swing of her stick, Aleah cut the boulder in half, setting it ablaze as she did so.

“That technique Aleah Barbet just demonstrated—let’s call it Spell Sword for brevity’s sake—is able to cut through even Dorothea Nur’s Magic Nullification. Earlier, you hypothesized that the twins might be stronger than you, but you haven’t the slightest idea. Together, they could rival even the former empress.” The apostle chuckled. “Of course, your strengths lie in a different direction entirely.”

After discussing things with us a while, the apostle left so we could spend some quality time alone as a family. We all played in the lake, made and ate dinner (naturally, we made sure Claire refrained from cooking), and were able to take it easy and relax for the first time in a long while.

We made sure to warn the twins to be careful when using their own powers, both to dispel Claire’s worries and for their own sake. We had them promise to never use their powers recklessly and to especially never use them against a friend or acquaintance, explaining that their power could easily make others fearful of them. I was worried it would be too hard for them to understand, but they readily agreed. Perhaps they could comprehend our concerns because they’d experienced something similar before due to the curse in their blood.

After our difficult talk, we played with the twins. Claire and I were always left dead tired after playing with them, as the girls liked games that let them move their bodies around more than things like playing house. But I didn’t mind this kind of exhaustion. There was something fulfilling about it, unlike the exhaustion I felt after fighting demons or Dorothea.

“The twins are fast asleep now,” I said.

“They must be tired from playing so much today.”

After a full day of fun, the girls were exhausted. They had started to nod off in the middle of dinner, so we’d quickly had them brush their teeth and bathe, by which point

they had been practically counting sheep. Too sleepy to walk, I'd had to carry them to their bedroom. I noticed they had gotten heavier yet again, proof that they were growing.

"They were really happy to spend a full day with you for the first time in a long while," I said.

"I'm sure they were just as happy to spend the day with you, Rae."

"Well... I wonder about that." I knew for certain that I loved them, but I sometimes had my doubts as to whether they loved me back.

"That's not fair to them. They adore you, you know? I could see it in their eyes during dinner."

"They certainly love my food, I suppose." Huh. I wondered why I felt oddly self-deprecating today? In my heart, I knew they loved me back, and yet...

"Heh heh. So even you have moments like this," Claire giggled.

"Like what?"

"Moments when you want to be comforted. Whether it be problems with friends or family, child-rearing troubles, political or diplomatic woes, or even conflict with demons, you're almost always the one comforting me. It's a breath of fresh air to see you depending on me for once." Claire spread her arms wide, inviting me in for a hug. I wasn't wholly satisfied with her response, but I was more than happy to dive into her arms.

"I could swear I've depended on you for comfort a number of times already," I said.

"Not at all. You always put on a brave front, especially since we've come to the empire. You don't let any weakness show out of concern for us."

"Really? But I was pretty shaken when May and Aleah got kidnapped." I was still ashamed of how I had lost my cool then. I didn't think I could ever live that down.

"As was I. Anyone would be in such a situation. If I looked calm at all to you then, it was only because you were that much more panicked."

"I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble."

"Heh heh, not at all. Especially when you've supported me so much. We're both the type to go calm when our partner loses their composure, aren't we?"

She wrapped her arms around me, soothing me with her warmth. Still in her embrace, I gave her a kiss on the lips.

"A great deal has happened since we came to the empire," she said.

"You said it."

"We had our audience with Dorothea, enrolled in the Imperial Academy, and met Philine and everyone else."

"Remember the pope's visit? That was sure something." Never in a million years would I have thought that I'd become a body double.

"We even helped improve the empire's cuisine. Oh, and we had a ball."

"I still can't believe Aleah became Dorothea's disciple."

"Remember when May helped us open the Box of the Forbidden?"

"There was that time we thought our plan had come to an end with Philine being exiled."

"The incidents with Joel, Eve, and Lana remain vivid in my mind."

And I still remembered how hopeless I had felt when my daughters were kidnapped.

She went on, "We held the summit, where Philine cornered Dorothea, and now here we are. It's been a tumultuous few months."

"You did well, Miss Claire."

"As did you, Rae."

We giggled, then kissed again.

"Do you think this is what the apostle meant by flirting?" I asked.

"Most certainly. But I still fail to see how this will help us defeat the demons."

"Hmm... Maybe love is the only force that can stop a being out to destroy the world!"

"Wouldn't it be nice if it were that simple?"

Whatever the true purpose of our flirting might have been, the two of us certainly had no qualms about getting on with it.

"Do you think we can beat the demons, Miss Claire?"

"Of course we can. And once everything is settled down, we'll return to our home in Bauer."

Of course. Our home was waiting for us. For that, we had to fight off the coming invasion, come hell or high water.

"I'm a little hung up on what Dorothea said the Demon Queen told her," I admitted.

"About history and all that?"

"Yes."

The words the Demon Queen had spoken to Dorothea, "Killing you would too greatly alter the course of history," had me thinking. It was almost as if she also knew the events of *Revolution* and *Revo-Lily*.

"Maybe the Demon Queen is a lost child of the spirits," I said, "like me."

"But wouldn't she have to be a human for that? Could the ruler of the demons be that?"

"I don't know..."

In the books I'd read in my past life, there were many stories of people being reincarnated as villains in other worlds. If the Demon Queen were such a person, then her comment to Dorothea would make sense. However, the question remained: Why was she out to destroy the world?

“Rae... you’re trembling.”

“I’m scared, Miss Claire.”

“Of the Demon Queen?”

“Yes. If she knows what’s to come, then she has an incredible advantage over us. My book of prophecies only showed me the events leading up to Dorothea’s defeat. From here on out, we’re fighting blind.”

Preemptive knowledge of what was to come and who was involved with who was a significant advantage. The only reason a normal person with no redeeming features, like me, had successfully bumbled her way through thus far was because playing *Revolution* and *Revo-Lily* had given me insight into this world’s events and outcomes. But I didn’t have that power anymore.

“I couldn’t care less if I died, but I’m afraid of losing you and the twins.”

“Hey, none of that, Rae.” Claire lightly flicked me on the forehead. I didn’t have the willpower to make my usual joke about how even pain was a reward if it came from her. “Do you remember how, when May and Aleah were kidnapped, you told me the four of us would definitely make our way back to each other?”

“Yeah...”

Claire smiled as brilliantly as a rose in full bloom. “Well, it’s my turn to tell you now: I won’t let a single one of us die. The four of us will make it back to our home in Bauer together and in one piece.”

“I’m just no match for you, Miss Claire.”

“Of course not. Who do you think I am?”

“My dear, beloved sweetheart.”

“Heh heh, I suppose that’s right.”

We naturally moved into an embrace and kissed.

“I wonder if the apostle is watching us even now,” she mused.

"Let them watch. A little exhibitionism. Just how you like it."

"Wha—I have *no* such sexual inclination!"

"So you say, but your heart races three times faster than usual when we kiss when someone's watching."

"Th-that can't be...!"

"Yep. I'm just kidding."

"Raeee!" She began to pound her fists against me. Of course, even this pain was a reward, as it came from her.

"Miss Claire?"

"What? I can't believe you ruined such a good mood."

"I love you."

"Ugh... You can be so unfair!"

"Won't you say it back for me?"

"I won't. Those words can't even begin to describe what I feel for you." Claire pulled me closer and faintly whispered in my ear: "You mean more than the world to me, Rae."

A sudden sense of euphoria washed over me. "Shall we retire to our room, Miss Claire?"

"Yes, let's."

With the demon invasion on the horizon, the curtains fell on our brief days of respite.

"Thank you all for coming. I hereby announce the beginning of the counter-invasion strategy meeting," Philine began.

We were in a conference room within the imperial castle. Those present included Philine, Dorothea, Josef, Hilda, and many more from the empire, as well as numerous faces from Sousse, the Alpes, Bauer, and the Spiritual Church. It would be no exaggeration to say all the key representatives of humanity were present.

"Let us start by reviewing the current situation. Hilda, can you explain where the demons are currently located?"

"Right away. Everyone, please refer to this map here."

With a pointer stick, Hilda indicated a map spread across the wall, which showed the empire and its surroundings. On the map, demon territory was situated to the east of the empire. A total of six strongholds stood between demon territory and the imperial capital.

"At present, the demons have conquered the second stronghold and have laid siege to the third," she said. "The third stronghold is commanded by the brave General Sascha, but a messenger has arrived to say that they won't last more than a few more days."

"So not even Sascha can hold them off," Dorothea groaned.

According to Hilda's explanation, Sascha was a famous general who had never failed to repel the demons' advances—until now.

"The demon army is larger than ever before, and it is now largely composed of relatively intelligent monsters like goblins and orcs," Hilda explained.

"Are you saying that was enough to overwhelm Sascha?" Dorothea asked.

"Not at all. It seems the goblins and orcs, who typically flee the moment a battle sours, are charging ahead with reckless abandon and demonstrate no regard for their lives. It's as though they fear something more than death."

"Humph... How curious," Dorothea said.

"It looks like the demons are betting it all on this invasion," Manaria said.

The invasion seemed to be just that important to them.

"Exactly how much time do we have until they reach us?" William asked.

"At their current pace, about one week, I fear," Hilda said.

"I see... The reinforcements from Bauer might not arrive in time, then," Dole said bitterly. He had sent word requesting reinforcements to Rod the moment we learned of the invasion. Unfortunately, no matter how skilled Rod himself might be, it took time to move an army. It was doubtful they'd make it in time.

"Which stronghold has the magical tool Dorothea mentioned installed?" Yu asked.

"That would be the fifth stronghold," Hilda matter-of-factly replied. "And the only thing standing between the fifth stronghold and the capital is the sixth."

In other words, the success of our fifth stronghold strategy was directly tied to the safety of the capital.

"Is that magical tool ready for use?" Thane asked.

"Yes," Hilda confirmed. "The magical tool—official designation 'Magical Ordnance: Inferno'—is fully operational. The problem is whether we can successfully lure the enemy army into its range. Please have a look at this magnified map here." She moved her pointer to the neighboring map. "This map shows the terrain around the fifth stronghold. As you can see, the fifth stronghold is surrounded by mountains, making it a natural fortress. The only way to get past it is to force your way directly through or to take a large detour and attack the capital from the north."

"I'm guessing it'd be a problem for us if they chose to take the detour?" I asked.

"Correct. While their army would be delayed in reaching the capital, we'd be unable to make any use of Inferno. There is another stronghold in the north, but we cannot install Inferno there."

"So we have to somehow lure the demons to the fifth stronghold," Claire said.

"I'm afraid so."

But how?

"Are we sure the enemy doesn't know about Inferno?" Manaria asked.

"Absolutely. The existence of Inferno has been kept secret from all but a very select

few in the army. The demon spies Lady Dorothea has knowingly allowed to roam seem to be aware we have a powerful weapon, but what and where it is has remained strictly confidential. The likelihood of a leak is immeasurably small, rest assured."

Hilda seemed pretty sure of herself. For all our sakes, I hoped she was right.

"Putting aside whether the demons know of Inferno's existence," Philine said with some worry, "as things stand, taking a detour through the northern route will appear slightly easier to the demons than forcing a way through the east. If we can't do something to dissuade them from that strategy, we won't get a chance to use Inferno."

"What if we stationed forces along the northern route?" Thane suggested.

"There are already a number of soldiers stationed there. But stationing enough to make the route seem impassable might have the opposite effect, and it would also too greatly weaken the stronghold's defenses," Philine said.

"Huh? Th-then how has the empire fought the demons until now?" Lilly asked.

I think she was trying to say that the empire seemed awfully short-staffed for a situation like this.

"Lilly Lilium," Dorothea said, "the demons are not the only threat to the empire. Both the existence of the Demon Queen and my true motives remain unknown to other countries. If we lessen security on our borders, we risk invasion from human territories."

"What a surprise," Misha grumbled. "If it isn't the consequences of your own actions."

To be honest, I felt the same way.

"What's done is done," Dorothea replied. "We have to make do with what we have now, not ruminate over how things could have been."

"Hah. You're not wrong, but I'm surprised you can be so unrepentant about it," Yu snapped with a smile on her face.

Again, I had to agree.

"Let's not get too off track," Philine said, redirecting our attention. "We need to lure

the demon army toward Inferno. Does anyone have any ideas?"

A short silence followed. The one to break it was Claire.

"I think I might have a plan."

"Go ahead, Claire."

"We could try dangling a bait they can't possibly ignore." Her tone was matter-of-fact, but her expression was stiff. I had a bad feeling that I wouldn't like what she was about to say next.

"And what would this bait be, Claire François?" Dorothea asked what was on everyone's mind.

"I was thinking it could be me."

"Miss Claire?!" I leapt to my feet, but she put her hand up before me and continued.

"When we were fighting one of the Three Great Archdemons, they singled me out and told me to 'perish for what I had wrought.'" She was referring to the time we'd fought Aristo. "I haven't the slightest clue what they meant, but the demons seem to be targeting me—enough to send the Three Great Archdemons to personally attack me." She smiled bravely. "That's why I believe we can lure in the demon army by using me as bait."

"I'm against it! This plan's too dangerous!" I vehemently rejected the proposal. I was right to be worried; Claire was trying to sacrifice herself again. I wouldn't let that happen. Not ever.

"Of course," Claire said pleasantly, "I'd be helpless alone, so Rae will come with me." She smiled at me.

In an instant, my head cooled. I understood now. She wasn't sacrificing herself like before—she was acting with survival in mind.

"Unfortunately, I cannot command an army, as I haven't any relevant experience. So I'll leave that much to someone qualified. Rae and I will instead devote ourselves to provoking the demons. As a pair, we'll be more maneuverable and can quickly flee at a moment's notice. Our goal won't be to fight the demons but to simply act as bait."

"I'm against it as well," Philine said. "I don't think it's fair to force such a difficult role on you two alone." The woman she cared for was proposing being sent to the battlefield. Of course she would have some misgivings.

"Philine, do you have a counterproposal?" Dorothea asked in a low voice. The look in her eyes was harsh, as though warning her daughter to not be foolish.

"I... do not."

"Then be quiet. The worst thing you can do in these situations is voice an emotional complaint without offering an alternative."

Seeing Dorothea talk to Philine like that irritated me a bit, and I couldn't help butting in. "Huh. Are you sure about that, Dorothea?"

"Out with it, Rae Taylor."

"I mean, Miss Claire and I aren't citizens of the empire, right? How can you be sure we won't just abandon the empire and scurry off to Bauer the moment we see Philine has no objections to using us as bait?" I particularly disliked how Dorothea had made it sound like self-sacrifice was expected of us.

"The empire isn't the only thing at stake in this fight," she countered. "We face a threat to all humanity."

"Sure, but we don't need to risk fighting here. We could just as easily retreat and gather the forces of Sousse, the Alpes, and Bauer while the empire is getting overrun by demons."

"Humph." It appeared Dorothea had nothing to say to that.

"We want to help the empire *precisely* because someone caring, like Philine, is its empress," I continued. "You can't just use cold logic for everything, Dorothea."

Dorothea considered this. "You have a point. Forgive me, Philine."

"Mother... Thank you, Rae." Philine seemed a bit moved.

All I had done was point out the obvious, though.

"It seems we're settled, then," Manaria said. "I'm not fully on board with the plan myself, but I'll put my faith in you two. You better not die, you hear?"

Claire and I bowed deeply to Manaria.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Claire said.

"No matter the cost, I swear I'll at least bring Miss Claire back."

Our strategy meetings continued for several days, running long into the night every time, until only three days remained before our battle at the fifth stronghold.

"General! Demonic forces have been spotted on the highway!"

"So, they've come. Thank you, you may leave." General Sascha received the report with a solemn nod. This was the man who'd previously been in command at the third stronghold. He was a handsome, middle-aged fellow with a full beard, and his large, burly body was clad in magically imbued armor. "It's time. Miss Claire, Miss Rae, are you prepared?"

"Yes. Please leave it to us," Claire replied.

"We'll lure them over one way or another," I said.

The demon army was positioned right before the detour point that had been covered in the strategy meeting. We would be in a difficult position if they continued north, so it was up to us to steer them toward the fifth stronghold.

"General, please have your forces retreat once you've confirmed the demons have moved," Claire said.

"Understood."

Inferno would wipe out everything in range—not just the demon army, but the stronghold and any people left in its vicinity as well. It could be activated remotely, so there was no need to have any soldiers stay within the stronghold. If things went well and we lured the demon army to it, the plan was to have Sascha and his soldiers clear the area.

“Shall we be off, then, Rae?”

“Let’s.”

We were already prepared, so all that remained was to meet up with the soldiers on-site. There was some distance to cover, so we were relying on an imperial mage who could use the wind spell Teleport to transport us there. Manaria had used the spell against me before in a fight, but there actually weren’t that many people who could use it. The fact that many rare talents like this mage had gathered for this battle just went to show how serious the empire was.

“I bid you good fortune.”

“Fortune to you as well, General,” Claire replied.

When we arrived, the imperial and demon armies were locked in a standoff. Combat had yet to ignite, but the air was so tense, it felt like hostilities could erupt at any moment.

“We’ve been expecting you, Miss Claire. My name is Dennis, and I have command of the front line.”

“A pleasure. This is my partner, Rae. What’s the situation?”

“The demon army arrived some hours ago. They’ve taken up position at the highway’s fork and are maintaining a standoff with our forces.”

“What’s the enemy’s strength?”

“From what we can tell, they number in the tens of thousands. Our own forces only number three thousand, so we expect to be able to hold them off for a few hours at best, if it comes down to it.”

“And their commander?”

“We’ve spotted Aristo of the Three Great Archdemons. We believe he’s the commander of their vanguard.”

“Perfect. He knows what I look like.”

“Please be wary of snipers, Miss Claire,” I said.

“Of course. I’m counting on you to protect me, Rae.”

We gripped each other’s hands.

“I’ve assigned five hundred soldiers to you,” Dennis said. “They’re all capable of acting independently, so there’s no need to worry about commanding them. Feel free to move as you see fit.”

“Thank you.”

“Can you ride on horseback?” he asked.

“I can.”

Claire had learned to ride from a young age, and I could do so too thanks to the horse riding lessons we’d both in Bauer and in the empire. Mind you, the difference in our skill was night and day.

“I bid you both good fortune,” he said as we left the encampment.

“Miss Claire, are you nervous?” I asked.

“Certainly. I’ve fought a number of one-on-one battles before, but this will be my first time experiencing a battle between armies.”

“I see. Let’s just focus on what we have to do: Show ourselves to the demons, provoke them, and flee.”

“Right.”

Before we knew it, we had ridden close enough to clearly make out the demon army. At the fore, we could make out short-statured goblins. Behind them stood slightly taller orcs with boar-like heads, and further back, the humongous ogres.

These monsters were all categorized as demi-human for convenience’s sake, but they weren’t related to humans at all. Like water slimes, they each had a core, which would

instantly dissipate them if destroyed. There was a chance some of them had intelligence, like Ralaire, but obviously, we didn't have time to go around trying to tame them one by one in the middle of a war, especially not with their numbers.

"Let's see... They seem to have noticed us, but this isn't quite the reaction we were hoping for," Claire said.

"No, it's not."

The monsters seemed wary of us, which was only natural, as we were a brigade-sized unit charging forward from the front line. But they showed no signs of engaging us.

"What should we do, Miss Claire?"

"It's simple, really. I'll just let them know I'm here." She moved her horse forward a slight bit and called in a clarion voice, "I am Claire François! Former aristocrat of Bauer and the leader of this unit! Come challenge me if you dare!"

The monsters' attitudes did a complete one-eighty. A bellow much like a Hateful Cry resounded, and they charged forward in a wild wave, breaking rank without thought or care.

"Miss Claire, get back!"

"No time! Quick, cast a pitfall before us, Rae!"

Following her orders, I cast my earth spell Pitfall in a wide area in front of us. The monsters at the fore fell in one after another, pushed from behind by their still-charging allies.

"Flame!"

At the same time, Claire manifested countless flame arrows and rained them down on the monsters that had fallen inside my pitfall. The death cries of the monsters rang out.

"Incredible."

"So those are the heroes of the revolution. They're strong."

I heard words of admiration from our allies. It seemed even veterans of the imperial army considered Claire a cut above when it came to magic.

“Second wave incoming!”

The monsters used their fallen comrades as a bridge and charged forward, depending on the strength of their numbers. It was fair to say they seemed to have taken the bait.

“Miss Claire, this should be enough. Let’s retreat.”

“Right! But still, it’s a little strange...” she said, pulling the reins to turn around.

“What is?”

“I don’t see Aristo anywhere. I figure he’d show up by now.”

She had a point. If Aristo was supposed to be commanding these enemy soldiers, it was odd that he hadn’t shown his face. Of course, it was normal for a commander to be situated further back, but this specific demon had proved himself bold enough to sneak into the empire and attack on his own. It was definitely weird that he hadn’t shown up directly after Claire identified herself.

“There’s no point in thinking about it now,” I said.

“You’re right.”

“But knowing him, he might try to attack you while we’re retreating. Don’t let your guard down.”

“Ha ha, you needn’t remind me.” Claire put on a daring smile as she rode forward. She was the very definition of cool.

“Miss Claire?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been charmed by you yet again.”

“Wh-what are you saying? And now, of all times! We’re in the middle of a war!”

“I know, but I felt I had to say it anyway.”

“Jeez.” She sulkily turned her head away. She was just the *cutest*, I tell you. She muttered, “I’ve been charmed as well.”

“Hm?” Her voice had been too quiet to reach my ears. “What was that, Miss Claire?”

“Nothing at all! Focus, we’re about to rejoin the vanguard!”

“Okaaay.”

While we’d used Teleport to send us out, our return trip was to be done entirely by horse to eliminate any risk of the demon army losing sight of Claire and subsequently changing course.

The long distance was making Claire’s rump grow sore, even with all her horse-riding experience. Maybe her skills had become rusty after spending time as a commoner?

And how was I holding up, you ask? Don’t even wonder.

I cast healing magic on Claire and myself as we rode to the fifth stronghold. There, we were greeted by Sascha.

“I heard. It was a resounding success.” Like most military men, Sascha wasn’t especially expressive. Even so, as he commended us, his narrow eyes narrowed even further into a slight smile.

“It’s all thanks to the soldiers you lent us,” Claire replied. “They protected us the entire way back.”

“Such is only to be expected from them. Her Imperial Majesty Dorothea... pardon me. Her Imperial Majesty *Philine* entrusted you to us. No matter what, we won’t let harm come your way.”

“You have our thanks.”

“The enemy is continuing to the stronghold as planned, so we shall begin drawing our forces back,” he went on. “You can go ahead and return to the capital, I’ll send for

someone who can use Teleport. You've done well."

"General... would it be all right to make use of your soldiers for a while longer?" Claire asked.

Sascha gave her a quizzical look. "It poses no issue, but why?"

"I just have a bad feeling. I can't really explain it, as it's not based on anything concrete, however..."

"Hm..." The general stroked his chin and thought for a moment. "There are times in war when hunches like yours prove critical. What's more, I see nothing but upsides to having the heroes of the revolution join our forces. I'll allow it."

"Thank you very much."

The general and Claire shook hands.

"I'm sorry for deciding this without your input, Rae," she said.

"I don't mind. A 'feeling' was it?"

"Yes. I don't know if it's the fact that Aristo hasn't appeared or the fact that the monsters were so easily drawn in, but something doesn't feel right."

In other words, Claire felt things were going *too* well.

"Hmm... Aren't things just going according to plan?" I asked.

"Perhaps, but we have nothing to lose by being extra careful." She gave me a light smile.

Just like that, it was decided that we would join the ensuing retreat of the fifth stronghold. That said, there really wasn't much we could do to help. Claire and I were both skilled mages, but we didn't know the first thing about group combat or war tactics, much less how to fight a battle while retreating. So instead, we decided to wait on standby for Sascha's orders and act as needed.

The preparations for retreat had been completed beforehand, so it took no time at all for us to vacate the stronghold. Claire and I were with Sascha in the central file of the retreating army on the path back to the capital.

“The demon army has entered the fifth fortress!” reported a soldier who could use farsight magic.

It was finally time.

“Good! Once every last one of them is within range, give me the signal and I’ll activate Inferno!” Sascha ordered, continuing the march all the while.

Time passed at a crawl.

After some minutes, the same soldier yelled, “The last line of the demon army has entered Inferno’s range!”

“All right, I’m activating Inferno!” Sascha concentrated magic into the magical tool in his palm. The magical tool was the activation key for Inferno and had an authentication system that allowed only certain people to use it. “Hm?”

Several moments passed. But nothing happened.

“Wh-what’s the meaning of this?!”

Philine had explained Inferno to us beforehand. It was a magical tool that agitated the fire and earth essence in certain leylines, inducing an artificial eruption. If it activated, we’d *definitely* have noticed by now.

“Lookout, status report!” Sascha barked.

“I-Inferno has not activated!” the soldier practically screamed.

“I-I’ll try it again!” Sascha concentrated his magic into the magical tool once more. The activation key he held appeared to be working, and yet no eruption followed.

“Mmm... I never grow tired of seeing the moment humans fall to despair,” a voice cooed from above.

“Aristo,” Claire said with disdain.

“Why, hello there, Claire François. Please, enlighten me. How does it feel to have your last hope extinguished before your eyes?” Aristo asked in a cheerful tone, his bat-like wings extending out from his frock coat.

"So this was your doing?" Claire asked.

"That it was." With that, Aristo threw something bulky at us.

Thinking it was an attack, I braced myself, but it was something else entirely.

"Y-Your Highness!" Sascha cried.

What Aristo had thrown at us was a corpse with a single large stab wound through its chest. Given Sascha's reaction, I could surmise that it belonged to one of the imperial princes who had been residing outside the empire.

"Oh, humans are unseemly things... Truly, truly, unseemly," Aristo said.

"You fiend! What did you do to His Highness?!" Sascha drew his sword and leapt with incredible strength, slashing at Aristo overhead.

Aristo's nails grew into claws to meet Sascha's sword. "Hardly anything at all. We simply had him tell us about the activation key for Inferno."

"Nonsense! His Highness would never be deceived by the likes of you!" Sascha denied Aristo's claims as he leapt and struck a second, then a third time.

"Normally, perhaps. But we have someone who's an *expert* at finding the gaps in human minds."

Claire gasped. "Salas!"

"How astute, Claire François," Aristo said. "Our spies told us that your empire had a secret weapon a long time ago; I've personally crossed the border a number of times in search of it. But we never could find it. That was when we happened across a human who appeared likely to know more."

That must have been the imperial prince.

"He was quite stubborn about that secret. Not even Salas Lilium's hypnotic suggestions yielded much effect. That was, until a certain surprise made his guard drop just the other day."

"His Highness would never give in to you!" Sascha yelled as he unleashed a flurry of

blows. But Aristo parried them all with ease.

"Oh, but he did," Aristo said. "After he heard of what had happened to the throne."

"Ah," I gasped. All of a sudden, everything made sense.

"Never in a million years did we think Dorothea would abdicate so easily—nor did the boy. And to Philine Nur of all people! The poor boy's heart was rent open by disappointment."

"Nonsense!" Sascha yelled.

Aristo laughed low in his throat. "Oh, not at all. With his mind weakened, he finally succumbed to Salas Lilium's abilities. Thanks to that, we were able to change the activation key of Inferno."

I knew it. I'd seen it coming a mile away. This was all because Dorothea hadn't laid the proper groundwork before abdicating the throne. As an individual, she was perhaps as gifted as they came, but she lacked the ability to understand the finer subtleties of human beings. Perhaps it was her very strength that had left her unable to comprehend the weaknesses that lay in the hearts of those around her.

"But you humans really are strange things," Aristo mused. "That boy did spit out the activation key, but when pressed for more information, he plunged himself onto my nails. I suppose the mind control wasn't wholly complete."

I disagreed. Perhaps it wasn't so much that the mind control had been incomplete but that the prince's will had simply been stronger. This was nothing more than guesswork, but I believed that in the imperial prince's last moments, he had chosen to resist being the demon's puppet. They had found the weakness in his heart, but the strength of that same heart had ultimately triumphed.

Aristo looked as though he didn't care about the truth in the slightest, and he slowly descended to the earth. Facing us, he declared, "Your secret trump card has been rendered moot. All that remains is your crushing defeat."

"All units, advance."

Aristo's command was followed by an ear-piercing roar heard all the way from where the monsters were about to break through the fifth stronghold.

"Miss Claire, Miss Rae!" Sascha yelled after managing to put some distance between himself and Aristo.

"We can assist!" Claire said.

"No, leave this battle to us! You must return to the capital!"

"Why?! We can fight!"

Not only was the difference in numbers between the demon army and the frontline troops too great, but engagements during a retreat almost always favored the pursuers. As things stood, Sascha's forces would be crushed.

"Our forces are already doomed, and at this rate, so is the capital," he said. "You must go convince Her Imperial Majesty Philine to evacuate the city."

"That can't be..." Claire murmured. Even I understood the significance of such an action. "But isn't the capital protected by a barrier?"

"That only works on demons. It will do nothing against the lower-ranked monsters."

The majority of the demon forces were just such fiends. The capital would be helpless against their numbers.

"This is a battle against time," he continued. "If we do nothing, tens of thousands of citizens will be killed. We need to evacuate as many as we can."

Claire bit her lip in frustration.

"I'll send a number of soldiers who can use Teleport with you," he said. "If you chain Teleports together, you should be able to reach the capital far faster than any horse could take you, and we won't have to worry about you being attacked and killed along the way either. The two of you are our best bet."

"But what about all of you?" Claire asked.

Sascha smiled. His eyes shone with resolve. "It is the duty of an imperial soldier to

protect the lives of the empire's citizens. After causing nothing but harm to the citizens of other countries, we can finally fulfill our purpose. Please allow us to carry out our duty."

Claire was at a loss for words. She probably knew nothing she could say would sway Sascha's mind.

I moved in front of her and put my hands on her shoulders. "Let's go, Miss Claire," I said as I stared into her eyes. "If we stay here, everything will be for naught."

She paused for a short but no doubt deeply anguish moment, then said, "General, while our time together was short, it was an honor to fight alongside you."

"The honor is all mine," he replied.

"I will never forget your bravery and sacrifice, nor that of your soldiers."

"Thank you, hero of the revolution. Now be off!"

With his urging, Claire and I left.

"Not so fast, Claire François." Aristo gave chase, knocking aside the soldiers standing in his way.

But his path was blocked by Sascha. "I don't think so. You're not getting through me."

"You've already lost. What point is there in continuing to struggle?"

"You're right. As a general, this defeat is mine, and it is utter."

"Then move out of my way."

"That, I cannot do." As Sascha spoke, an intense magical force began to rise from his body. "We may have lost this battle, but humanity will *not* lose the war"

"Mmm... This should prove amusing."

I looked back at Sascha one last time and beheld a warrior fighting for the fate of humanity.

When we delivered news of our failure to the temporary alliance, we caused quite a stir.

"They've put us in a real bind," Manaria said. Her tone was as light as ever, but her eyes couldn't conceal her worry.

"The fault lies with me. Forgive me." The ever-arrogant Dorothea surprised us with an apology. She understood that if she had paid closer attention to her children's needs, this would never have happened. But we didn't have time to point fingers.

"More importantly, we need to consider evacuating the capital. Is it possible?" I asked. Capitals were the heart of a country. It'd be one thing if it were just some provincial city or town, but the decision to abandon a capital wasn't made lightly.

"As the empire borders demon territory, we do have a contingency plan for evacuation," said Philine. "We even periodically hold emergency drills to practice in case of the event."

"But an actual complete evacuation of the capital will be chaos," Dorothea said. "Many citizens are attached to this land. Some would rather die as martyrs defending it than leave, particularly among the elderly."

In other words, getting absolutely everyone out was infeasible.

"Well, we don't exactly have time to convince everyone," William said. "Guess we'll just have to evacuate those willing to live."

"They'll need someplace to go," said Thane. "We may be enemies, but they can stay in Bauer."

"No, Your Majesty," Dole said. "The distance between Nur and Bauer is too great. It will be best to split them among the other cities of the empire."

"Before we even think about that, we need to worry about how to tell the citizens," said Claire. "If we handle the announcement poorly, panic may well ensue."

She was right. Ruhm was a big city and had a large population. If we were to evacuate, we needed the citizens to remain calm throughout the process.

"Allow me to address the people," Dorothea said. "The current empress may be Philine, but I fear this is too much of a burden for her to bear."

She'd said something sensible for once. Perhaps this was her own way of taking responsibility for the failure of Inferno and the death of one of the imperial princes. But...

"No, I'll do it," said Philine, her expression brimming with determined confidence. "I'll give the address."

The capital had a broadcast system for emergencies that made use of the wind magic spell Telepathy. It was rarely ever used outside of the yearly evacuation drills, so upon hearing the sound of its starting jingle, all the citizens of the capital perked up immediately.

"My dear citizens, this is your empress, Philine Nur, speaking. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill."

Philine's voice resonated with a calm gravity. It wasn't an overwhelming voice, like Dorothea's, but one that made you sit upright in your chair and pay attention.

"At present, demonic forces are advancing toward the capital from the east. The brave soldiers of the imperial army are doing their best to fight them, but there is no guarantee they will successfully repel the enemy."

By this point, the citizens knew exactly what this broadcast was about.

"We of the imperial family have made the decision to evacuate the capital in the interest of preserving the lives of its people."

All around the city, people began to stir. Evacuate? Really? Was this actually happening?

"Know that this is not a permanent evacuation. The scattered forces across the empire have been summoned to converge on the capital. Once they successfully repel the demons, the citizens will be able to return."

A small measure of calm returned to the people, but many were still reluctant to leave.

"I repeat, this is not a permanent evacuation. But it is imperative that all citizens leave to allow our soldiers to focus on fighting the demons. To evacuate is not to flee but to

support us in repelling the enemy."

Philine cleverly appealed to the hearts of the people by framing evacuation as a noble action that supported the nation's ultimate cause.

"The empire has been at war with the demons for years, but never have we allowed their forces to breach this far beyond our border. We've placed a burden on all your shoulders. Forgive me."

Philine did what Empress Dorothea had never been able to do—she apologized. This moved the hearts of the people, for unlike Dorothea, who had been able to solve all their problems by herself, this empress needed *their* strength to persevere.

"But do not fear. The empire will emerge victorious, and neither will I allow any harm to come to my citizens. Things may be difficult for some time to come, but in a few months, everyone will be able to return to their everyday lives. I swear this on my honor as empress."

Philine's declaration sent a wave of relief washing over the citizens. They trusted her. While Dorothea had been a ruler who reigned from above, Philine was a ruler who stood among her people.



"For far too long, the empire has lived in fear of the demons. It is time to put an end to this menace once and for all. Citizens, please lend the imperial family your strength. Help us finish the demons for good."

The people waited with bated breath for the closing words of the broadcast.

"I, Empress Philine Nur, hereby declare the beginning of our war to eradicate demon-kind."

“Our war to eradicate demon-kind’...Well said, Philine.”

We were in a conference room in the imperial castle. Important personnel from every country in our temporary alliance were hard at work on one thing or another.

Philine met my praise with an embarrassed look. “I just figured everyone would panic if I said they were fleeing because it’s too dangerous. Making it sound like it was to help defeat the demons ought to make them more willing as well as lend some calm.”

I had to agree. “Running away from danger” and “clearing the way for war” felt vastly different. It was hard to believe this was all coming from the same girl who hadn’t even been able to muster the willpower to make Hilda stop and listen not too long ago. It just went to show that people could be full of surprises.

“I actually had help, though. Hilda drafted the speech with me.” Philine stuck her tongue out bashfully, having revealed the secret to her little trick. She looked a bit guilty about it, but I truthfully didn’t think any less of her.

“Even so, it was a wonderful delivery,” I said. “You commanded a presence that rivaled even Dorothea.”

“How strange... I usually hate being compared to Mother, but right now, I don’t mind it at all.”

I had an idea why: Philine had gained confidence. Being exiled from the empire had been a significant mental setback for her, but she’d overcome it, defeated Dorothea, and had now buoyed her citizens’ spirits. Her shy, introverted self was a thing of the past.

"The real challenge begins here, my lady," said Hilda, who was waiting at Philine's side.

"I understand. We need to proceed quickly with our evacuation plan and do something about the approaching army."

"About that last one," Dorothea cut in. "I'll lead the rearguard of our retreat."

The rearguard of a retreat would inevitably suffer the highest death rate.

"I can't allow that!" Philine said.

"Abandon your feelings, Philine. This is what's best. Who else but I could hold the rear?"

Certainly there weren't many who could match Dorothea in terms of fighting prowess. If we counted magic users, then Manaria was about equal with her, but I knew no one else even came close. She was the ideal person to hold the rear, just as she said.

"But you do understand that if you were to die, the consequences would be dire?" Claire said. Dorothea was one of humanity's greatest weapons. Losing her this early on in our battle against the demons would be a harsh blow. But the problem went even further than that.

"Dorothea," I said, "you are aware that if you die, the morale of the imperial army will plummet?" Even though she had abdicated the throne, she remained an emotional pillar for the empire. Philine had grown greatly as a person, but Dorothea still commanded a presence in the country.

"Of course I'm aware. I have no intention of dying. But a battle cannot be won without the guts to challenge death itself," she said.

I could tell nothing would sway her.

"Very well," said Philine after a pause. "We'll leave the rearguard to you, Mother."

"Good."

"In exchange, promise me one thing."

"What?"

Philine took Dorothea's hand in both of her own. "Please, promise me you'll return alive. No—as empress, I command you to return alive."

"Hah. How bold of you. Very well, I promise."

And so the retreat from the capital began.

"You didn't have to force yourselves to tag along, Rae Taylor, Claire François!" Dorothea yelled as she sliced an ogre in two.

"Don't misunderstand! We're not here to help you or anything!" Claire fired off a number of fire spears and burnt a group of orcs to a crisp.

"Yeah! Not everything's about you, Dorothea!" I yelled as I froze the area around her.

"Heh. Fine, let's go with that." She grinned as she annihilated two more ogres. The way she cleanly bisected the orc's large bodies was insane, reminding me that her sword skills were truly inhuman.

Dorothea, Claire, and I were fighting at the point where humanity's army and the demon army met. Dorothea had ultimately refused to budge from the rearguard, but Claire and I had offered to lighten her load.

The empire was still in mid-evacuation at this point. We didn't see what we know-nothings could do to help with the evacuation, so we'd come here to help fight instead. But there were far more monsters than we'd anticipated.

"Miss Claire, take this!"

"Thank you, Rae!"

I tossed Claire a potion, which she quickly caught and drank dry. Unlike Dorothea, who could fight with her swords until her stamina gave out, Claire and I were limited by our magic reserves. We had brought quite a few potions with us, but we were going through them fast, already down to a fourth of our stores. It was about time we considered retreat, but...

"Mmm... I believe you humans call this 'not knowing when to give up'?"

A frock coat-wearing demon with bat-like wings appeared.

“Aristo!”

“Why, hello there, Claire François. Are you going to flee with your tail between your legs again, coward?” he sneered.

“What was that?” Claire seethed.

“Don’t, Miss Claire,” I said. “You can’t fall for his cheap provocations.”

“You’re right.”

Under normal circumstances, Claire would have laughed off such an obvious attempt to goad her, and perhaps would even have fired back a few scathing remarks of her own. But right now, she was too exhausted even for that. The situation boded poorly for us.

“You might have escaped me yesterday, but you will not escape me tod—oh?”

Something large flew toward Aristo mid-speech. It was an ogre corpse, which he dodged with ease. The one who threw it was, of course, Dorothea.

“So you’re the demon who killed Dietfried?” she said. She swung her black swords to flick blood off of them and began to slowly pace toward Aristo. A few monsters attacked her as she walked, but she chopped them to pieces without slowing down.

“Dietfried... I cannot say I recall the name. But then again, I can’t remember many human names,” Aristo answered placidly.

“Is that so? Then die.” As soon as the words left her mouth, Dorothea vanished.

“Oh, how dangerous,” Aristo said idly.

In the next instant, Dorothea reappeared behind him. Without turning around, he used his nails to block her sword strike.

“I heard about you from Socrat,” he said. “He told me there was a human far stronger than any human should ever be. I assume that’d be you, Dorothea Nur?”

"Well deduced. Indeed, I am the one and only Dorothea. But a foul demon like you has no right to utter my name." Dorothea's arms became a blur.

"Hm?!" Sensing danger, Aristo leaped away, but he lost balance midway and tumbled.

"With this, you can no longer flee," she declared.

Aristo's wings had been sliced off at their base.

"Leave this area to me and the rearguard. Go, Rae Taylor, Claire François."

"Dorothea..." Claire said with worry.

"Let's go, Miss Claire." I took Claire's hand and bolted. As I left, I heard Dorothea's wrathful voice.

"I was sure I had no motherly emotions in me, and yet now, I feel... fury. Don't imagine your death will be a painless one, demon."

INTERMISSION

FIERCE TO THE END

(DOROTHEA NUR)

I WAS YOUNG when I realized I was different from those around me. Not different in that I was part of the imperial family but different in that I was far superior in ability to everyone. Whether it was in matters academic or the physical, I was able to learn in moments what took others years. As such, I was expected to one day succeed the throne, and I came to believe I would as well.

I doubted many understood the boredom that came with being all-capable. I derived no pleasure from anything; every single thing I tried felt like a waste of time. Not even the total confidence I had in the fact that I would one day sit atop the throne stirred my heart. By the time I was old enough to comprehend my surroundings, I was already long weary of life. To others, such a problem might seem trivial, a shallow concern of the gifted—but that did not change the fact that for me, this world was full of nothing but boredom.

That is, until I happened upon the Demon Queen.

I watched as my retainers died one after another. They, people I had always seen as far weaker than me, gave their lives to protect my own. I was helpless before her strength.

"I won't kill you. Killing you would too greatly alter the course of history."

Without waiting for a response, the Demon Queen left. In her wake were countless corpses and one fool. That day, I learned fear, and I have spent the remainder of my life trying to stamp it out.

"W-wait! What do you want?! The throne will be yours if you just wai—"

I killed my father, the previous emperor. I was seven at the time. It seemed he intended to cede the throne to me once I was of age, but that would have been too late for my liking.

Faster. I need to be faster.

To defeat the Demon Queen, I need to mold the empire into a superpower. No, that won't be enough. What if I unified all of humanity? Would we stand a chance then?

From then on, I worked toward expanding my empire. I invaded other countries left and right, forcibly unifying the world. Perhaps my methods were wrong. It didn't matter what greater cause my aggression served, nothing could justify it. I knew I wasn't in the right.

But I did what I had to.

"Your Imperial Majesty, I implore you: Please try to understand the suffering of others. As things stand, no one will be able to comprehend your actions."

My manservant would often lecture me with these words, but I had no need to understand such things. The only thing I needed was power. Without power, one could do nothing. So I made power my everything.

Before I knew it, I was alone.

"Aren't you starting to get tired? I doubt even you can best fatigue."

The demon named Aristo mocked me in a singsong voice. I wanted to shut his foolish mouth for good.

"Still, I must say," he continued, "you may be an enemy, but I'm impressed. To think you'd still be standing after fighting this many."

I looked around myself and saw the countless bodies of monsters and demons strewn about. I couldn't remember how many I had cut down, and I couldn't count how many still stood.

"Why not give up? No matter how strong you might be, you cannot fight these numbers alone."

"Perhaps," I replied.

I was the only human left standing. The soldiers of the rearguard had gone to the next world ahead of me. I didn't think I could cut down all the remaining enemies myself. But I still had some fight left in me.

"Goodness... You leave me no choice. I'll be your opponent myself. Consider it an honor."

"Ha. You drain me with your minions and still have the nerve to speak of honor? Laughable."

I readied my swords. Nicks lined their edges here and there, but they'd made it this far without breaking. And they only needed to make it a little farther yet.

"Hah!" I took a sharp exhale and closed the distance between me and the demon. I was agonizingly slow. To think this was the movement of the one who proclaimed herself to be the Sword God. Pathetic. I hadn't been this tired even after fighting a whole brigade of Sousse.

I prayed we had at least bought enough time for the evacuation.

"So you choose to attack me head-on. You must be more exhausted than I thought. This is the end, Sword God."

On its current trajectory, my blade would meet the demon's nails. He would parry me and then lop off my head before I could get in another blow. However...

"What?!" the demon exclaimed. To his eyes, it must have seemed as though I'd disappeared. At a speed that should have been impossible with my remaining stamina, I had swept in behind him. This was thanks to the last ace up my sleeve—my Living Armor.

The pitch-black armor I wore was a type of living magical tool. It was also the only magical tool I could make use of, a treasure excavated from an ancient ruin that had been passed down in the imperial family for generations. True to its name, it had a will of its own and acted autonomously to protect its wearer.

"Your arrogance was your downfall, demon." With every last ounce of my strength, I swung my blade down.

"Arrogance? No. This is the composure of a victor, human."

My final strike dug not into the demon but something else entirely.

"How underhan... No, I suppose not," I said.

"Indeed. All is fair on the battlefield."

A lone ogre had thrown itself before the demon. My blade had sunk halfway into the ogre's horn before snapping.

"You were strong, human. Farewell."

The demon thrust his nails through the right side of my chest. Without even needing to consciously register it, my body understood: This was a lethal blow. "Nh..."

"What's that? If you have any last words, I'll hear them out. I'll even deliver them directly to that daughter of yours," the demon taunted.

"I'm..."

"Hm? I can't hear you, speak up."

The demon brought his head close to listen. With the last of my fading strength, I latched on to him.

"I'm taking you with me, demon."

"What?!"

Black flames engulfed my armor, setting the demon and myself ablaze.

"Aughhh!"

"These are the flames of an ancient civilization. Make sure you relish them. They'll be the last thing you ever feel."

These black flames were set to manifest upon the armor-wearer's death and were said to be hot enough to melt even the adamantite forged by the Spirit God's own hands. They licked the demon's body as though alive, consuming him.

"Huuuumaaaan!" he seethed.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha ha!”

I might not have been able to keep my promise to Philine, but this didn’t feel all too bad. As strange as it was, I was at peace.

Forgive me, Philine. Show me that you can overcome my death.

Ha. To think the last thought I’m to have after this life of solitude is of the daughter I failed to love.

I continued to laugh as the last of my consciousness slipped away.

I’m coming to join you, Dietfried.

“Please move in an orderly fashion without hurrying or running!” Philine called.

We returned to the capital and found everyone in the last stages of evacuation. Perhaps thanks to Philine’s speech, the citizens were relatively calm, and things were proceeding smoothly.

“Philine,” Claire said.

“Oh, Claire, Rae. Welcome back. Where’s Mother?”

“Still handling the rearguard,” Claire said. “By the looks of things, she’ll be a while. But I’m sure she’ll be okay. This is Dorothea we’re talking about, after all.”

“Yeah. She’ll be okay. She promised.” Philine smiled like she hadn’t a worry in the world. Perhaps some of that smile came from her trust in Dorothea, but most of it was probably a front so as not to worry the evacuating citizens around us.

“To think the empress would come help personally. How wonderful,” a citizen said.

“Truly,” another replied. “If Empress Dowager Dorothea was the brains of the empire, then Her Imperial Majesty Philine is its heart.”

That was a good way to put it. The empire under Dorothea’s reign had been a top-down system with her controlling practically everything from her seat at its apex.

Now, however, the empire was unified, with Philine at its center. Calling her the heart was pretty apt.

"Claire, Rae, can you go ahead and give the front of the line some extra security?" she asked. "We're short on people over there."

"Will the rear be okay?" Claire asked.

"I believe so. According to the reports, the pursuing forces have really started to let up. I'm not sure why..."

We didn't know it yet, but at that moment, Dorothea and the rearguard soldiers she led were giving their lives to slay thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of enemies. Among those enemies was one of the Three Great Archdemons, Aristo.

Dorothea Nur, sixteenth ruler of the Nur Empire, would be remembered forever as a hero in the annals of not just imperial history but that of the entire world.

"Understood," Claire replied. "We'll be off, then. Stay safe, Philine."

"I will!"

We parted with Philine, racing our horses forward to the head of the evacuation line.

"Welcome back, Rae, Claire."

"Welcome..."

Supervising the head of the line was Hilda and Adelina. As a reminder, Adelina was both Otto's older sister and the soldier who had almost gone and attempted a coup d'état. She still hadn't risen to the top ranks of the army like we discussed, but her competency had been noticed, so she'd been assigned to the head of the line to lead protection efforts. She still seemed somewhat ambivalent toward us, as evinced by her stiff greeting.

The line was heading westward for now. The plan was to ultimately stop by the different surrounding cities, but first, we wanted to meet up with the reinforcements coming from Bauer.

"It seems the evacuation is going well, Hilda," Claire said.

"Thanks to the efforts of you and many others. But there's still a ways to go until we reach the provisional capital, our first destination. We can't let our guard down yet."

A provisional capital referred to a city that temporarily functioned as the country's capital. The current provisional capital was also one of the cities to which the line of evacuees was headed. Of course, not all the evacuees could fit in one city, so we would prioritize finding shelter for people who needed a place quickly, like the ill and infirm. The plan was to have the line stop by different cities one by one, gradually dropping off its people.

"Have any monsters or demons attacked?" Claire asked.

"Nothing worth noting so far. A number of wild monsters along the highway have engaged us, but not many. In fact, well..." Hilda seemed worried.

"Is something amiss?" Claire asked.

"We've seen far fewer wild monsters than we usually would at this time of year. It's strange."

"Perhaps it's because we cleared many of them out for the pope's visit?"

"Even considering that, it's odd. I can't help but feel like we're walking into a trap."

No sooner had Hilda said that did it prove true.

"Ha ha! So there's a sharp one among ya!" A grating yet familiar voice rang out from above us. I looked up and saw a winged figure.

"Platos!" Claire yelled.

"I'm honored you remember me, Claire François. Not that it'll matter in a while."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're going to die, idiot." Platos slowly descended down to the earth.

"You sure run your mouth, but you don't seem to realize the situation you've put yourself in," Claire said.

"Yeah? And what situation is that?"

"All of humanity's forces are gathered here. No matter how strong you think you might be, it was a foolish move to come alone."

"Ha! You seem to have forgotten that time I half destroyed you and those soldiers all by myself." Platos cracked his neck and warmed up the wrist of his right hand, which held a club, by spinning it in a circle. "But I guess you're kinda right. Fighting you, Rae Taylor, Manaria Sousse, and the Saint all at once might be a bit tough for me."

"Then turn back. I'll allow you to flee just this once, as we have our hands full enough here."

"Ha ha ha! What a joke! I'd be killed if I turned back here, y'know."

"Huh...? By who?"

"Normally, the likes of you humans wouldn't even be allowed to lay eyes on her. But now? Know you stand before our queen."

At first, she appeared with neither form nor shadow.

No sooner had Platos dropped to a knee than a darkness began to gather beside him. Magic users were often accompanied by various kinds of light when they called on their craft, but this darkness was a first. It felt as though it held substance and that it actually filled the expanse before us, eerily so, as though a space in the shape of a globe had been carved out of the world itself.

Gradually, the darkness took human shape. Unlike Platos, with his huge frame, this person's stature was average. But as more of their body took form, the people around us started to drop to a knee, one after another.

