



# I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS

Written by  
**INORI**

NOVEL

2

Illustrated by  
**HANAGATA**

# I'M IN LOVE WITH THE VILLAINESS

– Watashi no Oshi wa Akuyaku Reijou –

- VOLUME 2 -

-AUTHOR-

Inori

-ILLUSTRATOR-

Hanagata

[ SEVEN SEAS ]





**Lene Aurousseau**



**Claire François**

**Rae Taylor**

**Misha Jur**

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NOVEL

◀ 2 ▶

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

## **WATASHI NO OSHI WA AKUYAKU REIJOU 2**

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Illustrated by Hanagata

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**TRANSLATION:** Jenn Yamazaki

**ADAPTATION:** Nibedita Sen

**COVER DESIGN:** Nicky Lim

**LOGO DESIGN:** George Panella

**INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN:** Clay Gardner

**PROOFREADER:** Stephanie Cohen, Jade Gardner

**LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR:** E.M. Candon

**PREPRESS TECHNICIAN:** Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

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# **Table of Contents**

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CHAPTER 4

## **The Scales of Love**

CHAPTER 5

## **School Holiday**

CHAPTER 6

## **Yu's Secret**

CHAPTER 7

## **The Palace**

FINAL CHAPTER

## **Revolution**

## **Epilogue**

BONUS CHAPTER

## **Curses and Good Luck Charms**

## **Afterword**

# CHAPTER 4

## THE SCALES OF LOVE

**"EXCUSE ME.** Are you trying to let my skin burn in the sun? Hold the parasol straight."

It was Claire who grumpily said this, walking by my side one early summer evening. It was just starting to get dark, but the hot sun still beat down on us as we headed back to the dormitories, having finished our daily duties for the Academy Knights.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss Claire. I was just so busy staring at you, I lost control of my hand," I said as I scrambled to fix the parasol. I couldn't possibly let Claire's porcelain skin sustain so much as a single blemish. They didn't even have any good skin lightening creams in this world.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but would you mind doing your job?"

"I'm so sorry."

"Hmph..." Claire turned her head sharply away with a huff. She was adorable when she glowered. I would've expected her to fling more harsh words my way, but she hadn't been herself of late. Losing Lene had taken its toll.

"Miss Claire."

"What is it?"

"Once school is out, how about I make you something sweet?"

"Why this, all of a sudden? There's no need for that."

"Even the crème brûlée you love?"

"That's the recipe you gave to Lene, right?" Claire said in a sad voice. Ah. Here I'd been trying to make her feel better and ended up doing the exact opposite. This wouldn't do.

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“C’mon, chin up.”

“I am perfectly fine.” It was clear that Claire was putting on a brave face, but I couldn’t think of a good way to console her.

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“Can I hug you?”

“What?!”

Oh dear. Coming up blank on other ideas, my brain had gone straight to my own simple, worldly desires.

“Of course you may not. What kind of servant asks their master for a hug?”

“Um? This kind?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!” Like the silver lining of a dark cloud, getting angry with me seemed to improve Claire’s mood. This was as good a time as any to say it.

“Miss Claire.”

“That’s the fourth time you’ve said that. What is it?”

“I like you.”

“Yes, yes. And I hate you.” She shot me down at once.

“That’s strange. I thought my timing was perfect.”

“Perfect for what?!”

“Oh, you want me to say it? Miss Claire, you have such a dirty mind.”

“You started it!”

It was perfect. She was warming up to me.

I escorted Claire to her dorm room, unlocked the door, and went inside. While unpacking and putting her things away, I noticed something in the letter tray. Inspecting and sorting the mail was another of my jobs as her servant, and I recognized the wax seal. It was the first time I’d seen it since being transported to this world, but I’d played *Revolution* enough times to guess at the contents of the letter, let alone the sender.

*She was coming.*

“Miss Claire, you have a letter.”

“Who is it from?”

“Manaria Sousse.”

“Sister?!” Claire walked briskly up to me and snatched the letter away, eyes fixed on the sending address. “Please open it.”

“Yes, Miss.” I took the envelope from her and carefully sliced it open with a silver letter opener. The contents were a single slip of paper. I handed it to Claire.

She read it in silence, but a happy look washed across her face. Claire yearned deeply for this person she called “sister.” As for who Manaria was—you’ll see soon enough.

“Miss Claire, shall we go to the cafeteria?” I asked.

“You go ahead. I’ll join you after I read this letter.”

“In that case, I’ll wait too.”

Claire didn’t answer, lost in the letter’s contents. It was like she was reading a long-awaited message from her sweetheart. Something unpleasant rose in my chest.

“My sister... She’s come to the Academy,” Claire eventually muttered in a feverish tone, finally finished reading.

Unable to remain silent, I said, “Your sister is this Manaria?”

“That’s right. She is the First Crown Princess of the Sousse Kingdom. I greatly admire her.”

“Heh...”

“It seems she is on exchange to the Bauer Kingdom and has enrolled here. The letter was an apology for waiting so long to contact me.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Your voice sounds excessively flat, or dare I say it, even dissatisfied?”

“It must be your imagination, Miss Claire.” My only wish was for Claire to be happy. I knew, rationally, that it didn’t matter who she cared for—but my heart wasn’t rational.  
“Shall we head to the cafeteria?”

“Yes, let’s... But my heart is so full right now, I don’t think I’ll be able to eat much.”

“Oh, is that so? Let’s go quickly.”

“See, you *are* dissatisfied, aren’t you?”

“Huh? No?” *I don’t care one bit.*

“Could it be you’re jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Such a prompt answer!”

*I mean...* “I already told you that I pine for you, didn’t I, Miss Claire?”

“I grow tired of you repeating that joke.”

“How can I convince you that I’m being serious?”

“Impossible... But, well—” Claire cut herself off and then broke into a sly smile. “Would you place an offering of the Flower of Flora on the scales? That would prove to me

your feelings are true."

This was an uncharacteristic show of romanticism, coming from her. "You mean Poesie Amour?"

"Oh, you know of it?"

Poesie Amour was an ancient legend in the Bauer Kingdom. The story went like this: Two men, one tall and one short, vied for the love of a shrine maiden. Each held a position of power in the kingdom, and as they neglected their duties to wage this romantic rivalry, the land and its people suffered. The shrine maiden prayed to her god that the men would end their feud, and the god presented her with a scale, saying, "Place their offerings on this scale. You will wed whomsoever the scale weighs in favor of."

Based on the direction the scale tilted, the maiden wed the shorter man. The tall man, heartbroken, went on to become a great king. Claire had just recited the lines the maiden had said to the men as she presented them with the God's Scale.

"Do you like such stories too, Miss Claire?"

"I don't dislike them. But I'm not a romantic." And yet, Claire's steps were lighter than usual, perhaps buoyed by the good news that Manaria had come to the Academy.

"I don't dislike love stories either, but I'm not a fan of Poesie Amour."

"Oh? Why is that?" It was so cute when she cocked her head to the side like that.

"I just don't see why the maiden didn't choose one of them in the first place. To make them feud like that... She's the worst kind of villainess."

"That's not true at all." Claire frowned at me as though I were clueless. "The maiden was surely unable to choose. When you're truly in love, it can't be easy to decide who gets how much of your love."

Her words were so young, and so naive.

"I don't even know how much I love, let alone who. I almost wish someone would tell me," Claire continued, growing more poetic with every word. Of course, she was well read in such things.

“Miss Claire.”

“How many times are you going to say that today?”

Despite her clear exasperation, Claire always responded when I said her name. So I replied with, “I’m hungry,” telling her frankly and truthfully what I was feeling.

“You are just—such a—!” Claire’s face turned red as a boiled lobster for a moment before she slumped her shoulders in disappointment. “Well, I guess I can’t expect someone who ridicules love to understand such nuance.”

She flounced out of the room.

“But I’m not joking...” I muttered to myself as I followed after her.

\*\*\*

“My name is Manaria Sousse. It’s a pleasure to meet you all,” Manaria said with an eloquent smile.

For whatever reason, the Academy had a homeroom hour before classes began every day, just like Japanese schools. Manaria, now attending as an exchange student, stood before the class and introduced herself—also just like in a Japanese school. Her platinum-blonde hair was cut short in a boyish style, and she had the full attention of not just the boys but all the girls too.

Claire, who sat next to me, had a proud look on her face. Her nose was practically twitching.

“As most of you probably know, Lady Manaria is the First Crown Princess of the Sousse Kingdom. Keep in mind that—”

“Mr. Torrid, that won’t be necessary,” Manaria interrupted. “This is not the Sousse Kingdom. In this country, I am just another student. Please treat me as you would anyone else. Everyone, I hope we will come to be friends.”

She bowed dramatically, placing her hand on her chest and bending at the waist. When she lifted her head, she gave another refreshing smile. I could almost see the flowery shoujo manga backdrop behind her.

"Brava, Sister," Claire said, blushing—just as I expected her to.

"That is very gracious, Lady Manaria. But we cannot possibly treat the First Crown Princess of Sousse like an ordinary student." Mr. Torrid seemed unsure of what to do. Although he'd been awarded his own noble title, he came from commoner roots, and he was visibly hesitant to drop all formalities in the presence of royalty.

"'First Crown Princess' is a meaningless title. I was part of a battle for succession that has essentially resulted in my being sent away," Manaria said. Since she was still smiling, it took Mr. Torrid and the other students some time to process the meaning of those words. "The official story is that I'm studying abroad, but the truth is that for all intents and purposes, I've been exiled."

The classroom erupted in chatter at this frank summary. I'd expected Claire to be shaken by this news, but she didn't look shocked at all.

"Did you know?"

"Yes. It's of little consequence, really."

According to Claire, she frequently exchanged letters with Manaria and had already been informed that she would be exiled under the pretense of studying abroad. Claire, who admired and adored Manaria, undoubtedly found this outrageous.

"As you can see, I am no longer a princess. Once again, I ask that you all treat me as your equal," Manaria said without a hint of despair in her voice. She was still smiling with utmost charm, as if she were thoroughly enjoying herself.

"A-ahem. We will continue to reflect on how to treat Lady Manaria. For now, let us resume class," Mr. Torrid said, motioning for Manaria to take her seat.

"Understood, Mr. Torrid."

Manaria headed toward us. She took the seat to Claire's left, opposite me, and greeted her with a confident smile.

"Hey, Claire. It's been a while," she said.

"It has been quite a long time, Sister. I am glad to see you look well." Claire smiled back. "I cannot believe the Sousse Kingdom would cast you aside in favor of that imbecile."

"Ha ha ha. Don't say that. I was illegitimate, after all."

"But—"

"I'm actually quite relieved to escape all the family drama. Now, I'm free." Manaria smiled innocently at Claire's persistence. She sounded like she was being honest.

"Very well. If you say so, then I will not push the issue further."

"Thank you. And who is this?" Manaria looked curiously at me with her brown eyes.

"She is my servant. You, introduce yourself."

"I am Rae Taylor, slave to my beloved Miss Claire. I am pleased to meet you."

"A slave?" Manaria laughed, seeming to appreciate my tasteless humor.

"What nonsense is this? You are a servant—a servant!" Claire scrambled to correct me.

"That's an unusual name," Manaria said. "Perhaps you're an aristocrat from outside the Bauer Kingdom?"

"No, she's a commoner. A pustule on the face of the Academy's honor and traditions. It's only natural that you wouldn't have heard of her," Claire said vehemently.

This information only served to make Manaria more curious. "Oh, but if she made it into the Academy as a commoner, she must be special."

"She is far inferior to you, Sister," Claire insisted before turning to me. "Listen, you. Don't think you can start showing off that you're a dual-caster, you hear? Sister is the world's only quad-caster."

Her pride in Manaria was so darling. And she was right too. I've said previously that Mr. Torrid was the only confirmed tri-caster in the kingdom, but Manaria was the only confirmed quad-caster in the world. Furthermore, while Mr. Torrid's attributes were low in aptitude, Manaria's were all maxed out, granting her unimaginable power. Claire was right to say I was no match for her.

"I see no reason to brag about abilities I was born with," Manaria grumbled.

"What are you saying? Your very existence is a gift from the heavens," Claire corrected her. She was definitely *much* too fond of Manaria.

"Lady Manaria, Miss Claire, forgive me—I must finish making these announcements. Would you mind rekindling your friendship at a later time?" Mr. Torrid said, genuinely apologetic.

"Oh. Excuse us, Mr. Torrid."

"I'm so sorry."

"Now, the Amour Festival scheduled for the end of the month..." Mr. Torrid continued. As I sat with my head tilted to one side, listening to the professor's voice, hoarse with age—

I heard a voice in my head.

*Hey, Rae. Can I ask you something? Sorry, I don't mean to startle you. I'm using magic to speak to you telepathically. Don't worry—I can't actually read your mind.*

It was Manaria's voice.

*I understand,* I replied.

*You know how to do this?* Manaria asked.

*You've set up the channel, Lady Manaria. All I need to do is use it,* I said. *So, what do you need?*

*Mmm. I wanted to get to know you.*

So, it had begun.

Manaria was one of the few characters in *Revolution* meant to serve as an ally for the main character, like Misha. She was distantly related to Claire, who had stayed with Manaria's family for some time when she was very young, after her own mother passed away. Claire adored Manaria, thought of her as a sister, and was utterly unable to gainsay her on anything. This allowed the player to use Manaria as a seawall against Claire's antics, letting her keep Claire distracted while the main character spent most of her time with the princes. It was a popular mid-game strategy, but—

*I am merely a boring commoner. I have nothing to offer the Lady Manaria,* I responded to her indifferently.

I had no intention of wooing the princes, and I actually wanted to spend time with Claire, so Manaria's presence didn't matter to me. In fact, I was a little jealous of how much Claire loved her. She was my rival.

*Mmm. That is a refreshing response. I grow even more interested in you,* came her reply.

I glanced at Manaria out of the corner of my eye and saw that she wore a smirk.

*This is going to be a pain in the neck.*

I kept that last thought to myself, far away from our telepathic channel.

\*\*\*

Manaria assimilated to the school quickly.

"Claire, you haven't changed one bit."

"I'm glad to see that you haven't either, Sister."

"Lady Manaria, please speak to me too."

"Hey, Pepi, don't butt in. I want to talk to Lady Manaria as well."

Today, Manaria had joined Claire's entourage for tea. It didn't take long for her to win over every member of Claire's coterie; I'd thought Claire might not appreciate that, but apparently, Manaria was a special case.

"Thank you both, Pepi and Loretta. I'm so glad we can be friends." Manaria's royal pedigree was evinced by her social skills. She smiled suavely at the squealing girls rather than letting herself be overcome by their ardor—the exact opposite of someone I knew. I mean myself, of course.

"That poem you composed in our last class—why did you choose the wording 'I send this song to you' instead of the standard 'This sonnet I devote to you'?" one of them asked.

"It's an older form of prosody. I drew inspiration from a verse by the ancient poet Aine." Manaria proceeded to recite the poem in question.

"I like Aine's work too. Her Amour poems are particularly moving."

"Ah, you must mean 'Tip the Scales'? Gerle is also excellent when it comes to Amour poems."

Manaria was royalty, through and through—cultured and educated in the classics. I knew what she was talking about from playing the game, but I lacked the confidence to converse about these things as freely as she did. Manaria was on a completely different level from Claire's entourage, right down to the elegance with which she tilted her teacup to her lips. The only person who didn't look out of place next to her was

Claire.

"Why don't you take a seat, Rae? Have tea with us," Manaria invited.

"It's fine, Sister. Rae is a servant. It wouldn't do for her to join us." Claire made it immediately clear she didn't want me in her circle, and that was fine. I liked that about her.

But—

"Don't say that, Claire. I'd like to get to know her," Manaria said, prompting sour looks from Claire and her entourage.

"Sister, Why are you so interested in this commoner?"

"Who cares about status? I want to know all about her. Rae, come here."

"No, Miss Claire is correct," I said. "I will let you be."

"Well! How rude of you to refuse Lady Manaria's kind invitation!" Pepi gasped.

"Unbelievable—just because she has some skills, this peasant thinks she can do whatever she wants!" Loretta sniffed.

"Rae, are you really that skilled?" asked Manaria.

"No, she's nothing like you, Lady Manaria—" Pepi insisted.

"You bet she's skilled," It was Rod, this time, who interrupted the entourage's attempt to flatter Manaria.

"Well, well, Master Rod. How nice to see you."

"It's been a while, Manaria." Rod approached us and took a seat without hesitation, as if he belonged at a table surrounded by only girls.

"Might I ask, Master Rod, just how skilled is Rae?" Manaria asked.

"She's better than me. Her manners are only average, but she outshines aristocrats in every other area. Her magic is particularly fascinating." Rod accepted a cup of tea from his servant. Since Manaria was royalty, she and Rod knew each other well—though it was primarily a diplomatic relationship rather than a familial bond like the one Manaria had with Claire.

"Goodness. I would love to face her on the dueling grounds, if that's true."

"Yeah, so would I, but she's head over heels in love with Claire. It's tough to get her to agree to be your opponent in anything. I challenged her to chess once, and she wiped the board with me."

"So, she's giving His Royal Highness, Rod, the cold shoulder? What a fascinating development."

"Right?"

The two royal children met eyes, then broke out into delighted laughter. They had completely different personalities, and yet there was something similar about them—particularly their interest in me.

"Well, I'm interested in you too, Manaria," said Rod. "I want to see what the rumored quad-caster looks like in battle."

"Hm, I suppose I might like to see your Flame Troops with my own eyes."