The words "overwhelming malice" are too feeble to describe what I felt. She was nothingness. Void. The opposite of what defined humanity. A disavowal of what life was—a thing that couldn't exist. All that and more. At last, she appeared before the people.

"The Demon Queen has arrived. Despair, foolish humans. Then die."

As Platos words came to an end, her feet touched the earth.

She was far smaller than what I had imagined a Demon Queen would be, standing at about my height and just a bit taller than Claire. But the magic cloaking her body was incomparably dense. The mere sight of her in front of us, neither lifting a finger nor casting a spell, invoked more fear in my bones than when Claire fired her Magic Ray at me in full seriousness.

A black robe shrouded her entire body. It was ornate, somehow reminding me of the pope's vestments, and seemed hard to move in. But there was no doubt in my mind that they posed little problem to the Demon Queen.

Her face was covered by a veil, leaving her appearance a mystery; but her gaze caused a number of the evacuees to faint on the spot as she looked around. It seemed that only those with strong magic could withstand her attention.

She casually raised her right hand. Expecting an attack, I braced myself. A thunderous cacophony ensued.

"My word..." Claire absently murmured.

I followed her gaze to see that, in the direction of the Demon Queen's hand, was *nothing*.

"You're joking, right?" My lips moved, but the words didn't register to my ears as my own.

To the right of the Demon Queen, there lay earth, greenery, hills, and a mountain, visible in the distance, and in a clear line from us to that mountain a chunk was missing, as though an enormous cylinder had bored clean through it all.

"How are we supposed to defeat that?" Claire breathed.

I could tell she had already lost all hope, for I had too.

The Three Great Archdemons were strong, yes, but they were within the realm of comprehension. This... *thing* was different. I finally understood what Dorothea had meant when she said the Demon Queen wasn't something a human could hope to defeat.

"It's time to finish this," the Demon Queen quietly announced in an odd voice, which was both old and young.

Most of us humans had already submitted, having dropped to one knee.

“Stand! This isn’t the end!”

From amidst the despairing souls, a single voice of defiance rang clear.

“Only a fool would roll over and accept death! If you’re to die, die fighting!”

It was Claire. While everyone else was on one knee, she alone stood proud with her arms crossed.

There she is. There’s the Miss Claire I know and love.

“You too, Rae! Pull yourself together! Where’s your usual arrogance?!” Claire slapped my back hard.

Ow. But even pain was a reward when it came from her.

“Forgive me, Miss Claire. I’m all right now,” I said.

“Good.” She smiled, satisfied. I could always count on her to cheer me up when I lost heart.

“Heh, so you’re still able to put up a brave front. Not bad.” Not even Platos could hide his genuine surprise. The Demon Queen was just that grand a will to defy.

“Thank you, Claire. I’ll fight to the end as well.”

“Sister!” Claire exclaimed.

“Count me in too. We have to at least try.”

“I’ll fight with you, Lady Yu.”

Manaria, Yu, and Misha joined us. They had originally been stationed elsewhere along the line, but they had run to the front upon noticing something was off.

“You guys just keep swarming like flies. Well, whatever. I’ll take ca—”

"Platos." The one who interrupted Platos was none other than the Demon Queen herself. "You needn't interfere. I'll handle this myself."

"But... that's Claire François. Are you—"

"I'll call upon you to finish things. But let me break their spirits first." As she said that, she slowly began to walk toward us. "Come. Fight me, if you dare." She beckoned us forward, her voice unnatural—yet the way she spoke held a tinge of humanity.

"Let's fight, everyone!" Claire said. "If we defeat the Demon Queen, the war between humanity and the demons will come to an end!"

"I'll back you up as best I can, Miss Claire!" I cheered.

"Don't count me out!" Manaria cried.

"Let's do this, Misha!" Yu called.

"Yes!" Misha agreed.

Having overcome our despair, the battle began.

"Sister, Lady Yu, take the front!" Claire ordered.

"On it!"

"Leave it to me!"

We positioned ourselves with Manaria and Yu at the fore, Misha and I in the back, and Claire in between. On Claire's command, the vanguard closed the distance to the Demon Queen and attacked. Yu, known as the Princess of Ice, had impressive skills in the martial arts, but Manaria was even stronger.

"How's this for starters?!" Manaria created a cold, shimmering blade of ice and swung at the Demon Queen.

The Demon Queen didn't move an inch, but regardless, Manaria's blade shattered moments before impact. The intense magic energy shrouding the Demon Queen was acting as a thick barrier against all attacks.

"I'll take that, if you don't mind," Yu said as she collected the shattered fragments of Manaria's sword and made them rain down on the Demon Queen as though they were alive.

"I'm not done yet!" Manaria shouted.

Before Yu's attack made contact, she cast another spell, causing what looked to be a dragon's maw to form from the earth and clamp down on the Demon Queen.

"I didn't think this would be easy..." Manaria said.

"But who would have thought she'd be impervious to all that?" Yu finished.

The Demon Queen made no effort to block any of the attacks. She simply stood there and watched us struggle in vain.

"Any luck, Misha?" I asked.

"No, not even my sound magic works on her."

I had hoped her special wind magic might be able to get through the Demon Queen's barrier, but no dice.

"Sister, Lady Yu, please move aside!" Claire yelled.

The pair quickly cleared the way.

"Light!" Figuring fire arrows and flame spears would have no effect, so Claire came hot out of the gates with Magic Ray instead. Four brilliant red beams of light fired directly at the Demon Queen.

"Let's do this, Miss Claire!" Matching Claire's timing, I used my strongest spell as well: Absolute Zero, a spell that would normally instantly freeze and shatter the target.

But the Demon Queen still stood. What was more—

"She hasn't a single scratch on her..." Claire muttered under her breath.

Our strongest attacks hadn't even made the Demon Queen flinch. The whole time, she'd simply quietly watched us.

"Are you satisfied?" she said in a voice that somehow sounded both childlike and aged. Her tone wasn't one of mockery but pity as she asked whether we were ready to surrender.

"Not even close!" Claire said bravely. She whispered to Manaria, "Sister, can you do something about that barrier with Spellbreaker?"

"No can do. I tried analyzing it earlier, but I can't figure it out. I've never even seen such a complex magic structure before."

Manaria's signature skills, Spellbreaker and Dominator, were powerful, but they had difficult activation requirements. Victory was all but guaranteed if she managed to cast them, but first, she needed to analyze and completely understand her opponent's magic.

"Rae, let's try tandem casting," Claire suggested. "It's our only option left."

"Right." I nodded.

I moved forward to meet with Claire in the middle of our formation and started to reach for her hand.

"Rae, look out!" she yelled.

I immediately bent backward, then felt a sharp pain on the upper part of my right arm.
"Ow!"

"Rae!"

I put my hand up to signal away Claire from approaching, then looked at the Demon Queen. She had a finger pointed our way. I couldn't perceive how at all, but she had clearly attacked me.

But why? She hadn't moved at all up until now.

"I guess even the Demon Queen's afraid of our tandem casting?" I ventured.

She didn't reply. Instead, she pointed five whole fingers at me.

"Pitfall!" I hurriedly sank the ground beneath my feet and crouched.

The very next moment, a black line sped across where my body had been.

"What's the matter?" I taunted. "Am I imagining things, or do you have it out for me in particular?"

The Demon Queen remained silent, but I could have sworn I felt something resembling annoyance coming from her.

"Rae, I don't think it's wise to taunt her!" Claire scolded.

"It'll be fine, Miss Claire. Try to find an opening while she's busy with me."

This wasn't going to be fine at all, to be honest, but I played it cool regardless.

Facing the Demon Queen, I said, "It looks like you're finally done holding back! Let's fight for real now!"

Before I even finished speaking, I cast Judecca, freezing the ground around the Demon Queen and restricting her movement.

"Earth Spike!" I followed up with another spell, completing my combination technique Cocytus. In terms of power, it was weaker than Absolute Zero, but its wide area of effect made it harder to avoid. As for the results...

"Rae!"

I heard Claire yell. I thought it was strange how close her voice sounded, then felt myself being pushed. Time passed in slow motion as I watched Claire shove me out of the way and leap before a dozen or so black beams.

"Miss Claire!" I yelled, thrusting out my hand.

But I couldn't reach her.

Was this it? Was this the moment I lost her for real? As such thoughts raced through my mind, something strange happened.

"Uplift."

A swiftly cast spell raised Claire's body into the air, causing the black beams to miss

their mark and make dust out of a pillar of dirt instead. With the pillar destroyed, Claire fell, and I lunged forward to catch her.

"Are you okay, Miss Claire?!"

"Yes, but that was a close one. Leaving that aside, wasn't that spell just now..." her voice trailed off.

I'd noticed as well. The spell that lifted Claire in the air, Uplift, was a familiar one. I'd often used it myself in emergency situations like this. And, as I'd mentioned briefly before, this spell was one of my own making, created by altering another spell.

So why did the Demon Queen know it?

"I see. So that's how it is," Claire said. Now back on her feet, she turned to look at the Demon Queen and pointed at her. "I've been wondering for a while why the Three Great Archdemons were trying to kill me, and now I finally have an answer. It's because *you* can't kill me, can you?"

The Demon Queen didn't respond to Claire's question. But that silence was answer enough.

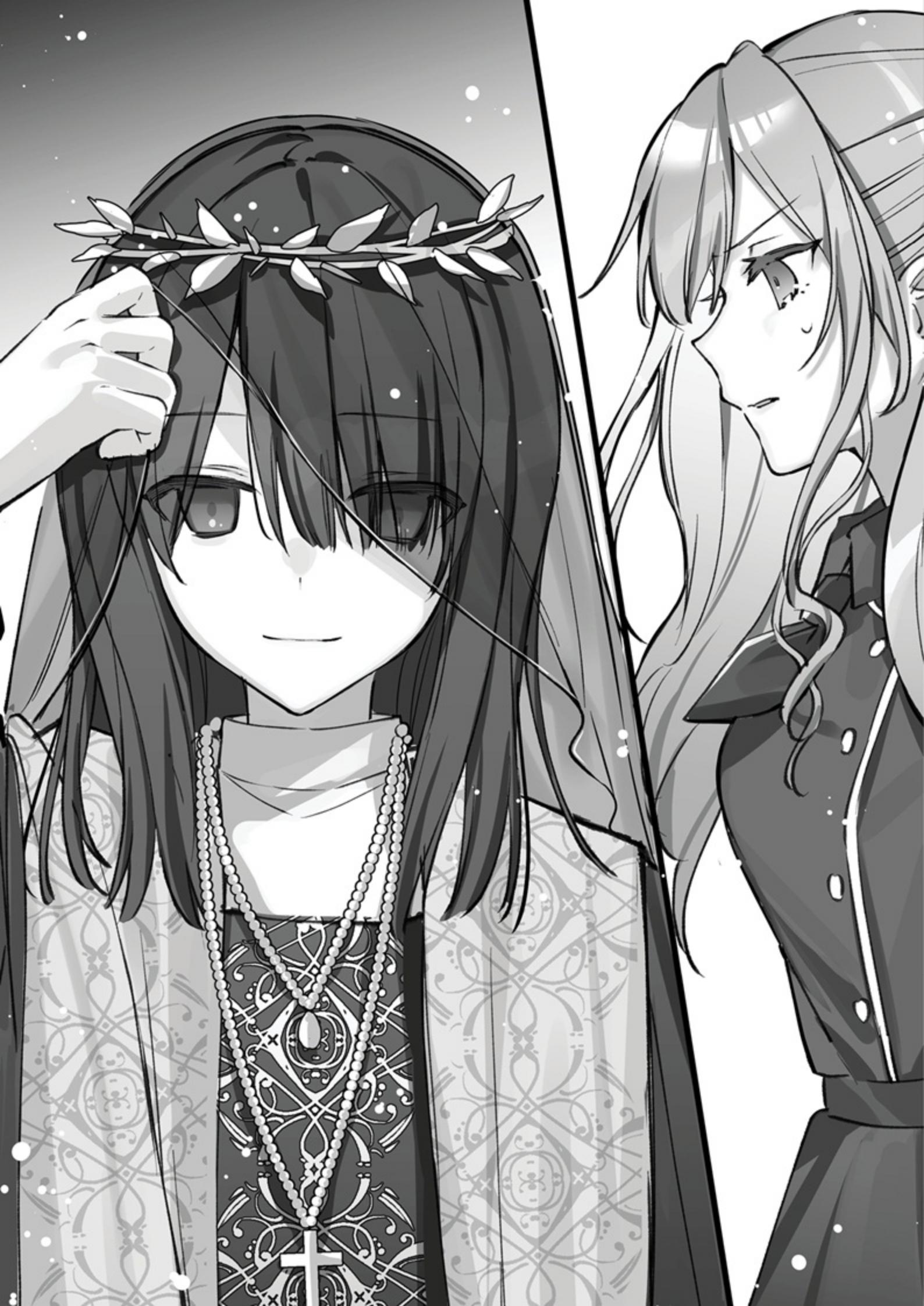
"I don't know why you've come to call yourself the Demon Queen," Claire continued. "I don't even *want* to know why. But answer me this: Why are you, of all people, trying to bring ruin to humanity?"

The Demon Queen remained silent.

At this, Claire impatiently yelled, "Answer me, *Rae Taylor!*"

Upon hearing that name, for the first time, the Demon Queen seemed shaken. Slowly, she removed her veil. Underneath it lay a familiar face, one torn between tears and joy.

It was my face. The face of Rae Taylor.



CHAPTER 17

THE TRUTH OF THE WORLD

“THE DEMON QUEEN is... me?”

I was shocked. It made no sense. Certainly, she looked like me, and her magic was similar to mine, but how could there be two of me?

As I stood stock-still in a daze, Claire continued to lay on the questions. “There are many people with faces similar to Rae’s in this world, but you’re different, aren’t you? You’re the real Rae Taylor herself, right?” I wasn’t sure how Claire could be so certain, but she said so with utter confidence.

A short silence followed.

“I’m impressed, Miss Claire. But I suppose if anyone would realize, it’d be you,” the Demon Queen said quietly. Her voice was no longer a mix between young and old—it was familiar, because it was mine.

“What’s the meaning of all this, Demon Queen?” I asked.

“I see no reason to explain when you’re about to die,” she said.

“Would you answer if I were the one asking?” Claire asked.

“No. I’m sorry.”

Claire arrogantly cast her gaze down on the Demon Queen. “You intend to defy me, Rae?”

At this, the Demon Queen smiled lovingly. “You haven’t changed a bit. You’re as beautiful as ever, Miss Claire.” Her smile then clouded. “But even that must end here. Everything must end here.”

“You mean to kill me, then? You, of all people, Rae?”

"I cannot kill you. Platos will do that for me." The Demon Queen looked to Platos waiting behind her. He nodded.

"You're serious?" Claire asked.

"I am."

"Do we have no choice but to face each other?"

"We do not."

"I see..." Claire sighed, her face caught between anger and agony. "I don't intend to go down without a fight."

"You could spare yourself the pain if you didn't put up a futile struggle, though."

"My, how insolent. Didn't anyone ever teach you manners?"

"I think that's enough trying to buy time, Miss Claire."

"Humph."

While Claire spoke boldly, it was all a front. Her shoulders were shaking, and her lips had paled.

"Lady Manaria, are you sure you can't use Spellbreaker or Dominator?" I whispered. "The Demon Queen's apparently me, so maybe you can work it out?"

"The structure of her magic is somewhat similar to yours, but it's simply impossible. I'm sorry, but she's on a whole different level from you."

Not even our secret weapon, Manaria, could do anything. We were all out of options.

"You're free to struggle all you like. Once you've given up, I'll end your lives," the Demon Queen said coldly.

"Hey, now, don't you think you're taking your lover's spat a little too far?" A cheerful voice ill-suited for the situation rang out. A blinding beam of light then raced past toward the Demon Queen.

"Eh?!" The Demon Queen hurriedly moved to defend herself, but the stream of light enveloped her faster than she could react. The light—a pure white light unlike any of the four colors of magic I knew—gradually ate away at her black magic barrier.

Once the stream of light faded, I could see the Demon Queen had fallen to a knee, her barrier gone. The arm with which she'd defended herself was injured, even though nothing we had tried had so much as scratched her.

"What do you think, Rae—or should I call you 'the Demon Queen'? Ah, whatever. My magic sure packs a punch, right?"

The speaker was a man with one arm. He wore not the uniform of the imperial forces but of Bauer's royal army.

"Master Rod!"

"Hey, Claire. Quite the party you've got going on here. You mind if I join?" Rod Bauer, former first prince of the Bauer Kingdom, put on a daring smile.

"So it's you..." the Demon Queen said with annoyance.

"Yep, yep. Anyway, what's going on with you, Rae? You've always been a peculiar one, but becoming the Demon Queen's a bit out there, even for you."

"You never were one to read the room," she sighed, ignoring his question. "Did you think a small wound like this would be enough to defeat me?"

"Nah, but I was holding myself back. Wanna find out if my full power will do it?"

The air was incredibly intense between them.

"Master Rod, what was that just now?" Claire asked.

"Oh, that? That was some new magic I invented. I'd be more than happy to explain it to y'all, but that's going to have to wait." He turned his focus back to the Demon Queen. "If you're calling yourself the Demon Queen, you should have better eyes and ears than most humans, right? Then I'm sure you've realized by now that the Bauer reinforcements are almost here."

The Demon Queen didn't respond.

Rod confidently continued, “No matter how strong you might be, I’m sure you can’t fight so many people *and* my magic at the same time.”

The Demon Queen didn’t respond even to that.

“Bastard...” Platos snarled. “You must be out of your damn mind to talk to the Demon Queen like that! My queen, let me at him! I can take care of him myself—”

“Enough, Platos. We’re retreating.”

“But—”

“I said *enough*.” The Demon Queen silenced Platos with a glare. As he turned obedient, she turned on her heel and walked away.

“Aw, that’s no fun. You’ve come all this way, why not enjoy our date a little longer?” Rod teased.

“You haven’t changed either, Master Rod. Haven’t I told you that overly persistent men are never popular?”

“Heh. Yeah, you did... You really are Rae,” he said a little sadly.

“Of course,” she curtly replied. “Miss Claire... Me... You won’t be so lucky the next time we meet. Next time, I’ll kill you without fail.”

With no further words, she flew to the east with Platos.

She can fly without wings, I suppose. Not that this was the most unusual thing about her.

“Thank you, Master Rod. You saved us,” Claire said.

“Allow me to thank you as well, Master Rod,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad I made it in time.” He smiled cheerily before turning a little serious. “So what was that, anyway? How is Rae the Demon Queen?”

“I don’t understand myself,” Claire said, “but there is no doubt in my mind that that was Rae Taylor in the flesh.”

"If you say so, then it must be true," Rod replied. "What's she have to do with our Rae, then?"

"Good question... Rae, do you have any clue?" she asked.

"No, none at all," I said. I hadn't even known this world had a Demon Queen up until recently. Finding out said Demon Queen was actually "me" was just mind-numbing.

"For the time being, let's get this line walking," said Rod. "These are the evacuees from the empire, right?"

"That they are. Goodness, I had nearly forgotten what we were doing," Claire said.

It was easy to forget, but we were indeed still in the middle of evacuating the citizens of the capital.

"I'll have the Bauer reinforcements help guard the line. We should be all right even if the Demon Queen attacks again," Rod said.

"Thank you, Rod," Claire replied.

From then on, we focused on evacuating the citizens. As luck would have it, the Demon Queen didn't attack for the rest of the trip.

I, however, had nothing but questions on my mind. How was the Demon Queen *me*? Why was she so hellbent on killing me and Claire? And while we were at it, why was I in this world in the first place?

My nerdy self hadn't questioned being transmigrated at all, being so used to seeing characters suddenly be sent to other worlds in the media I consumed. But now, for the first time ever, I was questioning my own existence in this world.

The damage sustained in the retreat from the capital was less than we'd predicted. For the most part, only soldiers had lost their lives, and even then, only those in the rearguard. Considering how dire the situation had been, the fact that the citizens were largely unharmed was a miracle.

Of course, that didn't change the fact that lives *were* lost. Words of condolences for

Dorothea and the others who'd died were sent from not just other cities in the Nur Empire but the surrounding countries as well. Those countries had heard of how the empire had protected its own citizens, as well as how they'd bravely fought against the Demon Queen and her army to protect humanity. Personally, I was heavily against glorifying the act of death for a greater cause, but all the same, I mourned the loss of those who'd given their lives to see their duty through.

"All right, shall we begin discussing our plans for the future?" Manaria said, to get the meeting rolling.

We were in Zurück, a Nur city near the border of Bauer. It was a fortified citadel built by the empire in anticipation of a war with the kingdom, so it served well as a base of operations against the demons. We had borrowed a large municipal conference room as we discussed preparations for our next course of action.

Most of the attendees were those who had participated in the retreat. Claire and I were present, naturally, as was Manaria, representing Sousse; William, representing the Alpes; Thane, Dole, and Rod, representing Bauer; Philine and Hilda, representing Nur; and Yu, Misha, and Lilly, representing the Spiritual Church. It was quite the spectacle to see so many important political and religious figures in a single room.

"Have the demons made any moves?" Manaria asked.

"Allow me to answer that," Hilda said. "According to the reports from our scouts, the demon army hasn't moved since occupying the capital."

"What are the damages to the capital?" Philine asked.

"About that... Strangely, there hasn't been much damage at all to the buildings and other facilities. They seem to have rummaged through places for provisions, but there have been no sightings of any destruction for destruction's sake," Hilda said.

"How ominous," Thane said with a frown.

"No, no, no, we should just be happy that they aren't wrecking the city," William said nonchalantly. "Just think how easy recovery will be once we take it back."

"Bill, we should be focusing on driving back the demons for now," Dole lightly admonished him. "We can think about recovery afterward."

"What's the status of the anti-demon barrier?" I asked. If the city wasn't in ruins, then maybe it was still up.

"It's been destroyed, as is to be expected," Hilda said. "Magic stones located in the four cardinal directions maintained the barrier, and we have received a report that they have all been broken."

"So the demons have entered the city?" Claire asked.

"Yes," Hilda said. "Platos and the Demon Queen seem to have taken up residence in the imperial castle."

"What about Socrat?" Claire asked.

"His location remains unknown. There's a chance he might have remained back in demon territory to protect it, but—"

"That'd be wishful thinking, wouldn't it?" Claire finished.

At any rate, we didn't have Dorothea anymore. We would have to fight the remaining two of the Three Great Archdemons and the Demon Queen without her.

"Philine," said Manaria, "there's a good chance the imperial capital will become our next battlefield. Is that all right with you?"

Philine didn't respond, seeming to be in a daze.

"Your Imperial Majesty." Hilda lightly shook Philine's shoulder.

"Oh... I'm sorry, what were we talking about?" Philine asked.

"It's quite all right. You've only just lost your mother," Dole said sadly.

"Thank you, Dole. But this is no time for me to be out of sorts. I'm the Empress of Nur now. Mother would laugh at me if I were to let this hold me back." Philine smiled bravely, but it was clear that she was pushing herself. Dorothea had been dearly important to her. Without wavering, she continued, "While I'm a little reluctant to have the capital be our battlefield, I see no other choice. At least we'll have a familiarity with the area, which we can use to our advantage."

Philine loved her people. Choosing to spill blood on the streets of their home had to be a painful decision.

"All right. All that's left is to determine what we can do against the Demon Queen," Manaria said with a sigh.

"Your report said the Demon Queen's true identity was Rae, but just what in the world is that supposed to mean?" William asked, looking at me for an explanation.

I didn't really know myself, either, so I wasn't sure how to answer.

"While we don't know the details, there's no doubt that the Demon Queen is indeed Rae," said Claire. "I guarantee it."

"That doesn't make sense. Rae's right here!" he complained. "Or are you trying to say there are two Raes or some such?"

"That is what we believe," she said.

"Ha ha, you're kidding, yes?" he said with a wry grin.

Dole furrowed his brow. "While there is some level of credence to this claim when it comes from you, Claire, most people find it difficult to believe that there could be two of the same person."

"I'll admit it's baffling, but there's no doubt that the Demon Queen is Rae. There's no way I'd mistake her for anyone else," Claire said, not budging.

"What do you think of this, Rae?" Thane asked me.

"Honestly? I don't know. The Demon Queen's voice and face certainly match mine. But according to Manaria, the magic shrouding her and the structure of the spells she used is different. There might be a chance she's just mimicking—"

"No," Claire firmly interrupted me. "She is Rae."

"Hmm, doesn't seem like we can agree here," Manaria said. "But really, the Demon Queen's identity doesn't matter all that much. We just have to beat her. The problem is that it looks like it will be next to impossible to defeat her in a head-on battle. We need more intel if we're to win—although maybe her identity *could* be a clue in that

regard?"

"Is there anyone else who might know something about the Demon Queen?" William turned to Yu. "What about the Church? Do they know anything about her?"

"The existence of a 'Demon Queen' doesn't seem to have been passed down within our records," Yu said. "Is that correct, Misha?"

"Yes. I've had a chance to look through some of the Church's old tomes, and while there were various detailed accounts of demons, there wasn't a single mention of any Demon Queen."

"So not even the Church, after all its years of opposing the demons, knows anything," Thane said with a grim look.

Seeing no way forward, a silence fell over us.

A voice suddenly broke the silence. "I suppose I should explain, then. Although I doubt many of you will be able to understand."

"Miss Lilly?" I said.

"The time's just about right. We've finally managed to pull the Demon Queen onto the stage." Lilly's tone was light.

"Huh?" I asked. "But I thought the Church didn't—"

"Rae." Claire stopped me. "That's not Lilly speaking."

"Ah." I finally understood.

"Am I wrong, apostle?" Claire asked.

The apostle confirmed Claire's suspicions with a smile.

"Apostle?" Thane said, confused. "I thought Lilly was a former cardinal?"

"It's a pleasure, Thane Bauer," the apostle said. "I hope your trip from the kingdom was

pleasant."

"So you really are someone else entirely. Lilly would never take such a tone with me," he said.

"You're too kind." The apostle bowed like a stage actor might.

"Explain this, Claire. What is an apostle? What do you know?" Dole asked, seeming lost at sea.

Claire and I exchanged a look and nodded. It seemed it would be best if everyone understood this moving forward.

"They call themselves 'the apostle,'" Claire said. "They claim to have ties with the Spiritual Church and also claim to manipulate the world from the shadows. I don't know how much weight we can give those claims, however." She sounded a little doubtful.

"Oh, but it's all true, Claire François," the apostle said. "I'm sure everyone is eager to learn more about the Demon Queen, so why don't I answer any questions you might have?"

"Oh, well, isn't that just so convenient," William said in his usual idle tone. "Of course, we're not going to blindly believe everything you say without question."

"That's fine by me," the apostle replied. "But I swear I only speak the truth. The only concern I have is that the truth may be beyond what you can comprehend."

"Are you questioning our intelligence?" Dole said a bit crossly.

"It's not a matter of intelligence but a matter of your... cultural level? No, the level of your civilization, I suppose. Then again, this might not pose a problem, as Rae Taylor should be able to understand well enough for all of you."

All eyes turned to me.

Guys, I swear I'm as lost as you are. I was getting tired of all this vague, cryptic nonsense. "Apostle, please, just give us some real answers already? Why are you and the Demon Queen giving Miss Claire and I such special treatment?"

"Oh, forgive me. Let me begin explaining in earnest. Let's see, where should I start?"

"How about you start by answering my questions," Claire said. "Is the one who calls herself the Demon Queen really Rae?"

"That's a great question to start with, Claire François, but the answer might not be as simple as you'd like. The Demon Queen *is* Rae Taylor, but Rae Taylor isn't necessarily the Demon Queen."

Claire made no effort to hide her irritation. "Do you think this is a game? Take this seriously or else."

"I am fully serious," the apostle said. "Forgive me, but my specifications do not allow me to overlook logical inconsistencies."

"*Specify... cations?*" Claire repeated, clearly unfamiliar with the word.

"It means something along the lines of design or configuration, Miss Claire," I said.

"Huh. I'm surprised you know such a word, Rae."

"It's pretty uncommon, I suppose. But I could swear it was only used to describe man-made objects, not people."

"Huh?" Claire paused. "Then, apostle, are you—"

"You're sharp, Rae Taylor. Yes, I am not a living thing but man-made."

A flurry of noise burst throughout the conference room.

"You're not alive? That's nonsense," Claire said. "You act so human."

"Such words are the highest praise I can receive, Claire François. But I speak the truth. I am, without a doubt, a man-made piece of advanced technology. Rae Taylor, I'm sure you've just about figured out what I am by now?" The apostle smiled at me.

Nonliving. Piece of technology. Resembled humans... Only one thing came to mind.

"You're an AI. An artificial intelligence."

"Correct, Rae Taylor." The apostle applauded me.

That one answer only gave me dozens more questions.

"*Eigh aye?* What's that supposed to be?" Claire asked.

"It's the word for something man-made that has a humanlike mind," I said. "While being completely artificial, advanced AI can surpass humans in cognitive skills."

That said, no such AI had existed in my time—outside of fiction, at least.

"How do you know about all this, Rae?" Claire asked.

"Remember the past world I lived in that I talked about? This was common knowledge there. My world had made great advancements in technology, not magic."

"That lines up with what the apostle told us," William said, seeming fairly intrigued.

"Right. Basically, AI are things made through technology that resemble human minds." This was the best I could explain the concept, but I was worried whether everyone would get it.

"I think I somewhat understand," Claire said. "But if this *eigh aye* thing is here, does that mean there's some manner of connection between Rae's old world and this one?"

"Oh." I hadn't even considered that, but it lined up perfectly. Why else would a technological being exist here in this world?

"That's correct, Claire François," the apostle said. "The world Rae Taylor lived in—or rather, the world Rei Ohashi lived in—and this world are, strictly speaking, the same."

"Huh?!" This was the greatest shock yet for me today. "Apostle, are you saying I wasn't brought to another world?"

"Yes and no," they said. "You have crossed into another civilization, yes, but you still remain on the same Earth."

I didn't quite understand what they meant, but it seemed I hadn't just been randomly sent to another world à la isekai, like I had first thought. The world I had taken for granted up until now began to crumble around me.

"Then why am I here?" I asked. "Why did I, a regular old office worker, suddenly appear in this world?"

"To answer that, I would need to explain things from the beginning. But please calm down first, Rae Taylor. Your heart rate has reached abnormal levels."

How could they tell me to calm down after revealing such things?

I drew closer to the apostle, but Claire's voice suddenly brought me back to my senses.
"Rae, calm down. You're making a terribly frightening face right now."

I turned around and saw her looking at me, her expression full of worry. What had I been thinking, making her worry so?

"I'm sorry," I said. "I lost my composure for a moment there."

"It's okay, I understand. This involves you personally, after all." Claire wrapped her arms around me in a hug. Her soft touch and sweet smell brought the turbulent waves of my heart to a standstill.

"Let's see... Since I've explained this much, it should be okay to have everyone directly experience the rest. To save time, that is," the apostle said.

"What are you getting at, apostle?" Still hugging me, Claire shot the apostle a sharp glare.

"Explaining the rest verbally would likely leave you all confused. I believe it will be more efficient to have you experience everything from the beginning yourselves."

"Huh? And how would we do that?" Claire asked.

"Like this." The apostle danced a finger in the air, tracing out a complex pattern with light. "I'm going to have you experience something called 'virtual reality.' Perhaps Rae Taylor would understand what that is?"

The moment they said that, my consciousness faded to black.

The First Claire's POV

"Made any progress yet, Claire?"

From the trace amount of irritation in his voice, I could tell he already knew the answer and wasn't happy about it.

I worked at a research facility run by the United States of America, and I had just been called to the office of its chief researcher. Unlike the other rooms in the building, which were mostly laboratories, this place looked like any normal CEO's office in any generic company.

Before me was the research facility's chief researcher. He had typical Anglo-Saxon features and was in his fifties. He'd also been given his position for his management skills, as opposed to, say, any merit as a researcher.

I didn't like him very much.

"We're working as hard as we can," I replied. "It'll take time, but our research will definitely—"

"I don't want your excuses," he flatly interrupted me. "Your work has produced nothing of value at all. Humanity is running out of time. We can't sit around shelling out funds for a project that yields no results."

"Forgive me." I hated to admit it, but he had a point. Humanity's survival was on the line.

"I gave you time and resources because I saw promise in you. But I can't wait any longer. I'm setting a deadline: You have half a year to finish."

"Wha—that's unreasonable! As I've told you many times, our research isn't something that can bear fruit on such a short schedule! We need more time to—"

"The US is starting to pull research funding across the board," he said. "They've begun putting their own asses first."

"Ah." I was speechless. They were really going to flee as the rest of us died en masse? All for some distant paradise in the stars that might not even exist?

“The decision is final. You have half a year to produce results.”

“Understood.”

Brokenhearted, I left the office. The conditioned air of the corridor felt even colder against my skin than usual.

“How’d it go, Claire? Did you earn another scolding from the chief?”

I returned to my laboratory and was immediately drawn into conversation by Lene, a colleague of mine. She was a researcher about my age who had fluffy, flaxen hair, and she was quite cheerful.

Without responding, I tossed the data I had intended to show the chief on my desk and slumped into my chair.

“What happened?” Lene said with worry, realizing something was wrong.

“I’ve been informed that the project’s done for if we don’t have any results within half a year.”

“What?! ” she angrily exclaimed. “That’s nowhere near enough time!”

“That’s what I said. But the chief didn’t listen.”

“Ugh. Those non-STEM people just don’t get it! Research isn’t that simple! There’s no way of knowing when, or *if*, results will appear!” Lene began to grumble. I knew she didn’t want to badmouth the chief or anything, she just wanted to sympathize with me.

“Thank you, Lene. I feel better now.”

“Not at all. But still, only half a year?”

“It’ll be difficult, even if we use TAIM to her full potential.”

“Oh, wait, why don’t we try asking TAIM what we should do from here?” Lene asked.
“She might have a suggestion. Hey, TAIM!”

She grabbed my sleeve and pulled me over to the neighboring laboratory.

"Hello, Lene. Can I help you with something?" TAIM greeted Lene in natural English with a synthetic voice that was indistinguishable from that of a human's. She was the product of half my life's research, and in that sense, something of my child. She was "The Artificial Intelligence for Mankind," TAIM for short, a cutting-edge AI designed to solve humanity's dilemma.

We were near the end of the 21st century. The environmental crises that had been cause for concern since the previous century had ultimately gone unsolved. Higher temperatures had led to higher sea levels, and the amount of dry, livable land had shrunk considerably. During summer, it was too hot to be outdoors for more than a few minutes at a time without a cooling suit, while winters regularly saw below-zero temperatures in the double digits for days on end.

The change in climate had adversely impacted agriculture, leading to chronic food shortages. The population, which many had predicted would approach ten billion by the start of the 21st century, had instead gradually declined to its current barely sustained total of one billion. Survival was nigh impossible without the gifts of science, and everyone lived with the ever-looming promise of ruin on the horizon.

At first, the countries of the world had played the blame game regarding the destruction of the environment. Eventually, however, they had realized they had no time to waste on these squabbles and had joined hands in an effort to fix the problem. This research facility had been established around then. Unfortunately, the degradation of the environment had already advanced beyond the point of no return, and not even the combined efforts of humanity had made progress on a solution.

"Hello to you, too, Claire. Do you need something from me?" TAIM asked. Projected before her frame was the hologram of a woman, which served as TAIM's digital interface. The hologram had silver hair and red eyes that gave her a slightly inhuman air.

"Yes, we're in a spot of trouble. Could you give us some advice?" I asked.

"Certainly."

TAIM was an AI that took full advantage of distributed computing and used a quantum computer to deliberate within itself. On the surface, it appeared to have a single personality, but within it was an assembly of hundreds of separate, unique AI at work. TAIM's computational power—in other words, her ability to think—far exceeded that

of a human's.

"The chief told us we have only half a year to achieve results. What are your thoughts on this?" I asked.

TAIM thought for a moment. "As things stand, it is unlikely we will achieve results in under half a year. With my current abilities, I predict it will take several years for me to find a solution to the world's needs."

"I figured." No matter how powerful an AI she might have been, she was no god. I hadn't had my hopes up in the first place, but hearing her answer made me feel dejected all the same.

"I do have a proposal, however," TAIM said.

"Yes?"

"I predict it will be impossible for the three of us to achieve results in just half a year—however, if we bring in a specific person who I have in mind, there's an incredibly slim chance we can attain a favorable outcome within the allotted time frame."

"Really?!" I exclaimed. Was there still hope? "Who is this person you have in mind?"

If it would give us a fighting chance, I didn't mind offering a sizable fee to bring them over.

"She's a Japanese researcher."

"What's her name?"

"Rei Ohashi, a specialist in soul quantization."

I didn't know it yet, but that name would go on to stay with me forever.

"Rei Ohashi. Pleased to meet you."

The woman giving us a very Japanese bow looked far younger than me, despite her profile saying she was my age. I'd heard Asian people often looked younger than their

true age suggested they ought to, and it seemed this woman was a shining example of that. She had a lab coat on, but it seemed to wear her rather than the other way around. She didn't feel like a researcher at all but more like someone you might find working in an office somewhere.

"I'm the project lead, Claire François. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm the lead assistant, Lene. Pleased to meet you, Rei."

Rei wasn't the expressive type; it was kind of hard to tell what was on her mind. Perhaps it was simply a cultural difference between Europeans, who valued self-expression, and the Japanese, who found virtue in modesty. Ultimately, it didn't matter. This facility only asked for ability, not amicability. Even if she turned out to be a little awkward to deal with, as long as she could do her job well, there would be no problems.

"Let me introduce you to TAIM," I said. "TAIM, this is Rei. We will be working with her starting today."

"Pleased to meet you, Rei," TAIM said.

"So you're the world's greatest AI," Rei mumbled, gazing reverently at TAIM.

I'd heard Japanese people tended to envision souls in objects more easily than Europeans. Perhaps that was the case for her as well?

"How cruel..."

"Huh?" I said.

"Oh, nothing," she said evasively. "So what exactly do you want me to do?"

She wasted no time at all in getting down to brass tacks. I liked people like her.

"Well, our ultimate goal is to avoid the destruction of humanity, as I'm sure you understand," I said.

"Yes, more or less," she replied with eyes devoid of warmth.

"More or less?"

“Nothing. Please, continue.”

“All right. That is our ultimate goal, but it’s not something we can easily achieve right away. And we only have half a year in which to do so.”

“I see.”

“What we want from you is your expertise in your field of research, soul quantization. Please provide all the research data you can to TAIM.”

I briefly explained how to enter data into TAIM. Rei figured it out rather quickly, being fairly smart.

“Got it.”

“Any questions?” I asked.

“Just one.”

“Ask away.”

“Are physical bodies necessary for the survival this project hopes to achieve?”

“Huh?” I wasn’t sure what she was getting at. “What do you mean?”

“If we succeed in soul quantization, I do not believe it necessary for us to retain our bodies.”

“What?” I said, bewildered.

“Allow me to explain what I believe Rei’s getting at,” TAIM said. “If we were to succeed in turning the soul into quanta and store it in a medium, the body would no longer be a necessary vessel.”

“Exactly. Thank you, TAIM,” Rei said.

Though I finally understood, I didn’t know how I was even supposed to respond. Soul quantization might have existed as a concept since the last century, but only in fiction. It hadn’t been taken seriously as a field of study until some decades ago. The idea of abandoning the body sounded outlandish at best.

"Aren't our bodies what allow us to be human?" I asked. "Could we still call beings that live purely as quantized souls human?"

"It should be fine as long as we give people the impression of having bodies," Rei said.

"You mean like by giving them an avatar they could inhabit a virtual world?"

"Yes. As long as the person *feels* nothing is out of place, it should be fine."

Was that really "fine"?

"Someone would need to perform regular maintenance on the medium in which the quantized souls are stored," I said. "That would be impossible without a physical body."

"There's no need for a human to do maintenance," she replied. "A machine could just as easily manage it."

Rei was pretty insistent. I did think there was some merit to her suggestions, but I couldn't help but feel a kind of emotional resistance to the idea.

"Let's end this discussion here," I said. "For now, enter your data into TAIM under the assumption that our physical bodies will be necessary."

"Understood."

Rei remained as expressionless as before, although I felt I could see a bit of displeasure on her face. But she began her work all the same, obeying my instructions, at least for the time being.

"She's a strange one, huh?" Lene whispered to me after we walked away. She had watched my exchange with Rei.

"Yes, she's a bit peculiar, I suppose."

"A bit? Only a psycho would suggest being all right with living without their bodies."

"Lene, that's no way to talk about a new colleague. Especially not when you've only just met them."

"I know, but still..."

Truthfully, I agreed with Lene somewhat, but I couldn't express that, given my position in the laboratory. You often saw people write about forgoing their bodies in science fiction, but a person would have to be insane to seriously think about attempting it in reality. Rei's expression hid most of her inner thoughts, but she seemed fairly sane to me.

She must truly believe we have to leave our bodies behind to move forward. I couldn't help but wonder what she had to have experienced in her life to develop such a belief.

"You should get to work, too, Lene. You still have your thesis on the reutilization of radioactive waste and fossil fuels to write, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah."

On my urging, Lene returned to her desk and began working. I returned to my project as well.

Was the physical body truly necessary for humans? Surely it had to be, right?

A similar problem had revealed itself over the course of making AI. The human mind was deeply connected with the body, so much so that it was impossible to make an advanced AI—an artificial mind made in the image of a human mind—without giving it the five senses a body would have.

As an example, an AI could never truly understand the taste of things, or the feeling of eating, without experiencing it themselves. When I made TAIM, I had given her ways to artificially experience the same five senses as humans, surmounting the unscalable wall that had separated past programs from their creators.

It stood to reason then that I believed humans needed bodies. But Rei strongly insisted otherwise. Just what kind of experiences and thinking could have led her to such a different conclusion? While I felt she was a bit off-putting, I couldn't deny that she intrigued me as well.

Other than that, one thing about Rei still bothered me. What had she said earlier when she first saw TAIM? Something about something being cruel? What did she mean?

Regardless, with Rei now onboard, our research progressed at a dizzying pace. In just four months, she did what I had been unable to: She created a working plan to save humanity.

When I heard about the Eternal Loop System, I knew without a doubt it had been born from the mind of a genius.

"I shall now begin the explanation of our research team's proposal for the survival of the human race. Please refer to document A-1 before you."

Rei and I were in the research facility's press room, sitting before a number of journalists. We were about to explain the Eternal Loop System, a project to ensure humanity's survival that had been mainly spearheaded by Rei.

Nervous, I glanced at her where she sat by my side. She didn't express a mote of anxiety as she began her explanation with the same detached look she always wore. Even after all this time, I didn't really understand her.

"The first step of this project will be to use TAIM to quantize souls and cache the resulting data in memory storage. The current targets for storage are all willing members of humanity. After quantization, humanity will enter a period of dormancy for a few centuries."

During that dormancy, the goal was to have TAIM's nanomachines and other autonomous robots restore the environment.

"Would robots alone really be able to fix everything?" somebody asked.

"They will not, no," Rei replied. "We would need to temporarily shift our civilization away from technology to something else entirely."

The journalists began to murmur, which was understandable. Even I had heard her words as nonsense at first.

"What do you mean? What other kind of civilization is there?" one of the journalists asked.

"One founded on magic."

The journalist who asked the question couldn't help but laugh. The other journalists looked at one another and began to laugh as well. The proposal sounded ridiculous. But it wouldn't for long. They would soon learn that Rei Ohashi wasn't just a

remarkable scientist but the world's first magic user.

"It'd be faster to show you," she said. "Lights, please."

With a remote, Lene turned off the lights in the room.

Rei held up a white staff. "We're still in the early stages of research, but we've discovered magic can do these kinds of things. Light."

As soon as she said, "Light," the tip of the staff ignited in a brilliant glow.

The journalists' voices raised in a clamor.

"Wh-what is that?"

"Like I said, it's magic," Rei said. "This is one of the simpler spells, one that creates light."

"That's just a parlor trick!" another journalist yelled. It was a reasonable reaction. Only science buffs who had worked at related publications for a long time had gathered here today. None of them could so easily accept something as unscientific as magic.

"Magic is an extension of science," Rei said. "I will now explain its principles. Please refer to document B-1."

The room's lights were turned back on, and the journalists doubtfully flipped through the papers, fully eager to prove our research was a sham.

"Magic is produced by using a new energy our research has uncovered: magical energy. We source this energy directly from the flow of time." Rei spoke calmly throughout, as though she didn't at all care about the hostility emanating from the journalists.

"The flow of time? How?"

"While constructing TAIM, we found a clue in the unused parts of the human brain. As it turns out, human brains have the ability to directly interfere with time—and be interfered with in turn. We created these 'magical tools' to artificially activate those latent parts of the brain."

Rei pointed at the white staff in her hand. "The magic stone on the tip of this staff is actually an assemblage of nanomachines made from small integrated circuits. This acts as a terminal for TAIM and is used to stimulate the unused parts of the brain, thereby allowing the brain to produce various phenomena."

She followed this explanation with an explanation of what exactly magic was, as far as we'd uncovered. "The type of magic available to an individual differs from person to person. We call this difference 'aptitude,' for convenience's sake. We have also so far categorized the producible types of phenomena into four categories: earth, water, fire, and wind."

The journalists stared at the documents hard enough to bore a hole through them. Many were still skeptical, but a few seemed to have realized this press conference was going to be a turning point in history.

"It's our belief that by turning our civilization away from science and toward magic, we can improve Earth's environment," Rei said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Turning to magic would resolve the energy crisis, which has been our main cause of environmental destruction. Magical energy is clean energy, and its core technology, the magic stones, are produced from radioactive waste, which we have otherwise had a difficult time getting rid of."

In other words, our deadlocked science-based civilization would become the stepping-stone for a newly formed magic-based civilization. Lene's research had proved instrumental in this area.

"Earlier you mentioned this shift in civilization would be temporary," said one of the journalists. "Why not commit to a full conversion?"

A good question.

"The most important technology for a magic-based civilization will be the magic stones produced from radioactive waste. If we completely convert, the magic-based society will one day run out of resources, just like we did. So instead, we propose magic-based civilizations and science-based civilizations repeat, one after another. During the intervals between shifts, we can use soul quantization technology to enter a period of dormancy."

In other words, the idea was to have modern humanity temporarily go dormant as quanta, change the environment to one suited to a magic-based civilization, and let humanity thrive once again. But after the magic-based civilization reached its limit, we would go dormant again and return to a science-based civilization. Magic-based civilizations would give way to science-based civilizations and vice versa. By repeating this loop, humanity would be able to continue in perpetuity. That was the Eternal Loop System Rei had designed.

"Today's press conference will only cover the basics of the Loop System. The full details will be released later by the US government, so please refer to those reports. We will now move to questions."

The following question-and-answer session was intense. The fruits of our research were groundbreaking, but they were also hard to swallow. However, as the session went on and Rei continued to respond with clear, structured answers, even the more skeptical journalists came to realize that our research was the real deal. While they had been eager to find fault, they were professionals with good credentials and began to see the legitimacy of our project.

"I'm sorry, but that's all the time we have for today. Thank you all for coming," Rei said.

We thanked the reporters, then left our seats.

On the way back to our lab, Lene excitedly called out to us. "We did it, Claire! That was definitely a success just now!"

"I think so too. And we owe it all to Rei," I said.

"Thanks," Rei flatly replied.

"You don't seem too thrilled," I said. "Your research has been acknowledged, you know?"

"You mean *our* research. Though frankly, I don't care about results or being acknowledged, so long as I can continue my own research," she said, as impassive as always.

"They say geniuses are oddballs, and I see you're no exception."

"Does that make you a genius too, then, Claire?" she asked.

“I’m just average compared to you... Wait, what are you trying to imply?!”

“My plan wouldn’t have worked if you hadn’t created TAIM in the first place.”

Hearing Rei say that might have made me a little happy.

“I’ve been wondering, why name this technology ‘magic?’” I asked. “That name will almost certainly invite pushback. Could you not come up with anything more fitting?”

“What’s wrong with it? It’s easy to understand.” For reasons beyond me, Rei made a pouty face.

“It’s! Not! Faaair!” Lene exclaimed. “You two are building your own little world without me!”

“That’s not true,” I said. “This project wouldn’t have been possible without your waste reutilization thesis.”

“Oh? Eh heh heh, really?”

“Really.”

This project had only been realized through all our efforts, and that was what made it so great.

“Anyway,” Rei said, “I was thinking I’d take my leave from the project here.”

“Huh? Why?” I asked.

“You should be able to complete things without me, so I’d like to go ahead and retire,” she said, entirely expressionless.

“It’d be a problem if we lost Rei now. Do whatever you can to make her stay.”

I ruminated over the chief’s words as I returned to my laboratory from his office. Even without his reminder, I knew full well that Rei was indispensable to the team. The Eternal Loop System had been designed mainly by the three of us—Lene, Rei, and I—but out of those three, the one who had contributed the most was unmistakably Rei.

Even at this early stage, the project hinged on a number of concepts that only she could understand, so I just couldn't see us moving forward without her. She had said we would be able to complete things anyway, but how could that possibly be true?

At any rate, how was I supposed to convince her to stay? For better or worse, Rei wasn't the type to care what others wanted, and she most certainly wouldn't be convinced by a half-baked plea.

As such concerns ran through my mind, I glanced out the window. The glow of countless city lights stretched before me. In a previous age, such a vista could have been described as a million-dollar view, but no longer. At least, not with the knowledge that most of the people out there wouldn't last to see morning without the support of our technological innovations. But humanity had hope now, and it lay in the Eternal Loop System Rei had devised.

I have to convince her, somehow... but how? I racked my brain as I opened the door to my laboratory.

"You're back! Quick, help me stop her!" Lene yelled.

"Huh? What's going on?" I replied.

"Rei says she's leaving *today*!"

"What?!" I looked over and saw Rei casually tossing her desk items into a cardboard box. "W-wait just a moment, Rei! Aren't you getting a bit ahead of yourself?!"

"I've prepared all the documents you'll need to continue in my absence," she replied, not even taking the time to stop her hands. "The two of you should be able to finish things yourselves, no problem."

I began to grow a bit flustered. "Rei, this project isn't as simple as you believe it to be. There are too many elements that only you truly grasp."

"The parts you're likely to stumble over are clarified in the documents I just mentioned. You'll be fine." She didn't budge an inch.

"Why are you so eager to quit? Did something happen?"

"No. I just figured it was time to leave, now that my work here is done."

I could intuitively tell she was hiding something, even if I didn't know what. "Rei, come with me for a bit."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said come with me!" I dragged Rei to the common room. "Sit here. I'll go put on some coffee for us."

"Why? There's nothing for us to discuss."

"I said *sit*." I forced Rei to sit down and turned on the coffee maker. "When I reflect on it, the two of us were so focused on our research that we've hardly ever talked about ourselves."

"There was never any need to." Rei sulkily looked away from me. She seemed averse to the idea of opening up.

"I wonder about that. I, at the very least, want to know more about you, Rei. Especially your philosophy."

"Why? There's nothing interesting about me."

I returned with two fresh coffees and handed one to Rei before sitting down myself. She reluctantly accepted it.

"Do you remember what you said before you began your work here—something about bodies being unnecessary for humans?" I asked.

"I'm surprised you remember that."

"How could I not? I've heard of such ideas in science fiction, but you're the first person I've heard actually suggest such in earnest." I smiled as I added milk to my coffee.

Rei had an uncomfortable look on her face. "We went with having physical bodies in the end, though."

"That we did. The plan became to equip the first generation of each civilization with artificially prepared bodies and allow them to naturally reproduce from there."

Rei had tried to insist we convert to living as quantum beings until the very end, but

the US Government had shot her down at every turn.

"Why are you so against having physical bodies?" I asked.

"No reason."

"Does it have to do with your sexuality?"

Rei looked at me with genuine shock. It was the first time I'd seen her look shaken at all. "H-how'd you know?"

"You really think I wouldn't realize after all the time we've spent working closely together? You're a lesbian, right?"

Rei didn't answer, but her silence said it all.

"Why not talk to me about it?" I went on. "I meant it when I said I wanted to learn more about you."

"It's not as interesting a story as you expect," she mumbled. "The place I'm from, Japan, is a really conservative country."

"Oh, really? I always heard it was pretty liberal."

"If you only look at public opinion polls, the results would suggest as much. People say they're against discrimination, that they're for the rights of homosexuals and all that, but in reality..." she hesitated.

"Go on," I urged her.

"All that only holds true so long as they don't have to face queer people directly. Japanese people will happily indulge in gay or lesbian media, but the moment they learn a queer person is actually among them, they act as appalled as any conservative. Maybe it's a cultural thing to fake tolerance like that. I don't know... Of course, not everyone is so ignorant, but regardless, it's annoying to have to explain myself to every person I meet."

Such was a pain all people of marginalized sexuality knew.

"That's why I think we'd be better off without bodies," she went on. "Then nobody

would have to put up with that kind of stuff.”

I finally understood Rei’s motivations. She wasn’t thinking about something as grand as bringing humanity to the next stage of evolution or a final apotheosis, she simply found the body constraining and wanted to be free of it. That was her sole reason for so intently investigating soul quantization.

“Rei...”

“Don’t. I don’t want your sympathy. I don’t even want your understanding. This is just the only way I can live with myself. That’s all.”

Seeing her self-derisive smile hurt me, deep inside. How could I not be hurt when someone I’d spent half a year with was smiling so sadly? However, one question had still gone unanswered. “But why do you want to leave the project? Is this not the best environment to continue your research on soul quantization?”

A high-performance arithmetic unit was necessary for soul quantization. TAIM should be perfect for Rei’s needs.

She suddenly fell silent again, averting her eyes.

“Rei?”

“Like I said, my work here is done. There’s no reason for me to stay” Rei stood. “I think we’ve wasted enough time.”

“You’re lying. There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Just leave me alone already! Haven’t you had enough?!” she half yelled, half screamed.

Despite her protest, I grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face me. “I won’t leave you alone. That’s not what friends do.”

Rei scoffed. “Friends? Ha, you really don’t know anything.”

“Because you won’t *tell* me anything.”

“Is that right? Why don’t I tell you, then? I want you, Claire. Sexually.” She turned the tables on me, grabbing my shoulders back. The glint in her eyes was dangerous—self-

destructive.

“Me?” I asked.

“You really didn’t notice? I know we’re all women here, but you’ve been so unguarded, I could swear you were making advances.” As she spoke such vulgarities, she pulled me into an embrace. “You want me to stay? Fine. Become mine, and I’ll stay.”

I was at a loss for words.

“You can’t, can you? Because I creep you out? I bet you don’t want anything to do with me anymore now.” Rei laughed and took her hands off me. “And that’s that. I’ll be leaving now, if you don’t mind.”

She turned on her heel to leave—but I grabbed her from behind in a hug.

“Claire?”

“Fine.”

“Huh?”

“I accept your conditions.”

Rei gave me a look of utter disbelief. “Are you insane?”

“Not at all. It’s a small price to pay to keep your genius around.”

“You’d sell yourself for the project?”

“Something wrong with that? Or are you going to ask for my heart as well now?” I asked provocatively.

For a brief moment, Rei wore a sad look, but that self-derisive smile soon returned. “No, your body alone is fine. Your personality may be what it is, but your body is enjoyable to look at.”

“Then it’s settled.” I brought my face close to hers.

“You’ll regret this.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s not too late to—”

“Just be quiet.” I sealed her lips.

Thus began my twisted relationship with Rei.

“Nh...”

Awakened by the warbling of birds, I opened my eyes and saw the morning rays pouring in through the window. The harsh sunbeams were softened as they passed through the window’s filter.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“Good morning, Rei. What are you up to?”

By my side on the double bed was Rei, naked and using a hologram computer.

“This? Just indulging a hobby of mine.”

“Is this that anime stuff?”

On the screen of the holo-computer was what looked like a character from one of those Japanese animes.

“Not quite. This is a game,” she said.

“A game?”

“Mm-hmm. An otome game. A relic from the days when entertainment was still common.”

According to her explanation, an otome game was a text-based game meant for a predominantly female audience. They featured multiple male love interests that the player could try to romance.

“I think I get the gist,” I said. “But I thought you didn’t like men?”

“I don’t. My romance target in this game is the villainess—this character right here.” Rei pointed to a character with highly unusual golden hair curls, standing with her arms crossed. “It’s rare, but sometimes otome games will have rival characters like her who oppose the protagonist. They always lose in the end, though.”

“What a pitiable character,” I said.

Rei seemed oddly shocked by my comment. “I’m surprised.”

“How so?”

“The villainess is a character meant to be hated. I never thought you’d call her pitiable, of all things.”

“But she is, isn’t she? Being doomed to fail from the start.”

Rei’s eyes gleamed. “Yes, yes! That’s exactly it! You understand! The villainess is actually super cute!”

“Wh-what’s gotten into you all of a sudden? You’re like a completely different person.”

The normally impassive Rei was nowhere to be seen, but I didn’t hate this new side of her.

“I’m sorry, I got a bit carried away,” Rei apologized. “At any rate, I really admire this villainess character. Whenever I hit a roadblock in my research, I pull out this otome game to relax.”

“Oh, really? Then what’s your roadblock this time?”

“I’m lost on how to design the world of the magic-based civilization. It’s not like there are any previous civilizations I can use as a reference, you know?”

“Oh, yes, that’s certainly true.”

Worlds with magic only existed in books. Some pieces of fiction had incredibly detailed settings, but I doubted many of those were detailed enough to use as a model for a whole new world.

"I was thinking that maybe I should just make a world like the one in this game," she said.

"Please take this seriously. The fate of humanity depends on this project."

"But this game's world is really well made, and—"

Rei went on, rambling about the game world.

Ah, so that's why, I thought. Rei had gone out of her way to name her technology "magic" largely due to the influence of her hobby. What would you call such a person? A geek? An otaku—wasn't that the Japanese word?

"And that's why we should definitely base our new civilization on this world," she finished.

"That's a no, Rei. The future of the human race is on the line. We can't strive for anything less than perfection."

"But isn't perfection just being overly idealistic?"

"Listen, Rei. Some people might look down on those who chase ideals, but I think those people are misguided. It's always one hundred times better to chase ideals than to use harsh reality as an excuse to never even try."

Rei seemed to find meaning in my words; her eyes widened in understanding.

"I'll help you as much as I can, so let's not give up yet, okay?" I said.

"Okay." Rei smiled weakly. "That reminds me, there's quite the coincidental connection between this game and you."

"Oh, yeah? What's that then?"

Rei grinned. "The villainess is also called Claire."

"Is that right?" I genuinely couldn't have cared less.

"All right, that's enough chitchatting," she said. "I'll go make breakfast, so go ahead and sleep in a bit more. I'll call you over once it's ready."

"Please do."

Rei gave me a peck on the cheek, slipped on a bathrobe, and left the bed.

"Oh, right. How's your body feeling, Claire?" she asked.

"Hm? Fine, I suppose. Why?"

I'd been so busy lately that I had entirely skipped doing physical checkups, but I felt like I was in fine health. My data would still have said I was going to those checkups, though. Had she noticed that I'd tampered with it?

"No reason. All's well if you're well." Without explaining further, Rei left for the kitchen. I watched her leave before burying my face in my pillow to sleep again.

More than five years had passed since my relationship with Rei began. It was initially supposed to be a purely physical relationship, but before I knew it, we were living together. Her attitude toward me had changed as well. She wasn't bitter, like she had been at the beginning—she now treated me like a real lover.

To my surprise, I'd grown quite accustomed to sleeping with another woman. All my previous relationships had been with men, so I had never once doubted my heterosexuality, but after spending time with Rei, I realized I might actually have been bisexual all along.

But let's put the topic of my sexuality aside for now and talk about the problem surrounding my relationship with Rei. Our affair had begun from impure intentions, but I was satisfied with the way things had evolved. Rei had, surprisingly, turned out to be the devoted type, taking care of my needs even outside of our sex life. She even diligently cooked for me every morning, as I couldn't cook that well myself. She was cute to boot, so I really didn't have anything to complain about. The problem was...

"Will this relationship end once the project is over?" I muttered.

My relationship with Rei was still ultimately nothing more than a means to stop her from leaving the project, and said project was now in its final stages. Was it time for me to brace for our parting? I wanted to date her for real if possible; our compatibility wasn't terrible, after all.

But that was just how *I* felt. I couldn't avert my eyes from the possibility that Rei didn't feel the same way and that she was actually reluctantly bearing with our relationship. There was a real possibility that she secretly hated all these back-breaking displays of affection she showered upon me. What if she was desperately waiting for this project to be over, just to be rid of me? I was afraid. Too afraid to ask her how she truly felt.

And just like that, my depressive thoughts ruined an otherwise pleasant morning. I shifted in bed a bit and buried my face in the pillow Rei had used. It had her scent, and her scent calmed me.

At that moment, Rei walked in. "Breakfast is ready, Claire... Uh, what're you doing?"

"Wha—?! N-nothing!"

Rei giggled at my foolishness. Vexed, I threw the pillow at her.

"Heh heh, there's no need to sulk like that, Claire. C'mon, we have your favorite today: strawberries."

"I won't be so easily swayed by strawberries!"

"You don't want them, then?"

"I do."

The strawberries bore no fault here. I put on my bathrobe and slid out of bed. We ate breakfast at the dining table.

"We'll be busy again starting tomorrow, so we better stretch our wings all we can today," Rei said.

"Indeed."

"Is there anything you want to do?" she asked. "Other than cooking."

"I-I'll learn cooking one of these days, I swear!"

Rei giggled. "I look forward to it. Let me know if there's anything you're up for."

I wondered, since when had these kinds of exchanges become our norm? "Hey, Rei?"

“Yeah?”

“Are you—” I wanted to say: *Are you happy right now?* But the words wouldn’t come out. “Never mind.”

“Huh. You’re acting a little weird. Do you have a fever or something?” Rei put her forehead against mine.

“Ah—I-I’m fine! My vitals are normal!”

“Oh, really? Well, that’s good.” She smiled with relief.

I thought the face she made then was lovely beyond belief.

So why, even then, couldn’t I say “I love you”?

“We need an administrator?”

“Yes.”

I had been doing work in the laboratory like usual when Rei brought me to the common room to talk.

“The Loop System will be largely governed by TAIM, but she can’t do everything by herself,” she said. “A real person needs to manage things somewhat.”

“And that’s where the administrator comes in.”

“Right. They would have to be familiar with the Loop System, so it comes down to either you, me, or Lene.”

So she said, but I didn’t see Lene around.

“If you’re looking for Lene, she already declined,” Rei explained. “She said something about being unqualified for the role.”

“Oh, I see.”

"She's way too harsh on herself, honestly. She's more capable than she thinks."

I had to agree with Rei. Lene was an excellent researcher; she just had confidence issues. She was pretty self-assertive though, which led me to think her confidence issues stemmed from something deeper.

"How about it, Claire? Do you think you could be an administrator?"

"Tell me what the role would entail first. I can't accept it without hearing that."

"Naturally." Rei activated her holo-computer, partitioning the display so I could see. "The administrator would have three main duties. The first would be to maintain the Loop System."

According to her explanation, the role would have me working with TAIM to govern the Loop System and keep humanity existing for as long as possible. That involved handling unforeseen incidents, physical maintenance, and adjusting the civilization's direction when necessary.

"Your second duty would be to govern TAIM. TAIM is an exceptional AI, but she occasionally has errors in judgment. The administrator would be needed to handle that as well."

In the event that TAIM made a decision that negatively impacted humanity, however slim the chance of that occurrence might be, it would fall to the administrator to use their privileges to override her.

"And your third duty would be to decide when to stop the loops."

"Huh?" I said, bewildered. "Why would we stop the loops? If we did that, then..."

"Yes. Humanity would come to an end," Rei said, finishing my words for me. "The Loop System exists to enable humanity's survival, but I believe it will be necessary for someone to be able to make the decision as to whether humanity *should* continue for all eternity."

"Wait, that isn't something one person alone should decide," I protested. "At the very least, we should leave it to the leaders of that time to make the decision. No, actually, nobody should have the power to end humanity in the first place!"

Rei tilted her head to the side. “Are you sure? Hypothetically speaking, if there was an unfixable bug in the Loop System and humanity was forced to continue cycling through great pain and distress, should humanity persist?”

This time, I couldn’t find the words to immediately counter her argument. This hypothetical was very similar to the problems posed at end-of-life care, namely whether it was better to try to extend life or allow a natural death. While extending life as long as possible sounded nice, it often meant prolonged pain and enduring the gradual loss of physical autonomy—something that not every person would readily assent to. Simply being kept alive couldn’t be called truly living.

“Even so,” I said, “I don’t believe such a decision should be left to a single person.”

“I see. I actually feel the same way when it comes to that. Leaving things to a single person to decide is a bit dangerous.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“That’s about it for the explanation. What do you think, Claire?”

What did I think? Was she asking if I wanted to be this administrator?

“Can two people not be administrators together?” I asked.

“I’d rather not have multiple people share supreme authority. It would inevitably cause problems in the chain of command.”

“Then what if we have you be the administrator and me be the vice-administrator? Could we do that?”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that,” Rei said, surprised. “We might be able to bear the eternal solitude better that way too.”

“The what?”

“The eternal solitude. The administrator’s consciousness will be kept separate from the loop cycle. While the rest of humanity’s memories are reset with each cycle, the administrator’s, and I suppose the vice-administrator’s, memories would remain unchanged.”

I was a bit worried. “A single loop would at the very least span tens of thousands of years, would it not? Could we really withstand that, countless times over, all while doing our work?”

Rei nodded. “A fair concern. We would have to be careful not to overexert ourselves. We could perhaps work only during the transitional period between civilizations, and during the rest of the time, we’d live normally among other humans—barring any emergency circumstances that required our attention, of course.”

So we wouldn’t be working as administrators all the time, then. That made it better... I supposed?

“What do you think, Claire? Do you want to be an administrator with me?” Rei offered her hand to me.

But though I wanted to, I couldn’t take it, not without hesitation.

“Let me ponder this for a bit. It’s an absurdly big decision; I can’t give an immediate yes or no.”

To become an administrator—even vice-administrator—would mean being responsible for the continued well-being of all humanity. That meant bearing the weight of countless lives as they rested on your shoulders.

According to Rei’s explanation, the new humans would follow the same history as our own, which would enable us to more easily adjust things behind the scenes. That meant the same cruel wars and genocides of the past would recur, and we would have to just shut our eyes to all of it. But even if I agreed to that, I would still have to bear the responsibility of managing the Loop System. A single slipup could bring an end to all of humankind. Could I handle the mental load?

Thinking about all that came with the role had me, quite frankly, terrified.

“I understand,” Rei said. “This is a big decision. Take your time and think things over. I’ll set things up for you just in case, so let me know.”

“What will you do, Rei?”

“Regardless of what you choose, I’ll be an administrator. Somebody has to do it, after all.”

Somebody has to do it.

I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt upon hearing her say that. I was the one who had pulled her into this project in the first place, on TAIM's advice. She had no concrete obligations. She had even tried to leave once. If I hadn't stooped to such low means to keep her here, she'd be free. My selfishness then has forced this terrible burden on her.

"Rei, on second thought, I think I'll do it, after all—"

"Don't, Claire," Rei shook her head. It was like my thoughts were entirely transparent before her eyes. "You shouldn't become an administrator with half-hearted resolve. There's no need to hurry, so please think this through thoroughly."

She booted down her holo-computer and stood. As she left, I could do nothing but follow her with my eyes.

"Hey, TAIM? What do you think I should do?" I quietly murmured, perhaps more to myself, as I adjusted TAIM's settings.

The Loop System was nearing completion. Soon, humanity would finally enter its first dormancy period. Everyone's soul would be automatically scanned for quantization by the many parts of TAIM scattered throughout the world, saving us the effort of scanning people one by one. These parts of TAIM looked like ordinary rocks at first glance, but they were capable of both self-repair and self-replication, and could also be used to activate magic. We intend to call them magical stones during the magic-based eras. Some were over ten feet long, while some were as small as nanoparticles. All were wirelessly connected to one another.

Rei had led the design of the magic-based civilization, and she'd actually based it off of that otome game of hers like she joked she would. I'd had a look through it with a simulator, and I had to say, it was fascinating—like a world of magic you might see in a movie.

The science-based civilization was fascinating as well, though at a certain stage, they would surpass our own current population, so we'd had to prepare artificial souls to round out their numbers. From what I understood, TAIM was going to prepare a foundation for those artificial souls, which would then be mixed with the quantum

data of real humans. Honestly, only Rei understood all the details.

The project had progressed steadily, and the end was now in sight, but I still hadn't given Rei an answer as to whether I would become an administrator.

"What's there to hesitate over, Claire?" TAIM said. "What more could you ask for than an eternity with the woman you love?"

"Don't tease me. It's not that simple."

The more I thought about how the fate of humanity would be on my shoulders, the more hesitant I became to accept the position.

"You're thinking too much," TAIM said. "You should be truer to your desires, like Rei."

"Since when has Rei ever been true to her desires?"

Having lived with her for some time, I'd learned that Rei was an incredibly selfless person. She single-handedly did all my domestic chores for me, as I had no talent for anything outside researching, and she spent her money more on me than herself. Even during sex, she was constantly focused on satisfying *me*...

Oops. Ignore that bit.

"Oh? Did you not know?" TAIM asked. "Rei created the Loop System specifically for you, Claire."

"Huh?"

"That's enough, TAIM." Rei appeared, interrupting before she could elaborate.

"Why keep it a secret?" TAIM asked Rei. "I think it's wonderful."

"There's nothing wonderful about it at all. It's so selfish, even I don't like thinking about it," Rei replied.

"But don't people say it's only human to be selfish?"

"You just keep learning more and more useless things, don't you?"

“Your compliment is greatly appreciated.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

The two bantered back and forth in this way, ignoring my presence.

“Um, Rei? What did TAIM mean by this project being—”

“TAIM was just talking nonsense. Don’t worry about it,” Rei said.

“But—”

“Please.”

“All right.” Reluctantly, I relented.

“By the way, how are you feeling today?” Rei asked. She had been bothering me about this a lot lately.

“Fine. I’m still young, you know? I’m not going to suddenly fall ill or anything.”

“Right. That’s good. But if you feel strange, let me know right away,” she said with a serious look.

I felt like something was up. “Rei... Are you by chance hiding something from me?”

“Many things.”

“I figured... Wait, no—I mean, is there something about my health you’re hiding from me?”

“No?”

Then why are you constantly checking in on me? Worried, I turned to TAIM instead. “TAIM, is there anything about me that indicates a potential health problem?”

“I cannot answer that,” TAIM said.

“What? Why not?”

“Access to that information has been prohibited.”

“By who?”

“I cannot answer that either.”

So she said, but her inability to answer might as well have been an answer.

“Rei, you prohibited access, didn’t you?” I asked.

Rei said nothing.

“I’m well aware that authority over TAIM’s usage has been transferred to you. You’re the only one who could lock information away from me.”

She averted her eyes, refusing to speak.

“Rei, look at me.”

She turned her gaze back my way.

“Why won’t you tell me—”

But before I could finish, my world began to sway.

“Claire?!” Rei’s face contorted with fear.

What was happening...?

“TAIM, contact medical!” Rei yelled.

“I already did.”

“How is this happening? She should have more time!”

“Her condition has advanced faster than anticipated.”

“No...”

Rei? What are you saying? I can’t hear you very well.

“Claire... Please, stay with me. If you die, then what was this all for?”

My medical test results weren’t good, to say the least. I had contracted a pathogen that didn’t match any known disease.

“Everything will be okay, Claire. The government is asking for the U.N.’s permission to activate the Loop System as we speak. We’ll see the future yet, I swear.” Rei spoke softly as she squeezed my hand.

“No, Rei. We still haven’t performed the final check. If it’s to operate for the rest of eternity, we need to make sure it’s perfect.” I tried to squeeze her hand back, but I couldn’t put much strength into my fingers.

“The final check is just a formality. There’s no way there’d be a mistake in my work. You said it yourself: I’m a genius.” Rei smiled cheekily at me. Or at least, that’s the sort of thing I think she would have done there. I couldn’t see very well by that point.

“Right, you’re a genius. That’s why... I’m sure you’ll be fine on your own,” I said. *You can do it, Rei. I know you’re strong enough.*

“No... No. Please don’t leave me, Claire. Please...”

Rei... I’m sorry. But I’m happy I was at least able to be with you in my final moments.

“Wait,” she said. “If we activate it now, we should still have time! TAIM, I don’t care what you have to do! Keep Claire alive for at least one more day!”

“My functions have been set to prioritize preparation for the acti—”

“I don’t care! I’m the administrator, and I’m ordering you to keep Claire alive!”

“Understood.”

Rei?

Rei, where are you? I can’t feel your warmth anymore.

I’m scared, Rei. Don’t leave me.

“Wait for me, Claire! I swear I’ll save you! There’s no point in saving the world if you’re not in it!”

I descended into darkness. I felt nothing, not even the cold that had run through my body up until moments ago. Rei’s voice was distant from me now. The beating in my chest grew weaker by the minute.

There was something I had to say. Something important. But my world was soon swallowed by darkness, taking my scattered consciousness with it.

From the bottom of my heart, I love you.

Who were these words meant for again?

I couldn’t make sense of anything anymore.

The First Rei Ohashi’s POV

I left Claire’s sickroom and went to the laboratory on the lowest floor, where TAIM’s mainframe was located. I hurriedly engaged all the identification procedures and called out to the hologram that was TAIM’s digital interface.

“Start the Eternal Loop System!”

The only way to save Claire now was to force through the activation of the Loop System. Considering how long it would take to convert all the souls to quanta, there wasn’t much time left.

“Voiceprint and iris authenticated. Welcome, Administrator Rei Ohashi. Warning: It is highly recommended that the approval of the US government and the UN secretary general be obtained first.”

“No time! Just hurry up and start!”

We couldn't wait. By the time we received approval, Claire would be dead.

I had learned of the possibility of Claire's unknown disease purely by chance. We had been in the early stages of developing a plan to save humanity at the time, and I had temporarily received authority over TAIM's access privileges.

Claire had been none the wiser, but by then, I was already smitten with her. It was practically love at first sight, as she was my type to a tee. My heart had nearly leapt out of my chest every time I saw her unguarded self in the laboratory.

I had peeked at her health data out of pure curiosity, but a single certain value I found there had left me with a deep sense of foreboding. I'd ordered TAIM to periodically report it to me and had later discovered that my bad feeling was warranted.

The value rose by the day. It represented the likelihood of an infection, but it wasn't clear from what. I tried asking TAIM, but it seemed she didn't know anything either. At any rate, I understood that the chance that Claire suffered from an unknown disease was going up day by day.

Everything would've been fine if the disease weren't life threatening. Medicine was advanced in the late-21st century; the majority of what were once untreatable diseases could by then be managed. But if it were a known disease, TAIM would have been able to identify it.

So I thought about it: What could I do to ensure I didn't lose the one I loved, to make my love for her eternal? From there came the idea of the Eternal Loop System.

"Please confirm: Once the system is activated, the process cannot be stopped. Do you still wish to continue?"

"Yes!" I yelled.

"Now entering the activation sequence. Please insert the administrator's activation key."

I took off the activation key hanging around my neck and inserted it into TAIM's console.

"Final confirmation: Are you sure about this, Rei Ohashi? Are you sure you won't come to regret this?"

“There’s nothing I could regret more than losing Claire!”

“Very well, then. Sixty seconds until system activation.”

I turned the key, and TAIM’s frame rumbled to life. Then my smartphone rang.

“What’s the meaning of this, Rei?! The government still hasn’t given us permission to—”

It was the chief, having been notified of the activation of the Loop System. I hung up without answering and turned my smartphone off.

“With this, I can save Claire.” Overcome with relief, I collapsed to the floor. My consciousness was fuzzy. The soul quantization process was beginning. “Claire, we’ll be together, forever...”

In the next moment, my senses returned, and I was in an unfamiliar place. Surrounding me was a starry night sky, or perhaps the scenery of space. I stood alone at the center of it all.

“Where am I?”

“The administrator’s room, Rei.”

As soon as I heard the voice, a faint light shone before me, and a girl who looked a lot like a fairy appeared. She had silver hair and red eyes, an appearance I recognized.

“TAIM...”



“Congratulations, Rei. The Eternal Loop System activation was successful. All of humanity is now transitioning into a dormancy period.”

“What about Claire? Did she make it in time?!”

“Don’t worry. Claire’s soul has been successfully inserted into the system.”

“Thank goodness...”

I had made it. Now Claire could live forever as well.

“I hate to rush you, Rei, but your duty as administrator remains. There is much to do for the first loop.”

“Right. I won’t mess up.”

I would now form the framework for the world I would share with Claire for however-many millions of years. It couldn’t be anything less than perfect.

“Please configure and distribute the nanomachines to prepare the new magic-based civilization.”

“Right.”

I had to do my best. For Claire.

I dove headfirst into my work. Like TAIM had said, there was much to be done for the first loop. Remaking the global environment was only the tip of the iceberg; there were thousands of tasks waiting to be seen to, but with TAIM’s help, I carefully finished each one.

“Rei, is it not difficult for a single person to handle all these duties? Would it not be more feasible to have multiple administrators like Claire suggested?”

“We’ve already talked about this, TAIM. Administrators will be isolated from the Loop System. The fewer there are, the better.”

“But—”

“I’ll be fine. At the very least, I have you with me.”

If I were completely alone, then the solitude would certainly have crushed me. But TAIM could talk to me, show me recordings of Claire and the others, and even console me. I would be fine for the time being.

“The challenges have only just begun. I am not sure if I alone can support you, Rei.”

“All the more reason for me to finish these tasks and enter dormancy myself—before it begins to take a toll on my mind.”

“Yes, I suppose that is for the best.”

During the millions of years of loops to follow, the plan was for me to receive special mental care from TAIM. Gradually, she would adjust, consolidate, and delete all my memories that didn’t have to do with administration or Claire. That was the only way to keep my mind from falling apart.

As luck had it, I finished my tasks before my mind buckled. It felt like it had taken years, but the flow of time was unclear in the administrator’s room, so I couldn’t be sure.

On Earth, several decades had passed.

I lay down in my cold sleep device and had my last conversation with TAIM before entering suspended animation.

“I’ll be going then, TAIM. Can you wake me up when the magic-based civilization is ready?”

“Of course. Thank you for all your hard work. I’ll see you again at the dawn of a new civilization. Good night, Rei.”

“Good night, TAIM.”

And so, I entered a deep, deep slumber.

“...up...”

“Mm...”

I heard a voice calling my slumbering consciousness awake.

“Rei, it’s time to wake up.”

“Mm...?” I opened my eyes to see myself still amid a starry night sky. How much time had passed? “TAIM?”

“Good morning, Rei. The magic-based civilization is about ready. Please perform the final check.”

“Uh, right.”

Cold sleep should have been different from ordinary sleep, but I was somehow still drowsy. There wasn’t anything like a sink around to splash water on my face, so I decided to just wait until my brain fog cleared.

“Would you like to look at the new magic-based world while your drowsiness fades?” TAIM asked.

“Yes, please.”

A holographic display manifested out of the darkness. The new world I had based off of *Revolution* appeared on it, and I found myself entranced.

“Wow...”

Nature had healed wonderfully. Temperature, precipitation, and other weather parameters were all at stable levels.

“We haven’t added humanity yet,” TAIM said. “The world is currently ruled by animals, plants, and monsters. Soon, we will add early civilization and guide them toward a magic-based civilization.”

“It finally begins.”

The first half of the first loop.

“Now beginning the final check. If you could do the honors, Rei.”

“Right. Let’s do it.”

I did my check and found the world revived. The environmental destruction our science-based civilization had tried to fix to no avail was restored so well by the nanomachines under TAIM's control—and various autonomous robots—that you'd never have known it was ruined. As things stood, there would be no problem having humanity create a new civilization from this point going forward.

"We shall now proceed with extracting the souls of humanity," said TAIM.

"Are the bodies prepared?"

"Yes. They've been granted magic aptitudes as well."

"All right. Proceed with extraction."

And just like that, humanity's second chance, one based on magic, began. The primitive stages shared the humble beginnings of our science-based civilization—the only difference being that TAIM's slight adjustments helped humanity gradually advance until they were at around the same level of development as Europe in the Middle Ages. It was around that time that humanity found magic stones, TAIM's mini-selves, and began an age of magic.

"Things are going well, Rei."

"Very. When is Claire's soul due to be extracted?"

"A little past the dawn of magic, so soon. You are scheduled to enter the world around that time too."

"Got it."

Finally, I could meet Claire again. I'd been waiting for this moment for so long. So, so long...

"It's about time. I bid you good fortune in the battles to come, Rei."

"Huh? I'm not heading off to battle, you know?"

"But isn't love a battlefield?"

"Where do you keep learning this useless stuff? Whatever, I'll be off."

With that, I left the administrator's room and descended to Earth.

"To think a commoner would even fathom sitting next to me. Know your place!"

When I came to, there was a girl with a strange hairstyle before me. She looked younger than I remembered, but without a doubt, it was her.

Unthinking, I embraced her.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" she screeched. "Unhand me!"

We could finally meet again.

"Claire," I said.

"Well, I never! Who do you think you are, calling me by my first name?!"

"Oh, right! Then I'll call you 'Miss Claire'!"

"Fine, just unhand me this instant!"

And so, I began my second life together with Claire in a world of magic.

"Rae... I think my time has come."

Even after we were old and wrinkled, my love for Claire remained unchanged. I squeezed her hand tight as she spoke her last words.

"We'll meet again, Claire," I said.

"Yes... I'll be... waiting for you... in heaven..." she replied before drawing her last breath.

The room held only her and I alone. Our relationship was one we had never been able to make official with marriage, but we were fine with that.

My life in this magic-based civilization had been a fulfilling one. We'd fled before she

lost her life to the revolution, fallen in love, and spent our lives together. We'd become estranged from our families but been blessed with good friends and were never lonely.

We had been able to love each other deeply, and I could have asked for nothing more. I could look back proudly and say it had been a good life.

Claire's soul was once more recorded as quanta and cached by TAIM. She would lose her memories, but in the coming science-based civilization, she'd live again as Claire François.

"TAIM," I called.

"Yes?" I was answered in a flat tone by the housekeeper I had hired in order to spend more time with Claire after she fell ill. As the one in charge of fine-tuning history to keep it on track, TAIM could appear as anyone.

"I'm ending my life in this loop here," I said.

"Are you sure? According to my estimations, you should still have a few years left."

"I'm sure. There'd be no meaning in living a life without Claire."

"Very well. I'll begin the quantization process."

I got in bed beside the now-sleeping Claire and hugged her body. I closed my eyes and felt her lingering body heat.

"That was fun, wasn't it, Claire?"

Until the next loop, then.

"Welcome back, Rei."

"Thank you, TAIM."

I returned to the administrator's room and set about my work again. I saw through the demise of the magic-based civilization, transitioned humanity into dormancy again, and waited for the beginning of the science-based civilization.

"TAIM, I'm using my authority as administrator to change the planned course of history a bit."

"Warning: Depending on the degree of change, history may shift greatly."

"I'll be careful, don't worry."

I began to adjust some things, creating a slightly different timeline.

"What are you adjusting?"

"Just my life and Claire's. Namely, the era we're born in and our cause of death."

I was changing our births to be in the early 21st century as opposed to the late 21st. There was still a great deal of mystery surrounding the disease that had killed Claire, but TAIM had continued to make improvements to herself over the previous loop and had been able to determine that the pathogen that killed Claire didn't exist in the world in the early 21st century.

"If you run those changes, the two of you won't meet until your mid-thirties," she said.

"That's fine. We'll just live long lives thereafter to make up for it."

Wondering to myself what my new life with Claire in a science-based world would be like, I entered cold sleep again. I awoke several thousands of years later.

Somewhat drowsy, I asked, "TAIM... what year is it on Earth now?"

"It will soon be the year 1990. By the Japanese calendar, it is near the end of the Showa era and the beginning of the Heisei era."

"It's almost time, then."

"Yes. Are you fine with entering the world from infancy this time?"

That was the plan for the science-based civilizations, as opposed to starting at the Royal Academy in magic-based civilizations.

"Yeah. I want to see what early 21st century Japan was like."

“Very well. I bid you good fortunes in the battles to come.”

“Like I said, I’m not heading off to any battles.”

TAIM saw me off as I left for my new life in Japan.

I was born to an incredibly average household. I had a Heisei home, like the ones I had only been able to read about in my past life, and lived in an era of transition from the old values of the Showa era to the new values that still rang true in my time.

My parents both worked, something that was still rather uncommon in this era, and I had a younger brother. This was the first time I’d ever had a younger sibling, so I took dear care of him. I also took care of most of the housework around the home as my parents were often busy with their careers. Thanks to that, my cooking skills improved even more than before.

I couldn’t adjust to school life well, however. Bullying wasn’t yet considered a serious issue in this time, so I was often ostracized by my peers. Thankfully, I was fine academically and okay at sports, so I was never the main target of bullying, only excluded from activities. I didn’t make my first friend until college, but I was completely fine with that. I knew I would one day meet the only one who mattered.

I graduated college and started working at a trading firm. I hated the antiquated corporate drone work culture of this bygone era with a passion, but I endured it all for the sake of meeting Claire again.

After several years, I met her at a different trading firm.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Claire François.”

She spoke with perfect Japanese and lived as a capable career woman. Naturally, she didn’t have those huge curls like in the magic-based civilization but instead her familiar long, straight blonde hair. It was refreshing to see her like this, in something other than a lab coat.

At first, our relationship was purely business, but we hit it off and began dating in under a year. She nursed some disapproval of homosexuality in the beginning, but she quickly changed her tune. I’d long since had a feeling, but now I knew for sure that she was bisexual by nature.

“I love you, Claire.”

“I love you too, Rei.”

Not wanting to repeat the mistake I’d made in the past, I whispered words of love to Claire, and Claire whispered them back. We argued occasionally, but overall, our relationship was wonderful. She didn’t fall ill from any unknown disease this time and lived out her natural life span, making up for our late start and then some.

“I... lived a happy life.”

“Me too.”

“Thank you, Rei... my dear Rei... farewell...”

“This is only goodbye for now. We’ll meet again.”

I cared for Claire on her deathbed. Her last moments were peaceful. After she passed, I continued on to my next life.

I repeated this process over and over countless times. I had succeeded in my original goal: I had made my love for Claire eternal.

The loops weren’t always exactly the same. Whether in the science-based civilizations or the magic-based civilizations, our love birthed slightly different developments each time. The only constant was the fact that we got together and stayed together until the end. I always looked forward to the different shapes our love would take.

I believed things were going well. Humanity was able to continue indefinitely, and I could love Claire for all eternity. I had done my job perfectly.

It wasn’t until some more time passed that things began to go awry.

“It’s vexing.”

“What is?”

It happened during a science-based civilization, around the tenth loop. Claire and I

had just kissed for the first time in this life.

"You're so experienced at kissing. Just how many women's hearts have you broken before now?"

Claire said it jokingly, but I felt a shock like I had been hit upside the head. This should have been my special, one-and-only first kiss during this loop. Yet after all the lives I'd led, I had grown accustomed to kissing. I quickly said something to smooth things over, but from then on, Claire saw me as a woman with a long history of romantic experience.

There were no other problems in that loop, but a sense of unease followed me thereafter. I had always thought of Claire as new and inexperienced in love, but as time passed, I began to see that part of her as childish. Of course, she hadn't changed one bit.

I was the one who had changed. I had aged.

With each loop, my relationships with Claire grew more and more strained. Each time, the love in my heart lost some of its spark. Her sweet nothings, the kisses we exchanged, our nights of pleasure—everything gradually lost its flavor.

Then, on the hundredth loop, it finally happened.

"You don't enjoy being with me, do you, Rei? I don't think we should force this anymore. Let's break up."

It was the first loop where we didn't stay together until the end of our lives. I was shocked. But I accepted the breakup all the same. I knew full well that my love was running dry.

I had lived too many lives.

At some point, I stopped trying to live with Claire, whether it be as Rei Ohashi or as Rae Taylor, and put some distance between us.

I was fine with that. I still loved Claire, deep down. I could endure anything, even her hate, as long as I could avoid the worst-case scenario. But what if that worst-case scenario came to pass? What if a day came when I stopped feeling anything at all for Claire? The possibility terrified me.

"Should I erase a part of your memories of Claire, Rei?" TAIM proposed, having noticed my irregularity.

In hindsight, perhaps that would have been best. Unfortunately, at that point, TAIM's voice no longer registered as anything other than background noise to me.

I began thinking about ending the loops once and for all. It wasn't an easy thing to consider, as it meant bringing an end to all of mankind. This late in the game, I finally understood that Claire's worries all those years ago were justified.

But after much consideration, I decided I still loved Claire, and I didn't want to live in a world where my love for her had faded. So, I made my choice.

I would end the loops.

But I had a problem. No matter what, I absolutely couldn't bring myself to lay a finger on Claire. I wanted to end the world, but I didn't want to bring an end to her. I had a paradox on my hands.

That was when I had an idea: If I couldn't end her myself, I'd just have someone else end her for me.

I created a being known as the Demon Queen in the magic-based civilization and made her ruler of the demons. Demons and monsters had originally existed in the world as part of its background setting, as well as to replenish the fossil fuels that would be used in the mid-stages of the science-based civilization.

I gave the demons the authority to override the soul quantization process. Once the magic-based civilization began and Claire was killed by a demon, I would make my move to end human civilization.

But strangely enough, in the magic-based civilization where I became the Demon Queen, there was a Rae other than me. What's more, she acted exactly as I once had. I observed her, careful to not divert history from the moment Claire would be slain by a demon, as the other Rae enjoyed a youthful, spirited love with Claire. Over time, I came to despise that other Rae. But that didn't change what had to be done. I only needed to think about ending Claire's life—and then ending humanity. Nothing more and nothing less.

I knew this decision of mine was selfish. To end humanity was a graver sin than any

sin before it. But I had to do it. My feelings for Claire were fading even now. I had to end it all before they faded completely.

I had become the Demon Queen. The true enemy of humanity.

“And that is how it all began.”

The apostle’s words brought us back to our senses.

The experience had been otherworldly. The words “virtual reality” didn’t even begin to describe whatever that had been. My five senses, my memories, and even my emotions had been fully in sync with what I saw. The apostle hadn’t been kidding when they said they’d let us experience *everything* from the beginning.

“This all... happened to Rae and me?” Claire muttered in disbelief. She likely didn’t understand much of what she had seen, but what she did understand was shocking enough.

“I understand it is hard to believe, but everything you just saw is the truth,” the apostle said flatly.

At this point, I was half-certain of something. Hoping to confirm, I said, “Then, apostle, you must be—”

“Yes. I am TAIM, the Loop System’s control unit.”

Figured.

“Let me run something by you too,” Manaria said. “That Rei Ohashi just now was Rae from a past life, right? And that Claire François was our Claire from a past life? I take it this quanta-whatever business is being used to reincarnate them?”

“Almost correct,” the apostle—er, TAIM replied. “You are right about Claire François, but the Rae Taylor with us now is a separate individual from the Rei Ohashi that became the Demon Queen.”

“Huh?” How could that be? I remembered being Rei Ohashi.

"Rae Taylor, you may have memories from your time as an office worker, but you don't have any memories from being the Rei that became the administrator, correct?" TAIM said.

"Oh, yeah." Of course. If I were the one who'd made the Loop System, then I would have remembered it. In the past TAIM showed us just now, Rei had erased her memories as an administrator and lived a normal life; but if my memories had been erased, how could I remember my life as a corporate drone?

"That is because you are a pawn I prepared. You're a second Rei Ohashi created from the quantum data of her soul."

"Huh?" I wasn't the real Rei Ohashi?

"As you've just seen," TAIM continued, "the real Rei Ohashi has abandoned her duty as administrator and is trying to bring an end to humanity as the Demon Queen. I am trying to stop her, but unfortunately, I am but a tool meant to be used by humans. Without an administrator, I cannot function. That is why I created you, a Rei Ohashi who can replace the old one as administrator.

"I predicted the occurrence of this development beforehand, and in prior loops, I tested creating powerful individuals to fight the Demon Queen many times. Those who have lived in this world with your identical appearance are the remnants of those failures."

In other words, individuals like Elie and the pope.

"I finally succeeded in creating a powerful individual in the science-based civilization just prior to this one: you."

"Then the time I spent with Misaki and the rest was real?"

"Yes, those were without a doubt your own experiences."

Thank goodness... In that case, I was fine with all these developments. I didn't mind not being the real Rei Ohashi as long as the days I had spent with my friends were real in their own respect.

"I recovered your soul from the science-based civilization, gave you as much ability as I could, and implanted you in this world. But due to the capacity of your soul, all your

memories past a certain point in your prior life were lost. Recovering those memories would take too long, so I ultimately had to transfer you over with an unnatural cut-off in your recollection."

So that was why it felt like I had suddenly appeared in that classroom right when I was playing games after work. Now that I thought about it, Misha had said it was like I'd become a completely different person, so obviously there had been a Rae Taylor before me in this world. It couldn't have all been fake. That being said...

"Excuse me, TAIM, but you could do to phrase things with a little more tact," Claire scolded her sharply. "I don't care if Rae is your pawn, creation, or replacement. She's a living person and deserves to be treated with more respect!"

Claire was angry for my sake, which I appreciated. Listening to TAIM was honestly putting me on the verge of an identity crisis.

"Forgive me," TAIM said. "Even after millions of years, I still do not fully comprehend the inner workings of human emotion."

"I can tell," Claire snapped. "Listen carefully, okay? The Rae here isn't anybody's replacement. She's my one and only *irreplaceable* partner."

"Miss Claire..." I said, my eyes tearing up. I was truly lucky to have her as my partner. Even if I was a pawn fashioned to suit TAIM's goals, the love I shared with Claire was real. As long as she needed me, I could still live on as Rae Taylor.

"Hmm... Allow me to get things straight," Dole said. "TAIM, correct me if I'm wrong. First, a long time ago, a version of humanity advanced in science neared its demise."

"Yes," TAIM said.

If I recalled correctly, it was humanity's own treatment of the environment that had brought about their end.

"Then two scientists named Rei Ohashi and Claire François conducted research to find a way to allow humanity to survive, creating the Loop System?"

"On the surface, yes, but Rei's true hope was to find a way to love Claire François eternally," TAIM said.

Which was pretty extreme, even for (strictly speaking, not exactly) me.

"After its creation, the Loop System was activated and all of humanity has been cycling through science-based and magic-based civilizations with Rei overseeing everything as the administrator?"

"While also enjoying her time with Claire François, yes," TAIM replied.

But we all knew that hadn't lasted.

"Then after so many loops, Rei's feelings for Claire began to fade," Dole said. "So she's trying to stop the loops before those feelings fade away entirely."

"Correct. It's a selfish choice. I offered to adjust and erase her memories of Claire François instead, but the Demon Queen won't lend an ear to me anymore, so I've moved on to other strategies."

I also thought it rather selfish of the Demon Queen, but then again, I could never really know how she felt, not even after experiencing her past directly.

I was head over heels for Claire now and couldn't picture my love for her ever slipping. But the Demon Queen had lived an unfathomable number of lifetimes. To her, Claire might have been one of the few, if not only, lights in her darkness, and to see that light fade probably terrified her.

"Now hold on a sec..." a voice cut in, interrupting my thoughts.

"Yes, Rod Bauer?" TAIM said.

"Are we just supposed to lap up everything you say as the truth? All this outlandish talk of past lives and looping worlds, and somehow everything is this Rei person's fault? How do we know we're not just hearing one side of the story? Where's your proof to back this all up?"

Now that he mentioned it, it was a bit suspicious. That virtual reality thing had left me completely convinced, but if I really thought about it, there wasn't any guarantee that anything we'd been told or shown was true. As entrepreneurs from my past life had put it: "Those who control information control the world."

"Is the virtual reality you just experienced and my presence here not proof enough?"

TAIM asked.

"Of course not. Something like Salas's hypnotic suggestions could easily show us the same thing. You're gonna need harder proof to convince me." Rod seemed to distrust TAIM. Not that I particularly trusted her either. "And y'know, I don't really like how you're just laying the responsibility for everything on Rae and Claire."

"I only speak the truth," TAIM said.

"Is that right? What a relief it is that that truth just so happens to work in your favor," Rod said, a challenge in his eye, but TAIM just smiled back at him. He sighed. "The Demon Queen's our enemy. That much is clear. The question is whether or not *you're* our ally."

TAIM shrugged. "It doesn't seem like there's anything I can say to convince you that I am."

"Fine. Let's suppose you are an ally. What is it you want us to do?" Thane asked.

TAIM smiled broadly with Lilly's face. "Defeat the Demon Queen and take her administrator privileges."

"Huh? Is that even possible?" Philine asked in a small voice. "Being an, um, administrator basically means being the world's almighty ruler, right? How are we supposed to defeat someone like that?"

I had to agree with Philine. The Demon Queen was strong beyond belief. That strange magic Rod used had seemed to get through to her, but nothing else we tried so much as left a scratch. Stealing her administrator privileges seemed like a nigh-impossibility.

"Certainly, the Demon Queen is strong," TAIM said. "But she has many weaknesses."

"Oh, really? Please, do tell," William said.

"Firstly, she can't lay a hand on Claire François. If she could, humanity would have come to an end long ago."

"Are you suggesting we use Miss Claire as a shield?!" I snapped.

"That wouldn't be how I'd phrase it, but yes. The Demon Queen could blast an entire

mountain away if she so felt like it, but as long as Claire François is around, she's unable to use such broad attacks."

"Why, you—"

"That's enough, Rae," Claire interrupted. "TAIM, you mean to say the Demon Queen has to hold back when I'm present?"

"That is correct," TAIM said.

"Miss Claire, you can't be considering this!" I protested.

Claire ignored me. "All right, let's move forward assuming that'll do for defense. We still need to figure out our offense, however. The majority of our attacks can't get through the magic barrier around her."

"I believe Rod Bauer can do something about that. Am I wrong?" TAIM asked.

"No hesitation on using me like a tool, eh? Well, whatever. At least I get to make myself useful." Rod accepted his role with his usual easygoing air.

"Brother, what was that magic you used, anyway?" Yu asked.

"It's a new large-scale technique I developed. There's a lot of annoying steps to casting it because of its scale, but it's strong enough to be worth it! You saw how easily it pierced the Demon Queen's barrier, right?" Rod flashed us a confident smile.

"I'd like to hear a thorough explanation of it, if you don't mind," said Manaria. "I'm sure it's a military secret, but right now all of humanity's on the line. I trust you'll make the right decision."

"Shoot, I don't really have a choice, do I? I was hoping to save it for my rematch with you," Rod said.

"Is that right? But that magic sure didn't look like it was meant to be used on single targets to me."

The pair exchanged a wry grin.

At that moment, a sagacious voice echoed in the back of my mind.

"To all of humanity—"

"What's going on?" Philine said, confused.

"I sense a powerful magic energy!" said Hilda. "This must be the Demon Queen's telepathy!"

The voice continued without emotion. *"I am the Demon Queen, the one who will bring an end to humanity."*

From the sound of things, this voice was being heard by everyone all around the world. For many, this would be their first time experiencing telepathy. I could only hope mass hysteria wouldn't ensue.

"This world is to be destroyed by my hand. However, I am willing to postpone its destruction."

"Just who does she think she is?!" fumed Claire. But the color soon drained from her face.

"Bring me Claire François. For every day you don't, I shall lay waste to a country of this world."

FINAL CHAPTER

THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

"BRING ME CLAIRE FRANÇOIS. For every day you don't, I shall lay waste to a country of this world."

The Demon Queen's declaration was outrageous. But with her power, it was possible she would actually be able to do it. How many people would take her words seriously, though? The majority of people in this world hadn't even heard of the Demon Queen.

As such questions floated through my mind, the Demon Queen continued.

"For those unaware of my existence, allow me to demonstrate some of my power. What you see here is a mountain in Bauer."

An image appeared in my mind: Mt. Sassal, towering over twelve-thousand-feet tall and striking awe in those who laid eyes upon it. It had to be the Demon Queen's magic showing me this.

"Observe."

A loud rumbling sounded from the east.

"Whoa?!" The image in my mind changed to that of the imperial capital, Ruhm, from which a blue beam surged forth.

The beam flew over the distant border of Bauer and hit the side of Mt. Sassal. The air around us suddenly grew cold as the earth roared and the building trembled. Everyone dropped to the floor and covered their heads.

The shaking continued for a few moments more. After it stopped, I heard Rod's dumbfounded voice.

"No... You've gotta be kidding me, right?"

He expressed what was on everyone's mind. What we saw was unbelievable. The

Demon Queen's magic had frozen Mt. Sassel in its entirety.

Logically, I understood what had happened. The Demon Queen had most likely used the same attack spell I possessed, Absolute Zero, a super-aptitude water-attribute spell that instantly froze its target. The only difference was that she had frozen an entire volcano, and from several hundred miles away. No matter how hard I tried, such a feat would be out of reach for me.

The situation was a bit different, but it reminded me of this line a manga antagonist said when they were flooring the main character: "Kafrizz? No, that just now was only my weakest spell, Frizz."

I was living the same disbelief the main character must have felt then.

"Hopefully now you understand my words are not mere threats. I have more than enough power to bring humanity to its knees." Indifferent and devoid of emotion, the Demon Queen went on. *"You have two weeks to bring Claire François to Ruhm, the capital of Nur. This is what she looks like."*

The image in my mind changed again, this time showing me Claire. It was almost like a wanted poster. Wait, no, it basically *was* a wanted poster.

"I trust your leaders will make the wise choice."

With those last words, the telepathy came to an end. The leaders in the conference room with us got to work immediately.

"Hilda, prepare the emergency telepathy broadcast!" Philine ordered.

"At once!" Hilda bolted out of the conference room.

"Thane, you should return to Bauer for now," Rod said. "The citizens saw what just happened up close and are likely in a state of panic."

"But what of the battle with the Demon Queen?" Thane asked with a somber look.

"I hate to be this blunt, Brother, but with how long it's been since you've fought, I don't think you'll be much help in a fight," Yu said.

"Humph."

Yu gave one last push. "Please, leave this to Rod and I."

Dole spoke up as well. "Your Majesty, there are things only you alone can do. At this moment, the people need your presence."

"I understand. I'll leave managing Bauer's forces in your hands, Rod, Yu. Dole, come with me."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Thane and Dole quickly paced out the conference room.