"How about it, Manaria? Shall we test our skills?" Rod baited.

"I wouldn't mind that." Manaria nodded nonchalantly.

"Let's get down to the track, then."

And with that, we were suddenly on our way to witness a royal duel. We stopped by the storage room where the tools used to reduce magic damage via the creation of barriers were kept—the same tools we'd used in the entrance exam for the Academy Knights—and went to watch Rod and Manaria face off.

"Don't hold back, okay?" Rod said.

"Do what you will," Manaria said.

"Okay, then... Show me what you got, Quad-caster!" And with that, an endless sea of flame soldiers appeared around Rod.

"My, how impressive." A normal person might have flinched at the sight, but Manaria just smiled, unfazed.

"Charge!" Rod ordered, and his minions besieged Manaria.

"Hm. Well, let's start with the textbook response, shall we?"

With a snap of her fingers, Manaria summoned ice arrows to counter the minions. The ice arrows and flame troops canceled each other out, both disappearing.

"It's not over yet," Rod said, immediately summoning more fiery minions. At the rate at which he was going, things might have ended up just like his battle with Misha. If Manaria stayed in defense mode, she would be able to hold off the minions, but she risked running out of oxygen.

"Hmm... They really are never-ending. I suppose I had better attack, then." Manaria snapped her fingers again, and we were blasted by cool air. When the chilly winds died down, she was surrounded by what could only be called ice minions.

"Are you taking a page from my book?" Rod asked.

"Is that permissible?"

"I'm a little offended, but I suppose we'll see how long they'll hold."

"What's going to happen?" Claire looked anxious as she watched the miniature fire and ice soldiers collide violently with each other. Confident as she was in Manaria's capabilities, she probably couldn't help but worry about what would happen if Rod went all out.

"Lady Manaria isn't even trying yet," I said without thinking, unable to stand seeing Claire so worried.

"I know that, but the Flame Troops only work as a tactic because of Rod's rare abundance of magical power. Isn't he at an advantage if she uses the same tactic?"

"Lady Manaria has a trump card," I said. Claire turned back to the match with a puzzled look on her face.

The battle had reached a standstill. The flame and ice minions were evenly matched, repeatedly slamming into each other exactly halfway between Rod and Manaria. As Claire said, if this went on too long, Manaria would be at a disadvantage.

"Ah, I have it," Manaria said, abruptly.

"Have what? How I'm going to defeat you?"

"No. I mean this." Manaria snapped her fingers again, not missing a beat. As she did, Rod's flame soldiers suddenly disappeared.

"What the?!"

Rattled, Rod tried to summon his minions again, but not a single one appeared. The tables had turned quickly and dramatically in Manaria's favor, and in an instant, Rod was surrounded by the ice soldiers.

An anticlimactic ending, but an ending, nonetheless.

"I... surrender."

"Thank you for your time."

"How did you *do* that?" Rod asked.

"I countered your magic. It's my specialty." Manaria smiled.

Manaria's signature skill was known as "Spellbreaker." She analyzed the structure of her opponent's magic, then forcefully disrupted and disarmed it. Other mages could deploy Spellbreaker, but for the skill to work, the caster had to have the same attribute as the opponent whose magic they were trying to counter, as well as higher aptitude than that opponent. Not to mention, it was a real trick to analyze the structure of another caster's magic on the fly. Magical analysis of that sort was normally only conducted in academic conditions and on a national level, but Manaria could perform it entirely on her own, and in the midst of combat. She was one of a kind.

"You're unreal," said Rod.

"I've been told so," said Manaria.

"This is the first time I've been so thoroughly defeated. You took me out. I acknowledge your superior strength."

"Thank you very much."

The two shook hands, and the crowd erupted in cheers.

"Sister... that was amazing." Claire's eyes were full of passion as she gazed at Manaria. The sight filled me with conflict.

\*\*\*

"Scales of Love...? That Amour poem?"

"Yes, that's right. Those scales are used in the ceremony that ends the festival."

I was attending another tea session in the role of Claire's servant. Today's theme: the approaching Amour Festival at the end of the month. In attendance were Claire's entourage, Manaria, Yu, and, in a rare occurrence, Thane.

Yu, who was well versed in the religious ceremonies of the Church, explained the festival to Manaria.

"And here I thought the Poesie Amour was just legend," Manaria said as she elegantly tipped her cup to her lips. Perhaps because they were similarly placed in the lines of succession to their respective thrones, she spoke more easily with Yu than she did Rod.

"Poesie Amour itself is said to draw on a number of different folktales," Yu said.

"But the scales really exist?"

"Well... they're probably just magical tools," Thane said.

Yu nodded in agreement. "We've only recently begun deliberately designing what we call magical tools, but items with strange powers have appeared all through history."

"And how are the Scales of Love used in the festival?"

"Well, it's a sort of duel, I suppose. You might even call it a blind date... Basically, it's a quest to secure a bride," Yu said with a grin. "As is written in Poesie Amour, love has long been a seed of war. The Amour Festival is the battle for a bride spoken of in the legend's verses."

"Is there an offering?" Manaria asked. She was joking, but, well...

"That is exactly correct. Offerings of love are placed on the scales, and their weight decides the victor of the battle," Yu affirmed.

"I'm stunned. I've studied the history of the Bauer Kingdom, so I knew the legend, but I had no idea the scales actually existed."

"Well, our history *is* full of elaborate customs and rituals. Perhaps your instructor couldn't cover everything in detail," Yu said as I quietly filled his empty cup. He thanked me and continued, "Of course, when I say 'weight,' I don't mean the actual mass of the objects. The scales are set to compare rarity. In other words, they tip in favor of the weight of love."

"What? So, you *could* just offer up the Flower of Flora?"

"Based on the festival's history, the Flower of Flora is undoubtedly the heaviest offering on record."

"Which is in keeping with the legend, then." Manaria looked impressed.

"You sound curious about the festival. Are you interested in participating, Manaria?" Yu teased.

"It's intriguing, isn't it? And so romantic. Even I can't help but want to put my love to the test."

"Sister, girls can't weigh their love on the scales. We're the ones the boys fight over," Claire said with a chuckle.

"But no one needs to fight over you, Claire. You have Rae," Yu said.

"What?! Yu!"

"Wait, what? That's what's going on between Claire and Rae?" Manaria asked.

"Don't be silly, Sister. He's just teasing me." Claire raised her cup to her lips in a huff.

"I have confessed my feelings to Miss Claire many times," I said, "but she keeps her guard up."

"Well, now. So, your love is unrequited, Rae?" Manaria asked.

"For now, but not forever."

"You'd better stop that nonsense right now, you hear me?" Claire glared at me. She was perfect. "Even if I were interested in other girls, I'd pick Sister long before I would ever look at you."

Manaria laughed. "That's so sweet of you. If I were interested in girls, I'd choose you over the average boy."

"Sister!"

The two girls giggled together. *Get a room.*

"Oh, that's right, Manaria was Claire's first love, right?" Yu said.

"Hey! Please don't bring up such ancient history, Yu."

"I remember this," Manaria chimed in. "You thought I was a boy."

They were referring to the time Claire had spent with Manaria's family. Claire's parents had been in a carriage accident on her fourth birthday. Dole, her father, had

survived, but her mother had not. Claire had lost all will to live in the wake of her mother's death, and Dole, having no time to comfort his daughter while dealing with the consequences of losing his politically minded and sociable wife, had sent her to stay with Manaria's kin. That was when the two had first met.

"Lady Manaria's words saved me," Claire said.

Manaria had been the first to realize Claire blamed herself for her mother's death—something not even her own father had picked up on. *"No one thinks this is your fault, Claire,"* she'd told her. When Claire heard those words, she began to cry for the first time in years.

As she sobbed, inconsolable, Manaria continued:

*"I swear here and now that I will remain faithful to thee."*

It was the vow of love from Poesie Amour. I don't know if Manaria had actually been in love with Claire at the time, but regardless, having lines of love from one of her favorite stories recited to her had made Claire fall head over heels for Manaria.

This information wasn't included in the actual game, only the character reference guide. That same guide, which expanded on Claire's background and history, was part of what had inspired my adoration for her.

Of course, Manaria's words, and later, Dole's utterly spoiling Claire, had also played a role in making her as self-absorbed as she was today.

"That's exactly why I love Miss Claire," I said.

"What are you talking about?! What kind of non sequitur is that?!"

"I'm so sorry! I just love you so much."

"I see, Rae. You really do like Claire. I see..." Manaria smiled, but I suddenly felt like a frog being eyed by a snake. She pulled Claire close and held her. "Unfortunately, Claire said she likes me better"

"What's wrong, Sister?" Claire asked.

*Stay calm. Count to infinity...*

"Claire, would you believe me if I said I like you?" Manaria said, voice suddenly layered with innuendo.

"Of course. I already believe that."

"Heh, I see."

*It's great that they make such a perfect couple. Stay calm. Stay calm.*

"Rae, you're spilling the tea."

"Please excuse me."

Yeah, I give. I wasn't calm at all.

"What's wrong? You don't look well," Thane said to me.

"It's nothing. Thank you for your concern." I tried my hardest to smile as I responded to this boy whom I had no interest in. But—wait a second. I thought Claire was supposed to be infatuated with Thane.

"Claire and Manaria really are close..." Thane muttered.

"Yes, they are... Would you like more tea?" I brushed aside his comment, offering to fill his cup.

"Rae... that's the milk pitcher, not the teapot."

Oh no. Ugh, this was going to be a problem.

Manaria watched me stumble through all of this, smiling like she was having the time of her life.

\*\*\*

"Good morning, Miss Claire—"

"That's right! Ha ha ha."

"Heh heh, oh, Sister!"

When I arrived at Claire's room to help her get dressed the next morning—the best part of my day—someone else had beat me to it.

"Hey, Rae. Morning."

"Good morning."

"You're late, you know? I'm already dressed."

"I'm so sorry..."

Not only was Claire dressed, her hair was arranged perfectly. It was tricky to get her curls just right. With Lene gone, I'd thought I was the only one who could do it.

"Did you do all this by yourself?" I asked.

"What? No. Sister did them for me. She's quite skilled."

"I used to take care of Claire all the time," Manaria said, and they laughed together like a couple.

"Thank you very much, Lady Manaria," I said.

"Don't worry about it."

"But taking care of Claire is my hobby—ahem—*job*, so I ask that you please refrain from doing this again tomorrow."

"Don't think I won't notice your threats if you talk around them like that!" Claire said.

"No, no. You needn't do such cumbersome work, Rae," said Manaria. "I enjoy it. You can leave the mornings to me."

"I enjoy it too," I said. "Please leave it to me."

"Yes, Sister. I... I can't allow you to perform the duties of a servant." Claire sounded hesitant.

"Are you dissatisfied with my service in this regard?"

“Stop teasing me, Sister!”

“Ah ha ha, sorry, sorry. You’re just so cute, I can’t help it.”

“Tee hee.”

They were getting along like a house on fire—without me. Well, whatever. “Miss Claire, it’s almost time for breakfa—”

“Oh, Claire. Aren’t you hungry? Let’s go to the cafeteria,” Manaria cut in as if to shut me up. The mischievous look in her eye confirmed she had done so on purpose.

“Yes. Let’s get going, then.”

“What are you gonna eat, Claire? I’ve been obsessed with the Eastern miso soup lately.” Manaria threw her arm over Claire’s shoulder and started to head toward the door.

Was she... getting back at me for something?

“What are you standing there for?” Claire shot at me. “It’s time to go.”

“I’m so sorry.” I gathered Claire’s things and started to follow them, but—

“Claire, have you heard of Broumet?” asked Manaria.

“Of course.”

“Word is there’s a new restaurant that’s giving it a run for its money.”

“Oh? What kind of restaurant is it?”

“I’ll take you there. May I escort you?”

“Oh, Sister!”

They were lost in their own little world. I usually hung back when Claire talked with others, anyway, but it felt like Manaria intended to exclude me. It was infuriating, the way she sometimes peeked back at me with a triumphant look on her face.

No. It was fine. If it made Claire happy, I didn’t care who she got cozy with. Manaria’s

arrival had made Claire act like her old self again for the first time since Lene's exile. For that, I could only be grateful to Manaria.

Or so I told myself. My heart clearly wasn't on the same page as my head.



Manaria continued her spiteful antics from there. She frequently interrupted me, made Claire take an aisle seat in the lecture hall and then planted herself next to her, disrupted our chess lessons, and spoon-fed Claire at lunch right in front of me. Her intentions were painfully obvious.

"Hey, Rae. You all right? You don't look so well," Misha asked me when I returned to my own room that night. She had sensed right away that something was off.

"I'm not getting enough Miss Claire..."

"Ahh, so you're fine, then."

Dismissing this melancholy as completely normal for me, Misha started to get in bed when I stopped her, desperate.

"I can't dote on Miss Claire because of Lady Manaria! She isn't even bullying me anymore! I want to be the one feeding her with a spoon!"

"Oh no, you really aren't okay. You're even worse than usual." Misha sounded as exasperated as always with my Claire obsession, but she heard me out, anyway. She was the best. She frowned at the end. "What did you do to offend Lady Manaria?"

"I can't think of anything." It was a half-truth, but I honestly couldn't think of why Manaria might want to seduce Claire.

"Perhaps this is the perfect opportunity for you to separate yourself from Miss Claire," Misha suggested.

"No! Miss Claire is my reason for living."

"If that's the case, isn't your only choice to fight back?"

"Hmm. It's just... I get the feeling that would be playing right into Lady Manaria's hands."

"Her hands?"

"I get the feeling she's trying to provoke me."

But why would Manaria, who served as the player character's ally in the game,

suddenly be going for Claire? I didn't understand.

"Then you just have to put up with it," Misha said. "It's not like you've been separated from Miss Claire."

"That's the only thing I can do," I said dolefully.

I got into bed but didn't sleep a wink. That night, I had a dream in which Manaria and I were each pulling on one of Claire's hands, playing tug-of-war.

Manaria's spiteful behavior toward me continued the next day. I ignored her as well as I possibly could, but she was persistent in her provocation. Once again, I told myself this was fine. We were straying further and further from the Thane route I'd been trying to steer Claire onto, but she was happy now, and that was all I needed.

Or so I'd thought.

"You're so patient, Rae." Manaria finally approached me one night, after I made sure Claire was asleep and headed back to my own room.

"Is there something I can help you with, Lady Manaria?"

"Nothing specific." Manaria was leaning against the wall right outside the room Misha and I shared, as if she had been waiting for me. She wore her usual bright smile. "You like Claire, right?"

"Yes."

"And yet, you're so restrained. Even after all my provocation."

"I like Miss Claire, but all that matters to me is that she be happy. Even if that means she has no interest in me."

"Hmm." This was the first time I'd seen Manaria look discontented. "Is that so? So after all that, it wasn't even serious... How disappointing."

Annoyed, I replied curtly, "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Oh, did I offend you? So sorry. That's right. You like Claire, after all. I'm sure you know her better than I do. At least well enough to give up."

My temper was boiling. “Such pettiness, Lady Manaria. Is this how the crown princess of a kingdom behaves?”

“Yup. I’m a crown princess. That’s why I’m a far better match for Claire than you.”

“I may be a commoner, but there’s not a soul in this world who loves Miss Claire more than I do.”

“Even though you’ve given up?”

What was she playing at? “I haven’t given up. Miss Claire’s happiness is my first—”

“You’re just running away, aren’t you?” Manaria interrupted. “Why not say you’ll make her happier than anyone else could?”

“Well...” Because I was a commoner and a girl. I couldn’t be a partner who would make Claire happy.

“Stop running,” Manaria demanded.

“I’m not running.”

“Then I’ll steal her from you.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

“That’s right. Have you finally figured it out?” Manaria’s face distorted. “I’ll nip this half-hearted love of yours in the bud. Claire deserves better.”

“Fine! I accept your challenge.”

“That’s better. I’ll see you tomorrow on the dueling grounds of the athletic field.”

And with that, Manaria left.

I was still struggling to process what had happened, but I knew this much: it made me angry to have her dismiss my love for Claire.

Thinking back... that was probably the day I began to lose control.

\*\*\*

“Lady Manaria!”

“You’re the best!”

“Rae, you can do it!”

“Don’t lose this!”

The next day, Manaria and I were surrounded by an audience on the dueling grounds of the athletic field. I really didn’t want to be the center of attention, but somehow, word had gotten out that Manaria and I were going to duel. Unlike Manaria, who thrived in front of an audience, I was wary.

“Umm... Do you really have to do this, Sister?” The other spectators were excited, but Claire was frowning. We’d asked her to judge the battle. Despite the presence of a barrier that reduced the potency of magical effects, used in mock battles such as these, Manaria and I both had high aptitude, and we’d determined it too dangerous for someone with a mediocre aptitude to join us on the field.

“What’s wrong with Rae and I going at it?” Manaria asked.

“Fighting like this is uncouth. Why do you have to fight, Sister?”

“Just to test my skills.” She wasn’t telling Claire the truth. “I suppose I do bear her a small personal grudge. Rae isn’t suitable for you, Claire. I mean, you don’t want her stalking you like this, right?”

“W-well, I...”

“Do you?”

“I do not,” Claire squeaked out. My chest tightened.

Manaria turned to me. “And Rae, you don’t care for me, do you?”

“I don’t.”

“So, you see, we need to settle this once and for all.”

"I understand..." Claire said, stepping away from us.

"Are you ready, Rae?" Manaria asked me.

"I hope *you're* ready, Lady Manaria."