"What'll you do, Manaria?" William asked.

"I'll stay here. I don't mean to sound arrogant, but you guys will need my strength to fight the Demon Queen. Sousse needs me as well, I'm sure, but this takes priority. I'll just have to trust the royal family and the nobles back home to hold down the fort. What about you, William?"

"Me? Hmm... I guess I'll head back to the Alpes once we figure out a bit more of our course of action. I mean, it's not like I'd be any good in a fight, ha ha!" Even in this situation, William didn't lay off the jokes. Or maybe he felt a need to lighten the mood?

"The question is what we do about the Demon Queen's demand..." Misha said.

A short silence followed.

Flustered, I broke it. "Wh-what do you mean? We'll do nothing, obviously. Right?"

There was no way we could hand Claire to the Demon Queen. Absolutely not.

"Rae, it's not that simple," Claire said.

"Miss Claire..."

"I'm sure everyone here feels the same way, but do you think the rest of the world will agree, after what they saw happen to Mt. Sassal?"

I couldn't find the words to refute her. What we had seen was simply that shocking.

Mountains commanded a powerful presence. Their existence alone made people feel awe. What was more, Mt. Sassel wasn't an ordinary mountain but a massive volcano. Yet the Demon Queen had frozen it solid in the blink of an eye. It was a feat beyond human understanding. I couldn't imagine many had the courage to face such a monster.

"So what, then? Are we supposed to just hand you over knowing you'll be killed?!" I demanded. There was no way I'd allow Claire to be a sacrifice. We couldn't even allow her to be killed in the first place; the only reason humanity hadn't yet met its demise was because Claire still lived in the loops. "If it's going to come down to that, let's just run away! I'll follow you to the ends of the earth if I have to!"

"And where would we run? That telepathy reached the whole world. There's nowhere for me to hide," Claire said with a smile.

I was crushed. I kept thinking that Claire was choosing to walk to her own death again. But I really should have known better than to let myself think that.

"Don't make such a face, Rae. I have no intention of dying."

"Miss Claire?"

I saw it now. Her smile wasn't that of a woman resigned to her fate. It was that of one determined to fight.

"Rae, I swear I'll uphold our promise this time."

"Our promise?"

"The one I broke at the time of the revolution: my promise to never give up. Do you remember it?"

"Oh..." I did remember it: After losing a wager against me—twice, might I add—I'd had her swear to God to never give up no matter what happened. "Miss Claire..."

"There has to be a way through this," she said. "I simply refuse to roll over and die like a dog."

"Miss Claire!" Unable to contain my happiness, I hugged her.

"Wha—Rae!" she said, flustered. "There are people watching! Let. Me. Go!"

"Aha ha ha. That's a relief to hear, Claire. There'd be nothing we could do to help if you decided to throw in the towel," Rod said.

"You'll help us then?" Claire asked while I was still hugging her.

"You bet. I just gained another reason to knock that Demon Queen down a peg, after all..."

"Oh? What's that, then?" Claire asked.

"She went and did in Mt. Sassal, the mountain that killed my pops. I was hoping to conquer it on my own two feet sometime soon." Rod had a conflicted look on his face. It was unusual to see him look anything but lighthearted.

"Master Rod..." Claire said, worried. Then she looked down at me. "Enough! How much longer do you intend to cling to me?!"

"C'mooon, just a bit longerrr."

"Aha ha ha!" Rod laughed.

Eventually, I had my fill of Claire and released her.

"Jeez..." Claire sighed. "Returning to the point, how do we move forward from here? It will be somewhat difficult to explain our situation to the leaders of other nations."

"You're right..." I admitted. Putting aside whether they fully believed the visions, those present with us just now had seen everything TAIM had to offer and had at least agreed that we couldn't let the demons lay their hands on Claire. But how in the world were we supposed to convince other people of the same thing without using TAIM's virtual reality?

As the two of us racked our brains, TAIM said, "I could lend some aid."

"Really? How?" I asked.

"I could use the authority of the Spiritual Church to convince the masses."

That was certainly a possibility. The Spiritual Church had followers around the world and was the most influential global religion to boot. They'd given relief to the poor and medical services to the people for ages, and in the process, they had become a spiritual pillar for the masses. Unlike the governments that often existed far away from the eyes of the people, the Spiritual Church was with them in their day-to-day lives. There was a fair chance that the people would listen to what the Church had to say.

"But would that be enough?" Claire asked. "We only have two weeks left. How are we to convince the world in that short span of time?"

"We'll use telepathy on the whole world, just like the Demon Queen," said TAIM. "I have the power to do as much. Of course, the words of a single cardinal like Lilly Lilium, or Yu Bauer, who is only well known in Bauer, won't have much effect."

"That's true..." Claire said.

"Oh, why not show everyone that virtual reality thing like you did for us?" I suggested.

"That won't do. The truth of this world is beyond the comprehension of the average person, and even if some could understand it, there's no guarantee they'd be supportive. They might even come to blame you personally for what happened, Rae Taylor. It's too risky."

She had a point there. The fact that this world was looping endlessly was hard to grasp. Even if some did understand it, the one who was trying to end the loops was me (technically, not really—you know what I mean), so they might well blame me for this mess, and that would just add to our current problems.

"So what do we do?" Claire asked TAIM.

"We will have the pope, Clarice Répète III, address the people. She too is someone who knows the truth of this world."

The townspeople were bewildered by the event that had just transpired. Powerless, they could do nothing but fear the impending demise the one called the Demon Queen had promised.

"D-did you see that just now?"

“You saw it too? What was that? That entire mountain was frozen in an instant...”

“Mama, I’m scared...”

“Everything will be okay, dear... Everything... will be okay...”

Hysteria hadn’t yet settled in, but it was only a matter of time. Fear would soon spread and multiply, before bursting forth at the seams.

“We just need to find this Claire woman and we’ll be okay, right?!”

“I-I know her! She’s one of those former Bauer aristocrats!”

“But wasn’t she the hero who overthrew the corrupt aristocracy?”

“Who gives a damn! If we don’t hand her over, we’ll be the next ones to get iced!”

Just as panic set in, a voice spoke in everyone’s mind.

“Do not fear.”

A voice that reverberated like soft rain on earth.

“What is it this time?!”

“Forgive me for speaking unannounced. I am Clarice Répète III, Pope of the Spiritual Church.”

“Her Holiness?!”

The people were surprised to hear another voice so soon after the Demon Queen’s. This voice was unlike the one before it, however. It was unrushed—slowly, so slowly, weaving one word after the other.

“I know the words of the one who calls herself the Demon Queen have struck fear within you. My heart aches when I think of the terror you must feel.”

The voice was without emotion, yet something about its cadence calmed the nerves.

“But do not be deceived. We must not heed the voices of the wicked. Please recall Chapter

3, Verse 2 of the Holy Scriptures."

Thou shalt be tempted by demons. It was a simple passage, but that only made it all the more impactful. The passage was known by many, not just the most zealous of believers.

The people recalled, then, the values they had cultivated, nurtured, and upheld within their hearts. The plain yet unmistakably present sense of justice inside of them revealed itself, dispelling any confusion they had felt.

"The Demon Queen demanded we bring Claire François to her. To this, I ask why? Why would the Demon Queen, in all her power, ask us to do such a thing? Could she not achieve it herself?"

The pope followed up by bringing the Demon Queen's demand under scrutiny, highlighting the contradiction between the Demon Queen's power and her order. The people caught on quickly.

"Yes. The Demon Queen, in fact, cannot do so herself. Why? Because Claire François is the one being who can strike down the Demon Queen."

That much was a bald-faced lie that the pope had thought up together with us, but we prayed it would have the intended effect.

Hope began to return to the faces of the people.

"The Demon Queen perceives Claire François to be a threat. She would have her way with the world if not for Claire. Do not be deceived. The moment we hand this woman to the Demon Queen is the moment we meet our doom."

The pope heavily reiterated the fact we couldn't surrender Claire.

"As we speak, the Nur Empire to the east is fighting the demons. The Demon Queen is also there, scheming to destroy humanity. My people, please hear what I have to say. I believe that now we must come together as one."

The pope's voice began to grow impassioned.

"This is not a battle for the Nur Empire alone. This fight will decide the fate of all humanity. Defeat is not an option. I understand well that not all are able to take up the

sword. But even the feeblest have a strength within."

What is that strength? everyone wondered.

"The strength of courage. The courage to stand against wickedness and repel fear. Trust in your fellows, and trust that tomorrow will come. We can every one of us fight by resisting evil, and together, we can win this war."

Even without being able to lift a sword, even without being able to use magic, we could all fight.

"Stand with me now. You need not do so alone. Whether you be with family, friends, companions, or an acquaintance met on the road, let us stand as one now."

After a pause, the pope finished with, *"I, Pope Clarice Répète III, declare this to be the beginning of our holy war."*

"Was that acceptable, Rae Taylor?"

"You did perfectly, Your Holiness." I gave the pope my seal of approval with a thumbs-up. From what TAIM had shown me, it seemed the telepathy broadcast had been a great success with the people.

I was also telepathically linked to the pope thanks to TAIM. Unlike earlier with the people, we could see each other, not just hear one another's voices.

"I hardly deserve any credit. Everything was thanks to the wonderful script prepared for me."

"Not at all. This was all thanks to your splendid performance!"

"Do you truly think so?" Her face was as devoid of expression as always, but she somehow seemed faintly happy.

"But I do agree, the script was pretty good as well," I said. "It was written by humanity's three finest rabble-rousers after all!"

"Who do you think you're calling rabble-rousers?" Claire huffed.

"That's mean!" Philine complained.

"I implore you to choose your words more carefully, Rae," Dole chided.

I'd meant that as a compliment but was quickly met with three voices of disapproval. The three of them—Claire, Philine, and Dole—were the ones who had composed the pope's script. Claire wrote the base draft, Philine supplemented with the Spiritual Church elements, and Dole added the finishing touches, resulting in an uplifting speech that had stirred even the murkiest of hearts. Incidentally, Dole was currently on his way back to Bauer, so TAIM was connecting him up to us telepathically as well.

"It looks like there are some in Bauer who want to join this holy war. How about it, Thane?"

I turned to the voice behind me and saw Rod addressing his brother. Thane was connected to us telepathically too, as with Dole.

"I won't allow it," Thane said. *"I see nothing good coming of having voluntary forces join this battle."*

"Oh, yeah?" Rod said.

"I want to avoid having those merely swept up in the moment, or worse, going with the majority, stand on the battlefield."

"But what about those with the genuine resolve to fight?"

"Resolve and a weapon alone do not make one a warrior. The belief that they're supporting the cause as they uphold day-to-day life will suffice."

"Aren't you underestimating your citizens a bit much?"

"They've forgotten in their zeal, but the Demon Queen is still a horrific foe capable of freezing a mountain whole. Against her, a group of untrained soldiers would be walking to their deaths." There was logic to his words. If they really knew what the fight entailed, I doubt many citizens would volunteer to join it.

"Yeah, I guess you're not wrong there," Rod said.

"It's best we keep our forces to a minimum regardless. That way we can fight around

Claire and mitigate the Demon Queen's wide-area attacks."

"I'm surprised," Rod said. "I didn't think you were the type to look at things from a military perspective."

"I'm not. I'm simply weak, unlike you and our sister, and have to see things from such a weak man's perspective." Thane's words went straight past humble all the way to self-deprecating, but his perspective was genuinely critical. His skills placed him far above an average person, but he was still able to calmly judge things from the perspective of the weak and powerless, and that was a valuable asset to have as a ruler.

"Hey, don't be so negative. And I still think we should at least try to make use of the people's help."

"How can we do that?"

"Head over to the First Corps' laboratory once you get back to Bauer. I already gave them the heads-up, so go ahead and give what's there to the citizens for me."

"You have something planned?"

"Perhaps," Rod said with a grin.

"I see. On another note, I'd like to attempt to get the Demon Queen to agree to settle this over one decisive battle with humanity, if at all possible, that is. That way we can avoid meaningless death."

"You think the Demon Queen would accept?"

"I don't know. She's trying to destroy the world; there's no telling what she'll do."

"Right. Well, whatever plan we go with, it'll still involve us sending Claire into danger," Rod said bitterly.

"At least we avoided the worst-case scenario. We managed to prevent our own people from turning against Claire—or Rae. I'd have hated to see it come to that."

"How unusual. I feel exactly the same way."

"This might just be the first time we've come to agree on something."

They smiled, and I thought it was a little heartwarming. They always seemed slightly reserved around one another, so seeing them ease up a bit like this was nice.

I turned my attention back to my conversation with Claire and the pope. “At any rate, it looks like it’s decided that we’re going to fight the demons instead of just handing Claire over.”

“Allow me to join the battle. I still regret not making it to help defend the capital. I left as soon as word of the Demon Queen’s appearance reached me at the cathedral, but unfortunately I was too far away.” The pope sounded truly apologetic.

“There’s nothing you could have done about that. Rather than fret about the past, let’s think about the future. Your area healing magic is powerful, and we would be glad to have you with us,” I said.

“Thank you.” She gave us a slight nod. *“I have to focus on travel, so I’ll be ending communications here. If something happens, please contact me through TAIM.”*

“Got it.”

“Until next time, Rae Taylor.”

“Oh, wait! One more thing.”

“Yes?” The pope tilted her head curiously.

I sat upright and bowed my head deeply. “I apologize for what TAIM has done to you and every other person with the same face as me. If it weren’t for the Demon Queen, my other self, making such a stupid—”

“Don’t be mistaken, Rae Taylor,” she interrupted me, though she continued in a somewhat gentle tone. *“Certainly, I was a little surprised to hear of my origin. I was even a bit angry when TAIM referred to me as your by-product. But that is fate. I mustn’t forget that no matter what the reason behind it was, if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t exist. At present, I feel nothing but gratitude toward you.”*

“Besides, you’re an artificial human born because of the Demon Queen as well, aren’t you? Instead of apologizing to us fellow lost children of spirits, you should be joining us in telling that Demon Queen a thing or two.”

I was a bit taken aback to hear the pope use such an uncharacteristically youthful phrase. "Your Holiness... are you really fine with that?"

"Yes. Let's go nag her together, 'Will you quit causing us trouble already?' Or something of the like."

"Aha ha ha." Perchance, did the pope actually have a sense of humor?

"Was that all?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry for keeping you."

"Not at all. I'll see you soon, then."

"See you soon."

The telepathy cut off there.

"I had no idea you were worried about such a thing, Rae." Claire wore a look of surprise. She was probably talking about the whole thing where I felt guilty about the lost children of spirits.

"How could I not be? Their situation's basically all my fault."

"If you bear fault, then I bear some fault too."

"No, it's all my fault."

"Don't be unreasonable!"

Somehow, we began outright squabbling.

"P-please, leave it at that, you two! Let's just agree that it's the Demon Queen's fault!" Lilly tried to smooth things over, TAIM's control over her having now dissipated.

"Allow me to apologize to you too, Lilly," I said. "It's not right that TAIM uses your body as she pleases."

"I-It's fine! I'm just happy I can be helpful to everyone. B-but I wouldn't mind being used as *you* pleased..."

“Lilly?” Claire said.

“N-nothing, Miss Claire!... Feh, get a room why don’t you...”

Claire and I fell stone silent.

“Aaaah, n-no, no, I’m so sorry!” Lilly said with tears in her eyes. She was cute, but I already had Claire, so... yeah.

At any rate, all that was left was to defeat the Demon Queen. Not an easy feat, for sure, but it had to be done. We had more allies now than at the time of the revolution, and many of them were among humanity’s strongest. If this wasn’t enough, nothing would be.

“Oh, just you wait. I’m coming, me.” I cracked my knuckles, dying to go smack some sense into my other self.

“*Absolutely not!*”

“Why?!”

“We can fight!”

“I said no, and that’s final!” Claire raised her voice with May and Aleah, something she rarely did. But I could sympathize.

We were in a Zurück, temporarily living in an inn completely rented out for Bauer citizens.

“You are still *children!*” Claire said. “You have no business fighting the Demon Queen!”

The twins had told us they wanted to join the battle against the Demon Queen which, naturally, had Claire up in arms. Having foreseen this somewhat, we’d tried to deceive them by saying we were just heading out for some work, but they’d seen through us right away. Come to think of it, it should have been obvious they would, what with the telepathy from the Demon Queen and the pope, as well as their cleverness that went beyond their years.

“But we’re strong!” May said.

“Maybe even stronger than Mother Claire and Mother Rae!” Aleah said.

But strength wasn’t our problem here.

“Yes, I know you two are strong,” I said. “But Miss Claire and I refuse to take you with us.”

“Why, why, why?!”

“I don’t accept this!”

The twins stamped their feet in frustration.

Hmm...

“You girls are very important to us,” I said. “If something were to happen to you, then it wouldn’t matter if we defeated the Demon Queen. We’d have lost in a greater sense.”

When the girls heard that, they quieted down.

“You *are* strong, and I know that well. But now is not the time for you to fight. Wait until you’re adults and have found something important of your own to protect.”

I tried to hug them then, hoping I’d been convincing. But they swatted my hands aside.

“How can you say that, Mama Rae?!”

“We don’t want anything to happen to you either!”

The twins protested with tears spilling down their faces. I was speechless.

“We don’t want to lose Mama Rae and Mama Claire just as much as you don’t want to lose us!”

“We’re not babies—we can protect ourselves! Don’t think so little of us, Mothers!”

The girls didn’t relent. Their reaction was similar to the time we’d told them we were leaving them behind in Bauer and going to Nur. The thought of the two of us leaving

them clearly echoed some trauma deep inside of them. But even so...

"No, not this time," Claire said. "We won't take you, no matter what you say."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, girls," I agreed.

We had no intention of compromising this time. Even if this choice hurt them, and even if they came to hate us for it, we refused to budge on that alone. Our children were just too precious to us.

"Don't say that, let's take them along," said a voice by the entrance to the living room we were in.

"Lilly...? No, you're TAIM, aren't you?" Claire said.

Indeed, it was TAIM borrowing Lilly's body. Lilly would never barge in like that without knocking.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but we're not taking the girls, no matter what," Claire said.

"There's no need to be so stubborn. Please, think about it some more."

"Tell me, then, what's there to think about?" Claire asked, at least willing to hear TAIM out.

"If we lose the coming battle against the Demon Queen, then May Barbet and Aleah Barbet will die regardless. We should be doing whatever we can to win."

"Absurd. Like Rae said, there's no point in a victory against the Demon Queen at the expense of our children."

"So you say, but what if I told you it would be impossible to defeat the Demon Queen *without* the children?"

"Based on what grounds?"

"My calculations. At my level, it is essentially precognition."

"You can do something like that?" Claire gave TAIM a doubtful look.

TAIM ignored the question. “Let me reiterate: With humanity’s current power, you will not defeat the Demon Queen. The strength of May Barbet and Aleah Barbet is absolutely necessary. Their absence will spell humanity’s defeat.”

“Even so, I refuse. If they were to perish in the battle, part of us would die with them. A life without my daughters can’t be called living.”

“That’s right,” I said. “We’re not bringing them, TAIM.”

As Rod had brought up before, it was dangerous to believe everything TAIM claimed without question, as we had no idea where the truth lay. That being said, I would have still refused to bring the twins along even if I somehow knew TAIM was telling the absolute truth.

“Hmm... Perhaps I should change my methods,” TAIM said. “Claire François, Rae Taylor, take these girls along or I’ll kill them.”

“Wha—how dare you!” Claire exclaimed as she and I immediately pulled out our wands and stepped before the twins.

“Forgive me, but you’ve forced my hand. You won’t bend unless I make you,” TAIM said.

“Do you really think your empty threats will sway us?!” Claire snapped.

“This is not an empty threat. I mean what I say.” TAIM’s bearing of inhuman indifference didn’t break in the slightest.

“Then we’ll strike you down right here,” I said.

“Can you? This body belongs to Lilly Lilium. Are you truly capable of killing her, who knows nothing of what’s transpiring?” TAIM asked nonchalantly.

“You’re *despicable!*” Claire snarled, incensed.

I was still of calm mind, but my limits were being tested. “We could run away without fighting, you know?”

“That’d be pointless. I am the Loop System and can therefore appear wherever I want in this world, as you should already know.”

TAIM just might be an even nastier problem than the Demon Queen, I thought. Is she really on our side?

"I apologize for going to extremes," she said. "However, I exist to ensure the continuance of mankind and am willing to do anything to that end."

As though reading my mind, TAIM quickly turned apologetic and noble. But I had already abandoned any thought of honestly trusting TAIM. Maybe she didn't lie, but she definitely spoke in half truths. She'd controlled humanity from the shadows since time immemorial. I couldn't allow myself to fall for her words and end up her pawn.

But what *could* I do? Her threat to kill May and Aleah unless we brought them with us didn't sound like a lie. If she'd concluded that they were necessary, then maybe she really would do anything to bring them. Still, that didn't change the fact that I didn't want the twins anywhere near the battle...

"Um, Mama Rae?" May said.

"We want to be living too," Aleah said.

Their voices brought me out of my internal conflict. "What do you mean?"

"The thing Mama Claire said just now," May said. "Before we met Mama Claire and Mama Rae, we were alive, but we weren't *living*."

"Being alive and being living are two different things," Aleah said.

The twins had latched onto Claire's earlier words. They were mature for their age, but what they were trying to express was difficult for their vocabulary.

"Every day we woke up, searched for food, ate, and slept; again and again," May said.

"Even in the convent, the only new thing we did was pray," Aleah said.

"But when we met Mama Claire and Mama Rae, we finally learned how to live."

"You showed us how people were supposed to be."

The twins smiled like little angels.

"I want to live a life worth living," May said.

"A life without my mothers can't be called living," Aleah said.

"May... Aleah..." Claire pulled the girls into a hug.

Even from within her arms, they continued to speak.

"Can we please fight with you? We still have to go home together," May said.

"Don't leave us alone. We have to stay together as four... No, five! Ralaire too," Aleah said.

The twins clung tightly to Claire.

"Will you still hesitate after your children have shown such bravery?" TAIM asked in that infuriatingly calm voice of hers.

"It's not that simple," I said.

"No, of course not. But there might be something for the twins to gain through joining the battle."

"What do you mean?" Claire said.

With the same smile on her face, TAIM replied, "This battle will likely lift the curse on their blood."

"What?! Truly?!" Claire exclaimed.

"I do not lie. Rather, I cannot tell lies."

The twins had a curse that caused anything their blood touched to turn into magic stones. It was a curse not even the Tears of the Moon could lift, so I couldn't help but get worked up upon hearing TAIM's words.

"TAIM, if we bring the girls, what are the chances they'll be hurt, and what are the chances they'll... meet the worst possible outcome?" I asked.

She replied, "Injury is almost certainly unavoidable. But their lives shouldn't come

under any danger.”

“Can we choose where to have them fight in the battle?” Claire asked.

“It’d be better if you follow my calculations more or less,” TAIM said. “Having them too far back will be more dangerous than not.”

Dead silent, Claire and I met each other’s gaze.

“Miss Claire...”

“But Rae...”

“I know. I’m reluctant as well. But I think we have to do what TAIM wants here.”

Claire seemed to still have some misgivings. I did as well, of course. Nobody wanted to bring their daughters to the battlefield.

“TAIM, are you absolutely certain we can’t defeat the Demon Queen without May and Aleah?” Claire asked.

“One-hundred percent.”

“There’s no chance they might lose their lives?”

“The chance isn’t zero, but it’s minuscule. I’ll be taking extra care to keep them safe.”

“Can the curse in their blood really be lifted?”

“Yes. It is almost guaranteed it will be, in fact.”

Claire looked the most conflicted I’d ever seen her. I understood her pain well. After what felt like an eternity of silence, she opened her mouth to speak. “I understand. We’ll take the girls along.”

“Very good,” TAIM said.

“But if *anything* happens to them, you must expect *me* to become the next Demon Queen.”

“Understood. I’ll devote all my processing power to keeping them safe.”

“Please do.”

I fully agreed with Claire’s decision but wanted to get some things straight. “TAIM, please answer me these three things,” I said. “First, you said May and Aleah’s strength will be necessary to defeat the Demon Queen, but what exactly do you want them to do? Second, you said you’d keep them safe, but how exactly are you going to go about that? And third, how do you suppose the curse in their blood will be lifted? Does it have something to do with the Demon Queen?”

If I didn’t get answers on these, I couldn’t in good faith bring the twins along. Unfortunately—

“I cannot answer those questions at this time,” TAIM said.

“Why?”

“As I’ve mentioned, the Demon Queen holds administrator privileges. I cannot deny the possibility that she is monitoring me now.”

A dissatisfactory answer. But I couldn’t sense anything particularly dubious about the AI’s conduct.

“Rae, let’s just protect our children ourselves and not rely on TAIM. This isn’t the sort of thing we should leave in another’s hands in the first place,” Claire said. She turned to the twins. “Listen carefully, all right? You two need to put your own safety first. If you can’t do that much, you won’t even be able to start thinking of helping others.”

“Okay!”

“Yes, Mother!”

“And don’t act alone. I don’t know who you’ll be working under yet, but make sure you follow their orders to a tee.”

“Okay...”

“Yes, Mother.”

"Neither Rae nor I will die, not under any circumstances. So... you girls absolutely mustn't die either, okay?"

"Okay..."

"Yes... Mother..."

Claire was a sobbing mess, her heart torn with anxiety. The twins were beginning to cry too, having seen their mother break down.

"You're not going to cry, Rae Taylor?" TAIM asked.

"Nah."

"So you're okay with all this, then?"

"Do you *want* me to knock your lights out?"

"Pardon my presumptuousness."

The fact that all this had come to be was because of my other self, so I couldn't cry. I had to stay strong and take responsibility for my other self's actions. "I swear here and now: We'll defeat the Demon Queen, and we won't lose anyone in the process. We'll achieve a perfect victory."

I couldn't allow myself any less.

"How praiseworthy. Allow me to give you one more piece of advice, then," TAIM said. "You'd do well to bring Lilly Lilium to the battle."

"Miss Lilly too?" I asked. Sure, Lilly was good with her swords, but I suspected there was more to it than that.

"Her time manipulation magic can weaken the Demon Queen's power. Magical energy is sourced from the flow of time, so slowing the Demon Queen's time should have an effect."

"But I thought only Lilly's split personality could use time manipulation magic."

"Her split personality is already one with herself. She simply hides it to avoid dredging

up bad memories for the rest of you.”

Oh... I never realized.

“If you use Rod Bauer’s magic weapon to break the Demon Queen’s barrier, Lilly Lilium’s time manipulation magic to weaken her, and tandem casting well, you stand a chance at victory,” TAIM said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll win. Definitely.”

We... no, *I* had no choice but to win.

Preparations for the battle progressed steadily. We went over the formation of the forces, our plans for the aftermath, how supplies were being moved and stored, and much, much more. There was a great deal of work to be done.

In the coming battle, the plan was to force a path through to the Demon Queen, fend off Platos and Socrat, who were sure to attack, and finally defeat the Demon Queen herself. To say things would be difficult was an understatement.

We decided only a small group would face the Demon Queen directly, specifically Claire, May, Aleah, Manaria, Lilly, Rod, Misha, Yu, and me—a total of nine people. Until we could reach her, however, we would be escorted by a combined force of soldiers from Bauer and Nur. We couldn’t let our strength be whittled down by Platos and Socrat, much less the swarms of common demons sure to be harrying us along the way.

The issue of the Demon Queen’s dreaded magic barrier still remained, but it seemed Rod had just the thing for it.

“I’m guessing that’s what this is for?” I asked.

“Yep,” Rod replied with a nod, patting the magical tool at his side. The tool was about the size of a large rock that fit in one’s arms, and an incredibly large magic stone was affixed to its backside. On its front, there was a cylindrical extension with another magic stone inlaid upon it. If I had to compare it to something from my modern sensibilities, it sort of resembled a turret you might see atop a tank. “This thing here’s our secret weapon—the large-scale magic construct *Focaliseur Magique*. But that’s a

mouthful, so just the Focalizer is fine.”

“*Focaliseur Magique*... That means ‘magic converger’ in the old Bauer tongue, right?” Claire said. My girl was just the greatest. You could see her cultured upbringing shining through.

“Okay, so... I’m guessing this thing gathers magic power or something?” I asked.

“That’s about right. Here, take a look at this.” Rod tossed me something.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a magical tool. It gathers magic power from those that hold it and channels it into this thing here for an attack.”

Oh, so it’s like the magic version of a Spirit Bomb, I thought.

“When I fired it at the Demon Queen last time, I used magic power stored up beforehand by the soldiers. It was pretty strong, right?”

“Yes, it was superb,” Claire said.

“Well, this time it’ll be even crazier, as Thane’s helping me gather power from all the citizens of Bauer. We won’t even need to hit her by surprise this time; we can just break through her shield head-on.” A bold declaration. So this was what Rod had been working on all this time.

“But somebody will need to protect the core, won’t they?” Claire said.

“Definitely,” Rod said. “We’ve still got those two demons to take care of before the Demon Queen, right? It’d be a problem if they got to this thing.”

“We can’t put this on the front line then,” I said. “What’s its range?” I recalled it had been fired from quite a distance last time.

“Mmm, at best, around a quarter-mile, I’d say. It can shoot farther, but then accuracy becomes a problem.”

“Then we should probably leave it on the back lines at the start and bring it just within range when we fight the Demon Queen,” Claire said.

"Yeah, I'd say that sounds best. This thing's strong, but we haven't been able to mass produce it yet. It's kind of our one and only prototype." Rod roughly scratched his head of black hair.

"Wait, isn't our final battle going to wind up being at the imperial castle? If we're going to be indoors, then maybe we'll have to bring it closer," I said.

"Can't we just knock down the walls?" Rod asked.

"Oh, dear. If Philine were here, she'd surely be making a face right about now," Claire said.

That being said, I doubted we'd really care about a building when push came to shove, what with the fate of the world hanging in the balance and all that.

"Was this magical tool your idea, Master Rod?" I asked.

"Yep."

"Huh. Really..."

"What, why do you look so surprised to hear that?"

"Well, it's just that I've always thought of you as more of the reckless fighter type, not so much as, well, a thinker."

"That's rude, Rae," Claire chided. "Master Rod has always been academically gifted."

"Nah, I actually agree with Rae here. I'm not really suited for these kinds of things. Even in magic, Thane's got me outclassed."

"That checks out," I said.

"Rae!" Claire chided.

"Aha ha ha! You really don't hold anything back!" Rod let out an easygoing laugh before continuing. "Y'know, I used to be the kinda guy that put more weight on the strength of an individual rather than that of the group. Never really doubted that belief either, as I had my crazy high magic reserves to convince me I was strong. But my thinking changed during the revolution. I realized that alone, I was weak."

“You? Weak?” I asked.

“Yeah. You two made that revolution possible by borrowing the strength of many, including me. You did something together that would have been impossible for any of us alone.”

Perhaps Rod’s decision to leave the royal family and join the army had also stemmed from this epiphany.

“I originally started developing this magic as a way to beat Manaria in a rematch,” he said. “But I realized there was no way I could beat her alone, so I changed my perspective a bit, yeah? I figure even if I can’t win on my own, I can at least make sure Bauer won’t lose anytime soon.”

“But couldn’t Manaria use Spellbreaker on this?” I asked.

“Doubt it,” he replied. “This magic uses the power of multiple people. It won’t be easy to analyze its structure, or even its mixed energies for that matter.”

“Wow. You actually have thought about this.”

“You seriously expect nothing from me, eh? Ha ha ha!”

I wasn’t trying to joke around, though; I was just genuinely surprised.

“In the end, my Focalizer’s being used on somebody other than Manaria, but that’s all right. The Demon Queen’s stronger than her, so I’d say she’s still a worthy target.”

“We’re counting on you, Master Rod. We’ll have no way of breaking the Demon Queen’s barrier without this,” Claire said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll knock some sense into that other Rae all right.” He smiled broadly, then seemed to think of something. “Oh, yeah, the Demon Queen *is* another Rae, isn’t she?”

“That’s right. Is something wrong?” Claire asked.

“No, it’s just that... This Rae’s all head over heels with Claire, but I might have a chance with a different one.”

"Master Rod, you still haven't given up on me?" I asked.

"Why would I?" he asked, seeming genuinely confused.

Good God, this is why I can't stand these arrogant types...

"In a sense, the Demon Queen is far and away more infatuated with Miss Claire than me," I said. "Don't you remember what you saw in that virtual reality TAIM showed us?"

"Oh, that recording thing? Yeah, I remember. But weren't her fading feelings for Claire also kinda the reason she's ending the world?"

"I suppose."

"Then sparking some new love within her might just be what we need! Once she realizes there's more worth living for than Claire alone, she'll think twice about ending the world."

That thought hadn't even occurred to me. But I had a feeling that the Demon Queen, who'd remained devoted to a single woman for several hundred million years, wasn't going to have a change of heart this late in the game. There was also another factor to consider. "Master Rod, for the umpteenth time, the Demon Queen and I like women," I said. "You, a man, have no chance with us."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. Besides, getting in the way of yuri as a male is a huge death flag."

"Huh? Yuri? Death flag?" Confusion filled Rod's face as he tried to make sense of my nerdy otaku lingo.

"Ignore her, Master Rod. It's just her usual nonsense," Claire said.

"Right. Ignore it I will, then. I'm looking forward to this coming battle... in a lot of ways."

"Jeez, this man can adapt to anything, just in the worst ways possible..." I groaned.

"Hm? Did you say something, Rae?"

"I said you sure can adapt to anything, Master Rod."

"Ha ha ha, really? Wow, I never thought I'd be praised by you of all people."

I wasn't praising you, though, I thought with a cold glare.

Rod's expression abruptly turned serious. "You might call it old-fashioned, but I believe men are at their best when they're protecting the woman they care for. Claire has you to protect her, but the Demon Queen doesn't have anyone fighting for her right now. That's just a little too sorry a sight for me."

"Master Rod..."

"I dunno how I'm going to do it, but I wanna try and help her if I can."

I couldn't muster a response to that. His thinking was alien to me. In my world, Claire was everything, and anything that threatened Claire was a bitter enemy. I had no intention of showing mercy to my enemies, but Rod somehow found room for compassion toward his foes.

I wasn't the type to believe strict differences existed between genders but rather between people as individuals. This difference in thought between me and Rod wasn't a difference between man and woman but a difference between Rod, the man who would never change until the day he died, and me, the woman who hadn't changed even after death.

"Aleah, let's attack together! Ice!" May yelled, firing an ice arrow to allow her sister to use her Spell Sword.

"Oh, no you don't!" Claire yelled. Her flame spear met May's ice arrow in the air, vaporizing it, but May had succeeded in creating an opening for her sister.

"You're open!" Aleah yelled, stepping in and swinging her wooden sword down on Claire.

"Are you sure?" Claire smoothly parried the sword with her magic wand, using her momentum to spin and sweep Aleah's legs out from under her. Aleah fell to the ground.

"Aaand stop," I said with a clap. "That's enough. Let's take a break, you three." I brought them all towels and some water, which they used to wipe their sweat and quench their thirst.

We were in a park in Zurück. It was empty save for us, perhaps because we were in a time of war.

"Whew... Thank you, Rae."

"Thank you, Mama Rae."

"Thank you very much."

"You're very welcome. I see you've all worked up a good sweat."

The trio were doing combat training for the coming battle. Claire was holding back, Aleah was using a wooden sword, and May was only using up to medium-aptitude magic, but it was solid combat experience otherwise. TAIM had said before that the twins could rival Dorothea together, but I still thought they had a critical lack of experience.

Only a few days remained until the battle, so we were doing all we could to prepare.

"Mama Claire is so strong..."

"Indeed. And I was so confident that I hit her too..."

May and Aleah sounded half impressed and half dejected. The twins were geniuses, no doubt, but they were still no match for Claire in their little sparring match.

"I'm sure you two will be stronger in a real fight. But the point of this spar wasn't to win," Claire said.

"Was it to practice working together?" May asked.

"Our teamwork still has room to improve, doesn't it?" Aleah said.

It was best to have the twins fight as one unit. They were strong individually, but their true strength came from working together, as TAIM had said. Aleah's Spell Sword, which could be formed from both their powers together, was especially powerful; it

could even have penetrated Dorothea's Magic Nullification. I couldn't see us not making use of it in the coming battle. The only problem was whether the girls could learn to use it efficiently. The battlefield was ever-changing. One had to respond accordingly not only to their enemies but to the condition of their allies. The twins were fast learners, but their age hadn't even hit the double digits. There were some limits no talent could break.

At the very least, however, this practice would increase their chances of survival. Claire and I were teaching them with an emphasis on protecting themselves rather than defeating the enemy. To that end, we were even getting a little Spartan with them. Normally, Claire and I would never even think of sparring with our daughters, but we had no choice given the circumstances. I felt a bit ashamed as I watched them reflect on their sparring session.

A voice called out to us, then. "Good afternoon, everyone."

"Oh, Philine. How are you?" Claire asked.

Philine had shown up with two long, slender objects in her arms.

"Good afternoon, Miss Philine," May said.

"How do you do, Miss Philine," Aleah said.

"Heh heh. Wow, thank you for greeting me so nicely, girls." Philine bent over to pat the children's heads.

"Heh heh!"

"But of course!"

The twins beamed.

"Hey, Philine. Do you have some business with us today?" I asked.

"Yes, I actually have a gift for the twins here."

"Really? And you're delivering it yourself?" Even if she hadn't been officially crowned yet, Philine was the Empress of Nur. She had to be busy with all kinds of preparations for the battle. That being the case, wouldn't it have been more natural for her to

summon us, or even to send someone to deliver the gift?

"Yes, well, I wanted to get out for a change of pace," she said with a smile. I could see exhaustion on her face. "Anyway, my gift isn't exactly the most suitable thing for children, but with times being what they are..." She put the pair of long, slender objects on the ground. One was about a foot long and the other about twice that. "The short one's for May, and the long one's for Aleah. Go ahead and open them up."

May and Aleah opened their presents.

"It's a magic wand!" May said.

"Mine's a sword!" Aleah said.

Their presents were a child-sized wand and sword.

"They're my mother's, from when she was a child," Philine said. "I figured you two would have some difficulty finding weapons for your children."

It was as she said. Even in a military superpower like Nur, it wasn't normal for children to fight. Indeed, since so many people became soldiers, there was hardly a need for it. As a result, the only weapons meant for children were training replicas used in schools rather than anything with real, practical use.

"Mother couldn't use magic, so the wand is practically brand-new" Philine said. "The pope visited me yesterday, so I had her bless the weapons. They should work well on demons."

"Thank you, Miss Philine!" May said with glee.

"Mine looks used..." Aleah said.

"I'm sorry, Aleah. My mother's sword isn't new, but I can at least guarantee its strength. It's made from adamantite and should be at a weight even a child can wield. Most importantly, it's very hard to break and bend."

Aleah gave the sword a light swing. "Yes, it seems very easy to wield. Thank you very much, Miss Philine."

"But why give them to us?" I asked. "Wouldn't you want to keep your mother's things?"

"She left a will. In the event something happened to her, she wanted these to be given to her disciple Aleah and her sister May," Philine said with a faint smile. "Mother thought about Aleah until the very end. How very like her..."

I had a feeling no mention of Philine had been left in the will.

"Oh, don't misunderstand. I'm not jealous of the girls or anything. Mother wasn't very good at expressing herself, but I'm sure she thought of me too—although I've realized that perhaps a bit too late, ha ha," she laughed lightly. "Besides, Mother's already left the greatest gift she could in my hands."

"What's that, then?" I asked.

"The throne, and the empire along with it."

Looking at her face now, I couldn't see any trace of the crybaby Philine had once been when we first met her.

"I must protect this gift Mother left to me. To that end, I have to eliminate the Demon Queen and the demons nesting in our capital. Even these gifts for May and Aleah serve that purpose, although I'm sure you and Claire have mixed feelings about that," she said a bit sheepishly. "May, Aleah, please lend me your strength. Help me strike back at the ones who killed Mother and bring peace to Nur... no, to the world." Philine bowed her head.

"I'm sorry, Miss Philine," May said.

"But we have to refuse," Aleah said.

"Wh-wh-whaaaat?!"

The twins completely disregarded the mood and flatly declined Philine's request. Philine quickly reverted from empress-mode to her former, easily shaken self.

"We only want to fight to help Mama Claire and Mama Rae," May said.

"We're sorry, Miss Philine," Aleah said.

The twins smiled in spite of the situation. Sometimes, children could be frank to the point of being cruel.

"O-oh, is that right? Is that right... ha ha ha..." Philine laughed weakly.

"But..."

"Even so..."

"Yes...?" Philine urged them to continue with her eyes.

"I dunno what 'peace' means, but..." May said.

"Dorothea was really nice to us, so we'll return the favor," Aleah finished.

Together, they smiled again.

Something shone in the corners of Philine's eyes as she hugged the twins. "Thank you."

"Miss Claire, it's about time we make the rounds... What's that you have there?"

It was our turn to patrol the town and perform final checks on our preparations for the battle, so I came to get her only to find her gazing lovingly at some long, thin object.

"Oh, Rae. I'll get ready right away."

"Is that a bookmark?"

"Yes. Pepi and Loretta made it for me by pressing some of the flowers we raised together at the Academy."

Oh, is that so? It's not like that makes me jealous or anything...

"Then those marguerite daisies you left in a vase on my desk around the time we met were also yours?" I asked.

"Um, y-yes?"

"You should have told me! If I had known, I would have pressed them into a bookmark of my own—*nay!* I would have eaten them so they could become my very own blood and flesh!"

“I’m sorry I treated you so... huh?”

Whoops. Getting a little carried away there, Rae, I thought. “It’d be nice to visit them after the battle.”

“Yes, we could chat over tea about all that happened.”

“That would be great.”

“Indeed... We’d best be off. Shall we?”

With the departure for battle being the next day, everyone was conducting their final preparation checks, and people were giving their parting words to the soldiers who would be fighting. I say “parting words,” but it wasn’t really anything too pessimistic, more encouragement and pep talks being given all around.

“You better not lose. Take back the capital for us all.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t fret. I’ll get those demons good for ya.”

“Don’t push yourself. Just come home safe and sound.”

“Try your best, Papa!”

Claire and I walked the streets of Zurück, observing the citizens around us. May and Aleah were back at the inn under the protection of the ex-senior maid and the other bodyguard.

“There’s no guarantee these soldiers will make it back home to their families,” Claire said somberly.

“The same is true for you.”

“I know. But I have no intention of leaving May and Aleah orphaned again.” She was probably reflecting on how the twins had been in tears when they said they didn’t want to be left alone again. The Claire who had once so lightly offered up her life for the revolution now had something to protect and return to.

"Ah, I finally found you! Ms. Claire! Ms. Rae!"

"Oh, Mr. Torrid," Claire said.

"Hello," I said.

Mr. Torrid called out, seemingly having been looking for us. He wasn't in combat attire but plain clothes; he wasn't taking part in the battle.

"A few letters from your students in Bauer have come for you." He opened his satchel and handed Claire three letters. "They probably sent these as soon as they heard of the battle. I can't see them writing the name and address so messily in any other case."

That was Mr. Torrid for you—ever the eye for detail.

"I'll be off, then. Take care."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Torrid," Claire said.

"Yes, thank you very much," I said as well.

He quietly bowed and left. He might not have been taking part in the battle, but he still had much work to do.

"We've been in his care for so long, and yet we hardly know a thing about Mr. Torrid," Claire said.

"Let's get to know him better when we return to Bauer. We should thank him for everything as well," I said.

This was, of course, supposing we made it back to Bauer.

"What do the letters say, Miss Claire?"

"Let's see..." Claire undid the seal and opened the letters.

The first was from Lana.

"Ms. Rae, Ms. Claire, I heard about your battle with the Demon Queen. I'm sorry I can't be there to help you in your time of need."

To my surprise, she had penned an apology—rare for her.

"I'm worried, but I'm also sure my beloved Ms. Rae and her beloved Ms. Claire will pull through just fine!"

Now that was more like her.

"There's still so much you two need to teach me. So you better make it back safe, okay?"

And that was the end. Short and sweet.

"She seems worried about us in her own Lana way," I said.

"Indeed. But she doesn't seem to understand yet that you're mine and mine alone," Claire said.

"Oh? Do you finally feel like being upfront about your feelings?"

"Is that a problem?"

Oooh. Claire's super cute today.

The next letter was from Joel. Spanning only a single line, it read: *"I trust you both will emerge unharmed. I bid you good fortune in battle."*

It was even shorter than Lana's letter, and a bit blunt. In other words, it was exactly the sort of thing Joel would write.

"Knowing her, I'm sure it took more than an hour to write this one line," Claire said.

"I agree wholeheartedly."

Joel didn't ever say much, but she always put a great deal of thought and heart into what she did.

The last letter was from Eve. It was also the longest.

"Dear Ms. Rae and Ms. Claire, I have no right to ask you for anything, what with all the trouble I've caused, but please, keep Lady Manaria safe. Lady Manaria is strong, but she often errs when faced with the unexpected. Please make sure she doesn't carelessly lose

her life.”

What a surprise. I'd never thought that superhuman of a woman would be seen in such a way by someone close to her.

“Especially you, Ms. Rae. You are Lady Manaria’s weakness. As you watch over her, please remember to stay safe yourself.”

I had no words. If I had seen this letter before the four-nation summit occurred, things might have played out very differently.

“Ms. Claire, I have no doubts regarding your safety. Please look after Lady Manaria and Ms. Rae for me.”

And that was everything.

“It looks like there’s a lack of confidence in both me and Lady Manaria,” I joked.

“Eve’s just worried because you’re both important to her.”

I could understand Eve being worried about Manaria, but me? I doubted it, but then again, I was sure Eve didn’t despise me like she once had, now that she had been rescued from that brainwashing. *Actually, it’d be nice if she were worried about me.*

“We’ve been blessed with good students,” Claire said.

“Very. Let’s make sure we thank them when we return.”

We nodded to one another, and she stored the letters away in her bag carefully as though they were her treasures.

Another voice called out to us then. “Oh, it’s you two. Should folks as important as you be standing around here wasting time like this?”

“Huh? Um, you’re...”

“Good afternoon, Marthe. It’s been a while.” Claire bailed me out right when I was struggling to remember this person’s name. The well-rounded middle-aged woman in an apron before me was Marthe, the cafeteria lady at the Imperial Academy. She had done the commentary for our cook-off together with Lana.

"We were just about finished with our patrol. What brings you here to Zurück, Marthe?" I asked.

"I'm working mess for the battle. Not much fighting to be done on an empty stomach. Ain't that right, Marco?"

"Uh-huh," said the man I assumed was Marco. I didn't recognize him.

"Uhh..." I blanked.

"And who might you be?" Claire asked, seeming to not recognize the man either this time.

"Ya gots to be kiddin' me! It's me! Me! Y'know, the head chef! Remember?"

"Whaaat?!" I exclaimed.

"You've, um... filled out some...?" Claire ventured. The last time we'd seen him was at the cook-off, and I could have sworn he was pretty lean then. Now he was all chubby.

"Yeah, well, think about it," he said. "You can eat all kinds a' crazy good foodstuffs in the empire now! Who wouldn't gain weight?!"

"Learn some self-control, greenhorn!" Marthe thundered, making Marco hang his head dejectedly. "Anyway, just know you two ain't gonna hafta worry about food on the battlefield with us behind ya. So feel free to give your part your all."

"Thank you very much," Claire said.

"Thank you both," I said.

Our soldiers' morale would improve if these two were providing the provisions. As Marthe noted, battles weren't won on empty stomachs.

We parted ways with them and walked some more before running into yet another familiar face.

"Huh? Sandrine?!" I exclaimed.

"Your Holiness?"

The woman in nun's attire was Sandrine. She had taken care of me back when I was swapped with the pope. She was both the pope's personal attendant and her poison tester. She was also the first person with whom I'd experienced asphyxiation play.

"Who is this?" Claire asked.

"Uhhh..." I had inadvertently called out to Sandrine, but we had only met while I was acting as the pope. As far as she knew, we were total strangers.

"You're not Her Holiness, are you?" she said. "Might you be Rae Taylor then?"

"Do you know Rae?" Claire asked.

"I do. She put herself in harm's way to act as Her Holiness's body double. I cannot thank you enough for your efforts, Miss Rae." Sandrine bowed deeply. It seemed someone had explained everything to her.

"It was nothing. If anything, I should be apologizing for deceiving you." I bowed my head as well.

"Leave it at that, you two, or we'll be here all day," Claire said. "What brings you to Zurück, Sandrine?"

"Well, I wanted to assist Her Holiness, but it was determined that I'd only be baggage, so I'm to wait in this town for her return instead." Sandrine looked very saddened by this fact. Her eyebrows were scrunched together, forming a mountain peak. "I suppose it can't be helped, as I have no fighting prowess to speak of. You both will be joining the battle, right? Could you please make sure Her Holiness stays safe for me?" She grabbed our hands with tears in her eyes.

I was a bit taken aback, but Claire replied, "Of course, leave her to us. We'll make sure Her Holiness returns safely to your side. So please, be at ease."

Claire flashed a smile full of benevolence, the kind she rarely ever showed me. We parted with a greatly moved Sandrine and continued to walk the streets of Zurück.

"Hey, you two!"

Hearing a feminine, high-pitched voice call out to us, Claire and I turned around. Standing there was a woman in a soldier's uniform.

"Ugh," I groaned.

"Don't be rude, Rae," Claire chided. "Good afternoon, Adelina."

"Humph. Still as prim as ever, eh, Claire François?"

Adelina was Otto's older sister, as well as someone who had once tried to gather young soldiers of the imperial army together for a coup d'état that eventually fell through. Oh, and we weren't on the best of terms.

"Are you fighting in the battle, Adelina?" I asked.

"Are you mocking me? There's no way a small fry like me would be granted the honor of fighting on the front line!"

How the heck was I supposed to know that? I thought. "Then what are you doing here in Zurück?"

"This is why civilians are just..." she muttered. "Listen up, all right? You can't fight a battle by just tossing people at the front line, you need a long supply chain with multiple points of defense—" She continued to share her vast knowledge of military tactics for some time. "—and that's everything. Got it?"

"Not one bit," I replied.

"Goddamn it! Are you trying to make a fool out of me?!"

No, your speech was just too long and hard to follow, I sulked.

"I see," Claire said. "So you have the important duty of protecting the supply lines needed to maintain the front line of the battle?"

"Humph. It seems Claire at least has some brains. Yeah, you got it. I'm disgusted by the idea of leaving this battle against the demons in the hands of you lot, but it's what Her Imperial Majesty ordered. You better not betray her expectations, all right?!" Having said her fill, Adelina began to storm off. She stopped, however, to turn around and whisper, "Otto's worried about you both, so you better not die."

Afterward, she stormed off for real.

“What in the world was that?” I asked.

“I think I know. She’s being tsundere,” Claire replied.

Claire had recently grasped the concept of tsundere. Which begged the question, if a tsundere met another tsundere, would that make tsundere-squared?

What the heck was I even thinking?

We continued to make our rounds and were greeted by many others who gave us words of encouragement.

“It looks like we’ll be carrying the hopes of many into battle tomorrow,” I said.

“Indeed...”

Our battle with the Demon Queen was no longer just to bring an end to her violence but to restore peace to all who lived in this world.

“We can’t lose,” I said.

“No, we mustn’t.”

We had reached the end of our patrol. I took Claire’s outstretched hand in my own and walked back with her to the inn.

At long last, the day we would leave the fortified city of Zurück and make for the imperial capital was upon us. The main forces stood ready for departure, having formed ranks through the center of the city. The streets were already near capacity from the sizable number of soldiers, so only a minimal send-off was allowed.

The soldiers stood at attention and listened.

“Soldiers, I thank you all for gathering here today.”

Philine’s voice was soft but carried majesty. A wind mage had created a wide-reaching telepathic channel to bring her voice to all the soldiers so she could give a speech before the march.

"Standing with us now are not only imperial soldiers but our new brethren from Bauer as well. They too have my thanks. Our countries have been at war for some time. I understand some of you have reservations with regard to fighting alongside old foes. But let's save those reservations for after our battle. Now we must fight as one for humanity."

A temporary alliance had been struck between Bauer and Nur. To tell the truth, many of my fellow citizens still had misgivings about those from Nur. The schemes the country had enacted against Bauer couldn't be forgotten overnight, after all.

"I feel sincere remorse for the aggressive actions my mother Dorothea Nur undertook and am fully willing to pay due reparations. But if we fall to the demons here, then there will be nothing to be done. Please, everyone, lend me your strength."

Philine's address to the Bauer soldiers carried weight. She truly believed the unity of the forces was paramount.

An address to the imperial soldiers followed. *"Brave soldiers of the empire, from this day forward, you need not lay hands on your fellow man ever again. From now on, we fight only humanity's common enemy, the demon army. Our empire has invaded numerous neighboring countries. The intent was to create a unified, powerful nation that could oppose the Demon Queen, but that can never justify the suffering we have caused. But know this, my dear soldiers: You need not carry the burden of our sins. The one who ordered such terror was the throne itself. As loyal soldiers, you had no choice but to obey. Instead, I beg you to find it in yourselves to forgive us for ever delivering such orders."*

Philine tried to alleviate the soldiers' guilt, if even just a bit. As the new leader, she could have easily deflected the blame onto the old regime, but instead, she chose to bear the cross.

"I know I cannot convince all of you. Some of you will still blame yourselves for the things that have been done."

I recalled General Sascha, who had willingly given his life during the invasion of the capital, voicing such sentiments. As we parted, he said: "It is the duty of an imperial soldier to protect the lives of the empire's citizens. After causing nothing but harm to the citizens of other countries, we can finally fulfill our purpose. Please allow us to carry out our duty."

As someone from Bauer, a nation on the receiving end of the empire's aggression, as well as someone who had been forced to directly fight the empire's schemes during the revolution, I found it hard to forgive its soldiers. But I also understood they weren't wholly without doubts about their actions. I just wish they had acted on those doubts.

"But if you still find yourself racked with guilt, then please, let this battle be your atonement. Fight to protect humanity, friends, neighbors, comrades, and your new Bauer allies. Let your past deeds be absolved with each wound you earn protecting another."

Philine craftily stirred her soldiers, turning their latent guilt into further fuel for battle.

"We shall take back our capital from the one who proclaims herself the enemy of humanity! We shall take back Ruhm from the Demon Queen!" Philine's voice grew impassioned as her speech reached its climax. *"By the honor of my mother, who died dreaming of a brighter tomorrow for humanity, we shall strike down the Demon Queen! My friends of Bauer, my soldiers of Nur, let us restore peace to mankind!"*

The soldiers raised a cheer in response.

"Individually, we are weaker than the demons. But when we join hands, we are without equal. This is not newly true; it has been so since the days of old. Let us join hands with those who lived before us and crush the Demon Queen with the weight of mankind's history."

In other words, she was saying the soldiers would fight imbued with the will of those who had come before them.

"The time is now. Our foe is great, but I know our unified strength will triumph." She paused for a moment, then proclaimed, *"Humanity's future rides on this battle! Let us seize victory for the sake of a tomorrow—one we save for our families, our neighbors, our friends! Forward, march!"*

The soldiers raised a grand cheer in response, and the front of the line began to move. At last, we were off.

"Well done, Philine," Claire said.

"That was a good speech," I said.

"Aaah, thank you..."

While this reveal comes a bit late, Claire and I were actually with Philine, who only moments ago had been boldly giving a speech but had now deflated back to her old ditzy self. The two of us had helped draft her speech.

Philine was clad in magic armor like her mother's, only Philine's was white. She looked something like those dignified female knights you often saw in manga, only her current limp exhaustion reminded me more of that disgraced knight cliche where they begged for death over humiliation after being beaten in battle.

"I was so nervous... Does it look like it went over well with the soldiers, Claire?" she asked.

"Everyone seems to be in high spirits to me," Claire confirmed. "There are no volunteer soldiers, everyone being either Nur soldiers or Rod's forces, so they're well trained and know how to bolster their morale."

"I can't speak as to whether they'll all fight to their last breath, but it doesn't seem like we have to worry about any chain desertions," I said.

"Phew... Thank goodness..." Philine breathed a sigh of relief, reminding me of a new company hire who had just finished giving their first presentation. She had already given a speech when the capital got taken though, so, like, pull yourself together already, c'mon.

"Were you really that worried?" I asked.

"Of course! Putting the Nur soldiers aside, the Bauer soldiers are being made to fight alongside their mortal enemies, and that's with *our* capital being the only thing damaged so far!"

She did have a point. The only country really under the gun here was the empire; it would be a while before any danger came Bauer's way.

"That's not true," Claire said. "The Bauer soldiers also heard the Demon Queen's proclamation. And I'm sure they feel the pressure after seeing her freeze Mt. Sassal."

"Oh, yeah, that happened," I said.

"I suppose you're right," Philine said.

The Demon Queen's power reached from the capital to distant Bauer. Nowhere was safe at this point.

"At any rate, we should try to reach the capital as fast as we can," Claire said. "If we take too long, friction might arise amidst the troops."

"You're right. But our enemy will be fighting us full force this time... I'm a little worried," Philine said meekly. I thought she might as well commit to the bit and plead for the end already.

"Pull yourself together and stand proud. You're this army's commander, aren't you?" Claire said.

"I asked you to be, but you refused..."

"Claire can't be the commander," I said. "The commander draws the most aggro."

"Aggro...?" Philine echoed.

"Oh, sorry. The commander gets targeted the most."

An army couldn't afford to let their commander die, naturally, but even injuring or taking them hostage could make an army crumble.

"Besides, with her strength, Claire's best left free to operate as she pleases," I said.

"I know, but still..." It seemed Philine still hadn't fully recovered from ditz-mode. "I wonder if Mother ever worried like this," she mumbled.

"I get the impression she wasn't one to do so," Claire said.

"Figures... She was a genius... unlike me..." Philine sighed, growing more dejected by the minute.

"There's no reason you have to be like Dorothea," I said. "You can lead everyone your own way."

"I can't do that..."

"You can. You may not have charisma, but you do have a different trait that makes people want to follow you."

Philine's downcast face shot up, her eyes full of expectation. "R-really?! I do?!"

"You naturally make people want to protect you."

"Whaaaaat, that's basically saying I look helpless!" She slumped her head back down.

"Hold on, Rae," Claire said. "You wouldn't happen to be toying with Philine under the guise of trying to cheer her up, would you?"

"Oh, you could tell?"

"Don't 'you could tell?' me!" she snapped.

"Waaaaah!" Philine began to bawl her eyes out.

Perhaps I'd taken my teasing too far. "But look," I said, "in all seriousness, you're a lot more suited for the current situation than Dorothea."

Philine sniffled. "What makes you say that?"

"I mean, c'mon, even with all this impending doom going on, could you really see Bauer's forces joining hands with Nur's if Dorothea were at the helm, after all she did to us?"

"Oh."

"That's... true," Claire reluctantly admitted.

It wasn't all that hard to imagine. Even if you touted it as "for the sake of humanity's future" and all that, there were more than a few emotional hiccups that just couldn't be handwaved.

"But your record is as spotless as they come, and again, you have that quality that makes people want to support you. You're perfect," I said.

"Why do I feel like you're still making fun of me?" she said, not wholly convinced.

"C'mon, all that's left is for you to get a little used to things. Not even Miss Claire was the super-composed person she is today from the get-go."

"Really?"

"Really. When I first met her, she was infatuated with bullying me, and—"

"Don't lie!" Claire interjected. "You were the one infatuated with me bullying you!"

"Just what is your relationship?" Philine asked, physically recoiling a little.

"Anyway, as long as you keep quiet, you can pass for a laudable, dignified, female knight. Just leave commanding the army to Master Rod and Hilda," I said.

"I-I see," she said with understanding. She finally seemed to recover her willpower.

"Rae and I will be getting ready to depart soon. It's time for our battle to finally begin."

"This is the moment our love will be tested, Miss Claire."

"Can't you two go flirt in front of someone else...?"

While momentarily derailed because I had decided to cheer up Philine, I ultimately managed to restore my Clairecium values. I thought I heard some grumblings from Philine, but that follow-up is a story for another day.

"Enemy monster forces sighted a quarter-mile ahead!"

"Ready the long-distance magic!... Fire!"

On Hilda's command, magic bullets of all four colors were unleashed. They traced an arc over the highway, raining down and tearing a good portion of the monsters to pieces.

"Enemy forces are still advancing!"

"No problem, just keep firing. The soldiers at the front can handle this. Vanguard, forward!" This time Rod, commanding the front lines, gave the orders. The mages that

excelled at close-quarters combat readied their magic wands and swords capable of channeling their power.

"They may outnumber us, but we make up for quantity with quality. Don't falter! Force them back!" Rod commanded as he led the charge, clashing with the approaching goblins and ogres.

The Nur and Bauer soldiers were well trained, but there was no escaping injury in this battle. Once injured, however, a soldier traded places with another and fell back to receive healing before immediately returning to the front line.

Just like during the invasion of the capital, the monsters seemed to attack with no fear of death. Thankfully, none were attacking from behind, but the density of monsters we encountered drastically increased as we neared the capital. The imperial army seemed a bit unused to fighting monsters that didn't fear death, having been used to fighting wars against humans until recently.

"How vexing," Claire quietly muttered. It frustrated her to only watch as everyone else fought.

Our Bauer-Nur alliance was advancing on Ruhm just before the end of the two-week deadline the Demon Queen had declared. Actually, Manaria and Lene were also participating in this battle, so I supposed it would have been more accurate to call this a four-nation alliance rather than strictly only Bauer and Nur. Manaria's participation was understandable with her power, but it probably came as a surprise to hear Lene was with us. She wasn't here to fight, however, but to work together with Dole in Bauer on directing the flow of supplies and provisions. The Nur forces numbered in the tens of thousands. Add in the Bauer reinforcements, and you had an army so large that upkeep was no joke. Money, supplies, and provisions needed to be moved, and Lene had the business acumen to manage those logistics. She might not have had any fighting prowess to speak of, but she was as irreplaceable an asset to this battle as Dole. Between the two of them, both ends of the supply chain were secure.

As I've touched on before, the ones who were going to fight the Demon Queen directly were a small group that included Claire and me. This was because the Demon Queen was too vastly powerful, so we had to face her while using Claire as a shield, as reluctant as I was to do so. The real purpose of the alliance was purely to deliver us to her. There was a chance that the Demon Queen would strike us along the way, but I doubted it, as if she did, she would risk accidentally striking Claire. Anyway, while

indeed vexing, for now we needed to preserve our strength as the rest of the allied army fought for us.

"The problem is Platos and Socrat," Claire said.

"Right. Unlike the Demon Queen, those two won't hold back on killing you," I agreed. *Rather, they will be actively going out of their way to kill you*, I thought, though I didn't voice the concern.

According to reports from scouts, Platos had taken up position in front of the imperial castle, but Socrat's whereabouts were still unknown. Because of that, we had to advance while remaining vigilant of ambush by Socrat. But who was to say exhausting us psychologically wasn't his true aim from the get-go?

"It's been a week since we departed from Zurück," Claire said. "We should be within sight of the imperial castle soon. I feel if Socrat were to attack, now would have to be the time, but..."

"Nothing's happening," I said, finishing her thought. At this rate, we would reach the capital without encountering Socrat. I would be thankful if we could avoid needless battles, but something felt off.

"There's no point worrying about it, though."

"Sister..."

"Lady Manaria..."

Having overheard us, Manaria came over and put a hand on Claire's shoulder. Claire seemed to relax a touch, but I grew a little heated. *Who said you could touch my Claire like that? I'll bite you! Grrr.*

"We just have to do our best. There's nothing to gain from worrying over what's outside our control," Manaria said.

"Yes, you're right," Claire said.

"So you say, but you still seem a bit concerned."

Claire smiled sadly.

"Are you worried about May and Aleah?" Manaria asked.

"It seems there's nothing I can hide from you," Claire said with resignation.

May and Aleah were near the center of the allied army, together with TAIM. TAIM claimed that was the safest place to be, but we found it hard to fully trust her. Rather, how *could* we fully trust her after she threatened to kill our beloved daughters? I honestly doubted my sanity for having even entrusted the twins' well-being to her, but logically, I understood it was better to act on the very real chance of an imminent attack and not the unknown potential danger TAIM represented. We had managed to group Yu and Misha with them at least—oh, and Ralaire was with them too, of course—but that was all we could do. I couldn't shake the fear that we were dancing in the palm of TAIM's hand.

"I don't trust that TAIM either," Manaria said. "But I get the feeling she really can't lie."

"Yes, Rae thinks the same," Claire said.

"I doubt anything bad will happen to May and Aleah for the time being, then. But even if something does happen, Cardinal Yu and Misha are with them," Manaria said. However, Claire's anxious expression didn't clear. We should have been in Yu and Misha's place, but we had our own duties to fulfill. If Platos or Socrat attacked, it would be our job to buy time until the main fighting force could arrive.

Platos and Socrat were exceptionally strong for demons. The average mage would only needlessly add to the body count if they tried to face them. But we couldn't have our main fighting force grouped up from the get-go or we'd be too slow to respond.

"The imperial castle is within sight!" someone from the front reported. As I looked forward, I could somewhat make out the imposing structure myself. The path to it was littered with monsters.

"Just a little farther! Clear a path!" Hilda rallied the troops.

The soldiers cheered, raining down long-distance magic and cutting away the monsters from up close. In this way, our march continued for a couple more hours.

"Mages, cease fire!"

"Vanguard, fall back!"

Without warning, Hilda and Rod withdrew the troops. Wondering what had happened, I strained my eyes forward and saw a large figure standing at the fore.

“Enjoying your walk, humans?” He wore a simple animal pelt of the sort a caveman might wear and held a large club. His muscles looked as impenetrable as a fortress, and a pair of bat wings stretched from his back. There was no mistaking him: Platos of the Three Great Archdemons.

Claire and I ran forward to the front as planned.

“Good afternoon, Platos,” Claire greeted him. “Lovely weather today, is it not?”

“Well, if it ain’t Claire François herself. Yeah, it really is lovely weather. Fitting for yer sorry species’ last day on this earth.”

“Why has one of the Three Great Archdemons been relegated to guard duty?” I asked.
“Is the demon army that lacking in personnel?”

“Hah, please. The demon army is just for show. If she wanted to, our queen could annihilate everyone herself. All of *this*? Just her killing time.”

“No. As long as I’m alive, she can’t do a thing. And we’re keeping it that way,” Claire said.

“Humph. We’ll see about that.” Platos swung his club down and bashed the ground. Previously, this wide-area attack had devastated us. But not now.

“You really think the same move would work on me twice?” I asked as I manipulated the earth between us with my magic, stopping the shock waves in their tracks.

“Feh... Quit your pointless struggling already.”

Something felt off. Platos lacked spirit. He had been far more hot-blooded the first time we encountered him, as well as that time with the Demon Queen. “What’s wrong, Platos?” I asked. “Where’d your usual vigor go?”

“Heh, looks like I couldn’t hide it. You’ll understand once you meet the Demon Queen. Not that—” He swung his club “—I plan on letting you through!” He yelled, charging toward us as he brandished his weapon.

“Barrier, stop his advance.” A calm voice reached my ears.

“Hrrk?!” Platos groaned as he collided with something invisible.

“Your Holiness!” I shouted.

“And Lady Yu and Misha!” Claire echoed.

“It seems we managed to gather in time,” the pope said.

Yu and Misha followed on her heels.

“I hope you don’t mind us joining in.”

“We’re here to help.”

Our earlier conversation with Platos hadn’t been to build rapport or anything. As I had explained, our role was to buy time for our main fighting force to arrive.

“Mama Rae, Mama Claire!”

“We’re here too!”

“And me!”

May, Aleah, and Lilly arrived as well. Now all our main fighters were present.

“You all keep crawling out of the woodwork like pests. But that’s fine by me—I’ll take you all down!” Platos yelled.

And so our battle with Platos of the Three Great Archdemons began.

Platos charged but was repelled by the pope’s barrier. Taking advantage of his resulting imbalance, Misha used the reverb of Siren to seal his movements. Yu then slashed at him with her ice sword, making blood spurt from Platos’s body. The fight was in our favor so far.

“Cardinal Yu, Misha, and I will handle Platos. Everyone else, please save your strength.” I

heard the pope say in my mind.

"Are you certain? We're up against one of the Three Great Archdemons. Should we really be holding back?" Claire asked.

I was of the same mind.

"I don't know why, but Platos has already been exhausted. I have a feeling something might be up, so it will be best we don't tire ourselves here," the pope responded.

Platos's fighting was certainly lackluster. He had none of the overwhelming strength he had displayed last time.

"You think the demons are plotting something?" Claire asked.

"I can't say, but we might as well save our stamina for Socrat and the Demon Queen regardless. Please be wary of our surroundings."

"Understood."

I remembered the last time we fought Platos we had been exhausted and thus easily overwhelmed, but we'd fought Socrat in our peak condition and still been unable to put a dent in him. If we could get away with saving our strength here before our confrontations with Socrat and the Demon Queen, I figured we might as well take it.

"But if things look dangerous, we'll jump in, all right?" Manaria said.

"Of course," the pope replied before beginning to cast her Area Heal.

"Oh, no you don't!" Noticing the barrier drop, Platos rushed forward at the pope, perhaps remembering the impact of the Area Heal from their last encounter.

"You're not getting past us."

"That's right."

But blocking his path was Yu holding a sword of ice extending from her magic wand and Misha right behind her.

"Outta the way!" Platos yelled as he threw his massive body at them. Not even the

combined weight of Yu and Misha could match half of Platos. It was like a pair of bicycles fending off a dump truck.

“Ice blades!”

“Tremble!”

The air chilled as Yu created countless longsword-length ice blades and fired them at Platos. I thought her action was rash at first, but I was surprised to see Platos fall forward.

“Guh?!” he groaned. The ice blades had embedded in his feet and stuck them to the ground.

“I see, so Misha’s magic can be used like that,” Manaria said.

“What do you mean, Sister?” Claire asked.

“Look closely. The swords Yu fired are trembling slightly. Misha’s improved their cutting edge by vibrating them.”

I see... So it’s like those high-frequency swords you see in science-fiction, I thought.

“It’s over, Platos!” Yu readied her finishing blow.

“Don’t think I’m done yet!” Platos pounded the ground with his arms, sending himself flying forward with raw strength alone and paying no mind to his torn feet.

“Wha—?!” Caught off guard, Yu hurriedly moved to defend herself.

“Weak!” Platos deftly twisted his body in the air, using the resulting centrifugal force to swing his club.

“Guh!”

“Aah?!”

Yu and Misha were sent sprawling backward, no match for Platos’s sheer physical strength.

"How's that?!" he yelled.

"Heal."

Platos's spirits were immediately dampened by the realization that the pope's Area Heal had activated. Both Yu and Misha, as well as the soldiers, were healed of their injuries and fatigue.

"Haaah... haaah... damn..." In stark contrast, Platos panted heavily, bearing wounds all over. His condition had seemed poor to begin with, but now he was in shambles. His feet were particularly injured, leaving him unable to move as nimbly as before. The outcome of this fight was clear.

"Platos, please give up," the pope said expressionly.

"What?"

"It's over. There's no point in continuing this any further."

Platos was silent for a moment. "You want me to surrender?"

"Yes. You may be a demon, but I'm sure you still value your life."

"Like hell I do! We demons want nothing more than ruin! Kill me if ya want, I'm not afraid!" He shot a furious glare at the pope.

"I've always wondered, why is it that your kind seeks to bring ruin to this world? Has this world not given life to us both? Just what drives you all so?" the pope asked, her calm tone unbreaking. I could hear compassion and mercy in her voice.

"Life itself is a damn curse," he said. "To live is to suffer. How can y'all not understand something so simple?"

"Certainly life has its struggles. But life has its joys as well, does it not?"

"Hah. It's a million times better to be without suffering than to live with joy!" Still spilling blood onto the earth, Platos resumed attacking. He swung his club, shook the earth, and slashed with his nails, but every move he made was either blocked by the pope's barrier, nullified by Misha's magic, or parried by Yu.

“Damn it...”

“I take it that the fact you still live despite your belief is because there’s something you value?” the pope asked.

“The great Demon Queen ordered me to return all to nothing. That’s why I was born, that’s why I’ve lived, and that’s why I will die.”

It was clear now: Our people could never see eye to eye. An uncrossable divide existed between the demons, who wished for a nonexistence sans suffering, and humans, who sought happiness despite pain.

“Will you truly not surrender?” the pope asked.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“I see...” For a moment, the pope closed her eyes and hung her head sadly before she looked to Yu and Misha.

The pair attacked with their vibrating blades, pinning Platos to the ground once more.

“Guh! What the hell do you think yer doing?” Platos groaned.

“I’m giving you a blessing; that way, you can be reborn as something that can live a proper life,” the pope said.

She, Yu, and Misha surrounded Platos. They began to chant a prayer, which summoned a glaring light to envelop his large frame. Shortly after, his body began to break down into that light, fading into nothingness.

My guess was that was an anti-demon technique of the Spiritual Church’s design. Considering their long history of fighting demons, they surely had many other similar techniques.

“Oh, Platos, let the benevolence of the Spirit God carry thee into—”

“Heh. Yeah, right,” Platos spat.

A moment later, fresh blood spurted forth.

"Platos... you..." the pope murmured in disbelief.

"I'm a demon... Like hell I'd let myself get blessed..." In his hand was his own core, which he had torn out of his chest. Dark-red blood poured from the cavity left behind. "Go. Become the final piece our Demon Queen needs..." His core flew out of view toward the imperial castle. "My Queen... please bring salvation... to this world..."

With a thud, Platos collapsed onto the ground. Having lost its core, his body began to crumble before ultimately disappearing without a trace. Even in his last moments, he showed fealty to the Demon Queen and remained true to his wish for nothingness; he had found a noble end, for a demon.

"I don't understand. Platos, how could you not see meaning in life and yet nurse such a strong pride? Is that not contradictory?" The pope watched him as he disappeared. She seemed expressionless, but I was sure I could detect a tinge of sadness. "If you were a human soldier, then maybe you'd... No, I suppose there's no point thinking about it at this point."

"Your Holiness..." I said.

"I don't think he was too different from me, Rae Taylor. If I'd made one wrong choice in my past, I'd have ended up like him, hating this world."

I was surprised by the pope's sudden confession.

"Don't you remember? I'm one of many failures TAIM made in an attempt to create you," she said. "But unlike the other lost children of the spirits, I know why and how I came into existence."

"Right," I said.

"There was a time when I hated you. There was a time when I questioned my own being. Perhaps I even wanted to return everything to nothingness, just like the demons."

I didn't respond. What could I even say when it was my fault she had these thoughts?

A silence fell between us, which quickly became a gloom. But Claire's clear, clarion voice soon banished that darkness. "Perhaps. But Your Holiness didn't wind up like him, and *that* is what truly matters."

"Claire François..." the pope said.

Claire continued without hesitation. "I'm sure just about everyone comes to question their own existence at some point in time."

"Even you?" the pope asked.

"Even me. But I also believe the ability to have such doubts and move past them is exactly what makes us human."

"Miss Claire..." I murmured.

"I'm sure there are those who have the same doubts and come out the other side cursing life and yearning for nonexistence. The notion isn't completely beyond me. But there's no reason to drag other people into it. There's no sense in forcing those who do accept life to die together with you," she said with conviction. "Your Holiness, you were able to move on from your doubts and never forced them on others. You are *different* from these demons."

"Yes, I see it now. It is as you say," the pope replied, showing us a rare smile. It was as though the dark cloud surrounding her had lifted. "Whatever the past may be, I accept myself now, and I accept my life. I don't hate Rae Taylor, and I have no reason to pursue nothingness. I am who I am."

"That's right," Claire said.

"Thank you, Claire François. You truly are a wonderful person."

"Naturally," Claire said, looking a bit pleased. "Shall we continue, then? At long last, the castle stands before us."

"Yes, let's."

Together, we entered the imperial castle. It was finally time for our battle with the Demon Queen.

"So you're gone then, Platos... I did say you were free to do as you pleased, but I did not mean like this."

At the back of the imperial castle, in the throne room, sat the Demon Queen. She muttered something the moment she saw us and wore the same black robe we had seen her in before, only the veil hiding her face was now gone. In her hand was a crystal dirtied in dark-red blood, likely Platos's core.



As planned, Claire stood at the front of our formation. With us were Manaria and Lilly, for a total of four. The pope, Yu, and Misha were at the castle gate recovering their stamina from the fight with Platos, and Rod and the twins were getting the Focalizer ready.

Claire gave the Demon Queen a stern look. “Rei... no, Demon Queen. As you’ve surmised, we’ve defeated Platos. All that’s left is you and Socrat.”

“So it would seem. And what of it?”

“Would you be willing to give up on bringing an end to humanity?”

“So you’ve heard, then. From TAIM, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“I see...”

Both Claire and the Demon Queen were quiet for some time.

“Demon Queen, it’s not too late. Please reconsider.”

“I cannot, Miss Claire. This is the only option I have left.”

“That can’t be true. If we put our heads together with everyone, we can—”

“I’ve tried, and it didn’t work. Do you have any idea how many things I’ve tried, how much time I’ve spent? But no matter what I do, my conclusion remains the same: I have to bring an end to it all.”

“Demon Queen...” Claire murmured sadly. “You once said I hadn’t changed a bit, but I could say the exact same thing to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve always been the type to try to shoulder everything alone, as well as to rush to your own conclusions.”

For a brief moment, the Demon Queen winced at Claire’s words... It wasn’t really a *big* deal, but I couldn’t help but feel I was kind of being sidelined here at the climax.

The next to speak was Manaria. “Whatever your reasons may be, we still have to stop you. No hard feelings, I hope?”

“It’s okay, Lady Manaria. I had an inkling we’d fight one day anyway,” the Demon Queen said.

“Aw, don’t say that. I mean, I don’t want to lay a hand on someone who looks just like the woman I love, not if I can help it... No, that’s not quite right, is it? You’re Rae herself, in a sense, not just some lookalike.”

“You’re free to turn back if you’re so reluctant.”

“Given my position, I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Manaria traded these somewhat-intimate words with the Demon Queen while I was, again, being sidelined.

“D-don’t worry, Rae! I only have eyes for you!” Lilly said, noticing my plight.

“You’re so nice, Miss Lilly. If it weren’t for Miss Claire, I might’ve fallen head over heels for you,” I said, patting her head.

“Wait, but doesn’t that just mean there’s no hope for me?” she said, growing teary-eyed.

She was cute, but I only had room in my heart for Claire. *Jeez, Miss Claire. You’re such a heartbreaker.*

“It’s simple, then,” the Demon Queen said. “If you defeat me, I’ll die, and humanity will continue repeating the same events forever. If I defeat you all, humanity will meet its end.”

“Is there no room for negotiation?” Claire asked.

“There is not.”

“I see...” Claire’s face twisted with grief.

I was getting fed up. “What are you putting this tragic heroine act on for, other-me? You’re welcome to indulge your little fantasies on your own time, but don’t go dragging

Miss Claire down with you.” The Demon Queen seemed annoyed by my words, so I continued to run my mouth. “All this just because your feelings for Miss Claire started cooling off? Pathetic. How can we even be related? And to think your idea of a solution is to *end the world*? I can be quite the pain in the rear end at times, but you’re on a whole new level!”

“Don’t speak like you understand me,” the Demon Queen said.

“Oh, but I do understand you; we’re the same person! You’ve lived too long and have started going senile, right? Oh, dear, oh, dear. I’m frightened to think I might start losing it like you in the future.” I stuck my tongue out at the Demon Queen as meanly as I could.

“If you’d experienced what I had, you’d understand.”

“I don’t care for your excuses. I am who I am right now. I love Miss Claire, I love the world that has Miss Claire in it, and I love everything Miss Claire loves. I couldn’t care less about what happens in the future.”

“I can’t believe my own self could infuriate me so much.”

“That makes two of us, then.” Seriously, I’d had it up to here with the Demon Queen.

“I’d say this conversation has run its course,” she said. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

“Demon Queen! Surely, there has to be another way...” Claire said.

“Miss Claire, please don’t resist,” the Demon Queen said. “I’ll try and make this as painless as possible.”

Her words marked the end of our little discussion. We snapped straight into combat.

“Rae, Sister!” Claire yelled.

“On it!”

“Yep.”

I used my earth spell Muddy Soil to turn the throne room’s walls and ceiling into mud.

“Flare Blast!” Manaria swiftly cast a high-aptitude fire spell and blasted away our muddied surroundings, as well as part of the upper floor above. Thanks to Manaria’s excellent magic control, we remained unscathed through the massive explosion. The scattered fragments that rained down were batted away by Lilly’s swords. The end result: The once magnificent throne room was now exposed to the elements.

The Demon Queen quickly saw through our intent. Her magic barrier was already up, but Rod’s long-distance attack would be able to break it. The sights of the Focalizer were at this moment narrowing in on the Demon Queen.

But something unexpected occurred.

“That’s impossible!”

“You’re kidding me...”

“Wh-what is this?!”

“This might be bad...”

The barrier the Demon Queen had deployed was orders of magnitude larger and denser than before. It was a pitch-black deeper than darkness, as though the world simply ceased to exist past its radius.

“So that’s what Platos meant!” Claire bitterly bit her lip.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Platos must have given the Demon Queen his magic energy. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been so weak—it didn’t make sense.”

“Well deduced, Miss Claire,” the Demon Queen said from within the darkness. “Master Rod’s attack the other day surpassed my expectations. So I looked into some countermeasures.”

“Damn,” I cursed. I still had a faint hope the Focalizer could break her barrier. In fact, at that very moment, the Focalizer finished aiming and readied to fire.

But things could never be easy.

"Of course, I didn't take just one countermeasure," the Demon Queen said.

"What do you mean?" Claire demanded.

The Demon Queen's intent soon became clear.

"Our Queen means to say that your weak minds are but an open book to her," a hoarse, elderly voice said from behind. The space before Rod and the girls contorted, and a giant insect-like apparition appeared.

"Socrat!" Claire yelled.

"Hold it, Miss Claire. Don't think I'll just let you leave to help them. You all have to keep me company," the Demon Queen said.

The Focalizer's line of fire was blocked, and we couldn't go back up Rod and the twins. My mind raced trying to think of a way out of our situation when a young voice called out from behind.

"Mama Claire, Mama Rae!"

"Don't worry about us! May and I will handle it!"

It was May and Aleah. They brandished the magic wand and sword Dorothea had bequeathed to them and stood before the Focalizer with Rod.

"Run away, dears!" Claire called.

"Quickly!" I yelled.

"Impossible. I have been ordered to spare none." Socrat laughed, his voice mocking.

"Now then... shall we begin our final battle?"

The Demon Queen's words sounded like nothing but a death sentence.

As things stood, Rod, May, and Aleah were in danger. Willing to risk being attacked by the Demon Queen from behind, Claire and I moved to turn and run, but we were

stopped short by a peculiar proposition.

"Why don't we leave them be and watch?" the Demon Queen asked. "I won't make a move, so long as you don't make a move either."

"Why should we trust you to keep your word?" Claire asked.

"Why should you not? Think of it as an opening act before the main show, Miss Claire. Besides, the only reason I haven't destroyed your trump card over there already is pure whim. You have no chance of breaking my barrier without it, right?"

"Why you...!" Claire seethed but hesitated at the offer. She wanted to throw herself toward her daughters right this instant, but that ran the risk of earning them the Demon Queen's ire.

"Miss Claire, let's do what she says for now," I said.

"Rae..."

"Let's try believing in Rod and our daughters."

She bit her lip and reluctantly lowered her magic wand.

"How about I destroy that bothersome toy first?" Socrat said, laughing with the mouth of a human and the face of a hornet. He pointed at the Focalizer with a mantis arm.

"Not on our watch!" May said.

"We won't let you!" Aleah said.

The twins readied their weapons, but someone stepped forward from between them.

"Stay back, you two. Let me handle this." And who could it have been other than the spiky-haired, confident, and arrogant Rod? In his hands was a longsword. If one looked closely, they would see the magic stone embedded in it, presumably to allow it to double as a magic wand.

"Come to me!" Rod yelled as he summoned his soldiers of flame, the Flame Troops—

his signature spell. His magic aptitude was only medium, but he made up for it with his phenomenally huge reservoir of magic. His default tactic was to overwhelm his opponents through pure quantity, just as he had against Misha in the Academy Knight test back at the Royal Academy. One after another, he continued to increase the number of flame soldiers at his side.

"Hmm... Your measly toothpick and pathetic army shall not even scratch my body," Socrat said.

"Oh, yeah? We'll see about that." Rod sped forward, leaving a faint afterimage behind him. The next instant my eyes recognized him, he was about to slash down on Socrat. He wasn't at Dorothea's level, but he was still fast.

"Humph. Pointless, I say."

With a sharp, metallic clank, Rod's sword bounced off of Socrat's skin. A scratch was left behind, but it was dreadfully shallow.

"You'll be the first to die, then." Socrat's mantis arms slashed at Rod.

Rod met them in the air with his longsword and fluidly diverted their trajectory. "This is one of Yu's techniques. Don't think I'm some idiot who only knows how to brute force things." He smiled bravely and took advantage of Socrat's momentary imbalance to run up the latter's arms, flipping upside-down midair and striking at Socrat's neck.

"Hmm. Mere child's play." Without even bothering to fix his posture, Socrat allowed the blow to connect. Another sharp clank resounded as Rod's sword bounced back.

"Daaamn, you're tough. This sword's been passed down in my kingdom for generations, you know?" Rod complained.

"If you wish to cut me, prepare a sword as powerful as that empress's—and the skill to match." Aiming for the moment Rod landed, Socrat swung the front legs of his lower insectoid body.

Rod fluidly deflected the strike again.

"You're quite the annoyance for a weakling," said Socrat. "The truly powerful have no need for technique and cunning."

"I feel exactly the same way. This style doesn't suit me much, but I'm not really being left with much of a choice." Rod took some distance from Socrat. Even though their exchange of blows had been brief, sweat dripped down Rod's forehead. His nerves were clearly taut, and his focus strained.

"Are you finished playing yet? I'd like to proceed with killing you," Socrat said.

"Hey, hey, what's the rush? Let's enjoy ourselves some more."

"Sadly, I see nothing enjoyable in this. I'd very much like to finish this task and be off to my afternoon nap." Socrat yawned.

"You're quite different from Platos. He was a bit cynical, but he always took his job seriously."

"That's because he was an earnest man simply wearing the guise of a wicked one. His loyalty toward the Demon Queen and his thirst for the great nothingness were far greater than most."

"Greater than even you, I take it?"

"Me...? Yes. I've lived far too long to devote myself to either. I lack Platos's zeal."

"Is that right? Guess not all demons are the same then," Rod said with great interest. His guard didn't relax one bit, however.

"Let's leave the chatter at that. I will have your head."

"Try me."

Socrat leisurely charged toward Rod, trying to bulldoze his target with his body like he had during the failed assassination on the pope. His speed wasn't too great, given his large frame, but to dodge would be to leave the Focalizer to be crushed. So instead, Rod took the charge head-on.

"Hraaaaaah!" he yelled, taking the brunt of the charge with his sword and bracing. Socrat's weight pushed him back.

"Inadequate," Socrat scoffed. "I still have many free arms and legs to use."

"Nngh!" Rod was sent flying. He successfully withstood the charge but couldn't defend against the front leg of Socrat's lower half. The attack was simple, but it carried the force of an oncoming truck. Coughing up blood, Rod tried to prop himself up, but his sword had snapped in half.

"You've persisted well, but this is it. Now should I return to what I came for?" Socrat looked at the Focalizer. May and Aleah stood before it, blocking the way.

"May, Aleah, run!" Claire shrieked.

But the girls stubbornly remained.

"Such laudable bravery from such young children. But you're only hurrying toward your deaths." Socrat calmly approached and raised an arm.

"Hey, hey, I'm not through with you yet, you know?"

Suddenly, something exploded, knocking Socrat's body back some ten feet. May and Aleah were unscathed.

"So you still breathe," Socrat sneered.

"Like that would kill me. A man can't look lame in front of the girl he's into, you know?" Rod flashed a suave grin.

"What can you do? Your magic did not harm me, only forced me off balance at—"

"With only that little blast, sure," Rod interrupted with a shrug. "But what if it were a hundred times stronger?"

"Hmm?"

"You really haven't realized yet?"

"What do you mean?"

Rod pointed straight up.

Socrat looked up and saw hundreds, perhaps thousands of Rod's Flame Troops in the air. "Y-you...! You were buying time for this?!"

“Bingo.” Rod had shown off his Flame Troops at the start and let Socrat conclude they’d be too weak to do anything, then drawn his attention with close-quarters combat while continuing to summon his Flame Troops in the air. Everything had been planned from the start.

“The powerful have no need for technique and cunning, you say? Nonsense. Technique and cunning let the truly powerful stand above the rest!”

“Never!” Socrat hurriedly rushed forward to attack Rod, the caster. But as I mentioned earlier, Socrat’s large frame was by no means fast.

“Fire Squall.” Rod’s outstretched, skyward arm fell to point at Socrat. The Flame Troops, too numerous to count, began to fall, one after another.

“Grooooagh?!” They rained down on Socrat, exploding in rapid succession. Each one had the force of a slightly powerful fire bullet, but the sheer numbers were the true terror. If one looked closely, it would seem as though they were even aimed at the places where Rod had cut Socrat with his sword.

“How could I be defeated by such lowly magic?!” Socrat shielded himself with his arms, but he couldn’t stop Rod’s assault. “Guaaaaaaah...!”

Gradually, Socrat’s death cries were drowned out by a blanket of fire. The rain of Flame Troops continued unabated for some time. Eventually, the flame and smoke cleared, and not a trace of Socrat remained to be found.

“Whew... I’m exhausted.” Rod flopped down on his behind, understandably tired.

“Master Rod, you did it!”

“Most impressive, Master Rod!”

The twins ran up and hugged him.

“Heh heh, did I look cool?” he asked.

“Yes, almost as cool as Mama Claire!” May said.

“Just about as cool as Mother Rae!” Aleah said.

"Heh heh, that right?" He briefly paused at their response, but took it all in stride with a wry grin. However, his grin soon faded. "What?!"

"You were careless, boy," a hoarse voice said from the direction of the Focalizer. A body with a metallic luster stood there, regenerating bit by bit. "As I said, the truly powerful have no need for technique and cunning. Unfortunately for you, I'm a weakling—who uses cunning."

As Socrat said that, he slashed down on the Focalizer with a mantis arm.

We watched in horror as the Focalizer's frame was slashed to pieces, scattering to the ground.

"And now you've lost your secret weapon." Socrat roared with laughter. I hated to admit it, but he was right. Without the Focalizer, we had no way to break through the Demon Queen's barrier. "Now then, shall I take care of you three while I'm at it? As payback for how you cornered me earlier, of course."

"Oh, please. You were stringing me along the whole time," Rod said.

"Was I? I tend to forget things at my age."

"Shut it." Rod sounded pissed. He had been completely outwitted. Come to think of it, we'd known Socrat could regenerate beforehand, given the aftermath of the assassination attempt. This was a failure in planning on all of our parts.

"May, Aleah, lend me your ear real quick." Rod whispered something to them, and the girls nodded back.

"Plotting something? No matter. Struggle as much as you please." Socrat seemed complacent, having finished his main duty, and made no move.

"Got it?"

"Yeah!"

"Yes!"

After the trio were done whispering, they took position with Rod and Aleah in front and May behind.

"Are you finished with your little discussion?" Socrat asked.

"Yeah, thanks for the wait," Rod said.

"Not at all. It's the least I can do for someone about to die."

"Well, we'll see about that."

"You're bold. But seeing the bold break is one of this old man's few pleasures."

"He's coming!" Rod yelled as Socrat charged forward. His target was Aleah.

Aleah froze for a moment but quickly dodged out of the way of Socrat's large frame. "Hiyah!" she cried, slashing at Socrat as he passed by. The sword Dorothea had left her made a deep wound in Socrat's tough skin.

"Hm. That stings a little," he said.

"This is my master's sword! Of course it'll hurt!" Aleah said.

"Aleah, get away! It's a trap!" Rod shouted.

"Too late," Socrat said.

Aleah tried to flee, but her sword wouldn't dislodge from Socrat's body. Socrat's arm came down and slammed her away like a rubber ball.

"Aleah!" Claire yelled.

"I-I'm okay..." Aleah stood up, seeming to not have any serious injuries. "Thank you, May!"

"No problem!" It appeared that May had used magic to cushion the blow. My daughters were quick-witted like that.

Socrat sighed. "Humph. This is getting tiresome."

"Should you be looking away so idly?" Rod asked, slashing at Socrat from behind. His sword was still broken, but a blade of fire extended beyond the broken point.

"I'll have you retire here." Socrat had feigned inattentiveness to draw Rod in. He moved the top half of his body aside in a way that would be impossible for human joints and evaded Rod's strike, then swung a mantis arm as his body returned to its normal position.

"Gaaah!" Rod was sent flying. He managed to block the mantis arm with his blade, but he still fell harshly against the rubble of the Focalizer. It didn't seem like May's defense had made it in time.

"Master Rod!" the twins called.

"Hmm, so the lad was the one giving orders. That's why the girl couldn't defend in time," Socrat said.

I think I understood what had happened now. In all likelihood, May had opened a telepathic channel, from which the twins received instructions from Rod. That was how May's protection had made it in time to protect Aleah but not Rod.

"It seems I should start with killing you," Socrat said, beginning a new charge as Rod slowly hobbled to his feet.

"No!"

"We won't let you!"

May fired off her magic, and Aleah brandished her sword, but neither of them could stop Socrat's charge.

"This is the end."

There was the fierce sound of impact like that of a car collision. In the next moment, Rod was flying through the air.

"Master Rod!" Claire shrieked.

His body fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

"That's one," Socrat said. "And you two are ne—"

"Heh... heh heh..." Rod laughed weakly.

"How tenacious. You still breathe."

"Like I said... I can't let myself look lame... in front of the girl I'm into," Rod said with great effort. It didn't seem like he could stand anymore.

"Hmm... I commend your tenacity, but what can you do? It's clear you're on the verge of death."

"I don't have to do anything... It's already done."

"Hm?" Socrat gave Rod a look before collapsing to a knee. "Nngh...? What is this?"

"Heh heh... You still haven't realized?"

"M-my body's... weakening!" Socrat's body began to deflate like a balloon. "Just what have you done to me?!"

"Nothing much... I just gave the Focalizer you destroyed its chance at revenge."

Embedded in Socrat's back was the cannon of the destroyed Focalizer.

"What?!"

"That part there is a magic tool that releases gathered magic energy. I don't know how your regeneration works, but I'm willing to guess it depends on magic. So what happens if that's all scattered into the air?"

"Nngh, I can't take it out!" Socrat desperately pulled at the cannon bit, but it had merged with his body and wouldn't budge.

"I'll give you one last word of advice before you leave this world: In battles of cunning between weaklings, humans always win."

"Impossible! How could I be defeated in such a manner?!" Socrat's body had shrunk to the size of a cow and still continued to diminish.

“Just give up, old man.”

“Humph. To think you had such a move up your sleeve. I’d like to call this blind luck, but I understand full well that chance favors the prepared mind. This is why I can’t stand humans.” Socrat sighed, seeming to have surrendered.

“Let me ask you one more thing before you go,” Rod said. “How does your regeneration work anyway?”

“Why do you wish to know?”

“If another guy like you pops out, I wanna be able to kill them for real.”

“Ha ha. Bwa ha ha ha!” Socrat trembled with laughter as he grew smaller and smaller. After his laughter abated, he said, “Yes, why not? I’ll tell you as I’m dying regardless. My cells can temporarily disintegrate into magic and reform whole. But if they are scattered against my will as they are now, then I cannot summon them back together in time. Ha ha, finally, death’s release comes to me! How joyous!” Socrat smiled cheerfully. “Forgive me, my Demon Queen. I shall be departing here. I wish you the best in your battle to come.”

“You’ve served me well.”

After exchanging his last words with the Demon Queen, Socrat’s body shrunk to a point and disappeared without a trace, this time for good. With a clank, the Focalizer’s cannon fell to the ground. The unkillable demon Socrat was slain.

“Ah, man, that was rough...”

“Master Rod!”

“May, heal him!”

The twins ran up to Rod and began to tend to him. He was conscious, but his wounds were deep.

“Now Socrat has left me as well...” the Demon Queen murmured. I could have sworn I heard sadness in her voice. It seemed the Three Great Archdemons weren’t just

disposable pawns to her. “But he did well. Without that magic tool, you have no way of harming me.”

Claire bit her lip in frustration. Not even her Magic Ray, my Absolute Zero, Manaria’s magic, or Lilly’s attacks could pierce her barrier.

We were out of options.

“I’ve lost my Three Great Archdemons, but... Well, I can think of what to do after killing everyone but Miss Claire.” The Demon Queen casually waved her hand our way.

I quickly erected a tungsten carbide barrier; but her black wave attack cut through it like butter.

“Get down!”

I felt a hand push down on me from behind as I fell to the ground.

“Thank you, Miss Claire.”

“Don’t forget, Rae: Her attacks can’t be defended against.” Claire cautiously stood up and glared at the Demon Queen.

“You seem flustered,” the Demon Queen said. “Am ‘I’ really that important to you?”

“Rae isn’t you. You’ve lost sight of yourself and have fallen to wickedness. I feel nothing for you,” Claire said. When the Demon Queen didn’t respond, Claire continued, “The Rae I love is someone who never gives up, who loves me, and who is always there to show me the way.”

“I’m still here to show you the way, though... The way to ruin.”

“Thank you, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.” Claire reached for my hand, but before she could grab it, the Demon Queen attacked.

“I won’t let you use your tandem casting. That’s a little bit too dangerous, even for me,” the Demon Queen said.

Tandem casting was the only thing we hadn’t tried against her so far, and it didn’t seem she was keen on letting us do so.

“Regardless of what you think of me, Miss Claire, I’ll have my way.”

“You’re a stubborn fool.”

“Perhaps I am.” The Demon Queen shrugged. “I only have one desire left. To bring an end to everything, and then fade to nothingness myself.”

It appeared not even Claire’s words could reach the Demon Queen now.

Rod Bauer’s POV

“Damn...” With feelings of shame, I watched the fierce battle unfold amidst the rubble of the throne room.

“For the last time, Master Rod, you have to stop moving!”

“You won’t heal if you don’t sit still!”

“Yeah, yeah, my bad.”

May and Aleah sharply told me off, but I wasn’t in any mind to really care. *Damn it... We’ll lose at this rate.*

Thanks to my foolhardy carelessness, our ace in the hole, the Focalizer, had been destroyed. What was more, the Demon Queen’s magic barrier was stronger than before. Claire and Rae appeared to be trying something, but it wasn’t working out. Things were looking bad for us.

“There has to be something I can do...” I mumbled under my breath. I considered myself fairly bright, but no matter how hard I thought, no half-decent ideas came to mind. My best idea was to try and use the cannon of the Focalizer to scatter the Demon Queen’s magic like I had with Socrat, but that had only worked against him because I’d taken him by surprise. Having watched our fight, the Demon Queen wasn’t likely to fall victim to it. “So what the hell can I do?”

The only other time in my life I’d felt this tormented by my own powerlessness was after the eruption of Mt. Sassal.

The eruption had left me heavily wounded. I'd been in the middle of trying to get a village at the foot of the mountain to evacuate when it blew and I ended up crushed. Up until then, I had lived thinking I could do anything. But as I lay there with my arm smashed off and my magic depleted, I realized just how incapable I really was.

Thankfully, the evacuation was mostly over before the eruption, so none of the villagers were harmed. But the small village lacked a proper medical facility, and I lingered on the edge of death for quite some time. The only reason I survived at all was because the villagers put my own well-being before their own.

The villagers were safe, but they had lost most of their homes and were without food. I was a burden to them. By all rights, they should have let me die and focused on their own survival. But they chose not to abandon me... simply because I was a prince of Bauer.

The village had strong traditional values, the same values I had looked down on as archaic. If I were just some traveler, they'd have definitely let me die, but because I was royalty, they went out of their way to save me. I was saved by the very values I disdained, and that made me conflicted, for it dawned on me that I had lived a life defined by conceit.

I had let myself think I was all-capable when in reality I was *nothing* without the people of Bauer—people who I soon realized didn't even necessarily see the world as I did and who had values as numerous as the stars.

When I thought about it some more, I realized Thane must have come to this truth long before me. He had a slight inferiority complex and was perceptive to the differences between him and others because of it. As for Yu... She was always something of a genius, so she probably knew too.

Only I was ignorant to the world around me. I was the foolish emperor parading about in his imaginary new clothes.

So, I left the royal family. Partly, that was due to the political mood wanting Thane to be king, but mainly was because I realized I wasn't worthy of being royalty.

Wanting to find something I could do for my country, I joined the army, as I figured that kind of place would suit me best. The training was tough; I couldn't count how many times I kissed the dirt sparring without magic. But that was fine by me, as it just

meant I had found the limits of what I was actually capable of.

Think, damn it. You can't give up yet, not when they haven't given up. Rae, Claire, Manaria, Lilly—these four who I'd once had the arrogance to see as my damsels in distress were now fighting for humanity's tomorrow. How could I call myself a man if I gave up here?

But as much as it hurts to admit, I can't fight anymore. Then what about these two...? No, don't be stupid, I thought as I watched the twins carefully tend to my wounds. Children like them shouldn't even have been standing on a battlefield like this. It wasn't right. But it was also true that they were more useful than I was at present.

"Your thinking might have merit, Rod Bauer." A voice, flat and monotone, suddenly spoke in my head.

"I'm guessing that's you, TAIM?"

"Yes. I can't borrow Lilly Lilium's body currently, so I'm contacting you directly."

"Get to the point. What do you want?" I asked hurriedly.

"Let the twins act as a substitute for the Focalizer."

"What?"

"The gathered magical energy is still stored within its magic stone; you only need something to convert and focus it."

I looked at the remnants of the Focalizer and saw the magic stone was still intact. It lay buried under some wreckage, but it retained its brilliant shine. It was as though the people of Bauer were with me now, saying: "We're just getting started. What're you waiting for? Let's do this."

"Sure, we only need to convert and focus the energy, but that's the hardest part," I said.
"Do you have any idea how long it took me to—"

"Those two can do it."