"Heh, you're funny. That's what I want to see," Manaria laughed without a hint of fear.

"Now, are you both prepared?" Claire asked.

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Then on my mark... Begin!"

The crowd broke into cheers as Claire gave us the signal to start.

"Now, now, what will you throw at me first?"

"I'll start with this."

I raised my wand, and Manaria was swallowed by the earth. It was the same pitfall I'd used against Claire during the Academy Knights entrance exam.

"Oh, you startled me. But that's not enough to beat me, you know?" Manaria said nonchalantly as she floated up out of the hole. I'd expected as much. She could call on all four known attributes and possessed high aptitude for each; she could use her earth attribute to raise the bottom of the pit and probably use her wind attribute to make herself float too.

"I'm aware. I have something else in mind."

"Oh?"

I swung my wand again, and a Water Meteor—earth and water composite magic—landed on Manaria's head. This was one of the more powerful spells in *Revolution*, and it looked like it had landed a direct hit, but—

"Good grief. You got my clothes all wet."

I turned to look behind me. Her clothes were a bit damp, but Manaria had suffered no damage. I knew what she'd done. She'd passed through the air using an exceptionally complex spell, Teleport.

"You don't waste any time, do you, Rae?"

"It's the only way I have a shot at beating you."

Unlike the other characters in the game, the player character's fighting patterns weren't predetermined. The player could devise their own strategies to best counter Rod's Flame Troops and Misha's Siren, but that didn't work with Manaria. She had Spellbreaker. You couldn't afford to draw out a battle against her either—given enough time, she'd analyze your strategy and counter it.

In other words, the only way to defeat her was to rapidly attempt new strategies one after another.

That said, her earth, water, and fire attributes were high aptitude, while her wind attribute was ultra-high. I possessed ultra-high aptitude in both my attributes but there were only two of them. I'd hoped to slow her momentarily with the Pitfall and Water Meteor before I dealt a final blow, but she wasn't going to go down that easily.

"You're not out of tricks already, are you?" Manaria asked.

"Of course not," I said, waving my wand again. A fog enveloped her.

"Hmmm, I've never seen this one before. But the only thing a fog can do is obstruct my vision—"

"Freeze." Ignoring her taunt, I activated the spell. The air around Manaria instantly froze. This was a large area-of-effect water-attribute spell called Judecca—high-level magic that normally didn't show up until the second half of the game.

I didn't stop there. Stone drills emerged from the ground to impale the ice. This was the earth-attribute spell Earth Spike. Using these two spells sequentially created a combined effect known as Cocytus.

This attack, so powerful and wide-ranging that it warranted a special name, could not be overcome by a normal opponent—or even a seasoned one.

But—

“Mmm. You were so close,” said a voice right behind me.

I spun, reflexively slinging ice arrows.

“If your opponent had been anyone else, that probably would have ended it,” Manaria said stoically as she used Spellbreaker to make the ice arrows disappear.

“How did you ward it off...?”

“It’s. A. Secret.” Manaria put her finger to her lips. “But Rae, maybe you’re going a bit too far? I know there’s the barrier, but I would have been seriously injured if that hit me.”

“And yet you warded it off easily.”

“Well, this *is* me we’re talking about,” Manaria said, cackling. She grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “I guess it’s my turn. You showed me some interesting magic, so maybe I should fight seriously?”

*Oh no... She’s going to use it!*

I knew what was coming—I couldn’t help but know, with my knowledge of the game. Even though I knew it wouldn’t work, I activated Cocytus one more time.

But then—

“Dominator.” The instant Manaria’s magic wand lit up, the partial Cocytus froze. “This is the end.”

The next instant, I felt my blood start to leave my body. I collapsed, and everything went dark.

\*\*\*

“—ae!”

I heard a comforting sound. It was high-pitched, probably too shrill for most, but not me. I loved this sound.

“Rae!”

When I opened my eyes, Claire was staring down at me, her face pale.

“Miss... Claire...?”

“Rae! Oh, thank God...” Claire gave me a rare glimpse of her face in relief.

“I told you she was fine. I treated her, after all,” Manaria said, aloof.

“Still, you went too far, Sister! To hurt Rae this much!”

I gradually regained my wits and took stock of my surroundings. It seemed I was in the clinic the Church ran attached to the Academy. This was where I’d come to ask Matt about the incident with Dede.

“I... uh...”

“You were hit with Sister’s magic and lost consciousness. Are you hurt anywhere?” Claire asked me, sounding worried.

“Oh, I—”

“Yeah, you lost,” Manaria said, like a judge delivering her verdict.

I’d lost.

Manaria’s last attack had been composite magic that combined all four attributes. Known as Dominator, it was an attack spell of unrivaled brutality that overtook all other magic in the vicinity and made it go haywire. Once hit by Dominator, Manaria’s opponent was unable to use their magic. Worse, the higher their aptitude, the greater the damage inflicted on their body by the loss of magical control. It was the ultimate weapon to use against another spellcaster.

I’d known Manaria could use Dominator. I’d known pretty much everything there was to know about her from playing the game. But I’d lost my cool because my love for Claire was being ridiculed, and now I—

“Now then, can we finally say Claire belongs to me?” Manaria whispered.

I'd never stood a chance against Manaria.

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"Charge," I commanded.

I was using stone cannons to punch through monkey-like monsters. The monsters exploded and scattered as I ruptured them, leaving only their magical stones behind. I somberly collected the stones and put them in a leather bag.

Several days had passed since my battle with Manaria, and everyone at the Academy was busy preparing for the Amour Festival. More specifically, they were clearing the festival grounds of monsters beforehand. Since the Scales of Love used magical stones, they attracted monsters. It was normally the military's job to exterminate the beasts, but since there were so many of them, the students helped clear out the festival grounds each year.

Fortunately, the monsters in the area weren't very strong. Even so, most first-year students weren't used to doing battle with monsters just yet, so they worked in hunting teams. I was in a team with Claire and Manaria.

"Aren't you overdoing it?" Claire approached after a while spent watching me dispassionately dispatch one monster after another.

"No, I'm fine," I said, already searching the bushes for my next prey. My eyes found an amorphous green slime. For a moment, Ralaire crossed my mind—but then I obliterated it, using my stone cannon again. The slime melted into the earth.

"Oh dear, she's lost it," Manaria piped in. I looked up to see her with her arm around Claire, watching me with an annoying grin on her face.

"But she's only just recovered." Claire sounded concerned about me. I really hated that.

"I'm just fine," I repeated.

"But..."

It was true that Manaria had dealt me more than just a scratch, but I was back on my feet now. Before, I might have rejoiced in Claire's concern. Now, though—I couldn't enjoy it.

"Hey, Claire, you're not moving."

"Y-yes."

"Look, there's a giant wasp there. You can take care of that by yourself, right, Claire?" Manaria coaxed.

Claire continued to look straight at me, distressed. Finally, she pulled her eyes away and started to drive the monster back. I drifted quietly away, leaving them to their own devices, and fervently slaughtered monsters as if I were carving my way through my own discontent.

Once we'd dispatched our quota for the day, Claire approached me once more. "Hey, you."

"What is it, Miss Claire?"

"You are my servant. What good is a servant who leaves their master's side?"

"You were sufficiently protected as long as Lady Manaria was there."

"That's not what I mean. I'm saying it's your job to support me." She was correct, but I couldn't quite bring myself to listen like a good servant right now.

"I'm so sorry."

"Do you understand what you did wrong? You've only just recovered. It's extremely dangerous to go off on your own in this state."

If I'd been a bit calmer, I would have realized she was concerned for my well-being. As it was, though, I was getting a little fed up with her lecturing.

"It's not like I'm worried about you," Claire continued, "but imagine what it would be like for me if my servant just up and got herself killed—"

"I'm so sorry. I will be more careful." I tried to leave, but Claire grabbed my arm.

"You've been acting strange ever since your battle with Sister. What happened?"

"Nothing..."

"You're lying. You're usually all over me, but you've been hanging back the past few days."

"We were battling for you, Miss Claire," I said abruptly.

"Huh?"

I told her everything: the taunts, the challenge, the circumstances of our duel. I was surprised by the lack of emotion in my voice. Meanwhile, Claire's face was changing inversely to mine.

"So, as you can see, I am no longer qualified to be by your side, Miss Claire," I finished.

"Of all the selfish things to say!" Claire burst out. "Battling for me? What were you thinking?! I am not a thing to be won! To just selfishly—"

Claire was correct again. Who wouldn't be angered to know they'd been made a prize without their consent? But there was something *wrong* with me. Something that made me say, "Really? But doesn't it feel nice? To be wanted by someone as wonderful as Lady Manaria?"

In retrospect, it was the worst thing I could have said.

Claire's eyes glazed over. "You take that back! That is no way for a servant to speak to her master. This is why I hate peasants..."

She was just lashing out in reaction to my harsh words. Under normal circumstances, I would have understood that. Instead, I was utterly offended.

"Then, I quit."

"What did you say...?"

"I'm done being your maid. I'm too much of a commoner and no good at it."

When I said those words, the color drained from Claire's face. She continued in a flat voice, "...Are you being serious right now?"

"Yes."

“You want to quit being my servant?”

“Yes.” All I wanted to do was get out of there as quickly as possible.

“Understood.”

That was when I realized that Claire’s voice was shaking.

“Miss Claire?”

“Your pay will be calculated up to today, so be sure to come collect it at a later date.” Claire was instantly matter-of-fact. “You’ve given me plenty of cause for complaint, but at the end of the day, you served me well. On behalf of the François family, I offer my gratitude. Thank you for your service, Miss Taylor”

She gave me an awkward smile that even I could tell was forced. A single tear fell from her eye.

“Miss Clai—”

“Go, now. I am sorry for always being so selfish. I hope you live a happy life, Miss Taylor.”

I’d made a terrible mistake, but it was too late for regrets. There was no taking back what I’d said. I’d abandoned Claire.

“Goodbye...”

The only thing I could do was say my farewell and leave. All I wanted to do was go back to my room and crawl into bed.

“So, you’re going to leave me alone, then. You liar...”

Claire’s final words, said as I left, cut right through my heart.

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“I misjudged you.”

When I opened the door to my room the next morning, Manaria stood outside with a

grumpy look on her face. I had an idea of why she was there but pretended not to know.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m talking about Claire.” Manaria glared at me. “She came into my room last night and couldn’t stop crying. She wouldn’t tell me why, but I can guess.”

Hearing that made me want to run straight to Claire and hold her, even if she didn’t want me to. But that wasn’t going to happen. “Please take care of Miss Claire,” I said instead. “She gets lonely.”

I was asking a favor of my rival in love... but I could trust Manaria to take care of Claire. I bowed to her. When I did, she grabbed me by the collar, pulled me up, and shoved me against the wall.

“If you know Claire so well, why aren’t you running to be by her side?!” Manaria’s brown eyes burned with anger.

“You defeated me, Lady Manaria. I have no reason to stay,” I said, tears forming in my eyes.

Manaria’s face grew even harder when I said that. She was beautiful, with her clean-cut features, but her eyes were cold and full of rage.

“You’re giving up just because of that?! Your love is that weak?!”

“How can you say that?! It was you who took Miss Claire away from me!” I grabbed Manaria’s hands and tried to pry them from my collar, but she wouldn’t budge.

“I took her from you? No. You gave up. You ran away.”

“I didn’t want to give up! I never wanted to run away! If it weren’t for you, I—”

“Nope.” Manaria lowered her voice a notch. “Even if I never showed up, you would have given up on Claire eventually.”

“You have no basis—”

“You don’t need to be rewarded for your love. You said so yourself. You just want Claire

to be happy.”

“What’s wrong with that?! Why can’t I want the person I love to be happy?!”

I activated my water magic, striking Manaria with icy stones. Caught off guard, she let go of me and stumbled back a couple steps.

“And nothing in return?” she asked. “How very noble of you. You sound ready for your sainthood.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Of course not. You’re afraid of being hurt. You can’t let go of the hope that someday Claire will love you back—so you gave up before those hopes could be disappointed. Your escape was assured.”

“No!”

Though I denied her words, deep down inside, I wondered if Manaria was right. I loved Claire. That truth had never changed. But I wasn’t so confident I was content to receive nothing in return. Didn’t I want Claire to smile at me? Didn’t I want her to hold me? Didn’t I want to kiss her?

Didn’t I want her to love me back?

“No matter how much I want it, it can never happen! Miss Claire is a girl. We’re both girls! And she loves someone else.”

“So, you’re not even going to try? You’re going to settle for a one-sided relationship? How long do you think you can keep that up?”

“That’s enough for me. I would stifle any feeling if I was doing it for Miss Claire!”

But even as I said that, something screamed in my chest. What I really wanted—

“It’s impossible. A relationship like that would be a lie that would never last. Do you want to know how I know? Because I’ve been there,” Manaria said. Her mouth twisted with self-loathing. “I removed myself from the line of succession because they found out that I love women.”

Like I had been hit by a stone, I remembered the rest of Manaria's background in the game.

She was queer, like me. She'd fallen in love with a maid and, despite her best efforts to suppress her feelings, ended up having an affair with the woman. The relationship had proved to be one-sided, complicated by the power imbalance between a servant and a princess, and eventually, the maid left the palace. Manaria had regretted it ever since.

She took to visiting brothels, thinking she could avoid making the same mistake again if she kept things purely physical and professional. But someone caught on to what she was doing and ratted her out to the court. The ensuing scandal resulted in her being driven away.

"Love that seeks nothing in return always breaks. The human heart isn't strong or pure enough for that," Manaria said quietly.

"What are you telling me to do, Lady Manaria?"

"If you really intend to give up on Claire, then I will make her my plaything."

*What was that?*

"Claire cares for me," Manaria continued. "I can take advantage of that. Of course, I know it's not the same kind of affection as yours or mine."

"What... are..." What was she saying?

"Claire is a great deal like the person I loved. She'll make a good replacement. I'll treat her well," Manaria said with a condescending chuckle.

"Are you being serious?"

"Utterly. Did you forget why I was banished? I'm a womanizer, and now I have nothing else to lose." Her eyes were dark... Dark, bottomless, and staring at something that wasn't me.

Manaria was dead serious.

"I won't let you do that!" I snapped.

"Oh really? And how? You lost our match, and you quit being Claire's maid. What power do you think you have?" she taunted me.

My mind raced. I had to keep Claire away from Manaria, no matter what. She wasn't good enough for Claire. And I could make Claire far happier than *she* could!

"The Amour Festival is coming up, isn't it?" I said.

"At the end of the month."

"You know of the ceremony that features the Scales of Love, yes?"

"They say it measures the depth of your affection."

"Let's put our love on the Scales and let them decide."

"Hmm? Not bad..." Manaria paused. "But we already settled this with our duel. We can't just have a do-over, you know?"

"What do you propose, then?"

"If I win this time, I get you too."

So, it had come to this. "Fine."

"Are you sure? Once you're mine, I'll make sure you forget all about Claire, you know?"

"That's fine. I won't lose."

"That's some confidence. It's a good look on you." Manaria laughed, seemingly satisfied. "We're on, then. You'd better work hard."

She turned on her heel and walked away. I watched her go in silence, resolving to myself that I would do anything necessary to win this battle.

*Miss Claire, watch over me now.*

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## Claire's Point of View

"Are you worried about Rae, Miss Claire?"

It was Rae's roommate, Misha, who approached me to ask that question on the day of the Amour Festival. The ceremony hall was packed with people, and the Scales dealt out happiness and sorrow in turn. Fathers and sons vied for their wives and mothers' love, and established couples joked around with friends. Almost no one here was actually competing for a bride.

As for me—I was restless. As people took turns presenting their offerings to the Scales, I paced back and forth.

"No, not really," I said to Misha with all the indifference I could muster. An obvious lie, given my state.

"Rae has been especially busy lately," Misha said. "She said she's going to find the best offering she can make for you."

I said nothing. Sister had told me how she and Rae intended to use the Scales of Love to once more fight for my affections. I'd pleaded with her not to do something so—so *silly*, but she wouldn't be dissuaded. Instead, she asked, "Don't you trust Rae?"

Why would she ask me that about *Rae*? Why not about herself?

"Who do you want to win, Miss Claire?" Misha asked.

"I don't care." I was furious. How dare they fight over me—like I was a prize to be won—while paying no heed to my feelings on the matter?

"It's true, you've never had anything good to say about Rae. But this is the joy of being born a woman, isn't it?" Misha said, a rare act of baiting from her.

"Who do you think you're talking to? I am Claire François, daughter of Dole François, Minister of Finance. People love me; it's what I was bred for," I snapped back.

And yet... I couldn't help but wonder if these two people were different from the rabble who'd sought my affections in the past. Sister had been my first love. Yes, I'd mistaken her for a boy when we first met, but she was wonderful. As we grew into young women together, I found myself lastingly happy that she cared for me too.

And Rae? From the very first day we met, I'd found her absurd. She brazenly flirted with me even though we were both girls, teased me all the time, and when I bullied her back in return—she seemed to enjoy it. Before I knew what was happening, she'd won over my father and become my maid.

"Does something amuse you?" Misha asked.

"Huh?" I said.

"You're smiling."

To think that it had taken Misha pointing it out for me to realize I was smiling... How embarrassing. I couldn't believe just thinking about *her* made me smile. It was for the best that she was gone. Yes, I was relieved she was no longer my maid.

"Miss Claire."

"What is it?"

"Now you look sad."

*Absurd.* But I took out my hand mirror to check, and sure enough, the reflection peering back at me wore a long face. It was like I didn't know myself anymore.