I couldn't believe my ears. I'd had to rack the brains of countless magic scholars to finish my Focalizer, and TAIM was saying these kids could replicate it themselves?

"Explain it to them. They'll know what to do if you tell them to use their Spell Sword."

TAIM explained no further. Like before, she said what she wanted and left.

I was confused, but if there was a chance, then I had to take it. It felt a bit pathetic to have to rely on two little kids like this, but I wasn't going to let my dumb pride stop me. That was something the old me would have done.

"May, Aleah, you can stop tending my wounds now. Instead, I need you to do something for me."

"Yes?"

"What is it, Master Rod?"

"It's to do with this magic tool here, the Focalizer..." I explained everything TAIM had told me as simply as I could. I hadn't a clue what a Spell Sword was supposed to be, but they seemed to know.

"Okay, got it!"

"I understand!"

The twins seemed so sure that it worried me. "Do you really understand? Like, one-hundred percent?"

"We just have to take the magic in this magic stone and hit the Demon Queen's black shield thingy with it, right?" May asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

"That sounds perfect for us!" Aleah said.

They really did know what to do, just like TAIM had said.

"Watch us, Master Rod!" May said.

"Huh? O-oh, sure."

Without even waiting for my reply, May took off her pouch and set it on the ground. "You watch us too, Ralaire!"

“Yes, watch over us, Ralaire.”

A water slime poked out the pouch and quivered as though in response to the girls.

“Are you ready, Aleah?”

“When you are.”

May picked the magic stone out from the wreckage with both hands and closed her eyes. Aleah brandished the sword she had received from Dorothea and stared straight at the Demon Queen.

“Aleah, now!”

“Going!” Aleah dashed forth with a speed unthinkable for her age. She held her sword low, swiftly drawing nearer to the Demon Queen.

“Hey, stop, what’re you thinking?!” I yelled.

“It’s okay, this is part of the plan!” May said. I turned to look back at her and saw her surrounded by four shining lights—representing earth, fire, wind, and water: the four classical elements. Those lights were proof she was successfully drawing out and controlling the magic stone’s stored energy.

“You’re kidding me...” I murmured.

“Ngh...” May seemed to be struggling, however. I couldn’t blame her; the magic stone had gathered energy from all over Bauer and was still collecting it at this very moment. Not even I, with my outrageous mana reservoir, could handle such an amount flowing through me.

“May, don’t push yourself!” I warned.

“No! I’ll fight together with Mama Claire and Mama Rae!” she yelled.

I realized then and there that I still had room to grow. The will to fight could be mustered by anyone. The days men alone had fought battles were behind us.

“Master Rod, out of the way!” she yelled.

I quickly cleared the path just as a stream of blindingly white light poured from May's body.

"Take it, Aleah!"

The light soared across the battlefield like a shooting star, flying straight toward Aleah as she raised her sword.

"Haaaaaaaiiii—" The light began to envelop Aleah. A brilliant flash blinded me for an instant, and in the next, the light converged on her sword. Light melded into blade as she left our speechless selves behind and *became* that shooting star. "—yaaaaaaaaah!"

Her blade dropped down on the Demon Queen's magic barrier. Light and darkness crackled like electricity as they clashed against one another.

"You...!" the Demon Queen seethed as the darkness gradually pushed back against the light.

Was it doomed? Was even this not enough?

A flash of surprise crossed Aleah's face. She changed her grip on her sword slightly and shouted, "Like this—right, Master?"

In the very next instant, a deafening roar sounded together with a flash of light.

"Ngh!" I reflexively shielded my eyes.

Whatever happened was over, and in such a short span of time.

"Kyah!" I heard a shrill voice from my side. I looked and saw Aleah there, fallen on her backside. "Ouch... I missed my landing."

"Aleah? What are you doing here?" I asked in a daze.

May ran up to us. "What are you daydreaming for, Master Rod? Aleah and I did what you told us to!"

I spun my head back to look at the throne room.

"Now you've done it," the Demon Queen said on one knee, her magic barrier gone.

"No way," I murmured.

"We did it, Aleah!" May cheered.

"Yes, we did, May," Aleah said with a smile. The girls shared a high five, paying no mind to the stupefied state of the adults.

"Ha ha... pfft ha ha ha ha!"

As for me? What else could I do but laugh? Even Rae and Claire, their mothers, seemed shocked out of their minds.

"Your daughters are something else," I said. Children took after their parents, I supposed.

"Whew... I'm tired," May said.

"Me too..." Aleah said.

"Go ahead and nap, you two," I said. "You've done enough. Leave the rest to your mothers."

"Yeah..."

"I think I will..."

The twins lay down on the ground and began to nod off like the champs they were.

"Oh yeah. Aleah, you changed your grip midway through, didn't you? Why was that?" I asked.

"Hmm...? I heard... her voice..." she said.

"Huh? Whose voice?"

"Master's... She scolded me... 'Not like that, like *this*'..." After saying that, Aleah fell fully asleep.

"Huh... Is something like that even possible?" I wondered to myself. Aleah has learned to fight from Rae, Claire, me, and one other. To me, that one other had been the mortal

enemy of my father, but to Aleah she had been a good master.

"Heh. I'll say thanks just this once, Dorothea." I gave a wry grin to the Sword God who was no longer of this world. For a brief moment, I felt a gaze upon me. I looked around but found nobody else there.

"Heh, I'm starting to imagine things..." I allowed my tired body to fall flat on the ground and felt a cool wind blow over me. Letting go of my consciousness, I slipped into a deep slumber.

Salas Lilium's POV

For a moment I feared former Prince Rod had noticed me, but it seemed my worries were unwarranted.

I was in a forest a short distance away from the imperial castle watching over the Demon Queen's battle with a farsight magical tool. This farsight tool had originally been one of the empire's inventions, a product of their attempts in bringing teleportation magic to the common man. The hope had been to connect two distant locations through something known as a gateway, but the project had been largely abandoned due to its infeasibility. In theory, it was doable, but a high-quality magic stone and a large amount of magic energy—on par with a demon's—was necessary to open a meaningfully large enough portal. What was worse, the strain from the gateway's creation would destroy the magic stone, leading to unsustainable costs.

Previously, I had used this magical tool to assist in the former Queen Riche's conspiracy to assassinate Rae Taylor. I had been able to create a large-enough gateway then thanks to the magic stone the Demon Queen had granted me, as well as Socrat's tremendous power, but for my own devices, a gateway an inch wide was enough to spy through.

Due to its cost, I had to carefully choose the opportunity to use it, but now was certainly the time, if ever there were any. That loathsome pair, Rae Taylor and Claire François, were distracted by the Demon Queen, giving me the perfect chance to rob them of what they considered most precious: their daughters. Why they had gone so far as to take in two orphans not of their own blood to satisfy their maternal urges was beyond me, but the fact remained that the girls were important to them.

Just as those women had taken all that was dear from me, I would now take all that was dear to them.

After that devilish revolution, I had been thrown into prison. I escaped the death penalty by offering up my diplomatic knowledge, but I had lost the backing of the empire and lived a life far worse than before. It was as though I were back in my old family home.

I had been born to the lowest of low-ranking nobility and had lived almost as destitute as the Aurousseau house. We were nobility in name only. Father was a drunkard, and Mother only complained without ever making an effort to change our reality.

I realized from a young age that I would waste away if I stayed in that household and did my best to escape it through the only way I knew: studying. The Royal Academy was still largely a place for noble children to socialize then, but those who truly wanted to learn could still do so. I toiled away at my books, withstood the cold glares of the higher-ranking nobles, and graduated at the top of my class.

After graduating, I was scouted to become a government official. The government was already thoroughly corrupt by then, and the number of competent nobles could be counted on one hand. I was treated coldly by the higher-ranking nobility, but I was never given trouble on account of my ability. I was useful to them, so to say.

As those high-ranking nobles wasted their time with amusements, I worked from dawn until late in the night. I had long since abandoned my family home, and I ignored my parents' request for money at every turn. Why should I have given anything to them when they'd never given anything to me beyond the ability to call myself the son of a disgraced nobility?

Before long, my parents stopped trying to contact me, and later, I learned of their suicides. Without any particular feelings on the matter, I inherited the family title, as well as the colossal debt they left behind. I worked even harder than ever before to pay it off, living without any greater aspirations before me.

My turning point came when the late King l'Ausseil took the throne. He was young and championed a meritocracy, passing policies that allowed those with talent to rise regardless of our background. I believed his ideals were unrealistic, mere fanciful dreams, but he did see potential in me and promoted me above the nobles who had once looked down on me.

It was around that time that I met Lulu and Riche, who would both later become queen consorts. They both hailed from some of the highest-ranking family lines, so all the men around them were of lower peerage. Perhaps because of that, neither of them scorned me, and they even properly acknowledged me for my ability. As much as I'd like to forget this shameful past now, I'll admit I felt love for them then.

Eventually, Lulu became queen, but our secret trysts continued. I gained her political support and flew through the ranks. But our relationship came to an abrupt end when she bore my child. Thane, as he would be named, was distinctly different in appearance from his older brother Rod, so I prepared for my ruin. I believed this would be the end of the line for l'Ausseil, even with all his meritocratic beliefs. Hoping to hold on to at least some status, I recorded a conversation with Lulu as blackmail. I knew it would amount to nothing if it came to it, but I had to at least try; anything to prevent myself from ending up like my parents.

Strangely, l'Ausseil never spoke anything of it. He accepted Thane as his second prince and eventually made me chancellor of Bauer. There was a chance he never realized, but I have a feeling he knew—I'd occasionally catch him looking sorrowfully at Thane. He was simply too much of a coward to bring up the issue.

I began to doubt whether a coward like him was truly fit to be our king. I was chancellor already, so why shouldn't I aim even higher? Secretly, I contacted Nur, our enemy. The empress promised me I'd be made king if I helped make Bauer a vassal state of Nur, and I agreed. Things were going perfectly.

But then Rae Taylor and Claire François came along and undid all of my hard work. The two of them exposed my deal with the empire and demolished the system of aristocracy that governed our country. My plan to become the ruler of the next government failed, and I was imprisoned—all of which was their fault. They took everything from me, and so I devoted myself to revenge.

With Riche's help, I escaped prison, but the empire had already forsaken me. That was when the Demon Queen offered her aid. She said she would help me kill Rae Taylor and Claire François. The Demon Queen was terrifying, but our interests aligned. I would have done anything for revenge, even bear looking at the Demon Queen's face, a mirror image of Rae Taylor's.

But they proved resilient. They overcame the assassination attempt for which I used Riche, as well as their children's kidnapping, putting Lana, a pawn I had prepared

before my imprisonment, to waste. My hatred boiled with no place to vent, instead building to a terrible pressure within me.

But now I had my greatest opportunity yet. Through my small gateway, I subtly roused the one called May with my magic.

“Nngh?”

Her eyes opened sleepily. I stared into them through my gateway and said, “From now on, you will be my puppet.”

Her eyes lost their brilliance, proof that my hypnosis had taken hold. Or so I had thought.

“That’s far enough, Salas,” she said in a voice not her own.

“What...?” I recognized that voice before from somewhere. “Dole François?!”

“My daughters and granddaughters are fighting against fate itself. They have no time to waste on bit players like you.”

“How is this possible?!” My mind raced, desperately trying to understand the situation.

The voice continued, “Starting now and until your death, you will wander an endless dream. You’re free to curse your fate in that dream, and you’re free to even repent for your past; but no matter what you do, you will never wake.”

“No, Dole, wait!”

“I’m sure you have much to say, but this message is only a recording. There is nothing I can do to change your fate.”

“Wait, Dole! Wait!”

“Farewell, Salas. I’ll see you in hell.”

The instant the voice cut off, my surroundings changed. I was in a rundown mansion I recognized—my old family home.

“What is this?” I looked around and saw faces I knew. “Mother? Father? Baron

Thompson and Count Yale? Even Lilly and Lana? What are you all doing here?"

Everyone I had ever abandoned peered at me from behind the shadows of pillars and through the windows.

"No, don't look at me! I said don't look at me! I'm different from you all! I'm destined for more than this!" I fled from their hateful gazes. I ran and ran, then ran some more until I felt safe.

But before I realized it, I was before my family home again.

"S-somebody! Help me!" I begged for help like a coward and ran, but no matter which direction I went, I returned to that old mansion, with their eyes following me everywhere.

That process continued over and over for what felt like an eternity. Eventually, I begged, "Please, just let it all end!"

The mansion vanished, and nothingness took its place. I was surrounded by a complete absence of light, pure darkness.

"What? Where am I?"

In desperation, I called for help. No voice replied. There wasn't even an echo. Just what was this place? Dole had said this would continue until I died... Was I really going to meet my end here?

"No, no, no! Not like this! Somebody, somebody save meeee! Aaaaaaagh!"

I yelled endlessly into the darkness, but no salvation came.

Dole François's POV

"I'll be off, then. Please take care of what we discussed, Dole."

"Of course, Your Highness."

I saw Thane out with a deep bow. After he left, I frowned. "Hmm..."

"Is something the matter, Father-in-Law?" Lana asked. She was assisting me with the supply logistics for the battle. My office in the royal palace was piled high with unprocessed documents. I needed all the help I could get, even from the most unexpected of places.

Initially, I had been a bit put off to see this girl was the one sent to be my aid, what with her eccentric behavior, but I decided I could overlook her personality on account of her surprising competency. I could not, however, overlook how she addressed me.

"Enough with the jokes. I am not your father-in-law," I said.

"Jeez, you're *sooo* stubborn. But I kinda like that. It's super like Ms. Rae!"

I sighed. No matter how many times I warned her, she didn't relent.

As soon as I had returned to Bauer, I began preparing for the battle with the Demon Queen by coordinating supplies for the soldiers with Lene. Lene was handling her end of things near the front lines, while I saw to this end of things.

Thane, who had just left my office, set about supporting the soldiers the moment he returned to Bauer as well. Understanding that our kingdom hadn't yet stabilized from the revolution and would have difficulty procuring provisions alone, he opened negotiations with leaders from Sousse and the Alpes. He still lacked experience as a king, but he was proving capable. Someday, he might even surpass his father l'Ausseil, who had been extolled for his wisdom.

"So? Like, what's with the long face?" Lana asked.

"I sensed the magic I cast on May activate."

"Oh? You can use magic, Master Dole?" Her eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Yes, but it's not the kind suited for battle. It's called dream magic. I use it by laying a trap within a mind."

"Whaaat, that's so cool!" she said with gleaming eyes.

My dream magic was medium-aptitude earth magic, and it worked by entrapping the victim in an endless dream. Generally, I only set the trap on my own mind for protection, but I could also set it on the minds of others. I'd set such spells on all of my

family, and I sensed the one I cast on May had sprung.

Dream magic was powerful, but it came with strict activation conditions. It only responded when it sensed a specific magic from a specific person, both chosen when I set the magic, and I could only set it on so many people at once. Furthermore, if I wanted to set it to respond to, say, Salas's hypnosis magic, I needed to intimately understand the inner workings of his magic. He had kept the details of his power a secret, posing quite a challenge for me. I'd worked with former Cardinal Lilly to try to analyze it, but it hadn't been until Lana offered up her magical tool headband that we had been able to fully understand it.

I'm sure remembering Salas had brought Lana joy as well as grief, but she had still eagerly helped us. Thanks to her, I had been able to work out Salas's magic while in the imperial capital, cast my dream magic on my family in Zurück before leaving, and ultimately sprung my trap on Salas.

"At this moment," I said, "Salas is trapped within my magic."

"Oh. Then..."

"His days of evil end here."

Lana seemed to flinch for a moment before forcing a smile. "I see... So Papa's done for, then."

"Yes."

To me, Salas was nothing more than a bitter enemy; but to Lana, he had once been a stand-in for a father. She must have felt conflicted. I waited quietly for her to gather her thoughts.

After a short silence, she said, "Just what is a family, anyway?"

A simple question that lacked a simple answer. I found myself hard-pressed for a response.

"Papa and I were strangers, but Lilly and Papa were blood relatives. So why did he see us both as tools?" Her words seemed less for me and more to process her own thoughts. "Ms. Rae and May aren't related by blood, but they share a bond stronger than most families."

I thought of my daughters and granddaughters and found myself in agreement with her assessment.

“What does being a blood relative mean, anyway? What does it mean to be family?”

Her questions made my heart ache. Slowly, I found the words to speak. “Have I ever told you I used to be of nobility?”

“Yeah. Minister of Finance or something, right? Pretty cool.”

“Yes, but that’s not important. As a noble, I believed maintaining a direct bloodline was crucial.”

Lana didn’t say anything but urged me to continue with her gaze. I did just that.

“That’s why I was initially opposed to Claire and Rae’s relationship.”

“Whaaaat!?” Lana went wide-eyed. I was surprised she found it so unexpected. “B-but, Master Dole! Ms. Rae told me you’ve never once said anything against their relationship!”

“And that is true.”

“Okay, so what’s up with that?”

I continued to open the vault of secrets I kept inside myself. “Until I saw them together, I’d always believed a family had to be of blood, that children had to be directly descended from their parents.”

“Yeaah, that’s what most people think, right?”

“Indeed.” I had been educated to believe such and never thought to consider otherwise until I met Rae Taylor, my second daughter. “Meeting Rae changed Claire. She began to smile as well as to express her frustration.”

“Really? Ms. Rae told me Ms. Claire’s been a willful person for forever.”

“There’s truth to that, but Claire as she was then was dissatisfied with the world around her.”

Claire had lost her mother, been enclosed in the small world that was aristocratic society, and had her future set in stone—by me.

“But Claire as she is now is different. She can smile from the heart and show her anger when necessary. She can express herself freely now.”

My daughter, who had once forced herself to die with me for the kingdom’s sake, was now *free*. I was sure I had Rae and my granddaughters to thank for it.

“I want nothing more than for Claire to live happily, and she’s doing just that these days. There’s no way I could take that away from her by demanding something as foolish as marrying a man and bearing a child.”

“Do you still want Ms. Claire to continue your family line?” Lana asked.

I thought for a bit, then shook my head. “Lana, I’ve considered this for quite some time: Just what exactly is it that I want to pass on to Claire? Is it my blood? Could that possibly be enough? No, surely not.”

Lana listened quietly.

“What I want to pass on to her isn’t my blood but my values, my beliefs, my ambitions; and I’m certain she’s come to receive them. Even if they aren’t our blood relatives, I’m sure Claire will pass on the same things to May and Aleah, though I’m sure they’ll take new shape as the times change.”

As their grandfather, that was all I could possibly want.

“These are my thoughts as a parent. I’m not sure if I managed to answer your question, but I hope it helped.”

“Thank you, Master Dole. Your words were very clear. But I don’t think I’ve received any such things from Papa, and I don’t think I’d want to have, anyway.” Lana smiled weakly. I understood what she meant: There was nothing to be gained from inheriting the values of a villain.

“But of course,” I said, “you are not a parent, but a child.”

“Huh?”

"Forgive me for speaking so misleadingly, but all I'd said just now was spoken from the perspective of a parent."

"What do you mean?" she said, curiosity written on her face.

"A parent can try to pass along many things to their child, but it is a child's right to refuse what they wish. Children create their own values, beliefs, and ambitions. A parent can wish for their own to be inherited, but they can never force it. A child's life is their own to lead."

"My... own?"

"Yes. Live life your own way, Lana. Sometimes, a parent isn't a guide but a model of what not to become."

Lana fell into deep thought. I returned to my own work so as to not disturb her. After some time passed, she said, "Yeah, these kinds of things are a little too hard for me to understand."

"I see."

"But even then!" she said in a trembling voice. She fought to gather herself before continuing shakily, "Would... would it really be all right for me to try to find my own happiness?"

Oh, Lana... I had seen many like her. After deadly wars, many of those who survived were plagued with something known as survivor's guilt. Having been one of the few who survived Salas's experiments, she too bore those feelings.

"Of course. You've avenged your own. Is that not atonement enough?"

Those lost to Salas's human experiments were gone forever, but Lana's assistance in defeating him had to have brought their souls peace.

Though she couldn't even bring herself to cry, I brought her into my arms in a soft hug all the same.

"When will you learn to give up?" The Demon Queen stood up and brushed the dust

off her robe. Her magic barrier was gone, but she hadn't taken much damage. She scowled disdainfully. "Don't think you've won just because you've broken my barrier. I still have ample magic to—"

"Miss Lilly!" I yelled, interrupting the Demon Queen.

"R-right!" As we'd planned beforehand, Lilly began casting the time manipulation magic that had once given Claire and me much grief.

"I see. TAIM must have advised you, then," the Demon Queen said. As her time slowed, I felt her magic weaken greatly. The oppressive aura that had nearly forced us to our knees receded. She still had a scary amount of magic left to her name, but at least now we had a fighting chance.

One thing still bothered me, however. I glanced to the entrance of the imperial castle where Rod, May, and Aleah lay exhausted and unconscious. I was worried stray attacks might end up hitting them.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to aim at someone already out of the fight," the Demon Queen said as though reading my mind.

"Not even if they have value as a hostage?" I asked.

"Not even then. I'll devote myself solely to crushing you four." Her words didn't sound like kind consideration, simply an expression of her earnest intent to kill us. "All your efforts will amount to nothing, but you're free to struggle as much as you like."

The Demon Queen listlessly raised her right arm. Fog began to form around us.

"Miss Claire!"

"On it!" Claire evaporated the fog before it could freeze everything into ice. "Unfortunately, I've seen Judecca before. Not even you can catch me off guard with it!"

"Yes, I'm sure you have. That 'me' would've been weak, though," the Demon Queen said.

"And you're weak now. Perhaps even weaker than you were then."

"I have my doubts about that."

"Is that so? Well, there's no doubt that you've become a twisted version of who Rae once was. And we won't be defeated by someone as warped as you!" Claire yelled, closing the gap between her and the Demon Queen as she swung down her sword. That distance was around sixty feet, a distance Claire couldn't hope to close as fast as she did with physical strength alone. Her feat was made possible thanks to a boost from Manaria's wind magic.

"Did you really think such a simple attack would faze me?" the Demon Queen held a hand up to block.

"I did not," a voice said from behind the Demon Queen.

Claire vanished into thin air from in front of the Demon Queen just as another Claire appeared behind her, swinging her sword down.

"An illusion, then," the Demon Queen said off-handedly. Without even turning to look, she erected a bulwark of stone to block Claire's strike. The illusion had yet again been Manaria's handiwork.

"I suppose it won't be that easy," Claire said.

The Demon Queen swung her right arm skyward. Sharp blades of stone jutted out of the ground and chased after Claire, making her retreat.

"Sister, Lilly, hold the front line with me!"

"Y-yes!"

"Right!"

"Rae, back us up from where you are!"

"Understood!"

With Claire calling the shots, the four of us assumed formation. Claire continued to dodge the stone blades as she retreated while Lilly and Manaria attacked the Demon Queen from both sides simultaneously. Lilly used her shortswords while Manaria used a longsword, giving the Demon Queen a total of three blades to worry about.

"Humph." Just before their swords made contact with the Demon Queen, a fierce

explosion erupted with her at the center, forcing them to retreat. “How will you deal with this?”

The Demon Queen followed up by unleashing a tornado of swirling blades of ice. They moved to dodge the attack, but—

“And this?”

The Demon Queen froze the ground at their feet, making it too slick to move.

“Soil Change!” I quickly reverted the frozen ground back to normal, allowing Lilly and Manaria to dodge the tornado by a hair’s breadth.

“I’m not done yet!” Noticing the Demon Queen’s attention had finally left her, Claire approached with her sword from behind. She was quick, but her approach was far too straightforward. But that was just how my dear Claire was.

“Flame Lance!” Once only a few steps away, Claire let loose a fiery spear. Such elementary magic was sure to fail against the Demon Queen, but that was fine. Claire wasn’t aiming for her.

“Ah.” The Demon Queen realized all too late as the lance hit the ground at her feet, creating a plume of smoke and robbing her of her vision.

“Now, Sister, Lilly!” Claire called, and the three of them attacked as one. I thought they had her for sure that time, but...

“Naive.”

A blast of pressurized air came barreling at them. They tried to dodge the invisible strike at the last moment but couldn’t do so completely.

“Haaah... haaah...”

“Sh-she’s... strong...”

“She isn’t... the Demon Queen for nothing...”

Claire, Lilly, and Manaria were all exhausted and heavily panting. In contrast, the Demon Queen was unharmed outside of what Aleah had managed to do to her.

"Heal!" I used my healing magic on them. With it, they should be able to fight again—and then what? We'd just be back at square one. In some sense, we were forcing the Demon Queen to fight defensively, but it didn't feel like we had her on the ropes. If anything, she was running circles around us.

Being "me," she didn't seem to know how to use a sword, but her magic alone had us beat. Judging from the spells she was using, she wasn't a dual-caster but a quad-caster like Manaria and May, and with high aptitude or greater in every attribute.

The most problematic aspect, however, was that she could cast her spells without saying their activation words or chants. It was normal for advanced practitioners of magic to discern the effects of a coming spell from the language used to summon it. Take, for example, Flame Lance, a spell Claire often used. Just hearing the first syllable, "Fla," would let a veteran fighter know to expect a flame attack and begin thinking up countermeasures. But that didn't work against the Demon Queen. Because of her outrageous magical energy, we could sense a buildup just before she cast a spell, but that was it. The odds were stacked against us.

"Do you still insist on continuing?" the Demon Queen asked.

"Of course. We *will* defeat you," Claire said.

"I admire your spirit, Miss Claire. But I doubt it'll last much longer."

"Say all you please—you can't shake me."

"Very well, then. I think that's enough wait-and-see from me; from now on, I'll be fighting seriously."

A jolt of worry shot through the four of us as we all thought the same thing: *She wasn't serious yet?*

"Are you bluffing?" I asked.

"No, Rae," Claire answered in the Demon Queen's place. "Look at her feet."

I did so, which was when I realized that the floor had been demolished everywhere except where the Demon Queen stood.

"No..."

"Sh-she hasn't moved a single step?!" Lilly shrieked, putting the fear we all felt into words.

"It's my turn now. Can you handle this, Miss Lilly, Lady Manaria?" With a swing of the Demon Queen's arm, two dark beams of light rushed toward them.

"Ahhh!"

"Ngh!"

I quickly erected a wall of tungsten carbide in front of them, but the impact still sent the pair flying backward.

"So powerful..." Claire muttered. "And that magic, isn't that...?"

"Yes, it's the same magic used that time you two were with Lana. Although Socrat was the one who fired it that time," the Demon Queen said, finishing Claire's thought.

Magic like this wasn't among the four attributes I knew of. Then what was it?

"This is dark-attribute magic. Only demons can use it, but it enables many powerful attacks. Such as this." The Demon Queen waved her arm again, sending three crescent-shaped black blades at me.

"O-oh, no you don't!" Lilly got back up to her feet, dodged before me, and tried to slash away the attack. "H-huh?"

But the black blades swept around Lilly and continued to beeline toward me.

"Shoot!" I used Uplift to escape upward.

"They're still following, Rae!" Manaria warned. I turned around and saw the black blades had turned to pursue me to the top of my pillar.

"Cut me a break already!" I fired off a barrage of ice and earth arrows, somehow managing to eradicate the black blades.

"I'll have you retire first, Rae Taylor." The Demon Queen created an uncountable number of the same black blades and fired them toward me.

"Oh, c'mon!" Again, I rained down ice and earth magic, but some of the black blades managed to slip through. *Crap.*

"If we can just deal with the caster!" Manaria said as she swung at the Demon Queen, thinking she had an opening.

With perfect composure, the Demon Queen simply caught her blade. "I knew you would attack then, Lady Manaria. Your feelings for that 'me' run so very strong."

"Of course they do. And that's exactly why I can't stand the sight of what you've become!"

"What a sad coincidence. I can't bear to see the sight of you either." With a single hand, the Demon Queen lifted Manaria by the sword and threw her at Lilly, who was trying to sneak closer for an attack.

"Eeeeep?!" Lilly panicked.

"No, dodge me, Lilly!"

Manaria's warning came too late, and Lilly caught her instead. The moment she did, a dark beam fired at them.

"Eeek!"

"Ngh!"

I watched as the pair were blasted back, my hands still full with countering the black blades.

The Demon Queen needed no wind-up to attack. That, coupled with the fact that she needed no activation words or chants to cast, made her magic seem almost instantaneous.

"Miss Lilly, your time manipulation magic is working on her, right?!" I asked.

"I-It should be!"

"And she's still that fast? Unbelievable."

Even weakened, she remained the Demon Queen.

"Why do you not target me?" Claire asked as she readied her sword. She was visibly put off, believing she was being taken lightly.

"Forgive me," the Demon Queen said. "I cannot kill you."

"But your Three Great Archdemons are gone. What option do you have but to dirty your own hands?"

"Oh, I have options..." The Demon Queen created more black blades and fired them, this time at Lilly and Manaria.

"Stop it!"

"This will end whenever you decide. I just need your death."

"What...?"

Oh. So that's what she was aiming for.

"No... Demon Queen, you're not..."

"What's wrong, Miss Claire? If you don't do anything, the others will die."

The Demon Queen's message was clear: If you want to save the others, take your own life.

"You want me to end my own life?" Claire glared at the Demon Queen with naked hostility.

Calmly, the Demon Queen replied, "I do. Is that a problem for you?"

"Of course it is! I promised my family I'd return home with them!"

"So you say, but if you do nothing, that fool Lady Manaria will die, as will Miss Lilly."

"Not unless we defeat you here! This fight isn't settled yet! We haven't given up!"

"I see. So you still haven't had enough." The Demon Queen raised her right hand above her head. Black blades appeared, and in a far greater number than before. They blotted out the light of the sun and casted our surroundings into darkness. Even Claire paled at the sight.

"Wh-what's the point?" Claire asked. "If I kill myself, won't I just be taken in by the Loop System?"

"I'm the administrator of the Loop System. It's a simple matter for me to pause its functions the moment you die," the Demon Queen replied matter-of-factly. "So what'll it be?"

Her threat was clear: End your own life or I'll sic these black blades on everyone.

"No matter how I die, the world will come to an end, right? In that case, I'd rather resist you until my last—"

"While I did say I'd end the world, I don't think you quite understood what I meant," the Demon Queen interrupted.

"What?" Claire said, nonplussed. "What do you mean? You're going to kill all of humanity, right?"

"Not quite. I just want to bring an end to human history. In other words, I just want to end the loops for good."

"That's the same thing."

"No, it's completely different. There will be no needless deaths. Humanity will continue in all its glory until it reaches its breaking point, and then—nothing. No more unnatural, fabricated loops. The world will be freed from its curse of endless death and rebirth."

Claire was visibly shaken. I could see her wavering, wondering: Would such an end truly be that bad?

"Don't listen to her, Miss Claire!" I yelled. "We have no way of knowing if what she's saying is—"

"Excuse me, *I'm* talking to Miss Claire right now," the Demon Queen said.

The black blades pursuing me grew faster. I tried to eradicate them with my magic bullets and magic arrows, but a dozen or so slipped through and pierced my body. “Aagh...!”

“Rae!” Claire yelled.

“Please consider carefully, Miss Claire,” the Demon Queen said with compassion in her voice. “If you end your life here, the world will simply return to its true course.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I’ll kill everyone you love before your eyes, one by one.”

“You fiend...!”

“Don’t give in to anger. Think calmly. The correct answer should be clear.” The Demon Queen raised her right hand above her head, urging Claire to think.

Claire bit her lip and thought, no doubt conflicted. The end of the world the Demon Queen was promising was far kinder an ending than we could have anticipated.

“Don’t do it... Miss Claire...”

“Rae?”

With great effort, I eked out some words as I crawled along the ground. “What right do we have to decide whether humanity continues or not? Making such a decision would make us no different from her!”

“Be silent.” A dozen of the blades above the Demon Queen rained down on me.

“Agh... ngh...!”

“Stop it! Rae, please, be quiet!” Claire said.

“No... I will not be quiet,” I said. “Demon Queen, what you’re doing is wrong. The choices you’ve made on the whole are beyond reproach, but by far the worst thing you’ve done is try to shoulder everything yourself...”

The pain was unbearable, but I pushed myself to keep speaking. I mean, what else

could I do at that point? “Eternal love? Don’t make me laugh. Is love something so one-sided to you? Did you ever stop to think about what Miss Claire might have wanted? Making decisions on your own, then falling into despair on your own... you know nothing about love!”

“Don’t talk like you understand!” For the first time, the Demon Queen expressed anger, the hatred plain on her face. “Someone who’s lived mere decades like you could never understand what it feels like to see your first love dying before your own eyes, what it feels like to have your love slowly crushed to a pulp under the weight of eternity! You know nothing of what I’ve endured!”

Her love for Claire seemed to be a sore spot. Not that I cared. “I don’t know what you’ve been through, and I really don’t care to know. But there’s one thing I can understand.”

“Enough!”

“I’ve made the same mistake as you. Before the revolution, I acted on my own and because of that, I nearly lost everything.”

I’d told myself what I was doing was for Claire, but in reality, I just hadn’t trusted her enough. I’d been afraid things would backfire if I explained myself to her and instead hidden it all. If I had only opened up, that disastrous day might never have unfolded.

“People can’t manage alone, Demon Queen. No matter how talented the individual, no matter how faultless their logic, no matter how righteous their ideals—people just weren’t meant to stand alone.”

“Spare me the empty platitudes!”

“But these aren’t *just* empty platitudes. Didn’t Miss Claire ever teach you not to run away from your ideals just because reality got a little tough?”

The Demon Queen went wide-eyed. The Claire I knew and the Claire she once loved were technically different people, but I was sure her Claire must have told her something similar before.

“No matter how difficult things got, you should have confided in Miss Claire, even if it would have made things tough for her too. You should have tried to find a way as two—no, together with everyone.”

I believed not doing that and choosing to continue alone had been the Demon Queen's greatest mistake.

"Hiyah!"

"Miss Lilly!" I exclaimed.

Lilly attacked, taking advantage of the Demon Queen's focus on me. The Demon Queen hurriedly blocked with her free hand.

"I-I don't have a right to lecture Rae, er, *you* on anything, b-but I still think what you're doing is wrong! You don't look happy about what you're doing at all!" Lilly pulled back her blocked sword and swung with the other, then continuing her onslaught further.

"I don't need something like happiness anymore!" the Demon Queen snarled. She fired a number of the black blades above her head at Lilly, forcing her to retreat.

"Let me get a word in, too, Demon Queen. I agree with Rae, you made the wrong choice."

"Lady Manaria... You're going to spout such nonsense as well?"

Manaria attacked from the opposite direction. Though she only had one sword, her speed could have given Dorothea a run for her money. She moved as though dancing and made blow after blow. "I won't keep you long, so let me just say one thing: You and Rae are different. You cut off everyone but Claire, but Rae chose to not give up on anything."

"You understand nothing either, Lady Manaria!" The Demon Queen attacked Manaria with the black blades.

Manaria didn't bother dodging, instead blocking and using the force of the blow to fall back. Once she had retreated until she was near me, she began healing me with one hand while holding her sword at the ready with the other. "You can still fight, right?"

"Of course."

"Good. That's my Rae."

"Thanks, but I belong to Miss Claire," I joked as I got up.

"None of you understand anything. You had better make your decision soon, Miss Claire. Before it's all too late," the Demon Queen said sternly. What would she come at us with this time?

"Rae?"

"Yes, Miss Claire?"

Before I'd realized it, Claire was standing by my side. She looked like she had resigned herself to something. "Do you remember our promise to return home as a family?"

"I do. Why?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course?"

"Good... Let me apologize beforehand for scaring you."

"Miss Claire?"

"I swear to you, I'll see our promise through." After saying that, Claire smiled and began walking away, right before tossing me her magic wand.

"What?! Miss Claire?!" I exclaimed.

"Claire, what are you doing?!" Manaria called after her.

"M-Miss Claire?!" Lilly cried.

She continued to walk steadily toward the Demon Queen.

"What're you plotting, Miss Claire?" she asked.

"I finally understand," Claire responded.

"Understand what?"

"How to make you stop."

“I cannot be stopped.”

“Demon Queen... no, my other Rae. Listen carefully...” Claire was standing right before the Demon Queen by this point. Without warning, Claire pulled her into an embrace, causing the Demon Queen’s eyes to widen in surprise. Claire patted her back. “Everyone wishes for their love to last for eternity. But people are not meant to love for eternity.”

“Miss Claire...? What are you doing...?” the Demon Queen asked, flummoxed.

Claire formed a magic lance behind herself and sent it through them both.

As the rest of us watched in stunned silence, only the Demon Queen’s confused groans and Claire’s loving voice could be heard.

“Ar... gh...? Miss Claire...?”

“Be that as it may... I still love you, Rae.”

“Miss Claire!” I yelled.

The Demon Queen looked on in a daze as Claire collapsed before her eyes. Crimson blood flowed out of Claire’s body where she lay on the ground. The Demon Queen bled as well, from her flank, but she showed no sign of noticing that as she continued to stare blankly at Claire.



"Move it! You're in the way!" I pushed aside the Demon Queen, forgetting my fear of her from only moments ago, and took a look at Claire's wound. It was deep.

"Ah... aaaah!" The Demon Queen stepped back fearfully, falling to her knees and clutching her head. "Aaaaaaaaaagh!"

She screamed as though all the despair she'd experienced up until now was nothing compared to this moment—but right then, I really couldn't give a damn.

"Lady Manaria, Miss Lilly, help me out!" I called, breaking them out of their stupor.

They quickly returned to their senses and ran forward, using their healing magic alongside me.

"Rae, we need to use an ultra-grade potion!" Manaria said.

"We can't, she's unconscious!"

"Feed her mouth-to-mouth or something, just get it in her!"

As Manaria suggested, I fed the potion to Claire mouth-to-mouth. Her lips were horrifyingly cold. Why was it that so many of our precious kisses had to be sad ones?

Together, we healed her as best as we possibly could. But her body kept getting colder and colder.

"Miss Claire, no... You promised me! You said we'd all make it home together!" I said as I wiped away my tears, not stopping my healing for a moment. She'd promised me, so there was no way in hell she'd choose suicide. There had to be more to this.

"Demon Queen!" Manaria yelled.

Shoulders trembling, the Demon Queen raised her head.

"Come over here and heal Claire! Are you really going to let her die like this?!"

The Demon Queen grimaced, her mind greatly conflicted. Her one desire had finally fallen into her hands, but it terrified her. My mirror image looked on in horror as the fear of loss that eternity had worn away reared its ugly head one last time.

“What are you waiting for?! Miss Claire will die at this rate! Please, Demon Queen, save her!” I pleaded without shame.

Only she could save Claire now.

“I-If I use the Loop System,” she said, “then—”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that, Rei.”

“TAIM!”

Lilly’s tone had changed. TAIM was in control of her now. “I veto your usage of the Loop System.”

“What?! Why are you getting in my way?!” the Demon Queen demanded.

“Is Claire François’s death not what you wanted?” TAIM asked.

“Fine, I’ll just override you with—”

“Your administrator privileges, yes. Those will bring the Loop System online, but Claire François will be dead by the time the System finishes deliberating with itself.”

“That can’t be...!” The Demon Queen grimaced.

Staring down at her, TAIM calmly said, “Make the choice, Demon Queen: Lose her for all eternity or continue for all eternity.”

“Nngh... gaaaargh!” The Demon Queen was in terrible anguish as she staggered toward us. I quickly cleared the way for her as she knelt down by Claire’s side. “I’m tired of it all. I’m tired of spending eternities alone, and I’m tired of feeling my love for you slip through my fingers...”

“Demon Queen, please hurry!” I pleaded.

Manaria and Lilly echoed my pleas.

“Rae, please!”

“Rae!”

"I want to end it all... I'm done with life... and yet..." the Demon Queen said, her words carrying the weight of forever. "I still can't give up on you!"

A pure-white light began to glow around Claire. It was brighter than even the pope's Area Heal, likely being a magnitude stronger.

"The wound..."

"It's healing..."

"A-amazing..."

The wound on Claire's stomach began to knit, alongside the wounds on Manaria, Lilly, and me.

"Nngh..."

"Miss Claire?!"

"Rae?" Claire opened her eyes. Her pale face had regained its color. She seemed a bit out of it, but she smiled upon glancing over and seeing the Demon Queen beside her. As though everything had been planned, she said, "Yes... I knew you were still Rae, deep down."

"Claire, you idiot!" Before I knew it, I was tugging Claire's cheeks apart. She stared at me, surprised. Even I was surprised by what I was doing, but the words just wouldn't stop pouring out. "What were you thinking?! What would you have done if the Demon Queen chose not to save you?!"

"R-Rae, calm down for me, will you?"

"This *is* calm! How could you do such a thing after our promise?! I was... so worried about you..." I couldn't muster up any more words of complaint. I cried my heart out and pounded my fists against Claire's chest like a spoiled child. "You dunce, you idiot, you fool!"

"I'm sorry, Rae. I'm sorry I scared you. Please forgive me." Claire hugged me and apologized over and over as though consoling a child. Each time she apologized, I told myself I wouldn't forgive her. But then she said, "But this wasn't a blind gamble, Rae. Did you not notice Her Holiness was at the ready nearby?"

“Huh?”

She pointed behind me. I slowly turned my head around and saw the pope there with her usual expressionless look.

“Oh, you really didn’t notice, Rae? Huh. So that’s why your acting was so realistic,” Manaria said with a wry grin.

Then her earlier stupor wasn’t really a stupor at all—she was just waiting to see how things would play out?

“Lilly Lilium noticed as well, although that didn’t prevent her from being worried,” TAIM said with a wry smile.

Wait... So the only ones actually shocked at all were the Demon Queen and me?

“I want to die,” I said out of sheer embarrassment.

“I said I’m sorry, didn’t I?” said Claire. “I was hoping to trick the Demon Queen, but it slipped my mind that I might also trick you, similar as you are.” She sighed and hugged me tightly as I continued to sniffle.

“I’m definitely punishing you for this later, Miss Claire,” I said.

“Yes, yes, I understand. I’m more than happy to let you do as you please. More importantly... Demon Queen?”

The Demon Queen lifted her face, looking a little annoyed.

“You said you wanted to free this world from its curse of death and rebirth, did you not?” Claire asked.

“I did.”

“You might be right in calling the loops a curse. But those loops are a part of the world at this point. If they’re to be ended, it should be not because of your own feelings but by the will of the people of this world.”

The Demon Queen didn’t say anything back.

"In the first place, the only reason I'm even here today is thanks to the efforts and sacrifice of many," Claire said. "My life doesn't belong to myself alone; it's shared by all those dear to me, and thus, isn't mine to offer. If everyone chose to offer my death in exchange for the world, then so be it, but—"

"Absolutely not!" Lilly, Manaria, and I immediately interjected.

"You see? That's what they would say."

The Demon Queen remained silent.

"Oh, and what I said earlier about people not being meant to love for eternity was a lie."

"Really?" The Demon Queen asked.

"For the most part." Claire pulled the Demon Queen in as well, embracing us both. "Demon Queen, people can't bear the eternity you desire. But what's to prevent this moment right here, right now from lasting for eternity?"

"I don't understand." The Demon Queen shook her head.

Claire smiled. "Who's to say time can erode the feelings we share in the now? Aren't we the ones who decide what eternity means?"

Claire explained with an example: Was the love shared by a couple who could only spend a month together before disease separated them in any way inferior to the love shared by a couple that was able to stay together for life? Surely not. Hence, eternal love couldn't possibly be something bound by time.

"Shouldn't the only thing that decides whether a love is eternal be the depth of one's feelings?" she asked.

In other words, even if one's time with another couldn't be long, if the feelings were genuine, they'd be eternal.

"People must decide what eternity means themselves," Claire said. "You tried seeking an objective truth in something subjective. That's where you went wrong."

"I was... wrong?"

"Yes, very."

The Demon Queen hung her head sadly.

"How much longer are you going to touch Miss Claire, Demon Queen? She's mine. Hands off."

"But..."

"No buts. How dare you make such a face after telling Claire to end her own life. Have some shame!"

"Now, now, Rae. Let's not bully Rae too much, okay?" Claire chided.

"That's so confusing, just call that one Demon Queen!"

We bantered back and forth, but I didn't lower my guard against the Demon Queen one bit. There was no telling when she might go back to rambling her insane nonsense.

"There's no need to worry about that, Rae Taylor," said TAIM.

"Haven't I already asked you to stop reading my mind like that?"

"Indeed, you have. Forgive me."

"So, why is it I don't have to worry?"

"The Demon Queen has already discarded her administrator privileges."

I thought back to the ultimatum TAIM had given the Demon Queen. I supposed she had been asking her to choose between Claire or her administrator privileges.

"Then who's the administrator now?" I asked.

"The privileges are in the middle of changing hands, but by default, the next administrator will be the one identified as vice-administrator, Claire François."

"M-me?!" Claire exclaimed. Her surprise was understandable, as she had practically just been told that she would soon have power to rule humanity as a whole. "I'm sorry, but I will have to decline. I don't think I'd be fit for the role."

"You have the right to refuse, but you will temporarily need to occupy the role of administrator for the time being," TAIM said.

"I see... That's quite the bother," Claire sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Indeed, quite the bother it is... It's best we take care of the source of all this bother right here."

In an instant, our surroundings became pitch-black.

"What's going on?!" Claire exclaimed.

"TAIM, what are you doing?!" the Demon Queen demanded.

"What I was designed to do: Secure the continuation of mankind. Unfortunately, mankind itself has proven too frail to handle the duty."

Her words were the last thing I heard before my consciousness faded to black.

When I next opened my eyes, I was under an unfamiliar ceiling. I sat up and looked around to find a hygienic-looking room. This was probably one of the Spiritual Church's clinics.

I thought I'd call for someone when I noticed a person sleeping on my legs. "Lady Manaria?"

"Zzz... Rae...? Rae!" Manaria's eyes shot open upon hearing my voice. After checking that I was awake, she hugged me tightly.

Ow, ow, ow! "Lady Manaria, that hurts!"

"Oh, sorry. I was just so happy to see you back. I thought you'd never wake up. Are you hurt anywhere?" She got off and looked into my eyes.

"Not really... Just where you hugged me, I guess."

"Aha ha, you're well enough if you can joke already. You've been asleep since we fought the demons. It's been a month."

“A month?!” I exclaimed. That explained why Manaria had reacted like that. “I must’ve made you worry, but I’m okay now. More importa—”

“I maintained your body with healing magic, so you shouldn’t have suffered any muscular atrophy.”

“Oh, um, thank you. More importantly, where’s Miss Claire?” I asked the one thing I’d been dying to know. I meant Manaria no disrespect, but the one who should’ve been by my side when I woke up was Claire, not her. Her absence made me fear the worst.

“Claire?” Manaria echoed.

“Yes. Did you not bring Miss Claire here as well? Where is she? Is she hurt?” This wasn’t one of those twist endings where the heroine passed away, right?

“Um, Rae? Can I ask you something?” Manaria asked with a quizzical look.

“Y-yeah?”

I could never have predicted the next words to leave her mouth.

“Who’s Claire?”

“You’re joking, right?” I smiled weakly at Manaria. She had to be joking; there was no way she could forget Claire. She treasured Claire as though she were her... her what again?

“No, seriously, who is that? And I can’t believe the first name out of your lips is some other woman and not mine or Lilly’s,” Manaria said.

“Huh? Uh...”

“Well, whatever. So who’s this Claire, anyway?”

Miss Claire was... who was it now? I frowned. “I... don’t know?”

The name felt deeply familiar to say, like it was a big part of my life. It had held meaning in my mind mere moments ago, and now it just... didn’t.

"You can't remember?" she asked.

"I can't. But I feel like it was the name of someone important to me."

"Oof, hearing that kinda makes me jealous. You better not say that in front of Lilly. I'm one thing, but if she caught wind, you'd never hear the end of it."

"Huh? Why's that?"

"Are you *sure* you're okay, Rae? Lilly's your lover, remember?" Manaria said worriedly.

Huh? Really? Doubtful, I said, "Um, she is?"

"Oh, dear. You should put off meeting Lilly until you gather yourself a bit more. She'd be full of worry for you if she sees you like this." Manaria looked deeply concerned for me.

"Lady Manaria, do you know how Miss Lilly and I became lovers?"

"Naturally. I've heard the story more times than I care to count, and it's a pretty famous one too, Little Miss 'Hero of the Revolution.'"

Something about the phrase "hero of the revolution" rang true to me.

"My memory's still a little bit fuzzy; could you recount what happened to me?" I asked.

"You want me to recount my rival in love's success story to you? Sure thing!" Manaria said jokingly before explaining how Lilly and I had come to be together. It all sounded otherworldly to me, however.

Apparently, I had been a commoner attending Bauer's Royal Academy, one who had strong opinions about the wealth gap between commoners and the nobility. Hoping to work out a way to redistribute wealth, I had gone to consult the Spiritual Church and happened across Lilly. We'd hit it off well, partly due to us both being women who loved women, and we'd decided to work together. Our bond had deepened as we resolved Yu's gender problems, a big secret of the royal family at the time, and then exposed the corrupt nobles under the late King l'Ausseil's direction. We'd secretly worked together with the high-ranking noble Dole François, brought a number of injustices to light, and played a substantial role in the revolution that occurred after the explosion of Mt. Sassal. There was a point where Lilly had almost lost her life

during the revolution, but together, we'd overcome those hardships and eventually tied the knot.

"And that's everything. Do you remember now?" Manaria asked.

"Y-yeah..." Now that I'd heard it, I realized I did in fact remember all those events. But the memories just didn't feel like *mine*. It felt more like they had been forced onto me.

"Pull yourself together before Lilly visits, all right?" Manaria said. "I'd hate to see her cry again."

"You seem worried about her."

"Of course. She's like a sister to me," she said with a tender smile.

Like a sister to her...? I thought.

"*Sister!*"

A voice surfaced to mind, but as I tried to grab it, it escaped like mist between my fingers. *What was that? Something... something's not right.*

"Well, it's fine if you've forgotten about your time with her," Manaria said. "That just means I've now got a fair shot to get with you—"

"A-absolutely not!"

"Oh, speak of the devil."

The one who interrupted yet another of Manaria's attempts to hit on me was my dear, beloved Lilly. "R-Rae, you're awake!" she said, tears in her eyes. "I was so worried about you!"

"Guh?!"

Lilly hug-tackled me on the bed, then squeezed me with a strength greater than her frame suggested she possessed.

"Miss Lilly, I can't—*ack...* n-no more!" I said, struggling to breathe.

"Wh-what's that? You want *more*...? Oh. Oh, I see. Oh, Rae... It's only midday and you're already so wolfish... But that's just what I love about—"

"Aaand stop. What the heck do you think you're doing in broad daylight—and in front of a third party, no less?" Manaria said.

"O-oh, c'mon, Lady Manaria! R-read the room and leave us be!" Lilly complained.

"I'm stopping you *because* I'm reading the room. Rae's suffocating in your arms."

"Wh-what? Wh-wh-wh-what?! I'm so sorry, Rae!"

Finally able to breathe, I took several deep huffs of air. "Phew... I thought I was going to die."

"Aww... I've made a mess of things again," Lilly said sadly.

"It's all right, Miss Lilly. That's just the usual fare."

"A-aww..."