"I think I want Rae to win," Misha muttered almost under her breath.

"Why is that?"

"Sure, she's strange. I'm certain she's given you a great deal of trouble."

"She really has."

"Yes... But her love is true and pure. She loves you from the bottom of her heart, Miss Claire," Misha said warmly, as if she were describing a clumsy but adorable younger sibling. "And you don't really hate her as much as you say, do you?"

"I *despise* her."

"That's not very honest of you, is it?" Misha giggled. "I *have* been watching you for the past few days."

"How... did I look to you?" I suddenly wanted to know.

"You looked lonely. Even though you were always together with someone as amazing as Lady Manaria, your mind seemed far away. Just like you were after Lene left."

"That's not—" I couldn't finish the sentence. Sister had been by my side ever since Rae selfishly fought with her and lost, and though I loved having Manaria around, some part of me had yearned for Rae's eccentricities.

"I think," Misha said, "that it's Rae who makes you happiest right now."

"That commoner...?"

"Her status doesn't matter. What matters is Rae, the person. She's strange, but she has a way of making the people around her happy. Not that I could ever say that to her face." Misha laughed. "So please, Miss Claire. If Rae wins, give her another chance at being your maid. Ask her yourself, if possible."

"That... I cannot do." I was an aristocrat. Not just any aristocrat either, but a member of one of the most important families in the kingdom. It would be unthinkable for me to petition a commoner to enter my service.

"I see. Being an aristocrat sure is tough."

"You would know" Before their downfall, Misha's family had been old money nobles.

"In that case, I will hope for a miracle."

"A miracle?"

"Yes. A miraculous happy ending, like in a fairy tale."

"That's not..." *...going to happen*, I was about to say, but I was interrupted by Sister.

She approached us holding a strange, glowing flower. "Hey, Claire."

"Sister..."

"I see Rae hasn't shown up yet," she said, showing me the flower in her hand.

“Is that flower... really...?”

“Mmm. It’s the Flower of Flora.”

The flower from the Legend of Amour. A blossom made of pure light. The ultimate offering one could place on the Scales of Love.

“It seems I will be victorious, after all,” Sister said, gazing at the legendary flower with a hint of sadness. For some reason, I glared at her. “Perhaps we should just go ahead and declare me the winner.”

*The God’s Scales showed what was in my heart. I swear here and now that I will remain faithful to thee.* Thus went the verse from Poesie Amour—the words the shorter man, who was chosen by the Scales, said to the maiden. That verse had once dried my tears at Manaria’s family home. Long ago, the maiden it was recited to must have felt the same way.

Sister put her hand under my chin and tilted my head up to look at her. I thought, in a daze, that our lips were going to touch. And if it was Sister... perhaps I wouldn’t mind.

But then again—

“Wait!”

It was the voice that I think I must have been waiting for.

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“Wait a second!”

Manaria was going in for a kiss with Claire when I made it to the ceremony hall. All eyes turned to me, faces filling with surprise as they beheld my disheveled state. Whew. Just in the nick of time.

“Rae, you’re too late,” Misha said, trying to hide her anxiety.

“No. It just took me a little longer than I expected.” I quickly inserted myself between Claire and Manaria.

“So, you *can* do something other than run away. I’ll give you that.” Manaria looked

annoyed.

"Who's running? I told you I wouldn't lose, remember?" I stuck my tongue out at her and took Claire's hand.

"You..." Claire looked at me with a complicated expression.

"Don't worry, Miss Claire. I won't let this jerk take you away," I declared, still out of breath.

"But you've already lost. I don't know what you plan to offer the Scales, but I have the Flower of Flora," Manaria said, holding up the glowing flower. "Even if you happen to have the same flower, I was here first. I remain the winn—"

"This is my offering," I interrupted Manaria, pulling it out of my bag.

"A branch?" Claire said quietly.

She was right. My offering, at first glance, looked like nothing more than an ordinary tree branch.

"You'll see when we present our offerings," I said, confidently. Claire still looked worried, so I gave her a reassuring nod.

"Fine. Let's do this, then," Manaria said, moving toward the Scales of Love.

The Scales of Love were made of ancient wood but still sturdy. Their design was simple and elegant, lacking ornament, but imbued with a presence befitting a sacred treasure bestowed on us by the gods.

"I'll start. I offer what is in my heart to be judged by God." Manaria recited a verse from Poesie Amour—a bit dramatically, in my opinion—then respectfully placed her Flower of Flora on the Scales, where it glowed bright. It was an appropriate offering, a celebration of the legend. The Scales immediately plunged to one side under the flower's weight.

"My turn. Here's my offering." I placed the branch on the Scales, not reciting any of the lines from the legend.

The Scales showed no sign of movement at all.

"I thought so. I wi—" Manaria started, but she was interrupted by a deep rumbling sound.

"Earthquake?!" Alarm ran through the assembled crowd, but it faded as they realized it wasn't the ground that was shaking. It was the Scales of Love.

I watched as the branch I'd placed on the Scales suddenly sprouted new buds. It didn't stop there. Roots burst from the other end, and in a matter of moments, the single branch had become a full-grown tree whose weight tilted the Scales back the other way.

"The Flower of Flora lost...? What is this branch...?" Manaria muttered, dumbfounded.

"The Branch of Eternal Love," I answered.

These were not the intertwined branches described in Bai Juyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, but they were similar. The Branch of Eternal Love was a rare drop from a powerful monster known as the Tree of Eternal Love, which lived deep in the forest behind the hall where this ceremony was held. The Tree of Eternal Love was nearly immune to magic, but it did have one weakness: slime solution could corrode its bark. With the help of my familiar, Ralaire, I'd gone on a desperate hunt through the forest and procured a branch just in time.

"The Flower of Flora isn't the heaviest offering possible...?"

As I'm sure you've already guessed, it was my knowledge of the game that had led me to the Branch. There was a Scales of Love episode in *Revolution*, and while you could complete the quest with the Flower of Flora, the Branch of Eternal Love was a special, secret item that could be offered instead. If you happened to secure the Branch for your offering, you unlocked a bonus image for your gallery.

"Miss Claire," I called out to my dumbfounded love.

"Huh?"

"Whether or not these divine Scales recognize it, I love you. No matter who I lose to, I will continue to love only you. So—" I stood in front of Claire and took her hand, "will you let me return to your side not as your maid but as your partner?"

It was the first time I'd articulated my hope that Claire would love me back. And I'd

done it in my own words, not those from a poem.

I hadn't initially planned to use my knowledge of the Branch of Eternal Love. It often felt unfair to rely on knowledge from my previous life, even against an opponent as detestable as Manaria. But then I'd realized I couldn't hold back.

*Love is a battlefield*, they used to say in my previous world. Love couldn't be rationalized or reasoned with. If I wanted Claire to be mine, I had to do whatever it took to show her.

"You... are really..." Tears welled in Claire's eyes. I feared what they meant. But then... she smiled.

"Ah ha ha!" Manaria's merry laugh interrupted the moment.

"Lady Manaria, please read the room," I said. "You're ruining the moment."

"Nope. I've decided I want you. You're the best," Manaria said, throwing her arms abruptly around me.

"Wha—Lady Manaria..."

"I mean, I already thought you were fantastic, but this just proves you're even more amazing than I imagined. You're all I want in a companion."

"S-Sister, what are you saying...?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Claire. Rae's been my target from the start. She's just so fun to tease, and I ended up roping you into it too." Manaria chuckled, making a cheeky face.

That was when I remembered—in the game, Manaria fell in love with the main character. *This* Manaria had been so cruel to me that I'd completely forgotten that could happen.

"Hey, Lady Manaria," I said. "Please get away from me."

"Nope. I'm going to take you back to Sousse with me."

"I won't go!"

“Playing hard to get makes you even cuter.”

“Stop—”

“Nooo!”

No one was more surprised than me by the scream that cut through my words. Claire’s beautiful, high-pitched voice rang through the ceremony hall, stunning the crowd into silence.

“Rae is mine! Don’t take her from me!”

“M-Miss Claire...?” I said timidly. That seemed to make her realize what she’d just blurted out.

“N-no! That’s not what I meant!”

“Miss Claire!” I embraced her without thinking.

“Hey, let go!”

“No! I love you, Miss Claire!”

“Well, I hate you! Leeet gooo of mee!”

“You said I’m yours!”

“Shut up! Forget I said it!”

Overcome by emotion, we squawked at each other, blurting out everything we wanted to say. It felt like it had been forever since we’d just gone at it like this.

“Excuse me, Lady Manaria. Do you agree the contest is at an end?” Misha asked.

“Well, it seems that way.” Manaria watched us carrying on. “Love between women can be a thorny path. I hope Rae and Claire will be happy, but—”

“But?” Misha prompted.

“But, well. I don’t think they’ll have any regrets,” Manaria said, wearing a broad smile,

as if something within her had at last burst free.

"Leeet gooo of mee!"

"Nooo!"

Claire and I, meanwhile, were completely oblivious to anything but each other. Needless to say, I was the happiest I had ever been in my life.

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"What?! You're returning to Sousse, Sister?!"

"Yeah."

The morning after the Amour Festival, Manaria announced she was returning home. Claire was in disbelief, as was everyone else.

"The firstborn prince has abruptly passed away. That moves me up in the line of succession, so it looks like I'll be turning cartwheels at court once again." Manaria laughed, but she didn't actually seem displeased by the prospect.

Rod scoffed at this in seeming discontent. "You're just going to take your winnings and go?"

"I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunities for a rematch in the future. Don't you think so, future King of Bauer?"

"Hmph. I'll keep my head in good shape so you can cut it off," Rod said, laughing fearlessly.

"Ahh, Rae. Won't you run away with me?" Manaria said, flirtatiously.

"You're on your own," I replied shortly, to which she pretended to sob. Not cute at all.

"Since Rae's rejected me... I guess I'll just have to go home and take the throne. Once I have a crown on my head, I can come back and be a thorn in your sides."

"You don't need to come back," I said bluntly.

“Rae, don’t be rude,” Claire chided.

Setting that aside, Manaria was speaking awfully lightly of something like taking the throne.

“What about the scandal over your sexuality?” I asked.

“The populace at large remains unaware. It’ll work against me in our internal family feud, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter.” Manaria said. “This last month has been the most fun I’ve had in my life. It’s really too bad that I must leave.”

“I feel the same way, Sister.”

“Hurry up and go...” I muttered.

“Rae!” Claire stomped down on my foot. Ow! Oh, I did love her. “Have more respect for the royal family!”

“My heart is just too full of my love for you, Miss Claire.”

“Ah, argh!” Claire turned red and looked away with a huff. She was so unbearably cute.

Maybe this had been Manaria’s plan all along. Maybe she’d made herself the villain on purpose in order to bring Claire and I closer to each other. If that was true, I owed her a debt of gratitude—but I was still eager to see her gone. She’d hurt me, and Claire loved her. And I knew I could never best her in battle.

“By the way, Master Rod, I have some bad news for you,” Manaria said, her face suddenly serious.

“What is it?”

“The firstborn prince of Sousse was assassinated, and the deed was done by means of the same poison used on Thane in the past.”

“What?! That means—”

“The Nur Empire...”

“Yes.”

It seemed the neighboring Nur empire, longtime rival of our kingdom, was still on the move.

"The firstborn prince intended to move aggressively against the Nur Empire. They can't have been very happy about that," Manaria explained. "And I don't expect they're going to change their approach once I take the throne. An assassination attempt on Thane and the successful assassination of the prince of Sousse... They're getting bolder. We must be careful."

"Thanks. You be careful back home too," Rod responded.

"I appreciate your kind concern," Manaria said and then looked at me. "Rae, you be careful as well. I'm sure you can neutralize cantarella in another person, but if you're the one poisoned, you could die."

"I'll be fine. The Academy is working on an antidote." Immediately after the attempt on Thane's life, I'd given the Academy's researchers the formula for the magic I'd used to counteract the poison so they could teach others to replicate the spellwork.

"I see. You really are remarkable. Claire, I think you should—"

"I'm not giving her to you."

"You guys have really started to act alike," Manaria chuckled.

Around this time, someone came to notify Manaria that her horse and carriage had arrived.

"Oh, I'll see you off—" Claire started.

"Claire, you stay here. I need to borrow Rae."

"Sister, you aren't still..."

"Ha ha, no. I just have something I need to discuss with her in confidence before I leave. That's acceptable, yes, Rae?"

"I suppose I have no choice..."

I begrudgingly walked with Manaria to her carriage. When we were some distance

from Claire, she said, "Rae, there's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?" I replied.

"Just who are you?" Light flashed in Manaria's eyes. "You can counteract rare poisons, and you know of secret, legendary offerings. Where did you learn such things?"

"I can't answer that." I couldn't fool Manaria with a half-baked lie, so instead, I answered honestly with nothing.

"Are you a spy of Nur?"

"No, I am not."

"Really?"

"I swear it on Miss Claire."

"Hah. Well, in that case, I believe you. At the very least, I'm positive you won't stab Claire in the back."

"Is that all you wanted to ask me?"

"No. Do you still want nothing in return for your love for Claire?" Her eyes told me she wouldn't let me avoid the question this time.

"No. I... I want Miss Claire to return my feelings," I replied, looking Manaria straight in the eye.

"It's going to be a difficult path."

"I know."

"Claire has always considered herself straight."

"I know that too."

"But you will persist?"

"Undoubtedly." I answered each question without a hint of hesitation.

"Yes, that will do. Now I can finally entrust Claire to you." Manaria had a look on her face like a father giving his daughter away at her wedding. Whatever her feelings for me, she also cared deeply for Claire. She held out her hand. "This was fun. Take care of Claire for me."

"You don't need to ask." I shook her hand firmly.

"See you again," Manaria said. And then, like a gust of wind, she was gone.

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"Miss Claire—"

"What is it?"

"Please recite it one more time for me."

After seeing Manaria off, we'd returned to Claire's dorm room, where Claire now sat at her desk with a book open in front of her. I had my arms around her. What I was asking her to recite, of course, were the words she'd blurted out at the Amour Festival.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"You're playing dumb again." I couldn't help but tease her when she was being this adorable.

Claire's face turned crimson. "Don't go getting any ideas! I have no such—"

"Hmmm?"

"No such feelings about the matter either way..." Claire put her nose in the air and turned her head away from me.

"Name."

She didn't respond.

"You're going to call me by it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I wasn't yet convinced that Claire liked me. But still— "Miss Claire."

"What is it?"

"I love you."

"Hmph."

I believed that Claire and I had taken a step forward.

# CHAPTER 5

## SCHOOL HOLIDAY

“WHAT ARE YOU ALL doing over the break?” Rod asked us in an Academy Knights meeting soon after. “We did get those free tickets at the Foundation Day Festival. I was wondering how many people are actually going to use them.”

“I’m going home for the holidays,” Misha said indifferently.

“I’m going to a beach resort, so I won’t be using a ticket either,” Claire declared.

“I guess that means I don’t have to ask you, Rae.”

“Yes. I will be with Miss Claire.”

Wherever Claire went, I followed. The usual strategy in *Revolution* was for the main character to use their ticket on a special event, thereby unlocking some images for their gallery, but I didn’t care about any of that.

“That leaves the three of us,” Rod said, clearly disappointed.

“That’s boring.” Yu shrugged.

Thane said nothing, looking uninterested.

“Why don’t you invite someone to join you? No aristocrats would turn down the royal family.”

“That’s true, but if we invite someone, it becomes a whole political thing...”

*That makes sense.* Aristocrats weren’t vying for the throne, but they formed factions and engaged in power struggles all the same, including for the royal family’s favor.

“Well, be that as it may... I hope none of you have forgotten your duties during the holiday as Academy students?” Rod asked.

"Our... duties?" I couldn't think of what he could mean.

"Come, Rae. Did you forget? Such disappointing behavior from my servant..." Claire said, hanging her head.

"Rae, he's talking about the Undead Hunt," Misha explained. I finally remembered.

The Undead Hunt—officially known as the Undead Sending—took place every summer at the Academy. Come summertime, undead tended to appear, and Academy students were duty bound to exterminate a certain number. *Revolution* included an incident where a group of undead showed up within the castle, but that hadn't happened in this reality yet. And it wouldn't. I would make sure of it.

"Why the sour face, Claire?" Misha asked.

"I dislike the term Undead Hunt. It is insufficiently respectful to those who have passed." Claire picked strange things to get serious about. This one was a bit harder for me to understand, coming from a more scientifically advanced and secular world, but it made me respect her even more.

"But Undead Sending sounds unpleasant too. Only the clergy use that term now."

"That may be, but... Rae, say something."

"Uhhh..." Claire was finally relying on me. I didn't want to let her down. "Do you mean it's like *Obon*?"

"What in the world is that?"

"A festival that we have back where I come from..."

"We don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Well, that made sense too. In that case... "Why don't we go for something simpler?"

"Oh. That might work," Claire agreed.

"An entirely new phrase will be hard to remember, but we could modify the original." Rod was on board too.

So, it came to be that we decided to rechristen the Undead Sending as simply “The Sending.”

“Moving on. I don’t expect the Academy Knights to fall behind, but letting your guard down could prove fatal. Stay on your toes during the Sending.”

“I’m not about to be defeated by some undead.” Claire put a brave smile on her face. However—

“But Miss Claire, I thought you were afraid of—”

“We’re not talking about ghosts! These are undead!” Claire shrieked before I finished my sentence. Adorable.

“Rae, you protect Claire,” Rod directed.