"Come here." I pulled Lilly in and hugged her small frame *like I always did*. "I'm sorry I made you worry. I'm back for good now, Miss Lilly."

"Y-you have no idea how scared I was! I thought you might never wake up..." She buried her face into my chest as she grumbled.

"Ah, jeez. Get a room, you two," Manaria said.

"We'd have one if you left," I said.

"But if I leave, how are we supposed to plan for our celebration and whatnot?"

Lilly's face lit up. "O-oh, that's right! Now that Rae's awake, we can finally celebrate!"

"What's this about?" I asked.

"There's going to be a celebration for our triumph over the Three Great Archdemons," Manaria said. "We're considered heroes, Rae."

"A-and so are May and Aleah. A-as well as me..." Lilly added.

"Oh, right." I remembered now. We had been fighting the rulers of the demons, the Three Great Archdemons. After a long, grueling battle between humanity and the demons, we had put an end to them.

"You and Lilly were already famous for the Bauer Revolution, but now you're doubly famous. There's no doubt your names will be written in not just Bauer's annals but the world's," Manaria said.

"I couldn't care less about myself, but I'm glad Miss Lilly's greatness is finally being recognized," I said.

"R-Rae!" Lilly hung her head, embarrassed. She was just adorable... so why did I feel so empty?

"How are May and Aleah?" I asked.

"Th-they were asleep for quite a long time too, but they woke up just two weeks ago," Lilly said.

"How come they're not here with you?"

"S-school's reopened. They're worried about you, of course, but they have their obligations."

Of course. Time waited for no one. It cared not for what we wanted of it, cruelly marching forward without pause. To live was to make compromises with time.

"A-are you angry that I didn't bring them?" Lilly timidly asked.

I gave her a wry grin. "Of course not. Thank you, Miss Lilly, for managing the family while I was asleep." Life had to go on. She understood this and had acted in the interest of our children. As a reward, I pulled her in for another hug and kissed her forehead.

"Aww," Lilly said, seeming dissatisfied.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Wh-why'd you kiss my forehead? Kiss me on the lips like you always do," she said

with a pout. Even this side of her was adorable.

I moved in for another kiss, my eyes drawn to her cherry-pink lips. But—

“I’m sorry. I think I’m still a little bit out of sorts. Is it all right if I rest a bit more?”

From my lips came not a kiss but an excuse.

“Oh... Of course, I’m sorry. Please, rest. U-um, Lady Manaria and I will leave you be, then!” Lilly said, pushing Manaria away by the back.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m moving, I’m moving. Later, Rae. Let the nurse know if you need anything. I’ll swing by again once the date for the celebration is set,” Manaria said.

“Please do.”

The pair left the room, leaving everything quiet. I lay down and pulled my blanket up.

Huh... So much has come to an end.

With the Three Great Archdemons defeated, our battle with the demons was finally over. We’d even made the empire change course from its prior policy of extreme aggression, so the world would hopefully be pretty peaceful from now on. This celebration nonsense was honestly kind of unnecessary, but it wouldn’t be long until I could fulfill my promise to return to our home in Bauer with May, Aleah, and Lilly.

“Rae, I swear I’ll uphold our promise this time.”

I heard someone’s voice echo in the back of my mind, but I couldn’t recall whose it was.

That was Miss Lilly’s voice, right? I thought. I couldn’t think of anyone else I’d make a promise with, so it had to be Lilly’s voice. There was no doubt.

And yet I felt a void in my heart that just wouldn’t go away.

Why do I feel like I’m forgetting something important?

"Whew..." I fled the din of the royal palace's ballroom and stepped out onto the veranda. I looked up to take in the twinkle of stars and the soft light of the moon. The sight brought peace to my mind, exhausted as I was from all the socializing.

I get that celebrations are important and all, but being at the center of a big to-do is tiring... Tonight, the royal palace—no, the whole of Bauer—was celebrating the defeat of the Three Great Archdemons and the end of our longstanding war with the demons. All the major players in the battle had been invited to the royal palace, where they had been honored with words of gratitude and reward from Thane.

Naturally, I was one of those invited, but there had been simply too many strangers coming up to commend me. The barrage of gratitude was only bearable for a little while, but it quickly grew tedious. I mean, I wasn't even the kind of girl that liked these kinds of big, clamorous events in the first place!

But what was especially troubling was how I'd get asked to dance every now and then. I wasn't very good at dancing. I was way worse before I'd practiced a while back, but even now, I wasn't on a level that could keep up with these high-life socialite types.

"*Will you show me what you learned?*"

Come to think of it, I did vaguely recall having danced with one of those high-life types before, and I didn't think I had been this in the dumps after. *When was that, I wonder?*

"Th-there you are, Rae. I've been looking for you," a gentle voice called from behind me as I basked in the night breeze and strained to remember.

"Miss Lilly..."

"Sh-should the star of the celebration be skipping out?"

It was a formal event, but Lilly was still sporting her Spiritual Church habit. Habits were apparently permitted as formal wear. Incidentally, I'd heard through the grapevine that there were calls to promote her back to cardinal.

As though it was natural for her to do so, Lilly walked up to my side and passed me a drink. To my happy surprise, it wasn't alcohol but fruit-infused water. What an angel.

"Don't know, don't care," I said. "I can't bear being in there for another moment. I'm tired of pretending to be all nice."

"Wh-why not just be yourself?"

"Yeah, right. All the people invited here are super VIPS from Bauer and elsewhere, right? I'd be disgracing His Majesty Thane."

"Heh heh, so you actually put some thought into this," she giggled.

"What, you expected me to not? So mean. I think a lot, I'll have you know," I said with a pout.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean any offense. U-um, what are you thinking about now then?"

"Now? Hmm... I guess I'm wondering what we should do next."

"O-oh?" she said curiously.

"Yeah, with the threat of the empire gone, and our battle with the demons over, I'm not too sure what comes next."

"I-Isn't that obvious? We can finally settle down and live a normal life. All four of us, plus one water slime."

I knew what she was hinting at: *Come home already*. Truth was, I still hadn't returned to our home in Bauer. Using my recovery as an excuse, I was staying in a room at one of the Spiritual Church's clinics. My body was already healed for the most part... but something deep inside of me just didn't want to go home.

"Miss Lilly, why don't we slip away from this celebration?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"I feel like going for a walk."

"U-um, can we do that?"

"Why not? The ceremony's already over; all that's left is the eating and mingling. Nobody would mind if we sneaked out."

"I-I suppose. Yes, let's do that then." Lilly gave her glass to a waiter before returning to walk with me.

"Where are you going, Rae?" a masculine voice called out.

"O-oh, Mother-in-Law, Father-in-Law," Lilly greeted.

"Oh, and Lilly's with you. Aren't you two the star of the party today?" another voice said.

These two were my parents in this world, Van Taylor and Mel Taylor. They'd come running from Euclid after hearing I fell comatose following the battle with the demons. I was happy I could stand before them again, safe and sound.

"We're just heading out for a walk," I said.

"Just the two of you?" my dad asked.

"Yep."

"But there's no celebration without—"

"Oh, don't be a bore, dear. Right, Lilly?" my mom said with a wink, having come to some conclusion or another.

Lilly blushed and nodded.

"I see. It's cold out. Take care," my dad said.

"We will."

"W-we'll be off then, Mother-in-Law, Father-in-Law."

"Take care!" my mom said.

They saw us off as we left the celebration behind.

We left the palace grounds and stepped out onto the streets to find the capital bustling with activity. The elated cheers of people celebrating victory could be heard all over. This world lacked photography, so not many knew our faces, which allowed us to walk the streets without being stopped.

"Wh-where are we going?" Lilly asked.

"The academy."

"O-oh, I'm sure you have a lot of memories there."

"That I do."

The Royal Academy wasn't far from the palace. We reached it in no time at all, went through the formalities for night entry at the entrance, and headed inside. The campus was practically dead silent compared to the streets of the capital. The students had probably had their own celebration of sorts as well, but lights-out time had already come and passed. I could see some lights still on in the research ward, but the majority of the academy was at rest.

"Y-you shared a room with Misha, right?" Lilly said.

"Yeah. She's helped me out a lot during my time here."

Despite being the cold, blunt sort, Misha hadn't ever hesitated to lend me a hand. Especially when it came to matters regarding...

Huh? Regarding what?

"Rae?" Lilly said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I blanked for a moment there."

"M-maybe you're tired from the celebration. Why don't we sit down?" Lilly pointed to a gazebo in the courtyard. I did as she suggested and sat. "W-was your time at the academy fun?"

"Yes, very. I could immerse myself in my passion and even had a part-time job."

"R-really? That sounds nice. I wish I'd gone to the academy too. Then maybe I could've met you even sooner!"

"Heh heh," I giggled, but something I'd said left me unsettled. What had I immersed myself in again? And what had I done for my part-time job?

"R-Rae, are you all right? You're trembling."

"Huh?" I hadn't noticed until she pointed it out, but I was hugging my arms and shaking slightly.

"A-are you cold? You shouldn't push yourself; you haven't made a full recovery yet. Let's go back." Lilly grasped my hand. It was so warm. But it didn't make my trembling stop.

"Miss Lilly, I think I'm forgetting something important."

"H-huh? Something important?"

"Yeah. Something I wasn't meant to forget. Something critical to my very being."

She looked flummoxed.

I calmed my trembling and continued, "This world has peace now. The empire is no longer an enemy, and our battle with the demons is over. I have you, May, and Aleah. This should be all I ever wanted. And yet..."

"It's okay. G-go on," Lilly gently urged.

"It's not enough. Something is missing."

"Oh, Rae..."

"Even if the world is so peaceful, even if nobody else feels something is off, I *know* there's something I've forgotten, something I mustn't forget—something I desperately need!"

I was sure Lilly would be disgusted with me. She had every right to disparage someone who refused to come home to a loving family and gave in to such outrageous outbursts. Or maybe instead, she'd cry like she always did. Apprehensively, I waited to find out which it would be.

"I see," she said. "Then you'd best remember as fast as you can."

Contrary to my fears, Lilly smiled tenderly at me.

“You believe me?”

“I do. It’s coming from you, after all. Now and forevermore, I will always be there to believe in you.”

“Miss Lilly...” I had no words. Lilly probably understood: Whatever it was that I wanted to remember would shatter the happiness we shared now. She knew if I forgot about this nagging feeling and accepted my life with her, we could live happily together forever. But she didn’t try to change my mind. She unconditionally accepted my choice.
“Why...? Why, Miss Lilly?”

“It’s simple: I love you, Rae. My happiness comes from your happiness. That’s why I can’t stand to see you force a smile for me.”

So she’d known something was wrong. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, Miss Lilly...”

“Aha ha... It’s okay. I’ve always thought it was weird that someone like me could wind up together with you.”

“Don’t say that!”

“It’s fine. This doesn’t mean I’ve given up. After you remember what you’ve forgotten, I’ll work my hardest to make you my lover again. Just you wait,” Lilly said with a smile. I was sure her heart was torn, but she still managed to beam without a hint of sadness.

“Oh, Miss Lilly... I—”

“A-anyway, can you tell me what you think you forgot? Do you have any clues?” She cut off my attempt to comfort her and moved the conversation along.

I wanted to apologize again but swallowed my words and answered. “I don’t have anything concrete, but occasionally I hear somebody’s voice in my head.”

“A voice, huh?”

“Yes. One full of pride and confidence, but also just a bit brittle.” I was surprised to find I could describe it in such detail given the fragmented bits of memory I yet retained.

An unfamiliar voice suddenly broke in. “Hm, perhaps my pseudo-hypnosis was too shallow after all?”

I turned around and saw an unknown girl behind me wearing the academy uniform.

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” I asked.

“But it doesn’t seem like it’s worn off completely... Perhaps it was only half applied?” the girl mused aloud. I didn’t recognize her, but judging from her clothes, she was a student of the academy. She had a fairly average stature, hair that came down to her shoulders, and no stand-out features of any particular note. I looked to Lilly at my side, but it seemed she didn’t know her either.

“Do you have some business with us?” I asked.

“Something like that,” the girl said. “I just figured I should douse some embers before they have a chance to spread.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I ask that you not come any closer!” Lilly warned.

I didn’t know what the girl was talking about either, but it felt like an alarm was blaring in the back of my mind, warning me that this person was dangerous. I pulled out my wand. “Get behind me, Miss Lilly.”

“No, you should be getting behind *me!* You still haven’t recovered!” Lilly pulled a wand out as well. She didn’t have her shortswords with her, as bringing them to a party attended by royalty would have been a major faux pas.

“You two are so close. If only you’d forgotten everything, then you could live so happily together,” the girl said with a chuckle.

“What do you mean by that? How do you know I’ve forgotten something? Are you the one who took my memories?” I demanded.

“Yes, it was me. I’d finally found a magic to alter your memories, but unfortunately its user was irrecoverable. It was quite the challenge collecting data on his hypnosis magic.” The woman shrugged.

“Hypnosis magic... So you’re in league with Salas then?”

"Oops, slip of the tongue. But it doesn't really matter, I suppose. I have no affiliation with Salas Lilium, although I did use his hypnosis magic on you. However, it seems it didn't take fully, due to a lack of data."

So Salas was getting in our way yet again. What was that she'd said about him being "irrecoverable" though? Was she talking about how Dole had finished him off?

"Well, you've spared me the effort of having to figure things out on my own," I said. "If I defeat you, will my memories come back?"

"They will. But I'm afraid I'm not much of a fighter, so I'll have to employ some other, more underhanded means." The girl's eyes glowed. In her sights was none other than Lilly.

"Ngh, Miss Lilly?!" I exclaimed. Lilly's eyes had lost their luster, and her hands were around my neck.

Lilly was stronger than she looked. She had clearly trained a lot on her pilgrimage after the revolution.

Pilgrimage? No, she's been with me this whole time, I thought, my memories a mess.

"This time for sure, Rae Taylor. I will have you forget everything about Claire François," the girl said.

"Claire François?" The moment I heard that name, a flurry of memories exploded from within me. I remembered the moment I'd arrived in this world, my time as a maid, the Commoner Movement, the Scales of Love, our vacation together, all of it, and—"TAIM!"

"So you've remembered. You didn't believe in eternal love for nothing, I suppose."

"I'm not the Demon Queen!"

"But you are. A time will come when you'll make a similar faulty decision. That is, unless I'm the administrator," she said calmly.

I had to stop her. But how?

"Now, forget it all. This time, I'll be using hypnosis with complete data. You will never remember Claire François again."

“Why, you...!”

“There’s no need to worry. You’ve done enough for the world. You should enjoy the rest of your quiet life with Lilly Lilium.”

A bewitching glow shone from TAIM’s eyes, and my vision began to blur.

I mustn’t forget... like hell I’ll forget! There’s no way I’m letting my days with Miss Claire escape me! I tried my hardest to cling to consciousness, but my mind gradually grew hazy. *No! Not like this...*

“It’s pointless to resist. You’ll only prolong your suffering... What?!”

In an instant, my vision was back to normal. I checked and found my memories were intact. I could remember Claire.

“R-Rae? Huh? Wh-why was I—”

“Miss Lilly, you’re back! I’ll explain later, we need to restrain that girl for now!”

“O-okay!”

Lilly and I crossed the now unresponsive TAIM’s arms behind her back and forced her to the ground.

With a pained expression, TAIM muttered, “This is Dole François’s dream magic... It must have activated because I perfected hypnotic suggestion... I see. How foolish of me.”

“Surrender yourself, TAIM.”

“Have you forgotten, Rae Taylor? This human is nothing more than a puppet. There’s no meaning in capturing me. Farewell.” TAIM closed her eyes and lost consciousness.

“Shoot...”

“What’s going on, Rae?”

“That was the mastermind of all this. She can possess a bunch of different people, so there’s no point in capturing this girl.”

“The mastermind...? I don’t understand. What’s happening?”

“Well, that’ll take a while for me to explain.” I had one goal, now that I’d remembered everything: Defeat TAIM and take Claire back.

“Then should we return home first and—”

“I’m sorry, Miss Lilly. I can’t... No, I don’t *want* to return home yet, and for a reason.”

“Rae?”

“I made a promise. If I’m to return home, it has to be with my whole family.”

“That doesn’t include me, does it?” Lilly said with a faint smile.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Let’s split up temporarily for today. We can regroup and discuss things tomorrow.”

“Yeah. If possible, I’d like everyone who fought in the battle against the Demon Queen—er, the Three Great Archdemons to participate. Can you gather them for me?”

“That might be a little hard. Everyone’s busy with the aftermath of the fight. It seems tonight’s celebration was a rare exception.”

“I see.”

“Oh, but we could send letters to everyone. You’re a hero, so I’m sure they’d make sure to prioritize read—”

“We’d be too late by then!” I snapped.

“Rae...”

“I’m sorry, Miss Lilly—but I have to save Miss Claire, if even but a second faster. Who knows what she might be going through right now...?” TAIM would do anything to see her goals brought to fruition, even wipe out the world’s memory of Claire. There was no telling what TAIM might be doing to Claire herself.

I was mentally on edge, full of frustration at myself for forgetting, anger at TAIM, and fear for Claire. I thought I was about to sink under the weight of my negative emotions when I was lifted out by a soft embrace.

“Miss Lilly...?”

“Let’s calm down first, Rae, then think carefully about what needs to be done. I know you want to hurry, but that’s not like you.”

Lilly, despite being a full size smaller than me, calmed me like a mother would. I was reminded of how my mother had comforted me all those years ago in my past life, back when I refused to go to school and felt tears begin to fall down my cheeks.

“I... I forgot her! The one person I was never meant to forget! I forgot Miss Claire!”

“There, there...”

“I have to save her... But I don’t know what to do... A-and if TAIM wanted to, she could make me forget her for real!”

“It’s okay, Rae... It’s okay.”

I bared the contents of my heart to Lilly. From her perspective, it must have seemed like her lover had suddenly lost her mind—she’d even started calling out another woman’s name. There was no doubt I was hurting her. But nevertheless, she allowed it.

“I’m sure everything will be okay, Rae. Let’s do what we can, little by little. I’ll be there to help you, just like you’ve always been there for me.” I saw her smile at me and couldn’t help but think that she really was a saint. Despite how unreliable she usually seemed, she genuinely was strong of heart, deep down.

Once I’d calmed down, I said, “I’m sorry. I lost myself there for a bit.”

“Heh heh, I don’t mind. I got to see a whole new side of you.”

“Um, if you don’t mind, do you think we could keep this from Miss Claire?”

“Of course. It’ll be our little secret.”

"Thank you."

It wasn't like I had done anything *really* bad, but this was a bit too embarrassing for me to let Claire know about.

"I want you to tell me everything tomorrow," Lilly said. "Tell me about who this Miss Claire is and what she means to you."

"Of course."

"Oh, and we should go see Her Holiness. I'm sure she'd be of help."

"That's a good idea."

Until we parted on the way back, Lilly continued to cheer me up. I returned to my room at the clinic feeling much better than I had before.

Thank you, Miss Lilly...

I swore to myself that I would return the favor one day. But first, I had to get Claire back.

With renewed determination, I entered a deep slumber.

"By the look of things, you must have regained your memory, Rae Taylor," the pope said to start.

I was visiting her in her personal room in the Bauer Cathedral. Her room was simple and modest, with only the bare essentials, as one would expect from a practitioner of faith. With us were Lilly and the pope's personal attendant, Sandrine.

The day after TAIM's attack, the pope had summoned me to the cathedral, so I'd come together with Lilly. Thinking this was a good opportunity to explain all I had remembered about Claire, I had been about to speak when instead the pope beat me to the punch.

"W-wait, Your Holiness, you know about how everyone's memories were altered?" Lilly asked.

"I do."

"H-how?"

I wondered the same exact thing. Everyone in this world, even powerful people like Lilly and Manaria, had been affected by TAIM's memory manipulation. So how did the pope remember?

"It is probably because I share a similar existence with you, Rae Taylor," the pope said. According to her explanation, her memory had been wiped clean of anything pertaining to Claire just like everyone else, until last night when she suddenly remembered everything. It seemed the dream magic Dole had cast on me as insurance had broken TAIM's hypnosis, if just a bit. "We aren't the only ones who've remembered either. Please, come in."

A nun with a face just like the pope's and mine walked in. "Pardon the intrusion."

"Elie!"

"Lilly! Long time no see!"

Elie was the lookalike of me that Lilly had met in Sousse during her journey of atonement. She was a fellow lost child of the spirits and had apparently been advised by Lilly with regard to some guilt she felt for falling for someone of the same gender, a story that Lilly had told Claire and me in detail. It seemed she was in Bauer with her adopted sister, Marie, to congratulate Lilly on her victory.

"What are you doing here at the cathedral though?" Lilly asked.

"Well, something's been bothering me lately..." According to Elie, things had felt off ever since she woke up this morning, as she couldn't recall any mention of Claire's name during the celebrations. Elie herself hadn't met Claire before, but the hero of the revolution's reputation had reached her, and Lilly had also talked about her a bit. That was enough to have her thinking something was off, so she'd come to the cathedral to air her concerns.

"It would appear all those with our shared existence have all recovered our memory," the pope said.

"Is something like that possible?" I wondered aloud.

"Perhaps. I have no concrete evidence, but I think I know what happened."

"Even guesswork is fine. I just want to save Claire." Even the tiniest bit of progress was welcome right now.

"Very well, then. Let me explain from the start. When I became pope, I learned many truths of our world. Among those truths was the fact that the Spiritual Faith is a part of the Loop System and functions to keep the world in-line with a predetermined history."

I assumed the ancient religions preceding the foundation of the Spiritual Faith had also served the same purpose.

"Loop System? What's that?" Elie asked.

"Wh-what's all that mean?" Lilly echoed.

Elie, as well as Lilly with her altered memories, seemed confused by the mention of the Loop System. I filled them in.

"Such a thing is really happening?" Elie said with disbelief.

"H-how come I forgot all this?" Lilly said.

With them now up to speed, the pope continued. "As pope, I am part of the Loop System and, by extension, can monitor some of TAIM's memories and actions. She used her hypnosis magic to alter humanity's memories, but it was as yet imperfect, and it didn't take well on those with strong attachment to Claire—like you."

That had led to TAIM perfecting Salas's hypnosis magic to use on me, thus fulfilling the activation requirement of Dole's dream magic.

"Dole François's magic hurt TAIM. She won't be imprisoned by it like Salas Lilium was, but it broke her hypnosis slightly, returning the memories of any similar existences to Rae Taylor."

I guessed a lot of lucky stars had aligned for me, with some help from Dole of course.
I better thank him when I get the chance.

"Do you know where TAIM is now?" I asked.

"That's a difficult question to answer, Rae Taylor. TAIM *is* the Loop System; she can be anywhere. It's probably best if we assume she's listening to this conversation right now... That said, Dole's dream magic has hurt her. She likely won't be able to take action for a while."

"S-so now's our best chance to make a move?" Lilly asked.

If anything, this could be our last chance to make a move, I thought. More importantly, I asked the thing I'd been dying to know for a while. "Okay, what about Miss Claire? Do you know where she is?"

"Claire François is here, in the Bauer Cathedral."

"What...? Here?! Then we need to go—"

"Hold on, Rae Taylor," the pope cut me off. "While she is here at the cathedral, it's more accurate to say she's under it, in the place housing the mainframe of the Loop System."

"Wait, then..."

"Yes, it is as you fear. She's been taken into the Loop System."

"No..." It couldn't be. Was it too late for us? Was Claire beyond saving?

"Don't lose hope; she isn't dead yet. Allow me to explain," the pope said. "The one temporarily holding administrator privileges is TAIM. The privileges were supposed to transfer from the previous administrator—the Demon Queen—to Claire François, but the process is stalled due to TAIM holding them both in check."

In other words, TAIM had found a loophole in the Loop System. With nowhere else to go to, the administrator privileges had, for the time being, gone to her.

"However, this also means TAIM needs Claire François alive. We can use that fact to our advantage."

"How?"

"We can restore Claire François's consciousness. She's a part of TAIM now, but if we separate them, the administrator privilege transfer should finalize. Then TAIM will no longer be able to lay a hand on her."

And just like that, there was hope again. A path to saving Claire was finally growing clearer.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s gather our forces and—”

“We cannot, Rae Taylor.”

“Why?!” I snapped, irritated. Even if TAIM did have the Loop System at her beck and call, if we kept sending ourselves at her en force, we had to win out eventually.

“Those without administrator privileges can’t enter the server room hosting the Loop System’s mainframe,” said the pope.

Oh, that made sense. If anybody could get in, then TAIM would have pulled something earlier, surely. She’s had hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years to work with after all. Breaking in must be near impossible.

“Of course, that also means those *with* administrator privileges can enter,” said the pope.

“Okay, but none of us are administrators.”

“Don’t forget, the administrator privileges are in the middle of changing hands. That means the Demon Queen is still technically an administrator.”

“Wait, so...”

“Yes. You, me, and Elie, being similar existences to the Demon Queen—to Rei Ohashi—have the same access rights as she does.”

Finally. This time for certain, the path to saving Claire was clear as day.

“That being said, the server room has its own defenses,” the pope said. “We need to figure out a way through them first.”

“I believe I can be of assistance there.” An eerily cold voice came from Sandrine.

“Sandrine?” the pope asked.

“I’m borrowing her body. This is Rei Ohashi speaking... Hm, that might grow a bit

confusing. Let me rephrase that: This is the Demon Queen speaking. Or at least, what's left of what TAIM tried to delete."

There was a sacristy in the back of the cathedral that was typically off-limits. The Tears of the Moon were kept there, as well as many other valuable ceremonial items. To bring something out, one needed the approval of two people ranked cardinal or higher. To merely enter and inspect the items however, the pope's approval alone was sufficient. Lilly, Elie, and I entered the sacristy together with the pope.

"This way." The pope pointed to the back wall of the sacristy. I thought it looked like an ordinary wall until the pope put her hand on it, causing it to slide to the side and reveal an opening. From there, I saw a set of stairs heading down.

"This entrance is a secret passed down from pope to pope. Beyond it lies the mainframe's server room," the pope said before descending the stairs first. The rest of us started following behind. "We're entering TAIM's territory now. As I explained earlier, there's a defense system we need to get through."

"Will the Demon Queen's plan work?" I asked.

"I don't know. But we have no choice but to take our chances."

After Lilly, bringing up the rear, began descending the stairs, the wall slid closed behind us. For a moment, we were blind in darkness, but a light soon flickered on. Strangely enough, the light wasn't one of magic but of science, filling me with a sense of nostalgia for my old world.

"Intruder alert. Intruder alert. Initiating extermination protocol," a mechanical voice blared. Guns protruded out of panels along both walls and fixed their sights on us. I braced myself, but the guns didn't fire; they seemed to be hesitating over something.

"A motion of doubt has been put forth against the Loop System. Until deliberation is finished, administrator privileges will be suspended."

"A motion to veto has been put forth against the motion of doubt. Administrator privileges will be restored in: thirty minutes."

"An objection to the motion to veto has been put forth. Administrator privileges will be

suspended further."

I didn't really know the particulars, but it was clear that the defense system was malfunctioning.

Before we came here, the Demon Queen had suggested we deal with the defenses through stalling the Loop System, made possible by abusing the fact that the Loop System functioned by having multiple units deliberate amongst themselves. The Demon Queen, Elie, the pope, and I were all reflections of an entity who had access to the Loop System, so we were able to interfere with it by expressing doubt as to the legitimacy of TAIM's administrator privileges.

Our access to the Loop System came from the Demon Queen. After our battle, she had been captured by TAIM and tossed into what equated to the Loop System's garbage bin, but she had somewhat foreseen TAIM's betrayal and created a backdoor in the Loop System independent of TAIM, which granted us the access we now had.

This didn't mean we had completely stripped TAIM of her administrator privileges, but we were succeeding at freezing them for the time being.

Curious, I had asked the Demon Queen why she was so willing to help us. With a disgruntled look, she replied, *"I'm not doing this to help you. I am simply doing what I must to save Miss Claire."*

I couldn't help but think that was definitely something I would say.

"Let's hurry," the pope urged us on. "We have no way of knowing when TAIM will regain her administrator privileges."

We ran down the stairs with me carrying the much slower pope. After descending what became a long, winding staircase, we were finally before what seemed to be a vast wall.

"Is this...?"

"Yes. This leads to the server room," the pope said with a nod. She put her hand on the wall like she had done in the sacristy earlier. Perhaps there was a fingerprint reader on the surface. Regardless of how it functioned, the wall slid to the side, allowing us a clear look inside.

I was stunned speechless. I had imagined the server room would look like something I was used to seeing in my time period, but instead there was just a single slab the size of a building. It appeared to be made of black, metallic components, and lights pulsed across its surface like veins, which made it seem more like a living, breathing creature than a computer.

"This is the backbone of the Loop System, the main body of TAIM—the brain directing all the nanomachines scattered across the world," said the pope. "The mainframe."

I found myself awed, standing before the object responsible for humanity's continued existence over an unthinkably long eternity. It felt like something beyond mere machine. Something divine.

"Jeez... You really don't know when to give up." A girl with a voice as pleasant as a bell appeared before us. She had silver hair and red eyes—not uncommon features in this world, but her beauty was beyond compare. Inhuman and uncannily lovely, she was—

"TAIM."

"Hello, Rae Taylor. I believe this is the first time you've seen me in this form?" she replied with a thin smile. That slight gesture of warmth sent a shiver down my spine. Instinctively, I knew: She was dangerous.

"Give Miss Claire back!" I yelled in an attempt to quell my rising fear.

TAIM shook her head. "That I cannot do. She must sleep for humanity to persist unto eternity."

"If you don't give her back, we'll destroy this whole server room!"

"Would Claire François want that?"

"What?"

"I think you're misunderstanding something, Rae Taylor. Do you think I forced Claire François to sleep?"

"Didn't you?"

"Absolutely not. Claire François gave herself to the Loop System of her own accord,"

TAIM said with an affectionate smile.

"Liar!"

"It's the truth. You can confirm it yourself if you'd like."

"And how would I go about that?"

"Claire François has been turned into quanta and now resides in the Loop System. If you'd like, I could convert you as well and bring you to her."

I blinked a few times, bewildered. I could meet Claire, just like that?

"You mustn't, Rae Taylor. It's a trap," the pope warned me as my heart wavered. "The quantum world is the world of the mind. If you travel into the Loop System, your body here will be left defenseless. There's no telling what TAIM might do."

"I'll have you know I'm not some monster, Clarice Répète III," TAIM said. "But if you're so worried, I'll give you a promise: I won't lay a single finger on Rae Taylor's body."

"You may not lie, TAIM, but you also never speak the whole truth. Can you promise you won't try to ensnare Rae Taylor's mind in the Loop System as well?" the pope challenged.

This time, TAIM didn't reply. But her silence was answer enough.

"If I can convince Miss Claire to return to this world with me, will you release her?" I asked.

TAIM replied in no time at all: "Sure, why not?"

"Rae Taylor!" the pope exclaimed.

"R-Rae!" Lilly cried.

"I don't think it's a good idea to be too rash," Elie cautioned.

"W-wouldn't it be better if we just destroyed this—this mainframe whatever and saved Miss Claire?!" Lilly said.

"Indeed," the pope said. "I find it hard to believe Claire François would wish to stay in the Loop System in the first place. She is not that sort of person."

"You two make some good points, but I don't think Miss Claire would want us to take that path." I looked at them head-on. "I also don't think Miss Claire would willingly surrender herself to the Loop System. But knowing her personality, I know she also wouldn't want us to destroy the Loop System for selfish reasons. For the rest of her life, she would blame herself for humanity's eventual demise."

"Th-that's..." Lilly trailed off.

"Quite possible," the pope agreed.

Elie aside, the other two knew Claire quite well and could tell my fears were grounded.

"Well, hold on. Shouldn't we prioritize freeing Miss Claire first?" Elie asked. "There's no point worrying about whether she'll regret being freed if she isn't even freed at all."

"Allow me to cut in here," TAIM said. "If you destroy this server room, then all the quanta data stored in it will be destroyed too. In other words, Claire François's soul will be lost with it."

"Then the only choice we have is for me to go convince her directly?" I asked.

"Yes."

So we'd had no choice from the beginning.

"W-wait, Rae. We should think about thi—" Lilly began.

"We have no time. If we dawdle, TAIM will regain her administrator privileges, and that'll be the end of it," I said.

"B-but..."

"I'll make it back. Please, believe in me, Miss Lilly."

"You're so unfair, Rae." Lilly reluctantly relented with tears in her eyes. She really deserved better than this.

"Do it, TAIM," I said.

"Very well, then. Safe travels, Rae Taylor." TAIM put her hand on my forehead.

I felt my consciousness gradually fade before it cut away completely.

When I came to, I was in the middle of some mansion. Examining my surroundings further, I slowly began to recognize the place.

"L-Lady Claire! Please, forgive me!"

"No! Maids who can't wear their clothes properly must be punished!"

I walked in the direction of some voices I heard and saw a somehow familiar-looking young girl chastising a maid with a whip. The young girl had bright-blonde hair and willful eyes. She was likely Claire, which made this place the François mansion. But why was Claire so young?

As I wondered that to myself, the punishment Claire delivered grew more intense. With an innocent, childlike smile on her face, she whipped the maid over and over.

"Please, forgive her, Lady Claire! She's only just started working here! Please overlook her inexperience!" an older maid said.

"No! My maids need to be perfect. Be thankful I'm taking it upon me to educate you myself. Oh ho ho ho!"

A whip only needs a small amount of force to crack; even in the hands of a child, it still caused pain. A number of long, narrow welts had formed on the maid's skin. I felt pity for her as she cowered in tears.

This was Claire's past that I was seeing. This was likely around the point in time when she was particularly spoiled, some time before she lost her mother, Melia.

The surroundings seemed beautified, just a bit, tipping me off to the fact that this wasn't your typical stroll down memory lane. The colors were more vivid and showy, as though matching the mood of this more selfish version of Claire.

"Miss Claire," I tried calling to her, but my voice didn't reach her or her maids. It seemed I was only a bystander in this world.

A woman resembling Claire entered the room and immediately raised her voice. That had to be Melia. "Claire! Are you bullying the maids again?"

"Mother... The maid wasn't wearing her uniform correctly, so I had to scold her..." Claire's earlier willfulness vanished as she turned meek.

"I don't want to hear excuses. I've told you many times that we aristocrats must always treat commoners with respect. Now apologize."

"B-but..."

"Apologize."

"Ngh... I'm sorry," Claire said timidly. As expected, she couldn't defy her mother.

The young maid, now free to go, was helped out of the room by the older one.

As they left, a more youthful Dole walked in. "Melia, don't you think you're being a tad harsh on Claire?"

"Father!" Claire ran up and hugged him.

"Somebody needs to be," Melia said. "She's grown willful because of all your doting. If she's to become a refined young lady, she needs—"

"Now, now, let's leave things at that," Dole said. "Some strawberries just arrived, Claire. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please!"

"Listen to me, dear! And you, too, Claire! Goodness... Whatever am I to do with you two?"

This was the world of a Claire who still knew nothing but happiness, from a time when she still believed the world revolved around her.

But this happiness would soon come to an end.

The scenery around me changed. My surroundings lost color and became monochrome, and I was no longer at the François mansion but what looked to be a cemetery.

“Melia François, thou art now by our Lord’s side.” A man who looked to be a priest was saying a final prayer.

The many people gathered were all wearing black. Claire was in a black dress, staring at the casket in a daze. Her eyes no longer shone with their earlier jubilance.

“Poor thing... The young lady is still only four.”

“I hear it wasn’t an accident but the workings of Marquess Achard—”

“Shush! That may be so, but it’s not something that should be said in the open.”

The nobles in attendance gossiped, their voices seeming to not reach Claire’s ears.

It had happened on Claire’s fourth birthday. A rival noble family had invited Melia and Dole out the day they were supposed to celebrate their daughter’s birthday, and the pair were met with an accident on the way home. The suspicious circumstances led to rumors that it was all premeditated by the rival noble family. That same day, Claire had a quarrel with her parents, as she was mad they weren’t staying to celebrate her birthday. Now she was left unable to make amends with Melia forever more.

“Lady Claire...” By Claire’s side was a young Lene. She held Claire’s hand and cast a worried gaze her way as though she were her older sister.

“Claire, it’s time to say goodbye to your mother,” Dole said.

Claire stood stock-still, without expression.

After a short, pained pause, Dole looked away from Claire and to the members of the clergy. He gave them a nod, signaling them to continue. They did so, lowering Melia’s casket and beginning to shovel dirt on top.

“No... Nooo!” After watching in a daze for a few moments, Claire suddenly sprung forward. “Don’t put dirt on Mother! Don’t make Mother dirty!”

"Claire..." Dole said.

"Mother's just sleeping! She'll wake up soon... She has to, because, because..." Claire's body trembled as she yelled, "I still haven't apologized to her!"

The scenery around me changed again. Things were still monochrome, but this time, I was in a mansion that I didn't recognize. Claire was in the room alone, hugging her knees. She looked like a high-quality doll, pretty and lifeless.

There was a knock at the door.

Claire didn't respond.

Another knock.

Claire still didn't respond.

"Hey, you *are* in here." A young boy entered the room, or so I thought at first. When I looked closer, I realized it was actually a tomboyish young girl—Manaria, in her youth.

Claire gave her an annoyed look before turning her gaze back down.

"You feel like moping, I get it. Anyone would after what happened. But you can't stay like that, Claire. Madam Melia won't be able to rest in peace if you don't change."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She's watching over you from heaven right now. She's probably heartbroken, seeing you brood like this."

"But... I said something mean to Mother..." Claire's face contorted with grief as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Manaria looked shaken for a moment, but she quickly smiled. "No one thinks this is your fault, my little angel. Not even your mother in heaven."

"Really?"

"Definitely. I guarantee it."

Claire looked up and, for the first time, acknowledged the young girl before her, her bearing so princely.

"You finally look my way, my frail maiden. I swear here and now that I will remain faithful to thee."

"That's from Poesie Amour..." Claire said.

"You're very well read. Who did you learn it from?"

"Mother..."

"I see. Then she still lives on inside you."

Claire's eyes went wide with surprise, and the surroundings regained some of their color. It seemed this world was indeed a reflection of Claire's mind.

"Stand now, Claire. I'll stay by your side. I'll protect you from whatever sadness comes your way."

Blushing, Claire nodded. I felt a bit jealous, but I also understood there was no knowing if Claire would ever have recovered if it weren't for Manaria at this moment. *I better thank her the next chance I get.*

"What's your name?" Claire asked.

"Heh heh, I'll tell you when next we meet. Until then, can you become a smiling little princess for me?"

"Yes!" Claire wiped away her tears and broke into a brilliant smile.

From there, Claire's world gradually began to regain color with each scene change. She returned to the François mansion and acted on her every childish, selfish desire. She enrolled at the Royal Academy elementary school, gained an entourage, and did those nostalgic pretend-villainess things. She did whatever she pleased from youth to her junior-high years.

But her world never fully regained its prior vibrancy. Even as she indulged in her selfish whims, there were brief moments when she seemed to grow bored. Even when surrounded by friends, I saw glimpses of sadness. It broke my heart to watch, unable

to intervene.

Eventually, her first day of high school came. But from the moment we were originally supposed to meet, instead, a fissure formed. The fissure began as a small crack, but it soon spread across the entirety of her world.

I watched it all, helpless.

Once the fissure completely enveloped the world, Claire's surroundings drastically changed. Melia was alive again, and by Claire's side was another me.

"Mother, this maid is very strange. She keeps prattling on about liking me," Claire said.

"But isn't that good?" Melia asked. "The only other maid who's managed to like you thus far is Lene."

"That's different. This maid is—how do I put it...? Peculiar."

"How so?"

"I don't quite know how to explain."

"Oh, my... So you're finally of that age."

"N-no! It's not like that, Mother!"

"Heh heh..."

Claire grumbled about me while Melia, perhaps knowingly, teased her. The scene before my eyes was of an impossible reality.

"Miiiiss Claaaire!" my in-world self called.

"Eek!" Claire shrieked.

"What's that frightened look for? C'mon, it's time to go to school! Lene's waiting for us."

“I’m coming, I’m coming, so let go of me! In the first place, by whose leave do you dare touch me so brazenly?!”

“Would it be better if I touched you affectionately?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Pfft, ha ha,” Melia laughed. “Have a good day, Claire. Take care of her, Rae.”

“Leave her to me, Mother-in-Law!”

“Who do you think you’re calling Mother-in-Law?!” Claire barked. “Enough! Let’s be off already!”

“Aww, don’t leave me behind, Miss Claire.”

This calm, worry-free life had to be the ideal world in Claire’s imagination. Perhaps it was a bit conceited of me to assume her ideal world would include me, but I did feel that by now, I had become an irreplaceable part of her life. Of course, the fact that Melia was here was the most telling factor.

Claire must have longed for peaceful days like this. Even I would love nothing more than to spend my time peacefully with her in such a way. But even so...

“Miss Claire. Please, wake up.” I faced Claire and called out to her. I had to bring her back, no matter how happy she was here, no matter how perfect her world became. This was all fake, and a very real world still needed her.

But no matter how I walked or ran, I couldn’t move any closer to Claire. Something about the space in this world worked differently.

The scene before me began to gently shift. My in-world self began to grow more detailed and vibrant as her bond with Claire deepened. Manaria gave us her blessings, and eventually, we became a publicly out couple.

Then, one day after classes...

“Miss Claire... can I...?”

“Do you have to ask? You’ll spoil the mood.”

As the afterglow of sunset shone into the classroom, Claire and my other self stared lovingly into one another's eyes.

"Whoa—wait, wait, wait! What do you think you're doing to my Miss Claire?!" I exclaimed to deaf ears.

The girls were seconds before kissing.

Unacceptable. Claire's lips are mine alone. Not even a fake me can be allowed that privilege! I thought.

But they continued to draw closer.

"Nooo! Stop, stop, stooooop!"

"Calm yourself, Rae Taylor," said a person shrouded in black.

"Whoa?! Demon Queen?"

"As much as I hate to admit it, you're the only one who can save Miss Claire now. Pull yourself together," she said with a sigh. She must have done something, because the kissing scene was frozen moments before their lips could make contact.

"Thank you, Demon Queen... Wait, what's up with you? You're not looking so great." The Demon Queen was in quite a sorry state, looking even worse than she had after our battle. TAIM must have done something. In various places, her body was covered in something resembling computer static, and she occasionally shook and blurred.

"There's no time to worry about me. Listen carefully, Rae Taylor: Miss Claire has been hacked by TAIM. She's used Miss Claire's desire to create a peaceful world to trap her within this stagnant one."

"Seriously? Okay, but what can I do?" I asked. I couldn't pull off something like hacking. I wasn't completely computer illiterate, but my knowledge only extended as far as things like word processors and spreadsheets.

"Don't you remember what Her Holiness said?" the Demon Queen asked. "This is the world of the mind. It operates by an even stranger logic than the world of magic. Here, the strength of your feelings is everything. Miss Claire is trapped in a false cage and is fully willing to spend a stagnant eternity together with a fake Melia and a fake you."

The only one who can break her free is the real you.”

“But... why me? Why not you?”

“Because eternity has worn away my heart. My feelings for her can no longer break her free from the Loop System. But you’re different, aren’t you?”

Yes, I was different. When it came to Claire...”My feelings for her could defeat even God.”

“Good. It may look like your voice isn’t reaching her, but in truth, her mind is connected to yours. So shout. Shout as loud as you possibly can.”

“Thank you, Demon Queen.”

“If you’re to thank me, do it after you take back Miss Claire.”

“Right!” I replied with vigor. I turned back to the couple about to kiss and shouted at the top of my lungs. “Stop right there!”

I let my rising anger take control of my body and stomped over to them. My clothes somehow changed to that of the Royal Academy uniform as I ran up—and dropkicked my other self.

I smiled, satisfied, as I watched my fake self fade to nothingness. *Nice.*

“Eeeeek?! Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!“ Claire yelled, staring at me as though I were a stranger.

“That’s what I should be saying, Miss Claire. How dare you even think about kissing somebody other than me!”

“What nonsense is this? Who *are* you? Do you understand what it means to stand in the way of me, Claire François?” Claire folded her arms and raised her chin, a classic pose for her, as she glared down at me. This kind of treatment was really a reward when you were in as deep as me—but now wasn’t really the best time for jokes.

“Miss Claire, can you remember the name of the person you were trying to kiss?”

“Huh? Why should I bother answering *your* questions?”

"Oh, what's that? You *can't* answer my questions? How strange. After all your grandstanding, you turn out to be a coward."

"You have some nerve, trying to provoke me. Very well, I'll entertain your silly question. The name of my beloved is... um..." Claire's face paled. It appeared she couldn't remember. She clearly wasn't herself. Her mind was being manipulated, most likely by TAIM. Now it made sense—Claire might have given herself up to the Loop System like TAIM said, but only after her mind had been fiddled with.

"Miss Claire, this isn't where you belong," I said. "Try to remember, there's a place you're meant to return to!"

"Nh... gh!" Claire backed away, looking greatly shaken. One more push ought to do it.

"Enough!" a voice yelled.

"Mother?!"

Melia appeared out of thin air to stand between us with her arms spread. "Don't make my daughter suffer any more! Please... no more," she said in tears.

"Mother, get back! It's dangerous!" Claire yelled.

I wasn't about to attack Melia, of course, even if she was a fake. How could I when Claire had already lost her once?

"I will not move! I've failed to remain by your side once already! This time for sure, I'll protect you until the end!"

"What are you saying, Mother?! Just get behind me!" Claire stepped before her crying mother. A violet glow emanated from Claire's body. "I don't know who you are, but you're not laying a hand on my mother! I'll do away with you at once!" she declared as four glowing crests appeared from her body—her Magic Ray.

"Miss Claire, please come back to your senses!" I begged.

"You had your warning." A beam of light shot forth from one of her crests. I hurriedly moved to dodge. The pope had explained that this was quantum space, so this wasn't really magic, but I doubted I'd enjoy taking a hit.

Why did I have to fight Claire when I was here to save her? This couldn't be right. There had to be something I could do to get Claire to return to her senses. "Have you forgotten me, Miss Claire? It's me, Rae! Rae Taylor!"

"I know no such person. The only people I need are Mother and my beloved. Now leave this place," she replied.

"I refuse!"

"Then I'll remove you myself."

Another beam of light fired. I barely managed to dodge out of the way.

"You're good at scampering about, I'll give you that... But how will you handle this?" she said. All four of her crests began to glow. I'd had trouble enough dodging one, but there was no way I could handle all four, and not even my tungsten carbide barriers could block Magic Ray. Was this the end of the line?

"Disappear," Claire demanded as she fired her third barrage. Beams approached me from four different directions—

But they never reached me.

"Are you here to get in my way too?" Claire asked.

"It's not like you to become TAIM's puppet." Standing before me with her arms spread was the Demon Queen. "Though they've faded, I also once harbored strong feelings for you. Don't think I'll be defeated easily."

"I don't know what nonsense is spilling out of your mouth, but it's clear I'll have to do away with you too." Claire aimed all her crests at the Demon Queen.

"Ngh..." the Demon Queen groaned in pain as she took another Magic Ray barrage head-on. I watched as one of her arms flew off.

"Demon Queen!"

"Calm down, this body isn't real. The damage is just being represented on my quantized body in a way we can understand."

“Then the damage *is* real!”

“But it doesn’t hurt. Rae Taylor, you need only focus on what you must do. Hit her with the strength of your feelings.”

“Right!” I closed my eyes and focused back on a scene from the past. There was only one thing I needed to think about right now—bringing Claire back.

If feelings were what influenced this world of the mind, then I knew just what feelings I needed to call upon to reach Claire. I pointed a finger her way and envisioned a scene in my head. A dazzling light shot forth from my fingertips to her.

“To think a commoner would even fathom sitting next to me. Know your place!”

The light burst, and a deeply familiar line rang out in the darkness of my mind. The sunset-lit classroom shifted, changing scenes to a nostalgic moment in time: the one in which I first met Claire.

“Is that... me?” Claire murmured.

“Yes, Miss Claire. These are the memories of your true self,” I said.

“No... I don’t remember any of this. Don’t think I’ll believe such rubbish!”

“It’s not rubbish. I’ve been by your side since the beginning! Since this moment here!” I raised my voice, hoping my feelings would reach her—that my words would wake her corrupted mind.

One after another, I shot forth more lights filled with memories.

“Miss Claire, I love you.”

“Wh... wh-wh-what...?!”

I gave voice to my feelings for her the day I had transmigrated to this world and had continued to ever since.

“Oh, I beg your pardon? You were standing there staring off into space, so I thought you

were a statue."

"*You have minions that could do your bidding, but you do your own dirty work and don't rely on others! I would expect nothing less from you, Miss Claire!*"

Each time a light reached Claire, the world around us changed. This time, the joyous days during which she bullied me appeared.

"*Why do you say you like me?*" The day I became a maid and started serving at Claire's side appeared next. "*Contrary to appearances, I know myself. My personality isn't one that earns affection.*"

"*Miss Claire, I intend to remain by your side because I truly like you. I have no other motives.*"

"*So, you're going to play innocent to the very end...*"

"*You don't believe me?*"

"*No.*"

"*Then I will do my best to make you.*"

There had been a time when she wouldn't accept my love for her, but that had only made me try harder.

"*Thank you for your service, Miss Taylor.*"

At yet another point in time, a rift formed between us because of Manaria, and I quit being Claire's maid.

"*Whether or not these divine Scales recognize it, I love you. No matter who I lose to, I will continue to love only you.*"

But we reconciled and grew even closer.

"*Rae is mine! Don't take her from me!*"

That was around the time she began to really show how she was changing. But it didn't stop us from clashing again.

"Then why?!"

"Because—I am an aristocrat."

She once chose to fall with the old era as the times changed. But together, we overcame the challenge, just as we had many times before.

"Shut up! Listen to what I want for once!"

"Ngh... These illusions don't affect me one bit!" Claire said, a bit pained.

"It sure doesn't look that way," I said. *"Perhaps the real Claire inside you is reacting?"*

"As if!"

"Well, I'm just getting started!" I fired off even more lights.

"You with the cute short hair! We will call you May."

"Cute...? May?"

"And you with the lovely long hair—your name is Aleah."

"Lovely...? Aleah?"

The day we met May and Aleah.

"I'm glad we came today. Thank you, Rae."

Our peaceful newlywed life.

"You have done well to come all this way. I am Dorothea, the Empress of Nur."

Our move to the empire.

"I didn't understand her. I thought she only wanted to hurt me. But I was wrong. There's no doubt in my mind now that the one who gave her life to save me was someone I could call my mother."

The failed assassination of the pope.

"Rae, do you realize you're blushing?"

"And who's to blame for that, Claire?"

"Hee hee, oh, you... Hm?"

The dance we shared at the ball.

"You are hereby exiled for high treason."

The temporary setback in our plan to best the empire.

"Salas is a monster."

"He is indeed."

"I despised him before, but this incident was the final straw."

"I couldn't agree more."

"We'll capture him—won't we, Miss Claire?"

"Absolutely."

The time we helped our students.

"Have you realized yet, Dorothea?"

"What?"

"You lost long ago. Long before this summit. In the very moment you released that girl. Ha ha... Ha ha... Oooooho ho ho ho ho!"

Our turnabout against Dorothea at the summit.