“Leave it to me.”

“What do you mean, Master Rod?! I’m really not afraid of—!”

“Maybe we should tell some ghost stories to set the mood?” Yu interrupted teasingly. “Long ago, there lived a young priest who was excommunicated from the Church—”

“That reminds me! Misha, where do your parents live?” Claire forced a change in subject, and Yu chuckled to himself.

*I’m the only one who gets to play with Claire, you jerk,* I thought.

“Euclid. It’s a port town south of the capital. Rae’s from there too.”

“Oh, what a coincidence. The François estate is in Euclid as well.”

This wasn’t coincidental, obviously. It was a deliberate decision on the part of the game writers. Misha was the player character’s childhood friend because they came from the same town, and the François estate was located there so the main character could continue to be bullied by Claire if she chose to go home over break.

“In that case,” Claire continued, “you should journey with us. My carriage has plenty of room for one more.”

"I couldn't possibly impose," Misha said.

"What? You won't ride in my carriage?" Claire frowned. I couldn't tell if she was genuinely put out or just being mean. Maybe she just couldn't bring herself to say directly that she wanted to ride with Misha.

"That sounds fun," Rod said suddenly. "Boys, shall we go to Euclid too?"

"We can't, Brother. Euclid is too far."

"We have affairs of state to attend to..."

The princes couldn't ever travel too far from the capital.

"Ugh, boring!" Rod pouted like a child. "Well, it can't be helped. I suppose we'll just enjoy our separate holidays and ward off the undead while we're at it. I'll say it one last time—don't let your guard down, got it?"

"Miss Claire."

"What is it now, Rae?"

I gathered Claire's things and smiled. "Let's enjoy the holidays."

"What's with that look?" she muttered.

I couldn't help giving her another sidelong glance—she was apprehensive, but my heart was all delight.

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With vacation around the corner, there was a spring in my step as I walked through the town. The sun was getting hotter, and I could really feel summer coming.

"Where are you going?" my beloved Claire asked me. I was holding a parasol over her to protect her pearly white skin from the sun.

"I need to take care of some minor business before we leave."

"Minor business?"

"It's really small. It's like, umm... I want to nip some things in the bud before they can become problems."

"I don't understand." Claire cocked her head to the side, looking confused. It was just unfair how cute she was, really.

"Anyway," I said, "you've never accompanied me on personal errands before. Why the interest now?"

"Nothing... No particular reason. I just wanted to get some fresh air," Claire said as she put her nose in the air and turned her head away. Wait. Was she in a bad mood?

"But, Miss Claire... you don't like the heat or the sun." I genuinely had no idea why Claire, who was twice as spoiled as any person alive, had decided totally of her own accord to accompany me out into the blazing summer heat.

"Give. It. Up! Just hurry up and do what you came to do!"

"Ohhh..." Maybe she was just in a mood today. Her mood swings could be as capricious as a cat's, after all. As for me, I was just thrilled to spend more time with Claire, so I resolved not to think any deeper about it.

"And where are we going?"

"We're almost... here," I said, coming to a stop in front of a building.

"Tulle Trading Company? What are you buying here?" Claire asked, reading the name on the sign.

"I'm not buying anything. I need to talk to the shop owner about something."

"Hmm...? Well, let's go inside, then. It's too hot out here."

"That's why I said you should wait at the Academy—"

"Hurry. Up!"

"Yes." I followed Claire into the shop.

"Well... come?! Oh my, Miss Claire. What would ever bring you to a place like this...?"

The kindly looking shopkeeper grew flustered the moment he saw Claire. His name was Hans, and he owned and managed the Tulle Trading Company on his own. It wasn't a small company, but it wasn't large either, and he'd probably never been patronized by someone of Claire's status.

"We are not attending to *my* business. Go on, Rae. Hurry up and do what you came to do," Claire said with an utter lack of interest as she sank onto the sofa in the corner of the store.

"Hello, Hans."

"Hello, Rae. This is certainly a surprise. Is this the first time Miss Claire has joined you?"

"Yes. It seems she was simply in the mood to come with me today."

"Well, then. What sort of proposal do you bring me today, Rae?"

With those words, Hans' demeanor transformed from gentle and fatherly to strictly business. In the game, Hans was the merchant NPC who sold items to the main character. In *this* reality, we had a business relationship that had proved quite fruitful. He'd helped me procure the ingredients I needed for the new Broumet menu items, and he also helped me negotiate the sale of recipes to Broumet.

"Unfortunately, I've come to you today to ask you to squash a business deal."

"Huh?" Hans looked puzzled.

"I have a hunch that you've heard rumors of a new magical tool."

"What do you mean?" Hans tilted his head.

"Playing dumb won't work on me. The magical tool I'm talking about can supposedly... bring the dead to life. Ring any bells?"

"Well... I didn't really think I could fool you, Rae." Hans threw both hands in the air in defeat. "You're right, I have heard of it. It's not cheap, so I was still pondering whether or not to stock it."

"Please don't."

"Can I ask why?" Hans asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That magical tool, it's a fake."

"How do you know that...?"

"I can't tell you. But if you try to profit from it, you'll lose a great deal of money."

"Hmmm..." Hans sat there pondering my insistence, as well as my unwillingness to offer proof. I'd already brought him some excellent business opportunities by way of my knowledge of the game, so he had reason to trust my word.

The magical tool in question actually turned the dead into the undead. In the game, an aristocrat of lower status bought the tool from Hans and used it. As a result, the grave of an aristocrat's daughter became a nest of the undead, the aristocrats were enraged, and Hans' business was ruined. It was part of the Undead Hunt chapter of the game, but for my part, I wanted to avoid such a tragedy happening in the first place.

"If this were coming from anyone else, I would chase them out of my shop right now. But you've never been wrong before, Rae..."

"Of course, I'm not asking you to surrender this business opportunity for free. I have a tip for you."

"Of course you do." Hans smiled mischievously.

"There will soon be a growing demand for weaponry and armor. And it has to be kept discreet."

"Well, this sounds dangerous! Are we going to war?" Hans looked at me with inquisitive eyes.

"No, but something like that."

"And you won't tell me how you know this, right?"

"I'm afraid not. You'll have to decide if you trust me or not."

Hans looked deep in thought for some time. Finally, he let out a big sigh. "Okay. I'll pass on the magical tool. But please just tell me one thing."

“What is it?”

“These underground demands for weaponry—will it be safe to supply them?” Hans had a sharp look in his eyes. He was testing me.

“As a merchant, you should be fine. As a person... that would depend on your own personal beliefs,” I answered.

“Hmph...” Hans let out a grunt, indicating he understood. “Fine. It sounds shady, but no risk, no reward, eh?”

His expression softened.

“Really, Rae... What are you? Every time you come by, it’s like you’re telling me the future.”

“I have no comment.”

“Yeah, I bet you don’t. But be careful, Rae. If I were willing to make money at any cost, I might be tempted to take you prisoner.” He said those terrifying words so casually.

“I think you know that I’m a dual-caster.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t do it alone. I could hire someone or procure a magical sealing tool.” He had a point. “Well, I’ll keep my threats to a minimum today. But don’t forget how valuable you are—and how it makes you more likely to attract misfortune.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please do,” Hans said, giving me a little smile.

“Are you finished yet?” Claire called out, seeing our conversation turn lighter.

“Yes, for now. Thank you for your time, Hans.”

“Sure. Please come again.”

“Goodbye.”

I followed Claire out of the shop.

"We still have a great deal of time before curfew," said Claire. "I'm hungry."

"Shall we go back to the dormitories? I can make you something," I said as I pulled out Claire's parasol.

"So insensitive..."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Yes, let's go back. We'll just go back!" Claire started walking briskly.

"Miss Claire, your skin will burn."

"That's fine, who cares?!"

"It's not fine. Miss Claire, what if your beautiful complexion is ruined?" I rushed to catch up to hold the umbrella for her, but she stopped in her tracks.

"What, would that make you hate me?"

"Never," I answered without hesitation, even though I had no idea what she was getting at. I could never hate her.

"I see... Hmm." Claire looked conflicted for some reason. What was up with her today?

"Miss Claire, you're not quite yourself today."

"And whose fault do you think that is?!"

"Uhhh..."

"Let's hurry back! Once we're at the Academy, you will make me crème brûlée!"

"Ohh..." And now it seemed she was back to normal.

"After all that effort to go out..." she murmured.

"What did you say?"

“I said it’s all your fault!” She stuck her tongue out at me.

I didn’t know what was going on, but I did know this: Claire was as cute as ever.

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I’d been in this world for almost six months, and I still really missed cars.

I was jolting along in a horse-drawn carriage en route to the François villa, accompanied by Claire, Misha, and Dole. Claire and I were in the seat behind the driver, while Dole and Misha were in the back. There had been some fuss about the seating arrangements, but Claire got her way in the end.

“And then I said, ‘You lie. The kingdom would fall apart without the nobility to prop it up.’” Dole, the Minister of Finance, was waving his hands around dramatically. We’d been traveling for half a day, and he hadn’t stopped talking the entire time.

“Father, we already heard that story. How many times are you going to tell it?”

“Hmm? Have you? Well then, I’ll tell you a different story. This happened right after Claire was born—”

Dole was perhaps the most influential aristocrat in the country, second only to the royal family. If he wanted to talk, there were very few who’d dare interrupt him. Claire might, but etiquette made it difficult for her to talk over her father too. The best she could do was, as she had just done, redirect him when he took a breath here and there.

Almost everything Dole had to say was a boast about his own achievements. As the Minister of Finance, he basically held the purse strings for the entire country. No legislation introduced by politicians or bureaucrats could get off the ground without Dole’s approval. He played a part in the establishment of every administrative policy, and, therefore, saw them as his own achievements.

“Claire, you are still young... and a woman, so you may not understand this, but politics don’t conform to ideals.”

“Hm...” Claire said vaguely. She looked at me as if begging me to save her.

“Master Dole, what was Miss Claire like when she was little?”

“She was just an angel! The most adorable being in existence!”

I cast out the bait and Dole took it, hook, line, and sinker. He proceeded to ramble on in detail about Claire’s childhood, looking delighted.

I felt a poke in my side. It was Misha. “How can you speak so directly to Master Dole...?”

“Why not? He’s my future father-in-law.”

“And how can you joke about something like that?” Misha sighed. She looked exhausted. As a former aristocrat, unlike me, she couldn’t help feeling under pressure in Dole’s presence.

“Well,” Dole said, “I permit this commoner to speak with me because Claire permits her presence. Otherwise, we would never even be in the same carriage.”

“I am very grateful for the generosity of Your Excellency and Miss Claire.”

“Mmm.” Dole seemed satisfied with my humble comment. “Claire, you have become quite friendly with this commoner, haven’t you? What a turn of events after you started off hating her so much.”

“I have no intentions of being friends with her...”

“Claire, your heart is too gentle for an aristocrat. Be careful with whom you show compassion,” Dole said bluntly. “Otherwise, history will repeat itself... like that traitor Aurousseau.”

“Father!”

“After all those years, she turned out to be nothing but a disgusting whore. She should have been executed for conspiring with our enemies.”

Claire looked like she was about to explode. This wouldn’t do. I tried to change the topic of conversation again, but—

“And she was having relations with her own brother too. The very thought of you being contaminated by proximity to that filth, Clai—”

“That’s enough!” Claire cried.

“Claire... You have a kind heart, but you cannot defend—”

“Father, be silent. If you say another word about Lene, I will never forgive you.” Claire pinned a deadly serious gaze on Dole, who was speechless. “It’s true that Lene’s actions were unforgivable. In this you are correct. But she had her own struggles, her own pain...”

She bit her lip so hard it bled.

“Lene admitted her guilt. She accepted her punishment. Please speak no more of it. I still think her dear to me.”

Despite Lene’s betrayal, Claire sympathized with her. Her affections were not easily won, but once they were, they proved indelible. I loved her for this.

“Aristocrats are born to rule,” Dole shot back icily. “Kindness, personal sentiment—these are impediments to your obligation.”

“I am not being sentimental!”

“Then why defend a servant who betrayed you? What do you think would happen if another aristocrat heard you speak that way?”

“Th-that...!” Claire trailed off.

They were speaking from two completely different points of view. Claire spoke from the heart—about emotions that humans needed to live, which couldn’t be explained by logic alone. Conversely, Dole was purely analytical. He knew that unceasing calculations of profit and loss were what it meant to be nobility.

“Claire, I pray you do not disappoint me.”

She didn’t answer.

“Will you respond?”

Nothing.

“Claire.”

"Yes..." Claire's voice was quiet, defeated.

I thought of saying something but stopped myself. I could say nothing to salve her wounds, because it wasn't Dole's words that hurt her but the realization that she was a poor example of an aristocrat.

Claire was clever. I knew that if she applied herself, she could refute her father any number of ways. But what would come of that? She, an aristocrat, who had only ever been an aristocrat, would be arguing against aristocratic logic.

For now, I did better by her to mark her anguish by observing it than to make my own comments. So: I would not speak.

But one day, I would affirm Claire and everything she stood for. A true affirmation, not platitudes or empty compliments meant to make her feel better. In order to do that, I chose to remain silent for now. But at the very least...

Claire glanced over at me briefly. I was holding her hand in a way that Dole couldn't see. I squeezed it gently, and she squeezed back harder. Her hand was warm. I hoped I was conveying warmth back to her too.

We couldn't say it out loud, but I wanted to believe there was something between us that we could both understand without words.

\*\*\*

It was evening by the time we arrived at the François villa.

"This is amazing..."

"It really is."

"It's quite small compared to our residence in the capital, though, isn't it?"

The villa, lit by the evening sun, was so massive you could scarcely believe it was owned by an individual. Misha and I let out gasps of amazement when we saw it, but Claire didn't seem impressed in the least.

"I'm going to rest first. Head maid, take care of everything."

“Yes, sir.”

Dole must have been tired from the long trip, for he retired to his room.

“Miss Claire, you should rest in your own room too. Rae will carry your things.”

“I can carry that much myself.”

“In other words, you want to spend some time with me, Miss Claire?” Thinking this the perfect time, I took the opportunity to tease Claire.

However, she didn’t react.

“Oh, ohhh...?”

I expected her to reject me immediately, but she showed no sign of lashing out. Claire had a complicated look on her face. I suddenly didn’t know what to do.

“I’ll be leaving, then. Goodbye, Miss Claire. Bye, Rae,” Misha said and left for her parents’ house, maybe because she sensed the awkward air in the room.

“Rae, stop dawdling and pick up the luggage.”

“Oh, yes.”

The villa had its own staff of servants to help, so the luggage was sorted quickly. I think it took about twenty minutes, during which Claire waited without a single complaint, watching as if in a daze.

“Sorry for making you wait, Miss Claire. Let’s go to your room,” I prompted, picking up her things.

“Yes...” She obeyed meekly. What was wrong?

Claire’s room was decorated in typical aristocratic fashion, with perfectly coordinated interior decorating. Despite its tidy arrangement, it wasn’t a very welcoming room. I observed Claire as I put away her things.

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“Where should I put these clothes?”

“Just hang them wherever in the walk-in closet.”

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“Where should I put these undergarments?”

“Just put them wherever in that dresser... What are you doing, Rae?” Claire changed tack mid-sentence when she saw me holding up each of her undergarments to check the shape.

“I just thought that, as your maid, I should know everything there is to know about you, Miss Claire.”

“You... No.” Claire started to puff up in outrage, then suddenly stopped and forced a smile. “You’re teasing me to try and make me feel better, aren’t you?”

“Huh? No, this is just me being horny.”

“You could just tell me I’m right!” Claire sat heavily on the bed, as if she was exhausted from it all. “I suppose I am a bit melancholy. I took pride in being an aristocrat, but now, at times, it feels a bit painful...”

I didn’t say anything. I realized this was the first time she’d confided in me.

“I understand what my father was saying. Casting Lene aside was the obvious choice, in my position, but... she was like an older sister to me. Even after everything, I can’t bring myself to hate her.” Claire let out a deep sigh. “It’s depressing to think that I have to spend my entire vacation with my father around...”

She stopped talking suddenly, as if realizing I was listening, and forced another smile. “Well, this has nothing to do with you, Rae. I’m sorry. Forget it—”

“Miss Claire,” I said, interrupting her. “Would you like to come to my house?”

“Y-your house?”

“My parents are peasants, so we can’t give you the welcome you deserve, but—”

“I’d like that.”

“Huh?”

“I want to visit your house. I’m quite curious to see what manner of home environment produces such a strange creature as you.”

That was harsh. “It’s just a normal peasant house, though.”

“That’s fine.”

“The food is ordinary.”

“It’s good to have some plain food now and then.”

“There’s nothing to do there...”

“You’ll be there, won’t you? It’s settled. When shall we go?”

“Er, how about tomorrow?”

“Understood.”

I hadn’t expected her to be this eager to visit my home. I wondered what had struck that chord in her.

“Oh, Miss Claire, do you have a swimsuit?”

“Of course. Why?”

“I live right by the sea, so I thought we could go swimming,” I proposed, but Claire looked at me with a bitter face.

“I’m not very fond of the sea.”

“Ah...” I’d forgotten Claire couldn’t swim. “I can teach you to swim?”

“Wh-who said I couldn’t swim?!”

“So you can?”

“Er...” Claire turned away in a huff. She was such a darling girl.

“In that case, I’ll teach you the A to Z of swimming and all the letters in between,” I said.

“That’s not how the saying goes!”

“You’re so spoiled.”

“Me?! What have I done wrong?!”

“By the way, Miss Claire... Please watch out for my mother.”

“Huh?”

“She’s, well, you know.”

“I know what?”

“She’s even more shameless than I am.”

“More than you...?” Claire looked taken aback. “Maybe I shouldn’t visit, then.”

“It will be fine.”

“Of course it will. I am, after all, the daughter of the François family. No one would dare—”

“It’s precisely *because* people like you are my mother’s favorite, Miss Claire.”

“Then how can you say it’ll be fine?!”

And that was how it came about that Claire visited my home.

\*\*\*

"Hey, Rae. It's been a while."

"Hi, McCloy. How have you been?"

"Oh look, it's Rae. You're back?"

"Hi, Jane, how are you?"

Many people called out to me as we walked through my hometown the next day. I'd forgotten I was the heroine in a videogame aimed at young girls—in other words, I was *popular*.

"How have you been? They say the capital is dangerous, so we've all been worried about you," McCloy, owner of the local hardware store, said to me.

"It's okay. It's not as scary as everyone thinks it is."

"Is that right? Why, even this town has been getting dangerous lately. Just a few days ago, some aristocrats who came by for the Undead Sending went missing." McCloy noticed my companion. "Who's this young lady?"

"Oh, this is—"

"I'm a schoolmate of Rae. My name is Claire," Claire cut in, hiding her true identity. But why?

"Oh my, you certainly are polite. With a friend like you, our little Rae must feel a bit safer even in the capital, eh?"

"Yes," I said, "she takes very good care of me."

"And how's Rae doing, Claire? She was always the most capable kid in this town..."

"She's very capable at the Academy too. Everyone is aware of her talent."

"Is that so?!"

Claire's answer seemed to delight the townspeople, probably because in their eyes, I was a representative of their town. But as I smiled along with them, I only had one thought.

*Stop getting in the way of our alone time.*

Instead, more and more people started to gather around us. That was when—

“Rae...?”

Argh. The one person I never wanted to see.

“Louie.”

“So it *is* you,” the boy said as he pushed through the crowd to get to us.

“It’s very nice to see you, Louie.”

“Why are you talking to me like a stranger? After all we’ve been through?” Louie said, chuckling at his own joke.

Claire looked puzzled. “Who is this?”

“This is Louie. He’s my umm...”

“I’m like Rae’s big brother. *Miss Claire*,” Louie finished my sentence for me. Wait. Did he suspect Claire’s true identity? Apparently so, for he continued, “I’m an adventurer. I know these things.”

As you might expect from a generic fantasy world, adventurers took jobs from guilds and were paid for them. It made sense that such an adventurer, who traveled all over the world, would recognize the only daughter of the Bauer Kingdom’s Minister of Finance.

“Rae, are you going to stay a while?”

“Well, just during the holiday.”

“I see. Stop by my house later. My mom has been asking about you.”

“Okay then. We’re in a bit of a hurry, so we’ll be off now,” I said, pulling Claire away from that place.

“Hey, wasn’t that a bit rude?” Claire looked at me quizzically.

"It's fine. Louie is kind of a pain."

"Louie is totally in love with you, Rae." Misha suddenly popped out of the crowd to snitch on me.

"Hey!" I protested.

"Why, if it isn't Misha," Claire said.

"It's only been a day, Miss Claire. What in the world are you doing in a place like this?" Misha had shed her school uniform and was wearing casual clothes.

"I was invited to visit Rae's house."

"Invited... Rae's house isn't exactly a place that you can be invited to."

"Well, there's a lot going on..." I stumbled, unable to mention the issues between Claire and Dole in front of Claire.

"Who cares about that?!" Claire demanded. "What do you mean when you say that boy is in love with Rae?!"

Whoa... That was the part she was hung up on?

"It's simple. As you just saw, Rae is very popular in this town. Naturally, she has admirers."

"Ummm... Hmm." Claire's eyes glazed over.

"Louie is just one of those admirers. Before Rae left this town, she wasn't completely—"

"There is no truth whatsoever to that. Claire is the only one for me," I cut Misha off before she could say anything else.

Claire's stare was ice-cold.

In truth, Misha wasn't lying. In the game, Louie played the role of the boy the main character was closest to. In other words, he was a "boy from her past." The main character wasn't in love with him, but his presence in her backstory made things more

exciting. If the player chose to not use the tickets from the festival and visited her hometown instead, they triggered a love triangle event involving Louie and the prince the character was romancing. I'd figured that wouldn't happen, since none of the princes were here, but—

“Miss Claire, you aren’t jealous, are you?”

“I am not jealous! In fact, I don’t even know what you’re implying, though I have an idea!”

“Miss Claire.”

“What is it?”

“There’s nothing going on between Louie and me.”

“I wonder.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Umm...”

“What is it, Misha?”

“Would you please take your lover’s quarrel elsewhere?”

“This isn’t a lover’s quarrel!” Claire squawked, angry.

“Oh, is that so? Then I will be leaving. Have fun, Rae.”

“Wait, Misha!”

Having dropped that bomb on us, Misha left. What was she trying to do?

“C’mon, Miss Claire. Let’s go.”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s really just adorable when you’re jealous.”

“Do you think you can fool me with such words?”

I thought for a minute. Then I hugged her in the middle of the street.

“There.”

“Aargh?!”

“Hmmm. You’re so soft.”

“What are you doing?!?” She smacked me, hard—it hurt! But I didn’t let go. “This is a public place!”

“I’m not letting go until you forgive me.” I squeezed tighter.

“Fine! Fine, now let go!”

“Ahhh.”

“Why do you sound disappointed?! Aren’t you asking me to forgive you?!”

“Yes, but it just feels so wonderful to be holding you, Miss Claire.”

“That. Is. Enough. Now. Let. Go. Of. Me!”

In a feat of strength, she broke free. Wow.

“Just as I was starting to think you’d matured a bit...”

“Nobody can stop this overflowing love I have for you.”

“Shut up! Argh... Now I’m exhausted before I’ve even been able to greet your mother and father...”

“You mean your future in-laws?”

“You get your mind out of the gutter, you hear me?!”

\*\*\*

“Miss Claire, are you ready?”

“Aren’t you being a bit dramatic?”

Claire and I stood before the door to my parents’ home, which bore the name Taylor. Our name came from the word “tailor”, and, as you might expect, we owned a clothing store. I wanted a final confirmation beforehand, but Claire looked dumbfounded.

“So, you’re ready?”

“Hurry up with it,” Claire prompted, and I opened the door.

“I’m home.”

“Eh... Huh?”

From the back of the store came a young girl who looked like a teenager.

“Oh, look who it is! Rae! Welcome home.” The girl ran up to me and gave me a warm hug. Her chest, which was voluptuous enough to make me doubt we were related at all, pressed up against my face.

“I-I’m suffocating.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Might you be Rae’s older sister...?”

“Oh my, sister? You’re quite the flatterer, aren’t you?” The girl put her hand to her cheek, blushing, and swayed.

“This is my...”

“I’m Rae’s mother, you adorable thing.”

“Really?” said Claire. “*Not* your sibling, then?”

Yes—this was my mother, Mel Taylor. She *definitely* didn’t look like she could possibly have a daughter my age. We were often mistaken for sisters.

"Now, now. That's enough flattery. Rae, are you going to introduce me to your friend?" My mother finally came back down to earth.

"This is Claire François. She is the only daughter of Dole François, Minister of Finance, and she is my employer."

"Please, call me Claire. It's very nice to meet you."

My mother's mouth was agape at this for a moment, but then she smiled and said, "Thank you for taking such good care of my daughter. I hope your relationship may continue."

"Uh, Rae. What were you talking about before? Your mother is wonderful," Claire whispered, accusingly.

"Well, she may *look* harmless, but..."

"But?"

"Miss Claire, where is your jacket?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I do that..." My mother said, holding Claire's jacket.

"Hey! What on earth?!"

"My mother has the bad habit of undressing people that she likes."

"So it was true?!" Claire grabbed her jacket from my mother and took a step back as if she was afraid for her safety.

"I-I'm sorry. You just have such an ideal figure, I wanted to take your measurements..."

"And what does that have to do with undressing me?!"

"My mother acts on instinct. Apparently, she isn't even consciously aware of what she's doing until it's done."

"That's not something you can do unconsciously!" Claire cried.

"What's all the commotion?" A giant of a man—over six feet tall—appeared.

"Oh, honey, Rae is home. And she brought the cutest girl with her" my mother explained.

My father turned his penetrating gaze to us.

"I'm home, Dad."

"N-nice to meet you."

I was used to him, but Claire looked a little frightened. As his daughter, I'd be the first to admit my dad had a scary face. But—

"It is most lovely to meet you, Miss Claire. My name is Van Taylor, and this is my clothing store. Thank you for taking such good care of my daughter" my father said, showing her the utmost respect.

"You know who I am?"

"You are the most famous young lady in this country after the royal family. Of course I know who you are."

"Is that so? Please, there's no need to be so formal."

"Dad, I was hoping to have Miss Claire stay here a few days. Is that all right?"

"Well, well, well. She is more than welcome. Right, honey?"

"We can't possibly expect her to put up with such humble conditions..."

My mom was on board, but Dad was reluctant.

"Please don't feel the need to indulge me. As your guest, I will be grateful for whatever you have to offer." Claire surprised me with her gracious words.

"Oh my, my, my. What a modest and humble aristocrat. Please, you are more than welcome to request some indulgences," my mother said, looking even more smitten with Claire than before.

“But... we don’t have a room?” my father pointed out.

“I can stay in the same room as Rae,” Claire said.

“But where would you sleep...?” my father asked.

“We can bring a cot in from the main house. Miss Claire can use Rae’s bed and Rae can sleep on the cot,” my mother proclaimed.

“Or we could sleep in the same bed!”

“Oh my, my, my? Do you two have that sort of relationship?”

“Yes.”

“No, we do not! I mean, if we must sleep in the same bed, that’s fine, but—”

What was going on with Claire? She was being unusually meek and mild.

“I’ll bring the cot...”

“Yes, please. And let’s close the store for the day. Oh, make sure you work up an appetite for dinner!”

My parents went off to prepare for Claire’s stay. Or so I thought, until—

“Darling, how could you act like that after Rae finally brought home a sweetheart for us to meet?!”

“Honey, have you lost your mind? That’s the daughter of the François family...”

Their conversation in the back room was entirely audible to us, but I pretended not to hear. Claire had a complicated look on her face. To escape the awkwardness, I showed her to my room, carrying the bag with her clothes and other items as we headed up the stairs.

My bedroom was even smaller than the dorm rooms at school. It was simple, about ten by ten feet wide, and had a bed, desk, and one dresser. As a commoner, even having my own room meant I had it better than most. It would have been different if I had any siblings.

I put the bag on the floor and let out a sigh.

"So this is your room, Rae?"

"It's pretty bare, huh?"

"Well, yes. But there's something comforting about it." Claire sat on the bed and looked around. I took the chair from the desk and sat down as well. "Your parents are interesting."

"I get that a lot."

"Especially your mother. I see where you get it from."

"I get that a lot," I said again. My father was reserved, but he had plenty of common sense, while my mother couldn't really be said to have *any*. Not to mention the thing with the clothes... Honestly, though, the strangest thing about my mother was that everyone liked her despite her oddities.

"Are you sure you're okay staying here? There is an inn nearby, you know?"

"This is fine. But..."

I looked at her quizzically.

"We're imposing on your family."

"Well, yes," I said honestly. The peasant life wasn't easy. Guests showing up unnoticed, let alone the daughter of an aristocrat, meant everyone had to hop to it. "Still, my mom's sure to whip up a feast for us tonight."

"Sh-she will?"

"Just relax, Miss Claire. I'll unpack our bags." I'd brought Claire out here so she could get away from the mansion. If she spent her reprieve worrying, that defeated the purpose.

"Yes... I'll do that," Claire said and then lay down on the bed as if she were exhausted. She was soon breathing deeply.

*Does that mean... you're starting to trust me?* I thought to myself. My spirits soared at the sight of Claire's defenseless, sleeping face in my bed. I joyfully started unpacking.

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"Now then, in celebration of Miss Claire visiting our home... Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

"Cheers..."

"Thank you so very much."

We raised our glasses—filled with fruit juice—and began our evening meal. Our dining table was small, but it was laden with freshly baked bread, herb-seasoned grilled chicken, meatballs, vegetable soup, and fruit chilled in the river. My mom was a pretty good cook. It wasn't the kind of haute cuisine Claire was used to, but for a peasant, it was a feast.

"Miss Claire, please eat as much as you'd like." My mother, bursting with joy at the opportunity to entertain such a cute guest, encouraged Claire to partake.

"Y-yes..." Claire responded.

"Now, now, no pressure. If you don't like something, you don't need to eat it," my father advised.

"Oh no, I would love to," Claire said. She extended her fork to the herb-grilled chicken and daintily lifted a piece to her mouth. "...It's delicious."

Her smile was perfect, but I knew it was fake. Peasant food was hard for an aristocrat like Claire to stomach.

Completely oblivious, my mother continued to recommend each of the dishes. "Please, you must try this soup. We made a proper consommé today!"

"Thank you very much." Claire kept her perfect smile painted on her face as she took a spoonful of soup and then praised it. My mom looked overjoyed to see an aristocrat enjoying her cooking.

But—

“Oh my, my, my...? You’ve barely touched your plate?” she exclaimed.

Though Claire claimed everything was delicious, she was only eating the smallest portions.

“Perhaps it’s not to her taste, after all?”

“No, Mom. Miss Claire always eats small portions. Miss Claire, would you like some fruit? It’s freshly picked and tastes really good.”

“Oh yes, please. Thank you, Rae,” Claire said. She was smiling, but I was certain she was having a lot more trouble than she was letting on.

Somehow, we got through the rest of the meal. I told my parents all about the Academy over some after-dinner tea, starting with the time Claire and I went in the haunted house at the school festival.

“Miss Claire was so frightened!”

“I-I was not!” Claire denied.

“My, my. So Miss Claire is afraid of ghosts?” My mother laughed as if she found the story heartwarming.

“In that case, you should probably stay away from the beach,” my father said.

“Why?” I had been looking forward to swimming in the ocean.

“It seems that undead have been spotted along the coast lately...”

“It’s really been a problem for the fishermen.”

According to my parents, undead had been haunting the coast for about a week now. There weren’t many, and the neighborhood watch were currently keeping them at bay, but it was starting to get out of hand.

On hearing this story, Claire declared, “In that case, we’ll destroy them.”

"Well, well! But it's so dangerous... and besides, I thought you were afraid of ghosts, Miss Claire?"

"The undead are monsters. Not ghosts. We can go to the coast first thing tomorrow. Right, Rae?"

"Fine by me. Let's take our bathing suits too. We can start your swimming lesson—"

"Shhh! Shhh!" Claire interrupted me, flustered.

"Oh my, my, my? Miss Claire, do you have trouble swimming?"

"N-no, of course not. I am able swim; I simply wish to improve. That's all."

"Why, that's wonderful. Rae grew up by the water, so she should be able to give you some pointers. Rae, make sure you teach her well."

"Yes." It seemed like Claire wanted my mom to like her... but maybe I was imagining it.

"It's getting late. Miss Claire, you should rest," my father said, looking at the wall clock.

"My, my, my. Time flies when you're having fun."

"Yes. I'll have a bath and then go to bed."

"Umm..."

"I'm sorry, Miss Claire. We don't have a bath here." Peasants didn't bathe daily. We wiped our bodies down with wet cloths and went to the bathhouse once every few weeks.

"Oh... I see. I understand."

"I brought soap, so I'll wipe you down in the bedroom."

Such was the awkward atmosphere in which we ended Claire's welcome party.

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Claire looked thoughtful. "I really am fortunate," she said quietly, almost to herself, as

I gave her a sponge bath in my bedroom.

"You didn't like the food, did you?"

"I am so sorry, Rae... I didn't realize it would be this different."

Peasant food had a far weaker flavor. It would have tasted exceptionally bland to Claire, who was accustomed to the ample use of spices and abundant condiments in aristocrat food.

"It's not just the food," Claire continued. "Not taking a bath..."

There was a bath at the Academy, so she'd never had to confront her privilege in that matter. She seemed to be wrestling with the realization that the things she took for granted in her daily life were actually luxuries.

"Well, peasants don't live like aristocrats," I said, wiping Claire down.

"I knew that. But I didn't understand it. The Commoner Movement..."

"Yes?"

"I thought their demands were silly. But—"

"But?"

"If our standards of living really are this different, then I understand why people might resent aristocrats," Claire said, her eyes downcast.



This wouldn't do. I'd wanted to distract Claire from her troubles, not make them worse. I put the wet towel on the water basin and started to help Claire into her pajamas, saying, "Miss Claire, you are a powerful aristocrat, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"In that case, why don't you change the world?"

"Change... the world?"

"Change the world in a way that makes the lives of peasants even just a little bit easier. That shouldn't be an impossible task for you, Miss Claire."

"That... but..." Claire's eyes lit up with understanding and then dimmed as she realized it wouldn't be so simple a task.

"It wouldn't be easy, of course," I said. "And I don't believe it's something you're obligated to do. But if it's something you *want* to do..."

"Something... I want to do?"

"Yes. If it is your wish, then I will do everything in my power to help you," I said, buttoning the front of her pajamas. Claire was speechless. She looked both happy and nervous.

"You really are brazen, for a commoner."

"What do you expect from your maid?" The fact that she was insulting me meant that she was feeling a bit better.

"Hmm..."