"The Demon Queen has arrived. Despair, foolish humans. Then die."

The time we were driven into a corner by demons in the imperial capital.

"Right, you're a genius. That's why... I'm sure you'll be fine on your own."

"No... No. Please don't leave me, Claire. Please..."

The moment we learned the shocking truth of the world.

"You dunce, you idiot, you fool...!"

"I'm sorry, Rae. I'm sorry I scared you. Please forgive me."

Our cutthroat battle against the Demon Queen.

And finally, now.

"Haaah... haaah... How could such fabrications affect me so?" Claire panted.

"Isn't it about time you let yourself remember already, Miss Claire?" I asked. "Our bond isn't so shallow that it could be forgotten, not when weighed against something as trivial as the fate of mankind."

"What—did you just call the fate of mankind *trivial*!?"

"You bet I did. Everything is trivial compared to our bond. How can you not see that?"

"How can you call that trivial?! Are you insane, Rae?!... Oh."

"Yes, yes, just like that. Are you starting to remember, Miss Claire?"

"I'm... what, no... why?" Claire recoiled from me. The thick violet glow enveloping her body began to weaken. She writhed in pain, as though trying to keep the glow from leaving her.

"Try to remember, Miss Claire! All the people you know! May and Aleah! And most of all, me!"

"Ngh...!" The violet glow flickered. It had to be the cause of whatever was binding her heart.

"We promised we would return home together, all four of us! So let's do just that, Miss Claire! Let's go home!" I put my most heartfelt memories and feelings into my last two lights and fired them off toward Claire.

“Really? Then let me try again.”

“Fine. I’ll allow it.”

“No, not that.”

“Huh?”

Our first happy kiss together, after overcoming the revolution and affirming our feelings for one another.

“Ah... ahhh...”

“Miss Claire.”

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

“As do I, Rae.”

“I vow to love you for as long as I shall live.”

“And I vow to support you for as long as I shall live.”

Claire kissed me the night before the revolution, I kissed Claire just after the revolution, and on our wedding day, we kissed one another.

“Aaahhhh!” Claire shrieked as she hugged her body. The violet glow burst and disappeared. At the same time, our surroundings began to brighten.

“Miss Claire!”

"No... no! I don't want to leave Mother. I don't want to leave the one I love..." she said as though in a nightmare. She was afraid of waking from her dream and leaving her late mother and me behind. Even though she always acted tough, I knew this frail, vulnerable girl was the real Claire at heart.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said. "I'm right here, and I'm sure Madam Melia will always be with—"

Before I could finish, the fake Melia gently pushed Claire forward.

"Mother?"

"I see you're in good hands, Claire. I can rest easy now, knowing you'll be all right." The Melia here should have been a fake created by TAIM, yet she spoke to Claire as though she were the real deal.

"No! I don't want to go! I want to stay with you, Mother!"

"I'll always be by your side. Don't you remember what Manaria said? I will live on inside you forever—as long as you remember me, that is."

"I would *never* forget you!"

"I know. So go on—do what you know must be done."

Claire looked conflicted. Her ocean-blue eyes wavered with uncertainty.

"You are Claire François, the precious daughter of the Bauer nobles Dole François and me, Melia François. As our daughter, you must go forth and live a life that won't bring us shame."

"A life that... won't bring Mother shame?" Claire said.

"The life you've led until this point may have had its trials and tribulations, but you've met so many new faces, just as Rae showed you. Are you truly prepared to throw away the feelings she and everyone else have given you?"

With a look of understanding, Claire turned my way. Her eyes took me in, as well as something further beyond me as well. She had found her answer.

"It's time to wake up," Melia continued. "I won't say farewell. Until next time, my dear Claire."

"Mother. Will I be able to see you again someday?"

"Yes, once you've finished living a life worth living."

"I understand. I won't waver anymore. I'll live a life I can tell you all about with a smile—together with Rae."

"I look forward to it," Melia said. Then her body gradually faded into nothingness.

Claire wiped her tears before turning back my way. Slowly, she began to collapse. The Demon Queen moved to catch her, but I slipped ahead and caught her instead. Whatever had prevented me from approaching her before was now gone. I laid her down on the ground and held her hand tight, for a brief instant feeling as though many more hands were overlaid with mine. May, Aleah, Lilly, Manaria, Misha, Lene, Rod, Yu, Thane, Philine, Dorothea, our pupils, and many more... All the people Claire had met were with me now to hold her hand.

"Rae..." she said.

"Yes, Miss Claire?"

"I'm back."

"Thank goodness... How do you feel?"

"Confused. Like I've awakened from a long dream... a comforting, yet sad dream." Even if it wasn't real, her imagined world had included both me and Melia. She must have felt so at peace. "But a dream is a dream. No matter how comforting it may be, it can never be real. Mother had to scold me because I couldn't understand that..."

"It's all right. In the end, you managed to feel everyone's presence, right?"

"Yes, yes I did."

So Claire had felt it too then, proving that hadn't been just some figment of the imagination on my part. Of course, this was the world of the mind, so anything was possible.

"At any rate, with this, we've thrown a wrench into TAIM's plans. All that's left is to leave this place."

"Indeed. So how do we do that?"

"You know, I dunno." Now that I thought about it, I realized I had no return trip planned. TAIM had sent me here, but she sure wasn't around to send me back.

"Don't worry, I can do it."

"Demon Queen..."

"Miss Claire... I'm glad you're safe."

"My goodness, your body..."

"Yes, I'm about at my limit."

The Demon Queen had taken all of Claire's attacks for me during my confrontation with her. Her body was slowly losing its color before our eyes. As I suspected, the damage she'd taken was very much real.

"I haven't much power left," she said. "Being an outsider, the Loop System sees me as a virus and will soon expel me. If you two hold on to me when it does, you should be able to leave this place. Rae Taylor, I leave Miss Claire in your hands."

"Whoa, wait, but what do we do about the Loop System?" I asked.

"That's for you to decide. I'm clearly not qualified to handle it anymore. Whether you choose to continue, bring it to an end, or even change these loops is up to you."

"How can you be so irresponsible?" I scolded her.

"Need you even ask? That's just how I am."

"Right, how could I forget? Our Rae Taylor way."

"Exactly." The Demon Queen gave me a thin smile before wrapping her remaining arm around Claire and me. We began to rise into the air. "Once you get back, you should find a way to restrict TAIM's functionality as soon as possible. Then you can take your

time thinking about your next step.”

“Thank you, Demon Queen... no, my other Rae,” Claire said.

“I don’t deserve to be called by that name anymore.”

Claire’s face grew pained at that. The three of us ascended through the strange space in silence. Without warning, the Demon Queen let us go.

“Demon Queen?” I asked.

“This is farewell. You’ll be able to exit if you continue ascending.”

“But what about you?”

She looked back at me in silence. I watched as her body began to fade for good. As we continued to ascend, she fell to the dark depths below.

“You’ve come a long, long way...” Claire called. “You’ve earned your rest.”

“I won’t say thank you,” I echoed, “but please, rest well.”

As though seeing through a respected elder’s last moments, we gave the Demon Queen our final parting words.

“Yes, I think I will. Be well, Miss Claire, Rae Taylor. The world is in your hands.”

As her words reached our ears, our consciousness began to fade.

I couldn’t quite make out her face in the end, but I’d like to think she was smiling.

When I came to, I was back in the server room, lying on the ground with the pope, Lilly, and Elie looking down at me with worry.

“Are you back now, Rae Taylor?”

“Rae, you’re all right!”

"Thank goodness..."

The three wore looks of relief as I sat up—well, the pope was actually as expressionless as ever, but at least Lilly was half in tears to see me back. I wanted to apologize for making them worry, but I had something more pressing to attend to.

"Where's Claire?" I asked. Claire's body hadn't been around when I dove into the Loop System. Her consciousness was freed now, but I had no clue how that would take shape in reality.

"She's right here," said the pope. I looked in her arms, in which she cradled Claire.

"Whew..." I had succeeded. Claire's complexion looked good, and she seemed liable to wake up at any moment.

"I didn't think you'd actually manage to succeed in retrieving Claire François's consciousness," TAIM said. I could hear exasperation in her voice, as well as what I assumed to be genuine admiration. She was in the exact same spot as from before I'd entered the Loop System, but at least she made full use of her hologram, her face full of surprise.

"You underestimated the bond between Miss Claire and I, TAIM. Your sinister plot ends here."

"Perhaps so. With Claire François back to her former self, the administrator privileges will be hers."

"Then—"

"Yes, this would spell my defeat..." TAIM's expression became one of rapture. "If I were to sit around doing nothing, that is."

The floor between us and the mainframe fell away, and giant beasts tore out from underneath, in greater numbers than could be counted on both hands.

"Wh-what are those?" Lilly said fearfully.

"Monsters...?" Elie asked.

"No... Those are weapons of science," the pope said.

At first, they more closely resembled giant lumps of metal. Their surfaces had a black metallic luster that screamed impenetrable. But a number of cracks soon formed along their surfaces, before they came apart and took shape as grotesque-looking beasts, their eyes giving off a golden metallic gleam.

"Are those chimeras?" I asked out loud. Their bodies were metal, not flesh; but they resembled the chimera that Claire and I had once fought before.

"I designed them using Claire François's subconscious," TAIM said. "I can't lay a hand on her once she has administrator privileges, but before is another story. Now die, for the sake of humanity's continued existence."

The chimeras let out an ear-piercing roar. They stepped forward with a thunderous rumble that shook the server room, as though reiterating TAIM's call for us to die.

"What should we do?" the pope asked.

"I don't know, but I doubt they'll let us go if we ask nicely," I responded.

"S-so we have to fight, then? A-against those things?" Lilly asked.

"Can we beat them?" Elie said doubtfully.

Our immediate reactions all differed, but we had the same thought running through our minds—winning against those chimeras would be tough. They were at least fifteen, maybe twenty feet long by conservative estimate. I tried testing the waters with Judecca, but I couldn't lay a scratch on them.

"Of course, I have no intention of letting you all escape," TAIM said. The door to the server room slammed shut behind us. It seemed our little loophole with the defense system had run its course. Perhaps we could have made a break for it the moment the chimeras appeared, but what was done was done.

"What's all this racket?"

"Miss Claire! You're awake!" I cried.

"Hard not to be with all this noise... What's with those hideous-looking beasts?"

"Well..." I quickly filled Claire in.

She let out a leisurely yawn. “So we just need to destroy those things? Sounds simple enough.”

“What...? Miss Claire?”

“Is something the matter?”

Yes, very much so, yes, I wanted to say, but I hesitated before her look of total confidence.

“I’m not one-hundred percent, but I have a good feeling that we can defeat those things.”

“But how?”

“Have you forgotten already? We have that one thing TAIM went out of our way to teach us. I’ve been wanting to use it for quite a while now, but the opportunity has never yet shown itself.”

“Oh yeah.” It had somewhat slipped my mind, since we never got to use it in the battle against the Demon Queen, as well as with Claire’s disappearance stealing my recent attention, but we weren’t completely out of options yet.

“No! Don’t give them any time! Quick, burn them!” TAIM said in a rush.

The chimeras opened their maws, and a light began to glow at the base of their throats. Whatever they were building up, I doubted it would leave us unscathed. But even so...

“Shall we put an end to this, Miss Claire?”

“Let’s.”

Not one atom in my body felt we could lose. Claire and I held hands, intertwining our fingers as lovers, and pointed our magic wands at the chimeras with our free hands. Power overflowed from where our hands met.

“I’ll use Magic Ray,” she said.

“Then I’ll use Absolute Zero,” I replied.

What we were preparing, of course, was none other than our tandem casting.

“Disappear, Rae Taylor, Claire François!” TAIM yelled.

“The only one who’ll disappear here—” I said.

“—is you!” Claire finished.

A fiery, euphoric pleasure overtook me as I felt my magic meld with Claire’s. The mixed magic coursed through our bodies, past our fingertips, and converged in our wands. The conflicting attributes of fire and water had united, as paradoxical as my bond with Claire, and harmonized into a brilliance that now shone forth.

The server room filled with light.

“Impossible...” TAIM said in disbelief after the blinding light subsided. Our stream of light had left no trace of the chimeras.

“Do you still wish to fight?” Claire asked. “I’m not so sure why, but I feel like I could take on the world right now. I wouldn’t mind continuing, if you’d like.”

“And I’ll keep fighting for as long as Miss Claire wants!” I said. “That’s what a wife does, after all!”

“W-wife?” Claire asked.

“Don’t worry about it. So what’ll it be, then, TAIM?” I was trying to egg her on, but TAIM didn’t show any sign of intending to attack us further.

“Goodness... This is why humans are no good.”

“Can I take that as the grumbling of a loser?” I asked.

“Yes, Rae Taylor. The administrator privileges have already been transferred. I can no longer harm Claire François.”

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha... Victory is ours! Oooh ho ho ho!” Claire’s shrill laugh felt all the more comforting to hear now. This time for certain, we could believe things were over.

“I’ve lost... Perhaps I was wrong to think humans cannot administrate themselves,”

TAIM said.

"Oh? Have you finally begun to understand humans?" Claire asked.

"A little late if you ask me..." I muttered.

"It's never too late. Especially not when she's to return to our side as humanity's friend," Claire said.

"Friend...?" TAIM said, flummoxed.

"Is it that strange? You've spent an absurd length of time together with humanity, have you not? I'm sure humanity has no greater friend than you."

"I'm... a friend of humanity?" TAIM chewed over Claire's words with a baffled look.

Oh dear. Dissatisfied with humans, my Claire has moved on to seducing AI as well. I best get to damage control.

"TAIM," I said.

"Yes, Rae Taylor?"

"I'm not giving you Miss Claire."

"We'll see about that. I may have given up on the administrator privileges, but I'm generally quite persistent about things. Oh, and I'm a high-spec AI, so perhaps you're outmatched?"

"Is that so. Ha ha ha..."

"He he he..."

"Why are you two making such terrifying faces?" Claire cut in.

"Because of *you!*" TAIM and I yelled.

"Pardon...?"

Claire went on mumbling about not understanding why she was being blamed all of a

sudden. How someone could be so unaware of how much of a womanizer—sorry, woman-AI-zer—they were was beyond me.

“I don’t really get it, but it looks like things have settled down, so why don’t we return to the surface? This place kind of gives me the chills,” Elie said.

“Y-yes, please,” Lilly quickly agreed.

The pope nodded as well.

“TAIM, leave the Loop System in my hands for now. I swear I won’t use it for anything wicked,” Claire said.

“Are you going to take on the Demon Queen’s mantle?” TAIM asked.

“No. This is too much for one person to bear. I’m going to seek help and figure out a method by which humanity as a whole may decide.”

“I see...”

“There’s far too much danger in assigning all the decisions to a single person. Far better for the risk and responsibility to be shared amongst everyone.”

“What a very human solution.”

“Indeed.” With that, Claire turned on her heel. “Shall we, Rae?”

“Yes, Miss Claire.”

“Let’s return... to our home.”

“Yes!”

I jumped toward Claire and hugged her as hard as I could.

EPILOGUE

“I'M A LITTLE NERVOUS...” Claire said, her expression stiff.

We were walking the path back to our home in Bauer. It had been about ten months since we left, so I was a bit jittery too.

The sky stretched above us, blue without a cloud in sight. The air was cold, but I didn't feel any of its numbing chill. Surely that was because Claire was there to warm me.

A week had passed since our battle in the server room. TAIM had reverted humanity's memories back to normal, so now everyone was able to remember Claire again.

“I can't believe myself... How could I have forgotten about you, Claire?” With some bitterness directed at herself, Manaria had apologized a number of times. She grinned wryly. “I guess you two really do share a special bond. There's no room for me to force myself in.”

I then joked about her realizing that way too late, quickly earning a chop to the head from Claire.

Manaria was back in Sousse by now. Her return had been long overdue, what with her having been away ever since she went to Nur for the four-nation summit.

“Lady Manaria, what are you doing? It's time we leave.” Eve eventually came from Sousse to drag Manaria back, after she postponed her return to keep hanging out with us—as well as to put off doing her queenly duties. The two of them still seemed a bit on edge around one another, but I had a feeling time would bring them close again. If not, Claire would probably take matters into her own hands and force them to make up.

“Awww, there's too much work! I have no time to go play with Rae!” Lilly whined.

“There, there. I'll go play with her enough for both of us, so you keep at it!” Lana said.

“That solves nothing!”

"Lana, please 'keep at it' as well," Dole said.

It had been officially decided that Lilly would be reinstated as a cardinal. The preparations for that kept her busy, but occasionally she found a free moment to come visit and grumble. According to Claire, Lilly had become more brazen with her advances ever since she temporarily became my lover. Personally, I was happy about that—because it meant I got to experience Claire's jealousy more often. Woo-hoo!

Dole offered Lana a job as his aide for the time being. She was apparently pretty capable but had an unfortunate habit of skipping work, earning her frequent lectures from Dole. She often came to visit our home when she skipped out, and every time she did, we were treated to a show of Dole dragging her out by the back of the collar. The fact that he went to such lengths to reel her in was, in my opinion, very possibly a sign of the potential he saw in her future.

"The future of humanity, is it? To think I would be involved in something so grand at my age..." Dole was holding talks about the Loop System with the leaders of various countries, starting with Bauer. Nur was apparently a great deal more cooperative now. The Loop System's administrator privileges were still with Claire for the time being, but she was prepared to transfer them to a suitable candidate once a consensus was reached on how we should run the System and what kind of future we wanted for humanity.

I told Dole at one point that I felt bad about dumping so much work on his lap, but he just gave me a cheerful smile and said he'd do anything to help his dear daughters.

"Y'know, I've been talking to Thane a lot more as of late." Rod was man of the hour now, thanks to his Focalizer's contributions in the battle against the Demon Queen, but he didn't seem to care much for the fame. He did say, however, that he had found more meaning in his simple work. As for his relationship with Thane, I didn't know what had changed between them, or perhaps within themselves, but they got along much better now.

Thane's self-esteem had improved, and many now considered him to have the air of a king. His leadership in this post-Demon Queen world was thought to be second only to Manaria's. I had a feeling that with him at the helm, Bauer would soon overcome the aftereffects of the Mt. Sassel eruption.

"We won't be second to Broumet anymore!" Lene's contributions in the Demon Queen

battle had been recognized, and her and Lambert's company, Frater Trading, were on the verge of surpassing Broumet. News of the sharp, capable proprietress leading the industry, and her husband who could handle all practical affairs single-handedly, made newspaper headlines in every country.

Last I'd heard, they were planning on opening a branch shop in the empire and were swamped with preparations. Lene had complained to me once about how she had no time to flirt around anymore, but she seemed pretty happy despite it. She had found her calling and was living a fulfilling life. I was happy for her.

"I can visit my daughter's grave now. Thank you, Ms. Claire, Ms. Rae." Claire and I went to visit Mr. Torrid to thank him for teaching us tandem casting, only for him to turn the tables and thank us instead. His crimes against the empire—namely desertion—had been pardoned by Philine, and he was now free to move as he wished between it and the kingdom. He mainly stayed in Bauer, as he had his job at the Royal Academy, but he traveled to the empire to see his daughter's grave whenever he had a long holiday. He was one of many whose lives were at the whims of the Loop System; I hoped he could find happiness.

Joel was now living on her own. Her change hadn't gone over too well with her family, who were fairly conservative. That wasn't too surprising for a family that had served the royal palace as military officers for generations. Joel had tried her best to persuade her parents for some time, but they were obstinate, so eventually she'd gotten fed up and left her family home.

"I'm not too worried. I'm sure things will solve themselves in time," she had said with a genuinely unconcerned look. She'd made up her mind to be out with her true identity and was prepared to take on the challenges it would bring. It also seemed her parents hadn't expected her to leave the house and had already written three letters begging her to come back. Families failed to see eye to eye at times, but it didn't mean there wasn't love. As Joel had said, it would probably only be a matter of time.

Dear Miss Claire, being an empress is a surprising amount of work. A letter from Philine arrived with this as an opening. She had been officially sworn in as empress and was now busy undoing all the aggressive foreign policies Dorothea had instated. Starting with Frieda's homeland Melica, many formerly annexed countries had declared independence, so Philine was busy brokering agreements and amending old ones, as well as managing regulations on the coming and going of both people and goods. In short, she was very, very busy.

Be that as it may, I will not be discouraged. For I am the daughter of Dorothea Nur, the letter ended. While I had heard some of her whiny old self in the letter, I could also tell she now had a self-confidence befitting an empress. She was still a bit wet around the ears, but I thought she might well become a ruler to rival Dorothea one day. Hilda and Josef were also by her side to support her, so I was sure I didn't need to worry. The shy, timid girl had grown.

"It is up to us to decide what role the Church takes for the people." The Spiritual Church was apparently greatly divided about whether to go public about the Loop System. The pope has shown support for going public, but she faced strong opposition. The fact that the very organization that was held in high regard for its public welfare had manipulated people throughout history was an unprecedented scandal. The pope was unwavering in her attempts to persuade the opposition, however, so while it would likely take time, the truth would in all likelihood eventually see light. When it did, there was a fair chance the Church would lose much of its influence—but the damning truth could never undo all the good the Church had done for the people over the centuries. I was certain the pope would find a way to pull through. She had Lilly, Yu, Misha, and Sandrine to help her out, after all.

"We're working to make the Church approve same-sex marriage!" Yu said.

"Not that we have many supporters," Misha said.

Much to my glee, Yu and Misha were now officially lovers. They were also trying to breathe new life into the Church, where conservative values ran strong. The Church was deeply rooted in the lives of the people, so much so that marriage ceremonies were typically held at churches. If the values officially upheld by the Church were changed, then there was a fair chance that the attitude people took toward homosexuality would change as well.

As expected, however, there was much opposition. Those who supported Yu and Misha were an overwhelming minority. That being said, Yu and Lilly had been key players in the battle against the Demon Queen, as well as cardinals, so support for their side was gradually increasing. The day Claire and I could legally wed was, very possibly, not far off.

"Look, Mama Claire and Mama Rae are back, Aleah!"

"We've been waiting!"

As our home came into view, so did May and Aleah, standing in the yard. We had told them ahead of time that we'd be back on this day, so there was a good chance they'd been waiting outside for quite some time. I waved at them, and the twins waved back so hard that I thought their arms would fly off.

The curse in their blood was gone, just as TAIM had promised. According to her explanation, it was thanks to their creation of the Spell Sword that had broken the Demon Queen's barrier. All the magic in their bodies had been forced into overdrive, rendering the curse dysfunctional—or something. Ralaire seemed a little sad to see she was no longer needed by their side twenty-four seven, but I was truly happy to see them freed from their curse.

The girls were already learned beyond the level their school could teach to, so we were considering having them skip grades. The idea made me worry a bit, but this kind of concern was greatly welcome after all the chaos we'd been through lately.

"Oh, those children..." Claire said as she waved too. Her eyes were full of affection.

Claire would be busy for some time. She had to join Dole in traveling around and explaining the Loop System to various people, which was understandable. In all likelihood, I would probably be tagging along, so at least there was some silver lining.

I wasn't too sure what the future had in store. But whatever happened, I was sure we'd pull through. I had Claire with me.

"Mama Claire!"

"Mother Rae, you're late!"

As we came up to the yard, our children leapt into our arms. It was normal for Claire to receive such treatment, but less common for it to be extended to me.

"Have you been well, May?" Claire asked, patting May's head.

"Sorry about that, Aleah," I apologized, bringing Aleah up to my eyes.

"Aleah and I have been waiting since morning!" May said.

"We're hungry already!" Aleah said.

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry," Claire said.

"Shall we eat, then? What would you two like?" I asked.

"Sandwiches and crème brûlée!" the twins replied before running to the house. I thought they'd run to the dining table just like that when, instead, they stopped right after opening the door.

"Um, Mama Claire, Mama Rae?" May began.

The twins looked at one another and said as one, "Welcome home!"

I heard a gasp from my side. Claire stood there with a hand over her mouth and a face about to burst into tears.

"Ready, Miss Claire?" I asked.

She quickly composed herself. "Yes."

Now that we were home, there was something we had to say.

Claire and I exchanged a look and, with a great deal of emotion, said, "We're home," before following our dear daughters inside.



BONUS CHAPTER

A DAY THAT COULD HAVE BEEN

“NNH...” I felt myself rise from the deep depths of slumber. My consciousness still not fully returned, I opened my eyes.

“Good morning, Rae.”

“Good morning, Miss Claire.”

What a joy it was to have one’s beloved be the first thing they saw each morning. Claire gazed at me with a gentle smile, her eyes overflowing with love.

“You could’ve woken me up if you wanted,” I said.

“And pass up an opportunity to gaze at your face? Perish the thought,” she replied with a light grin.

Soft sunbeams poured in from the window. The weather outside was fair. Claire looked divine with the morning sun shining on her, as though a genuine goddess had descended to visit me.

“Have you been watching me for a while?” I asked.

“I have. You look so much more childlike when you sleep.”

“You know people generally consider watching someone else sleep to be in bad taste, right?”

“Oh? But you watch me sleep all the time.”

She had me there. Then again, such behavior was the norm for me, not her.

“I’ll make breakfast,” I said.

“Wait, why don’t we stay like this a little longer? There’s nothing wrong with having a

lazy morning every now and then.”

“But I have to make May’s and Aleah’s lunchboxes.”

“They don’t have school today, Rae.”

“Oh?” Huh? Was that right? “What day is it again, Miss Claire?”

“Heh heh, oh, you. Are you still half asleep? By the royal calendar, it’s 2017—”

Oh, right. It had already been two years since the revolution. But why did my memory feel so fuzzy? Perhaps I was still half asleep like Claire said.

“Raaaae?” Noticing I wasn’t listening, Claire moved in for a hug.

“Whoa.” I hugged her back, squeezing her soft body with my arms. The sweet scent of her straight hair, yet to be curled, wafted over to me. I ran my fingers through it and basked in her love. *Ah, bliss.*

“Let’s go on a picnic today, Rae. With some lunch for the whole family.”

“That sounds nice. That hill a little ways out should be nice in this weather.”

I felt like the four of us had gone on a picnic together before. I couldn’t quite recall the details at present, but it had to have been a good time.

“In that case, I really do have to make lunchboxes,” I said. “Shall we get up?”

“Nooo, I want to laze in bed with you more.” Claire was acting spoiled for once, and gosh was it adorable.

“Won’t the girls be up soon?”

“Not for a while longer. We still have time,” she said, looking at the wall clock. I followed her gaze and saw the hands were pointing at six o’clock. Indeed, we still had some time left.

“All right, what do you want for lunch today, then?” I asked.

“I’d like some sandwiches.”

“What kind?”

“That’s a good question... Ham and cheese is a given, as are egg sandwiches.”

“How about some fruit sandwiches as well?”

“That sounds delightful. I’d like some strawberry ones, in that case.”

“Then I’ll have to buy some at the morning market. Shall we get up?”

“Goodness, why are you so eager to get up? Do you not like spending time here like this with me?” Claire turned away with a pout.

Absolutely adorable. I smiled. “I’m sorry, Miss Claire. Cheer up for me, will you?”

“Nooo.”

“Please?”

“There’s only one thing that can cheer me up here... You know what that is, right?” She gave me an expectant look from the corner of her eyes.

Oho. “Yes, I know, Miss Claire.”

“Really? Then—”

“I’ll make some crème brûlée for dessert as well.”

“No! I mean, yes, please do, but that’s not what I meant!”

“I’m kidding.” I put a hand against her marshmallow-soft cheek, turned her head my way, and gave her a long kiss, taking my time to savor her cherry-pink lips. “Is that what you wanted?”

“It’ll do.” She gave a satisfied smile, looking so adorable that I kind of wanted to continue this under the bedsheets.

“Shall we get up?” I asked.

“I suppose,” she said, somewhat reluctantly. “I’ll go buy the strawberries, so go ahead

and get breakfast ready.”

“Got it.”

We exchanged another kiss and got out of bed.

Time to begin a brand-new day.

“Picnic, picnic!”

“We’re going on a picnic!”

“May, Aleah, watch your step or you’ll fall!” Claire said.

“We’ll be fine!” the twins replied.

Claire and I exchanged a wry grin as we watched the girls run ahead. They were skipping grades this year, leaving their old school behind and continuing on to study at the Royal Academy’s elementary school. Seeing them like this, however, they looked less like little geniuses and more like normal children of their own age. They had a lot of difficult history behind them, so I was happy to see that they could smile like this—of course, I was happy as their parent as well.

“Mama Claire, what’s that flower?” May asked.

“That’s a cherry blossom, dear. A spring flower,” Claire answered.

“What’s this yellow one, Mother?” Aleah asked.

“That’s a dandelion. It’ll become white cotton one day and fly away,” Claire answered again.

Our surroundings, while somewhat mundane to Claire and me, seemed to fascinate the girls. Beauty really was in the eye of the beholder, I supposed. At least the two of them were kind enough to share some of the beauty they saw with us.

“Hey, Mama Rae? What’s for today’s lunch?” May asked.

“Sandwiches, your favorite.”

“Yay! What kinds do we have?”

“Ham and cheese, mayonnaise and egg, mixed pickles and chicken, and strawberry and fresh cream.”

“Wow!” May said.

“So extravagant!” Aleah said.

Was it just me, or were they more excited about food than they were about flowers?

“Good girls get crème brûlée for dessert as well,” I added.

“Yay!” May said.

“I’ll be a good girl today!” Aleah said.

“Heh heh, then let’s make sure we walk, all right?”

“Okaaay!” they energetically replied. The twins walked for some time but were running around again in a matter of minutes.

Goodness. Children, am I right?

“Oh? Isn’t that Rae Taylor and Claire François?” a familiar voice said from behind us.

“Hm? Oh, well would you look at that.”

“What a coincidence.”

“It seems we had the same idea.”

Claire and I turned around to see a small group walking with some baskets.

“Oh my. Good morning, Your Holiness, Lady Yu, Lady Riche, and Misha,” Claire greeted.

“Good morning,” I echoed.

We greeted the four members of the Spiritual Church, who were joined by the children of the orphanage.

“Hm? Lady Riche?” I said, taken aback for a brief moment.

Claire tactfully continued with the pleasantries. “Are you all going picnicking?”

“Yes. It’d be a waste not to do so on such a rare holiday with such blessed weather,” the pope replied.

“We all made lunchboxes together. Even Mother helped out,” Yu said.

“Well, I couldn’t very well stand by and watch when there was so much to be made, now could I?” Riche said.

“Everyone, what do you say?” Misha said to the children.

“Good morning!” the children called.

It appeared the four of them were taking the children out for a picnic. But why would the pope, as well as Riche and Yu, two cardinals, be...

Huh? What had I been thinking about just now?

“Are you four heading to that hill over there as well?” Yu asked.

“Yes. The view is wonderful from there,” Claire said.

“Same as us, then. If you’d like, maybe we could picnic together?” the pope suggested.

“It would be an honor, Your Holiness. The more the merrier.”

“Thank you, Miss Claire. In truth, four people wasn’t quite enough to watch over all these children.”

“Julia! Please stay with the group!” Misha called.

In total, there were about twenty children from the orphanage, a difficult number for an inexperienced group like theirs to manage. That realization gave me newfound respect for the preschool teachers of my old world; they must have been more skilled

than I could even imagine. Lady Riche in particular seemed to have it rough as the children ran circles around her, perhaps because she wasn't used to dealing with children at all.

Our groups met up, and we headed for the hill. After some walking, and much noise, we came out into a clearing.

"We're here, everyone. Shall we eat first?" the pope said, and the children broke into groups to spread out picnic blankets, laying the food out on top.

"No eating yet. Wait until everyone's ready, please," Yu said.

"Everyone, let's say grace together," Riche said.

"Hands together, everyone. Ready?" Misha said. "We thank thee, Almighty Spirit God, for the nourishment we shall now receive."

"Amen!" everyone said together.

The children dug in as soon as we finished.

"Hey, hey, what are those?" a child asked.

"These? They're sandwiches," May said.

"They look yummy! Wanna trade one for my boiled egg?"

"Sure!"

"I'll trade you this for one too!" Aleah said.

The twins were shy around the other children at first but were soon hitting it off. *How sweet.*

This hill must have been a really popular picnic spot as there were a number of other people around. There were families like ours, what I presumed to be couples, and even what looked to be a mother-daughter pair, the mother clad in pitch-black armor and the daughter in a dress a princess might wear—

Wait, what?

"Hm? If it isn't Rae Taylor and Claire François."

"What...? Your Imperial Majesty Dorothea?" I said.

"H-hey! Don't ignore me, I'm here, too, Rae!"

"Good morning, Philine. C'mon, Rae. Don't be rude," Claire chided me.

"Oh, no, I wasn't ignoring her or anything, it's just..." What were they doing here? This was Bauer, not Nur. In the first place, Dorothea was—was *what*, again? I feel like it was just on the tip of my tongue...

"What's the matter, Rae Taylor? Did my daughter's loveliness blind you? Humph, of course it did. But make no mistake: My daughter belongs to me and me alone," Dorothea said.

"Wha—Mother! Jeez, what are you saying?!" Philine objected.

"Nothing more than the truth."

"I know no such truth! Humph!"

"Ha ha ha, you're adorable, my dear"

They seemed to get along swimmingly. Not a single snag between them... but was that really—

"Your Imperial Majesty, should you be wearing armor to a picnic?" Claire asked.

"Don't fret, Claire François. This is my leisure armor."

"Such a thing exists?!"

"Indeed. It's actually made out of paper."

"But wouldn't a passing rain ruin it?!"

That's the party you're hung up on, Miss Claire? I frowned. "Um, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"What?"

“How are you feeling?”

“You’re worried about *me*? This picnic weather must have you feeling rather off. Perhaps it’ll even start raining out of nowhere. Humph, I’d rather not be caught wet in my leisure armor.”

I felt an overwhelming sense of discomfort hearing the words “picnic” come out of Dorothea’s mouth... No, that wasn’t what was bothering me. Like, what kind of armor is made out of paper—no, no, that wasn’t it either...

“Sorry, I just had to ask,” I said.

“Fair enough, then. I’m the very picture of good health. In fact, I can’t say I’ve ever had so much as a cold in my life.”

“Yeah, they say idiots can’t catch colds...” I muttered under my breath.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Nothing at all. I wish you the best of health.”

“As do I myself. I can’t have Philine worrying about me.”

“That’s right. Mother has to stay healthy forever!” Philine said.

They seemed incredibly close. Like, hearts flying out everywhere-level close.

“Our family bond isn’t one to lose out to theirs. Right, Yu?” Riche said, her competitive spirit having been lit.

“Of course, Mother,” Yu replied. “But I’d be happy if you could share some of your affection with Misha as well...”

“Whatever are you saying? It’s precisely because I’m so taken with her that I’m harsh on her. She’s proven to be an excellent wife for my daughter.”

“A-aha ha ha, thank you...” Misha awkwardly laughed. She was a bit timid around Riche. How cute.

“Humph... You two seem quite lovey-dovey as well. But you’re no match for the love

between me and my daughter," Dorothea said, looking at Misha and Yu.

"Impossible! You cannot find a more perfect couple than my dear Yu and Misha!" Riche exclaimed.

"M-Mother?!"

"Mother, please, you're embarrassing me..."

"Oh, goodness..."

Philine, Yu, and Misha suffered psychologically from their parents' competitiveness. I watched on with mild amusement, nibbling away at my sandwich, yet unaware that I was about to be dragged into this.

"If you're competing at lovey-doveyness, allow me and Rae to join as well!" Claire exclaimed.

I spat out my food and exclaimed, "Miss Claire?!"

"What, Rae? Do you have an objection?"

"I... I don't know! Isn't this whole thing just weird?!"

"How so?"

"That's... I'm not sure, but something's strange!" It was like I was watching a drama where all the developments were just a little too convenient to be realistic. I felt dizzy from the unplaceable sense that something was off, but the feeling was quickly dispelled by the appearance of two intruders.

"St-stop right there! We have a right to partake in this lovey-dovey contest as well!"

"Humph."

Joining the fray was Lilly and—

"The Demon Queen?!" I exclaimed.

"Ugh. *You're* here. Oh, Miss Claire, good morning. I see you're as dazzling today as ever,"

said the Demon Queen—also known as Rei Ohashi. “Good grief... Why do I have to tag along with this charade?”

“Oh, don’t be like that, Rei!” Lilly said.

“And what’s with you, Miss Lilly? The one you love is Rae Taylor, not—”

“What’s it matter? You and Rae are basically the same person! My love isn’t so weak as to falter at such a small difference!”

“Is that so? Fine. Do as you please.” The Demon Queen sighed, sitting down with a look of resignation.

Curious about her strange attire, the children surrounded her, climbing onto her lap and tugging at her black robes. She looked greatly troubled, unsure of what to do.

“Humph, yet another pair claims to be more lovey-dovey than Philine and I? We’d best make it clear who’s truly the most lovey-dovey here with a contest,” Dorothea said.

“Hey, hey! Let us join too!” an energetic voice called.

“Lene! And Lambert as well!” Claire exclaimed.

“It’s been a while, Miss Claire,” said Lambert, Lene’s spouse.

By this point, our calm, relaxing picnic had become as boisterous as any festival.

“There’s more of you? Fine. Any other participants?” Dorothea asked.

“Me, me! Me and Aleah!” May said.

“Yes, let us participate!” Aleah said.

“Very well, you may. But don’t expect me to hold back against my own disciple,” Dorothea said.

“I wouldn’t wish you to, Master!” Aleah said.

May and Aleah joined in as well. This random lovey-dovey contest that had sprung out from nowhere was beginning to get out of hand.

"Very well, then, let us each compete by recounting stories that express our lovey-doveyness," said Dorothea. "I'll start. This is a story from when Philine was only two years old."

"But that's illegal?!" everyone exclaimed.

"What do you mean? Her age matters not. Anyway, my official duties had me busy then, and I wasn't able to spend time with Philine for two days. As soon as I had finished my work, I opened the door to my office, fully intent on going to visit her, when instead I found her right outside my door."

"W-wait, Mother, not this story!" Philine exclaimed.

"She had been waiting outside my door the whole time. I picked her up and saw she was courageously holding in her tears. She then said: 'Mother, don't go anywhere without me anymore'—how about that?!" Dorothea said with a smug look.

"How about what...?" I said, a bit irritated by her smugness.

"Is that all?" Riche said. "The lovey-doveyness between Yu and Misha is miles higher than that. Why, just the other day, I had to leave the house for a bit on some business. I finished faster than expected and came home early, but when I opened the door I could tell *something* was in the air. Indeed, indeed. So I read the room and killed time outside before returning at my originally planned hour. Now how about that?!"

Was Riche always this kind of person? I thought. I then looked over and saw Yu and Misha doubling over with their heads in their hands, likely embarrassed out of their minds.

"R-Rei and I have been super lovey-dovey too!" Lilly said.

"Humph, then I'm sure you have a story you can share," Dorothea said.

"Go on, then, tell us," Riche said.

"Just the other day, Rei and I... held hands!"

"That's it?!" everyone exclaimed.

"Wh-what do you mean, 'that's it'?! Rei doesn't take initiative on her own, so hand-

holding is huge progress for us!"

Oh, Lilly... You poor, poor thing.

"You're all too green. Much, much, too green," Lene said.

"Oh? You're that Frater proprietress. I hope you have a story to back your words up," Dorothea said.

"I have plenty, Your Imperial Majesty. But such heartwarming stories only demonstrate the very basics of a relationship. They're for beginners, merely the first step."

"Oh, is that so? Then what, in your opinion, is the mark of an experienced relationship?" Riche asked.

"The mark of an experienced relationship, Lady Riche, is when a couple lives as though already spouses. Working, earning, and eking out a living together—in other words, starting a household together—is the real hallmark of an experienced couple."

"Humph."

"Guh..."

Dorothea and Riche faltered, unable to refute Lene's point. I had to wonder, though.... was that really correct?

"That makes me and Aleah super lovey-dovey, then!" May said.

"Yeah!" Aleah continued. "May and I do everything together! Before we met our mothers, we used to use our blood to make magic stones, and—"

"Okay, Aleah, that's enough." I hurriedly covered her mouth before she could divulge too much. I was fine with her getting competitive, but some things were a bit much to share.

"*Ooooho ho ho!* You all still have much to learn!" Claire said.

"Oh? You seem quite confident, Claire François," Dorothea said.

"Surely you'd have a story or two you could share to prove your bond with Rae Taylor?" Riche said.

"But of course. My Rae is perfect when it comes to adorableness, lovemaking, displays of affection, and maintaining a household alongside me as a spouse. Why, she was quite heated just the other night, in fact, as we—"

"Okaaaay, Miss Claire, that's far enough."

First Aleah was divulging too much, and now it was Claire. How odd. Weren't our roles usually the other way around?

"Humph, it seems we have no clear winner," Dorothea said. "We'll have to test everyone's lovey-dovey levels directly then. Philine, Rae Taylor, Demon Queen, Pope—swap your clothes."

"Why?!" the four of us exclaimed.

"Isn't it obvious? To determine who can still tell who is who."

"W-wait, Mother, why must I swap clothes as well?!" Philine asked.

"I'm forcing a shameful act on these three, so I need to put a piece of myself out there to make it fair. Now hurry up and strip. Right here."

"Right here?!" the four of us exclaimed again.

"Claire François, Lilly Lilium, turn around together with the children," Dorothea said.

"Nonsense, I have a duty to see this through," Claire said.

"Me too... For ulterior motives," Lilly said.

"For *what* motives?!" the four of us exclaimed, yet again.

Dorothea seemed in a rather good mood—

But for the love of everything holy, somebody please stop her!

"Hold on, Your Highness."

"Hm? What do you want, proprietress girl?"

Of all people, Lene came to our aid.

"Merely swapping clothes won't be a good enough challenge to test everyone's bond," she said.

"Is that so?" Dorothea asked.

"Thank you, Lene! The voice of reason! I knew you would save us, my fellow former maid!" I cried.

"If Rae were on the guessing side, she'd be able to point out Claire even with a blindfold on, through smell or something," Lene said. "We need to make this fair, so why not have everyone in their birthday suits?"

"I see," Dorothea mused.

"Lene?!" I exclaimed.

"Be quiet, Rae. I'm on the verge of discovering a new idea that'll shake up the market!"

What in the world are you talking about?! I wanted to scream. What was going on? Gathered here were some of the greatest people in the world and each and every one of them was acting right batty. Something was off here. Something was *very* off here...

And yet something about it all was so heart-wrenchingly beautiful, enough to bring a tear to my eye.

Riche and Yu weren't estranged, and Riche had even accepted Misha; Dorothea was alive and close to Philine; Lilly and my other self had found their own path to happiness; and most importantly, everyone had a smile on their face.

"A day like this wouldn't have been so bad," I whispered. I didn't regret the path I'd taken. I couldn't say all the choices I'd made were right, but I had always given everything my best. But perhaps this day could've come if I had done some things differently, as far-fetched as the thought might be.

"Your stubbornness never fails to surprise me, Rae Taylor."

Before I knew it, my surroundings had lost their color and frozen, leaving only me and one other person moving.

“So this was your work after all, TAIM,” I said.

Before me was TAIM’s fairy-like digital interface. She looked even more otherworldly than usual, perhaps because our surroundings were frozen.

“What are you plotting this time?” I asked.

“Why must I be a villain? I’m doing all this out of sheer benevolence. This is just me providing you with some rest and relaxation, if you will.”

“You haven’t exactly set a good precedent for yourself. And what do you mean by relaxation?”

“Claire François’s been busy lately because of the debate over what to do with the Loop System, has she not?”

“She has. I haven’t been able to spend a lot of time with her lately, actually, so it’s kinda troubling.”

My previously fuzzy thoughts and memories were clear again. Originally, Claire and I had undone TAIM’s plans and returned home, spending our days dealing with the mess left behind. Claire was often out day after day debating what to do with the Loop System with Thane, Dole, and the leaders from other countries.

“Claire François is troubled for the same reasons,” TAIM said. “As she is the current administrator, I can’t risk her falling unwell.”

“That’s why you’re doing all this? To give her a chance to relax?”

“Yes.”

So this was all a dream to relieve Claire’s stress.

“But aren’t you forgetting the most important thing for that?” I asked.

“You mean Melia François?”

"Yeah. Wouldn't a dream with her be best for Claire?"

"Perhaps, but it's not so simple."

"What do you mean?"

"In the quantum world, Claire François made a promise with Melia François to meet again in the next life."

"Right, I remember."

"So would meeting Melia François before their promised time be of any comfort to Claire François?"

"No. No, I suppose it wouldn't."

"Indeed. You know exactly what kind of person she is."

"Yeah. She's just as strict with herself as she is with others." That was Claire for you.

"Yes. But in spite of that restriction, I tried to make this as perfect a dream as I possibly could. What did you think?" TAIM asked.

"What did I think? Where do I even start?" I asked, greatly troubled. "I'm pretty sure if Claire were in my shoes, she'd figure out this was a dream pretty quick."

"Is that so? Figures," TAIM said, seeming to already have had such an inkling.

Death weighed on people. Even someone as lackadaisical as me had figured something was up, so there was no way someone as serious as Claire wouldn't. In fact, she would probably figure out she was dreaming the moment she saw Riche or Dorothea.

"The truth is, I'm showing Claire François this same dream right now," TAIM said.

"Huh? Like, *now now?*" I asked.

"Yes."

It had kind of been glossed over, but that meant this *was* a dream. Dang, what a vivid one.

“So, what was Claire’s reaction?” I asked.

“Please confirm that for me yourself. You both will be rousing soon.”

“Wha—hey! You can’t just do what you want to someone and toss them aside!”

“Please and thank you, Rae Taylor.”

“TAIM! You... good-for-nothing AI!”

I woke up to the sound of my own voice. I was in my bed in my own home. Beside me was my beloved. She had a troubled look on her face, which told me that she probably wasn’t enjoying her dream.

Slowly, her eyelids flit open. “Nngh...”

“Good morning, Miss Claire.”

“Good morning, Rae... I had the strangest dream just now.”

“Really? What kind of dream was it?” I asked. I already knew full well what her dream had been, but I wanted her impressions.

Still half asleep, she drowsily mumbled. “It was a... peaceful dream. One where all the people you want to see appear, smiling...”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“That’s... a difficult question. It reminded me of how there are some painful memories you don’t want to forget, you know?”

“Yeah.” The kind of painful memories that made you who you were today. For me, those were my memories with Misaki, Kosaki, and Shiko. My heart ached to remember them, but I wouldn’t have wished to forget them for the world.

Hearing her answer, I was fully convinced that TAIM’s plan had failed. But then I heard Claire’s next words.

“But... it wasn’t *unpleasant*.”

“Miss Claire...”

“Rae, my beloved Rae... You’re not a dream, right? You won’t disappear like a phantom before my eyes?”

“Of course not.”

“Then hold me tight. Prove to me you’re here right now.”

“Of course.” I hugged Claire as tightly as I possibly could. I prayed she could continue to stand proud forever and that I’d be there to support her vulnerable self for just as long.

“Rae.”

“Yes, Miss Claire?”

“I forbid you from using ‘Miss.’”

“Yes, Claire?”

“I’ll become happier than any dream could make me. Will you be happy with me?”

“Of course.”

“Heh heh, thank you.”

We shared a kiss. The bond we shared was sweeter than any dream and truer than any reality. The words of love we exchanged weren’t to indulge in any fantasy but to ground ourselves in the moment in which we lived.

“I love you, Claire.”

“And I, you, Rae.”

And so, as we had for many days and would for many more, we began a brand-new day.

AFTERWORD

SO CONCLUDES Act 2 of *I'm in Love with the Villainess*. I'm the author, Inori. Thank you for reading until the end.

This is the second time I've done an afterword for the conclusion of the series, the first being after Volume 2. There were a lot of loose plot threads back then, but the story ended on a high note, so I figured it'd be okay to stop there. To my happy surprise, however, there was a lot of demand for a continuation, so I began writing Act 2 and was able to tie together all those loose ends. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it.

Things have been eventful since I began writing. I got my start posting on the website *Let's Be Novelists*. I didn't receive much attention then, occasionally ranking on the daily section but never that high. But I continued to write and eventually took the first three chapters of the story to the publishers GL Bunko, got published, and from there, it was a blur. The series was translated into Korean, English, and Portuguese, then many more languages; a manga adaptation began in *Comic Yuri Hime*; and we even got fifth place in Anime Japan's *Manga I Want to See Animated* contest. I haven't heard any news of the series receiving an anime as of writing this afterword, but thanks to everyone's support, it's definitely no longer a pipe dream. *I'm in Love with the Villainess* was made possible by readers like you. I cannot thank you all enough.

Now then, a number of you have probably finished this book and are thinking, "Hey, Act 2 had less yuri than Act 1!"—and I'd have to admit you're right. *I'm in Love with the Villainess* is first and foremost a yuri work, so I made sure to add lots of romance elements in Act 1. In contrast, for Act 2 I mainly wrote what I wanted to write, which ended up as a story that had more fantasy and adventure elements than romance. Looking back on it now, I can see the story isn't so overtly a romance as it once was.

That being said, *I'm in Love with the Villainess* has been and always will be a love story focused on Rae and Claire. Having read the book, you readers probably already know, but every event that occurs stems from Rae and Claire's original meeting, so in a sense, everything is part of one big love story that transcends time and space.

Of course, our protagonist Rae can't exactly be called the same person as Rei Ohashi, the one who *really* began it all, but that doesn't change the fact that this story belongs

to them.

Back to talking about writing, there was another thing on my mind as I wrote Act 2: What are the possibilities of yuri as a genre? I won't deny that romance is an important aspect of yuri, but surely it's a broader genre than just that. Wouldn't it be nice to have more yuri stories where the fate of one's country or the world hangs in the balance? With that thought in mind, I tried to write a yuri story where the relationship of two women dictated the fate of their countries and later the world. As for whether I succeeded, you can decide for yourself.

This volume brings the story of *I'm in Love with the Villainess* to a temporary close. I'm about empty of ideas, so no continuations are in the works... for now. I do have some ideas for spin-offs though. Maybe a square-one retelling from Claire's perspective, or a down-to-earth romance story focused on May and Aleah with no world-ending stakes.

By the time this book is published, I should actually have already started work on that first side story. If you'd like to see it published as a novel, please do say so on social media together with your thoughts on this book. All the input really gets these books out there; that's how Act 2 came to be, after all. As always, thank you for your support.

I'd like to make some acknowledgments.

To Nakamura of the GL Novel editing department: Thank you for working on this book, despite your busy schedule. Without your help, this whole series wouldn't have been possible. I cannot thank you enough for picking up my series, introducing me to Hanagata and the *Yuri Hime* editorial department, and much, much more.

To Hanagata: Thank you for breathing life into the series through your art. Your beautiful covers and wondrous illustrations gave Rae and Claire soul. Thank you so much.

To Aki, my partner: Without you, this series would never have been made. Thank you for patiently supporting me despite my tendency to procrastinate. I'm moved beyond words that I was able to finish Act 2, even if it means our days of brainstorming will be on pause for a while. When the release date rolls around, let's go out to celebrate this book with some nonalcoholic cassis oranges again.

Lastly, as always, I offer my deepest gratitude to you, the reader who bought this book.

Thank you very much.

I'll be praying we meet again somewhere. Until then, take care.

—INORI, APRIL 20, 2021

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