"Now, let's sleep. We'll go to the sea tomorrow," I said, turning off the light.

"Yes, that's right..." But Claire made no move to get in the bed.

"What's wrong?"

"This bed is pretty big, isn't it?" she said, but it wasn't. Even the bunk beds in the school dormitories were bigger.

“Is it?”

“It is! So...”

“So?”

“So... Ugh!” Claire was having a moment. “You can sleep here with me.”

“There won’t be much room, though?”

“It’s fine!” Claire grabbed my arm and shoved me on the bed, then lay down too. “Good night!”

“Good night... Miss Claire.”

Could this be... Claire showing affection for me? I didn’t want to get my hopes up and start imagining things.

*No use overthinking it.* I decided to get some sleep, switching my thoughts over to the sight of Claire in a swimsuit tomorrow.

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“Okay, Miss Claire. First put your face in the water.”

“You better not let go! You hear me?!” Claire’s expression was pathetic, and her words just childish.

We were at a beach near my house. The sand was pure white and the water emerald green as far as the eye could see; not a sight you could easily find in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japan. We were in the middle of Claire’s first swimming lesson. I started by assessing her level and discovered she couldn’t even put her face in the water. On my instruction, Claire screwed up her courage at length, as if preparing to jump off a building, then finally touched her face to the water.

“Blah!” She lifted her head in less than three seconds. “How’s that?! I did it, I put my face in the water!”

“Yes, you did. Now let’s try it for about ten seconds.”

“What?! You’re going to make me do such advanced moves on my first day?!”

“That’s... not advanced.” I was starting to realize she wasn’t going to be swimming today.

We were both in our bathing suits. Claire looked like a supermodel in her bright red bikini and white wrap. This world was theoretically supposed to resemble medieval Europe, so the presence of such modern swimsuits was a clear giveaway that it had been developed by Japanese people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The game developers would probably have been swamped by player complaints if the characters had showed up in historically accurate swimwear.

Actually, *Revolution* had been designed for a female audience, so more design work had been put into the male swimsuits than the female ones. Of course, there were no boys here, making that irrelevant.

“Let’s try for ten seconds.”

“Hmgh... Fine. I, Claire François, have mastered countless skills before and I shall do so again.” Claire talked herself up as she went through her tragic but brave preparations again before finally putting her face in the water. “Blah! How many seconds was that?!”

“Five.”

“Ergh... this is hard. I never imagined humans were capable of such things...”

“Most people can do it, you know?!” I never imagined Claire would have this much trouble with water. I wondered if it was because her attribute was fire?

“I wish to take a break.”

“What?! All you’ve done is put your face in the water twice!”

“And that was plenty. If I am already able to put my face in the water for five seconds, soon enough I’ll be able to swim.”

“You will not!”

“Rae! Miss Claire! I brought you lunch.” We looked up to see my mom waving at us with one hand and holding a basket in the other. In her swimsuit.

She was wearing a black one-piece suit. It had two white stripes on the side. In other words, it was a typical school-issued swimsuit. A woman, in her late thirties, wearing a school-issued swimsuit. Worst of all, she was rocking it.

"Perfect timing. We were just taking a break," Claire said as she wiped herself dry with the towel I handed her.

"Oh, I see. How many meters did you make it to? You're so talented, Miss Claire, I'm sure you could swim one hundred meters with ease," my mother said with an innocent smile. She meant well. She wasn't doing it on purpose.

"Oh, well... just about."

*Liar!*

"Heh heh. I thought so. Oh, here is your lunch. I tried making some sandwiches," my mother said, taking a cloth out of the basket to show us sandwiches and a thermos.

"Thank you very much," Claire said sweetly, but her expression was stiff.

"It's okay, Miss Claire," I whispered in her ear.

She looked back, questioningly.

"The sandwiches have things I suggested, like mayonnaise and mustard." Mayonnaise wasn't that hard to make, and even commoners had access to the ingredients.

"Yes, I followed Rae's instructions! Please try it," my mom said, holding a sandwich out to Claire. Claire looked concerned but hesitantly took a bite.

"It's delicious!"

"Well, well, well. That's a relief. This mayonnaise thing really is delicious," my mother marveled. "Rae, is it popular in the capital?"

"Yeah. It was first introduced by a restaurant called Broumet. Apparently, all the aristocrats are eating it."

"Is that right? You must be taking Rae to some fancy places, Miss Claire."

“Yup,” I said. I wasn’t about to tell them I was the one who’d introduced mayonnaise to this world.

“Really?” Claire said.

“Anyway, Miss Claire, you’re just lovely today. Is this swimsuit also the fashion in the capital?”

“I had it tailored just for me. This fabric wrapped around my waist is called a pareo, and they’ve been quite popular this year.”

“Oh... How wonderful.”

“Mom, settle down. We don’t need you activating your bad habit right now.”

Claire snapped to attention and moved back from my mother.

“I know that... Rae, you’re such a bully. And while we’re at it, your swimsuit is... uh...”

“Mom, don’t sigh like that.” Embarrassingly, my swimsuit had also been issued by the school.

“You’re right about the swimsuit,” Claire said, “but more to the point, your mother’s figure is so... so unlike yours.”

“Don’t say that,” my mother chided. “She’s still young.”

I don’t know if it was because I was the main character in a game aimed at young women, but my figure was profoundly average. I mean, it wasn’t bad. It was fit enough, and slender, but I looked utterly plain in comparison to Claire’s more mature figure and my mom’s voluptuous curves.

“I’m still growing. I’ll get bigger,” I said.

“Give it all you’ve got,” said my mom.

“Don’t give me that pitying look—hey, wait a minute...”

Something was happening while we goofed around. Clouds sailed over the sun, and a chill filled the air. Before we knew it, we were surrounded by swirling fog coming in

off the sea.

Was this... magic?

"Rae! Look!" Claire screeched. She was pointing at the silhouette of a tattered ship, looming through the fog.

"Is that... a ghost ship...?" my mom asked in surprise. I was wondering the exact same thing.

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The ghost ship's appearance threw the entire town into an uproar. The local lord proclaimed a state of emergency, and would have sent a runner to request military aid, but—

"We're trapped," Claire complained, and she was right. The fog blanketing the outskirts of the town had us all penned in.

"This fog is magical in nature," Misha said, calmly analyzing the situation. She, along with everyone in the town with the ability to fight, had come to the courtyard of the local lord's mansion in order to discuss what could and couldn't be done. "We need someone to step up and take charge. How about you, Miss Claire?"

"There has to be someone more qualified than my young, inexperienced self. And *he* isn't about to let me tell him what to do." Claire pointed at the person emerging from the mansion.

"Everyone, thank you for gathering here. Let me begin by expressing my gratitude." Dole's voice dripped with condescension, but he also sounded supremely confident. "I am Dole François, Minister of Finance of the Bauer Kingdom. Due to the extraordinary circumstances, the local lord has requested that I take command. I assume no one has any objections."

His arrogance was a welcome sound—calming, even—to the townspeople, who were beside themselves with anxiety over the sudden appearance of the ghost ship.

"We have nothing to fear from a few undead. We have only to destroy them," Dole declared.

"B-but, can we really defeat monsters that can conjure such a fog to imprison us...?" someone asked uneasily. Everyone gathered here was capable of combat, yet none shared Dole's confidence. The ordinary citizens of Euclid had to be even more spooked.

"You are right to be concerned. But do not worry. We have more than enough firepower at hand. Claire, Rae, Misha, come up here."

Caught off guard, we couldn't hide our confusion, but did as we were told.

"These girls are star students of the Royal Academy. They outshine their peers when it comes to wielding magic."

The crowd buzzed at Dole's words. To them, we looked like nothing but young girls.

"Allow me to introduce them to you. First, this is Misha Jur. She had high aptitude in the wind attribute. In a mock battle at the Academy, she used her impressive skills to drive Prince Rod into a corner."

Despite being suddenly put on the spot in front of a crowd, Misha bowed, keeping her cool.

"Next is Rae Taylor. She is an earth and water dual-caster. Furthermore, both her attributes are ultra-high aptitude. She is one of the Academy's most powerful mages."

I suspected he had an ulterior motive for heaping such praise on me. But I could read the room, so I bowed smoothly.

"Finally, this is my daughter, Claire François. Rather than explain Claire's capabilities... it might be better to just have her show you. Claire, a tenth should do."

"Understood."

Everyone's eyes were on Claire, waiting with bated breath. She slowly raised both arms. Four François family crests appeared above her head.

"Light!" Four heat rays burst from the crests at Claire's command and zeroed in on a large, decorative boulder in the corner of the yard.

"Look! It's turned to dust!"

"A-amazing... With power like that, the ghost ship could be smashed to kindling!"

"He said that's only a tenth of her power... We're saved!"

This was Claire's specialty, Magic Ray. It wasn't versatile, but in terms of raw power, it put her up there among the world's foremost mages. Calling that only a tenth of her ability was a pretty big bluff, though. I was pretty sure Claire had put everything she had in those beams just now. She and Dole were certainly doing this to assuage everyone's fears, and they'd worked in unison with no prior discussion too. They were on the same wavelength.

"You see, you have no reason to fear. We will restore peace to the town with our own hands." Dole's words were greeted with loud cheers. Playing a crowd like this was second nature to a politician like him. "Now, the Adventurers' Guild will be in charge of strategy. Everyone, do as they say."

With that, Dole went back inside the mansion.

"As one would expect of Master Dole," commented Misha.

"He really is a politician through and through," I added.

"My father only cares about making himself look good," Claire said, but she looked happy, nonetheless. Though their relationship was fraught, Claire respected Dole.

"Aren't you happy, Claire?"

"About what, Rae?" Claire looked at me vacantly.

"At this rate, everyone is going to be looking at you to save them. I thought you were afraid of ghosts?"

"Oh..." It seemed Claire had forgotten. "I-I-I'm j-j-just fine! And the undead are not ghosts!"

"You don't have to pretend with the two of us. If everyone sees you grow flustered when we're actually in combat, it'll affect their morale," I pressed Claire.

"That's right." Misha nodded in agreement.

“What should I do...?”

“Maybe we should work on our own, away from the others?”

“In that case, we should notify the Guild right away—before they devise a strategy that includes us.”

And so, we went to talk to the head of the Adventurers’ Guild. In an unfortunate turn of events, this turned out to be Louie, who chuckled when he heard what we came to say.

“Ah, so you have an unexpected weakness,” he said.

“Can we make this work or not?”

“To be honest, the three of you are in a league of your own when it comes to your combat abilities. Even if I teamed you up with the rest of these guys, they’d have a hard time keeping up. I was actually hoping you might go off on your own.”

Adventurers were a free-spirited sort who had little regard for status or social niceties; Louie spoke casually, even when addressing Claire. Claire understood this, of course, and she didn’t raise an eyebrow at his lack of formality.

“Based on my experience,” he continued, “I’m guessing that ghost ship answers to something bigger. How about we clean up the riffraff and you three go after the big boss?”

“That sounds like the only solution.”

“Ah, but—” Louie started again, a bit apprehensively. “Do you think you can help us out a bit, just to start? If you could use that spell again, even just for the first charge, it would sure boost these guys’ morale.”

“Just... just at first, right?”

“Yeah. Can you? We can come up with something else if not.”

“No... It’s fine. I’ll do it.”

“Great. Then you can leave the rest to us,” Louie said, and he returned to talking

strategy with the rest of the guild.

"We're with you," I told Claire. "I'm sure it will be fine."

"We will support you," Misha agreed.

"Yes, please..." Claire had a dark look on her face. She somehow managed to make even that look cute.

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The fighting force we'd mustered, which numbered thirty people in total, split up into smaller boats and rowed toward the ghost ship. We hadn't yet encountered any foes, but we were on high alert as we came dangerously close to the ship.

Just as I thought that—

"They're coming!" an adventurer in the first boat called out. I strained my eyes to pierce the fog and saw bird-like monsters flying toward us. There looked to be about ten.

"Miss Claire! You're up!" Louie called out.

"Mm, understood," she responded. Since the monsters were still far away, we couldn't make them out clearly. Perhaps that helped, because Claire didn't look all that scared. "Light!"

The heat rays struck the flock of birds, incinerating most of them.

"That didn't get them all." Louie clicked his tongue.

"Leave it to me." Misha said. A high-pitched sound cut through the air, and the rest of the bird monsters fell.

"That many monsters in a single instant..."

"W-we can do this!"

Our overwhelming victory in this first skirmish raised everyone's spirits. Louie gave us a thumbs-up to show his appreciation. We fought a few more monsters on the way

to the ghost ship but made it through without a single casualty.

"Here comes the real battle," Louie said after confirming that the entire team had boarded the ghost ship. "Just as we discussed. Groups A to E, clear the way. The girls and I will take the captain's cabin."

The other guys rapidly dispersed to take up their positions in accordance with Louie's command. He was an experienced adventurer and a good leader, as evinced by his ability to give precise, efficient orders.

We had barely set foot on the upper deck when we were confronted by ten undead in the form of shambling skeletons. "Don't hold back!" Louie ordered. "We have the advantage in numbers! Surround them and take them down!"

And so the battle to take back the ship began.

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It took us two hours to fight our way through to the captain's cabin, and everyone was exhausted by the time we got there. Louie was keeping me, Misha, and Claire back as trump cards, directing us to conserve our offensive magic and protect the rest of the team instead. The undead were weak, but there were a lot of them, and the team was tiring. Many of the men were wounded and flagging.

"Commander, it's the captain's cabin!"

Their faces lit up, however, when they heard those words from the adventurer scouting ahead.

"Okay," Louie said. "The four of us will go in. The rest of you, secure the perimeter and keep the monsters off us."

"Roger that."

With Louie leading the way, Claire, Misha, and I ducked into the captain's quarters

"Wait a second..."

The room was empty. I'd been expecting to face some kind of mini-boss, and the anticlimax left me deflated.

"Maybe we're in the wrong room?" Claire suggested.

"No. This is the right one." Louie was adamant. He pulled out a magic scroll. "I'll set up a barrier."

"But there's nothing here?" Misha said, looking around the room.

"Not yet. I need to summon the boss, first."

The moment I heard that, I jumped in front of Claire. Misha armed herself with her wand and took up a combat stance.

"It's you..."

"You girls are so sweet. Trusting everything I say just 'cause I'm an adventurer." Louie chuckled as he walked toward the back of the room.

"Louie—this is you? You're the enemy?" Claire gasped.

"Enemy? Yes, I suppose I'm an enemy," Louie said, holding out his left hand. On his finger was a ring I recognized.

"The magical tool to raise the dead!" I swore.

"You know what this is? I suppose you understand what's happening here, then."

"There are no corpses here for you to raise," Misha pointed out.

"I'm about to make one." Louie pulled a perfume bottle from his inside pocket. It was filled with a transparent liquid. "With this—the newest blend of cantarella."

"What?! You're a Nur Empire assassin?!"

"Yes, I am. Please forgive me," Louie said, actually sounding genuinely apologetic.

"A bit arrogant to share that with us, isn't it?"

"Maybe. But we all have our debts to pay." He really did sound like he regretted this. However...

"This ghost ship," I said, "it's yours?"

"For now. Let's say I'm borrowing it from some Bauer aristocrats."

In other words, we weren't Louie's first victims. He had passed the point of forgiveness.

"Now that we know you have poison, we will respond appropriately," I said.

"Are you saying... you know the antidote?" Louie laughed. "I told you, this is the newest kind of cantarella. Magic doesn't work on anyone it infects, which means your detoxifying magic is useless too."

"Then we just need to avoid being poisoned," Claire replied aggressively.

Louie didn't stop laughing. "No one said I was going to use this on you."

"What?!" Claire's surprise was genuine.

Louie opened the lid of the cantarella and emptied the bottle in one gulp. "Ugh?! Hngh...!"

"Suicide....?" Misha was the first of us to grasp what was happening. "No—he's turning himself into an undead!"

"What?!"

"Cure him with your magic!"

"No! The cantarella is already working!"

"Monster..."

Louie's skin stretched and tore as he writhed on the floor, exposing reddish black muscles, which began to swell. His young man's body bulged, warped, and expanded until he was massive, like an ogre.

"Let's run!" Claire yelled.

"You can't," Louie said, in a voice that was decidedly not human.

“The magic scroll he used...” The barrier had been meant to trap us.

“Now, be good little girls and let me kill you.”

“No, thank you!” Claire launched a fire spear. It struck Louie directly—and had no effect.

“I see... The poison nullifies all magic, not just detoxifying magic,” Misha said with analytical calm.

“So the reason you had us hold back was to wear down all the men who can fight physically?” I demanded.

“Now you’re starting to get it.”

Brute strength was not our forte. Without our magic, we were at a severe disadvantage, and there was no one left to rescue us. The looks on Misha and Claire’s faces matched my thoughts—this was bad.

“What are the people outside doing?!” Claire demanded.

“There are still monsters out there. And maybe they can’t come in through this barrier,” Misha answered, still calm.

“Give up. If you don’t resist, I’ll give you an easy death.” Louie stood, drawing a massive bastard sword.

“I have an idea,” I said to Claire and Misha. “Miss Claire, please use some low-level spells to hold him back a bit. Even if it doesn’t hurt him, enough force might knock him back.”

“Understood.” It seemed she trusted me enough to not ask for more. Claire switched from shooting fire spears to raining down fire bombs, filling the cabin with the sound of explosions.

“Misha, please use your magic to scan the rest of the ship for enemies.”

“Do you think we’re about to be ambushed?” A rare hint of despair showed on Misha’s face.

"Nope. I want you to search the entire ship, other than this room. Find me a spot with very few foes."

"Why—"

"I don't have time to explain. Trust me."

"Okay."

"Claire and I will buy time," I said, conjuring some water bombs to throw at Louie.

"Your attacks are futile..." he said.

"You think that's going to make us give up?!" Claire narrowly dodged the tip of Louie's blade, catching his ankle with her foot as she passed him. He fell, clearly still unused to his newly swollen, cumbersome undead form.

"Miss Claire, be careful!" Claire was certainly the most capable of us in terms of physical combat, but she still wasn't able to keep up with Louie.

"But if we don't end this now, he's just going to wear us down!"

"It's going to be okay. I know how to get us out of this."

"I can trust you, right?"

"Of course!" As I nodded to Claire, we rained down a storm of mingled fire and water bombs on Louie.

"I've finished my search. The room with the fewest monsters is the third one from the stern."

"Thanks, Misha." She was fast. "Now help Claire hold him back. I need to do something. Buy me time."

"Okay."

This was it.

"My body is for Miss Claire," I started chanting somberly. "My blood is for Miss Claire.

Every beat of my glass heart is for Miss Claire. Miss Claire, Miss Claire.”

“What in the world are you doing?!”

“Miss Claire, please concentrate!”

“What are you playing at?” Louie said inquisitively, plodding forward through Misha and Claire’s attacks. I had no intention of answering him. The spell I was chanting sounded strange to others, but I concentrated only on what I needed to do.

A loud rumble rose somewhere far away. The ship swayed violently.

“What is that...?”

“Miss Claire, don’t stop!”

But that moment of hesitation had been enough. Louie closed in on Claire and swung his sword at her. Without thinking, I stopped chanting and hit him with water bombs.

“Miss Claire!”

I was too late—but she didn’t need my help. Something repelled the sword and turned its tip aside. Claire seized that chance to regroup and resume her barrage of fire bombs, driving Louie back once more to give herself space. I was so anxious I thought my heart might stop, but I went back to work.

The sound grew louder and the swaying more violent. And then—the door burst off its hinges. A torrent of seawater surged in, carrying with it a flood of swords.

“Misha, Miss Claire! Use your magic to stab Louie with those swords!”

There was no reply, but they both worked fast. Instantly switching from bombs to propulsion, Claire used explosions and Misha used wind to drive the swords carried in by the water at Louie. I joined them.

“Unlimited Claireworks!”

Louie desperately tried to ward off the swords, but there were too many. He collapsed on the ground, run through from every side. As we watched, his tattered body began to shrink back to human size.

“I... lost...?” There was no sadness in his voice, just pure disbelief. “But how?”

“I have no obligation to answer.” I wanted to get out of here immediately.

“I want to know too. What happened?” Claire said.

“Me too...”

I gave in. “This room was sealed off by a barrier, but it wasn’t being cast by anyone. It came from a scroll, which meant it could only last so long.” That’s why I’d had us rain down a barrage of magic bombs under the pretense of holding off Louie. In actuality, we had worn down the barrier. “Misha, I had to scout for a spot free of enemies because that’s where the swords would be.”

“Are these silver weapons?” Misha demanded.

“Yes.”

Silver was extremely effective against the undead. The creatures on this ship had unconsciously given it a wide berth, which was why I’d had her scan for a place free of them.

“How did you know those swords were on the ship?”

“Remember what we heard in town? A ship full of aristocrats who came here for the Undead Sending went missing.”

And Louie said himself who he had “borrowed” this ship from.

“I just manipulated the seawater with my water magic to bring the silver weapons here,” I finished.

“I see.” Louie smiled as if he had been freed from something. “I’m in no position to make demands, but I have a favor to ask of you.”

“I refuse. Let’s go, Miss Claire, Misha.”

“We will listen to your request. Speak.”

“Miss Claire...”

"He tried to kill the person he loves. He must have had his reasons."

Claire could be so kind—and so rarely when I expected it. What had happened to Claire the villainess?

"Thank you," Louie said. "Please, I ask only that you take care of my mother. She's sick."

"Did the Nur Empire use that against you?" Claire asked. "Why didn't you pay for her treatment by honorable means?"

"I spent all our savings to take her to a doctor in the capital," Louie said. "He said she has a growth in her stomach. The magic potion she'd need to save her costs even more than the doctor's fee."

Claire looked at a loss for words.

"Even if I took on nothing but dangerous, high-paying requests, it would take me a year of adventuring to earn enough. She didn't have the time. I swallowed my pride and begged everyone I knew for help, but even with their donations, I only had half of what I needed for the potion." With every word, blood flecked from his lips. Claire couldn't look away.

"Are you satisfied?" I asked her. "You said we would listen, and we did. Now, let's go. This ship is going to sink."

"But..."

"Miss Claire, Rae is right. We need to go," Misha said in a calm voice.

Claire flinched from Misha's calm. "Very well." She turned to Louie. "I, Claire of House François, swear that I will take care of your mother. Now please rest."

"Thank you. Ahhh, I wonder if they'll forgive my debt..."

Those were Louie's last words. We escaped the captain's cabin and left the sinking ghost ship with the rest of the adventurers, who were waiting outside. The entire time, Claire didn't say a single word.

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Several days after our battle on the ghost ship, Claire and I visited Louie's home. The reason, of course, was that Claire had requested we do so.

"Why, Rae, it's been a while." Louie's mother, Ophelia, greeted us with a gentle smile. "I apologize for not getting up. I'm not feeling terribly well. It's nothing serious, but..."

She broke into a coughing fit. But it wasn't me who rushed over to her in concern—it was Claire.

"Please, don't worry yourself," Claire said. "You should rest."

"My, who is this young lady? Is she your friend, Rae?"

"Oh, no—"

"I am, ma'am. My name is Claire. And I'm Louie's friend too," Claire said to Ophelia with a smile kinder than any she'd even given me. I was almost jealous.

"Oh, Louie too? I haven't seen his face since the last time he brought me my medication. How is he doing?"

Claire froze at those words.

"Louie... has passed away," she said.

"No... Please say it's not true..." Ophelia's face didn't change at first, as if she couldn't comprehend what she'd just heard. But Claire's somber expression seemed to drive the words home. "Why... How did he die?"

"Louie..." Claire started, but seemed to think better of it and stopped. She tilted her head down in thought. "Louie died trying to take down the ghost ship that was threatening the town. He died protecting his friends."

That was the official version of events we were going with. I'd been dead set against it, but Claire had stubbornly insisted.

"Louie was very brave. If it weren't for him, this town would have suffered great loss," Claire said, taking Ophelia's hand. "He's the hero who saved this town."

Ophelia was speechless for some time after hearing Claire's words. Eventually, she

found her voice again and said, “I... see. Every little thing made him cry when he was little. I never thought he would grow up to do such a thing...”

A smile crept onto her face. Perhaps it was partly prompted by pride in her son. But the main reason for her smile was—

“Still... I wish he had stayed a crying child, if it meant he would have come back home to me...”

With nothing left to say, Ophelia wept.

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“Poverty... really is a terrible thing,” Claire said abruptly. We were back in my room, preparing for bed.

“Miss Claire?”

“I had no idea what it really meant to be poor,” Claire said with a brooding expression. This didn’t seem to be the time to tease her, so I sat down next to her instead. “It’s not just having less money, is it? It means you might be forced to do terrible things to save someone important to you.”

“Not always. But it’s true that the poor have fewer options than the more fortunate.” I tried to be gentle, giving her space to organize her thoughts.

“What Louie did was unforgivable,” she said. “But denouncing him misses the point.”

“The point?” I could tell Claire was trying to articulate something.

“Poverty is *evil*. And our politicians are neglecting those citizens who live in this wicked condition. In other words, the flaw lies in the system itself.”

“That might be a bit extreme...” I tried to reel Claire in a bit—her language was beginning to make me anxious. “You’re right, poverty is terrible, and I can’t say the government of this country isn’t responsible for the current state of things. But politics isn’t solely a matter of beautiful ideas. You know that better than anyone, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. But—”

“But?”

When I prompted her to continue, she thought for a moment and then said, “Isn’t that just running away from the ideal and using the difficulty of reality as an excuse? What’s wrong with aiming for something good?”

I resolved to protect this precious person forever.

“I think you should do what you believe in. Like I told you before, I will support you in whatever you want to do,” I said, taking Claire’s hand.

“Rae...”

“Miss Claire, I respect your noble heart. I will protect your aspirations to not run from reality. Please, make use of me.”

I would do anything for Claire—even betray her, if I had to. I hoped it would never come to that, but if necessary, I wouldn’t hesitate.

“Thank you, Rae,” Claire said with a smile. But I couldn’t look her directly in the eye.

“Do you remember when Louie almost cut you with his sword?” I changed the subject to distract her. I was talking about near the end of the battle, when Claire had been distracted by the sound of flowing water I created.

“Yes. I was careless.”

“But Louie’s sword didn’t make it to you. How did you block it?”

“I’m not sure, but I think this is the reason,” Claire said, fingering an object on her chest.

“Oh, that...”

“Yes, it’s the amulet you gave me at the Academy Festival.”

I had forgotten all about it. “It’s cracked.”

“Perhaps it was a sacrifice charm.” In other words, Claire supposed that the amulet was a kind of magical item that could protect the wearer from danger, if only once.

“To think it had such an effect...”

“Of course I’m only speculating, but I can’t think of what else might have done it,” Claire laughed nervously and carefully returned the amulet to where it hung under her clothes.

“Ah—but then it was false advertising to call it a real good luck charm. Although, I suppose it did save you in the end.”

“What? Oh, yes! That’s right!” Claire’s reaction to my words was strange for a moment.

“Miss Claire?”

“It’s nothing. Come now, it is far past time to sleep! Good night!” Claire said, jumping right into bed, alone. What was going on with her?

“Miss Claire, are you hiding something?”

“I am hiding *nothing*, and it’s *nothing*, and why must you be so *dense* about this of all things?!“ Claire was babbling, trying to shut me up. I gave up and got in the bed with her.

Changing how the story of this game was scripted was proving to be difficult. I’d tried to alter the course of events in the Sending episode, and it had come back to bite me this way instead. If I really wanted to change things, from now on I would have to get to the root of the event. Superficial alterations only threw things into disarray and made it harder for me to use my knowledge of the game. I’d have to be more careful from here.

“By the way, Miss Claire?”

“What is it?”

“Are you romantically content?”

“Go to sleep!” She turned off the light, keeping me from being able to see clearly—but I thought her cheeks looked just a little red.

# CHAPTER 6

## YU'S SECRET

“MISS CLAAIRE!” I came up behind Claire, who was reading a book at her expensive wooden desk, and draped myself over her.

“Argh... Rae, you’re heavy.”

She felt soft and smelled so nice. In the past, she would have shrugged me off at once, but now she let this sort of physical contact slide. We’d made amazing progress, if I did say so myself.

“What are you reading? Umm... *Overview of the Bauer Kingdom Government System?*”

“It’s a book about the political and social systems in this kingdom.”

“That sounds complicated.”

We were in the room Claire and her roommate shared in the Academy dormitory. Her roommate hadn’t returned to the capital yet, so it was just the two of us. There were still a few days before school started again, but Claire had insisted on returning so she could ask the history and political science instructors at the Academy for some reading recommendations. She’d had her

nose buried in heavy tomes ever since the incident in Euclid during our vacation.

Summer was coming to an end, but it was still sweltering. I was cooling the air around Claire to a comfortable temperature using my water magic.

“Miss Claire, how about taking a break?”

“I’m almost done reading this. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The events in Euclid had shaken Claire. Ever since, she had thrown herself into the study of economic disparity in the Bauer Kingdom and how those disparities might be addressed. I was a little disappointed that she had less time to spend with me, but I

didn't want to get in the way of her newfound conscience. Doing something about the gulf between the rich and poor in this kingdom was in line with my objectives—not that I was going to explain that any time soon.

"Miss Claire, I'll be right back. I'm going to prepare some tea and snacks."

She didn't answer, just waved her hand without even looking my way. She wasn't giving me the cold shoulder—this was just how comfortable she was around me, now.

At least, that was what I told myself as I left Claire's room and headed toward the dorm kitchen. I'd baked some madeleines and was about to take them up to Claire's room when, oddly enough, Yu turned up.

"Oh, Rae. You're back."

"Master Yu... Hello."

"What was it like to be back home?"

"Unremarkable."

"I see... What's that?" Yu asked, noticing the madeleines.

"Just some cookies. I thought I would make them for Miss Claire."

"They look good. Can I have one?"

"You cannot."

"Ha ha, yeah, I guess not. They're for your beloved Claire, after all."

Despite the fact that I was a commoner refusing the royal family, Yu was cheerful. As usual, I couldn't read his true thoughts at all.

"Claire has really been studying hard of late, hasn't she?"

"Claire has always been a serious student."

"More than usual since the holidays, though. Did something happen?"

"No, not really," I said evasively.

Claire's insistence on painting Louie as Euclid's hero had buried the truth of our experiences. There wasn't really anything I could say, even if I'd wanted to.

I didn't know what was going through Yu's mind as he studied me, but his smile widened. "Servants really have it tough too, don't they? Incidentally, if she wants to learn about peasant poverty, the Church might be able to help her out."

"Huh?!"

"Don't look at me like that," Yu said chuckling. I hadn't realized it, but my expression had gone grim. "I don't know what went on during your vacation, but some of the Academy instructors are concerned. They're wondering if Claire has developed an interest in the Commoner Movement."

Now that he mentioned it—that was an inevitable reaction to a dyed-in-the-wool aristocrat like Claire suddenly showing interest in social systems and poverty in the peasant class.

"I'm not worried, of course. Claire was born to the nobility." But Yu didn't stop there. "I don't believe this country can survive much longer on the path it's taking. I'd be delighted to discover Claire shares my views on some of our present problems."

"Wouldn't the *real* problem be you calling it a problem, Master Yu?"

"Ha ha... That may be true," Yu responded gently to my rebuke. "Please, don't tell anyone I said that. Say only that I think it would be beneficial for Claire to seek out the Church. And I'm not just saying that because of my mother."

"What does that—hey!"

"This is my fee for the advice. Mmm... delicious." Yu stuffed one of the madeleines in his mouth and winked playfully at me.

I really didn't care for him at all.

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"Yu said that?"

"Yes."

When I got back to the room, Claire was still engrossed in her book, so I demanded she take a teatime break. I thought she would say no, but she surprisingly wrapped up her studying without fuss. It was love!

"The Church..." Claire said thoughtfully as she put her teacup to her lips.

"I don't think it's a bad idea," I affirmed. "Subsisting on recurring donations from aristocrats and income-proportional costs for medical treatment are both typical forms of wealth redistribution. I think there's something to gain from learning from them."

"That's true..." Claire said, returning her cup to her saucer and picking up a madeleine. "To be honest, I have to say any path to the resolution of poverty led by the political institution of this kingdom would be grim. The royals and the nobility are the very deeply embedded systems siphoning wealth from the people, after all."

I nodded, urging her to continue.

"However, it isn't as though the aristocracy use this wealth solely for their own benefit; they conduct politics on behalf of their people, stimulate the economies of their territories, and protect them from enemy nations. But..."

"But?"

"Still water grows stagnant. There is corruption at work in this kingdom."

Similar thoughts had driven the king to introduce his reforms.

"I won't go so far as to say *all* the royals and nobles have forgotten that their purpose is to protect the people they rule over, but many see commoners only as a source of revenue—and the people can tell." Claire groaned, adding that she learned this particular piece of information in a book written by a teacher outside of the Academy. "The more I learn, the more convinced I become that this country as it presently operates is simply unsustainable."

"So what will you do about it, Miss Claire?"

"Rae?" Claire opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"You can't change the past. This ignorance may be the sin of all aristocrats, but... Now that you know, what will you do? You come from a family with position and authority. If you change, then other aristocrats may change too."

So I said... but I was mostly trying to embolden Claire. People didn't change easily, let alone entire societies. I knew how the game ended, which meant I knew exactly how difficult Claire's struggle was. But still—

"I know that much," Claire tossed the rest of her remaining madeleine in her mouth, chewed carefully, and then washed it down with tea. It wasn't very becoming behavior for an aristocrat. "You really are cheeky for a maid, Rae."

"I'm very sorry. I love you."

I would always prefer flirting with Claire to these painful discussions—so long as she wasn't in immediate danger, I couldn't help prioritizing her.

"Ugh! I'm going to the Church. Go ahead of me and let them know I'm coming."

"Understood."

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Claire and I stepped through the exquisitely carved gate. The lit lamps inside the building highlighted the historical architecture of the inner walls, evoking a sense of spirituality I didn't often feel.

We were in the Bauer Cathedral, head temple of the Spiritual Church. The Church was the dominant religion in this world, and the cathedral was appropriately magnificent. Not as grand as the palace, of course, but much larger than the François manor.

"Well, now that we're here, who can we ask about things?"

"If we ask the reception, she'll fetch the person in charge." That was what I had been told when I announced Claire's visit. But—

"That only gets you what the Church wants you to hear. I want the truth," Claire said. And with that, she passed right by the reception and headed deeper into the cathedral. I rushed to catch up with her.

"I'm sure they have plenty of classified documents, but I don't think they'll just let you pick them up and look at them."

"I don't need documents. I can talk to people. Oh, excuse me—" Passing the entrance to what was probably a hall of worship, Claire approached a nun who was in prayer.

"Wh-what is it?!" The nun startled like a frightened squirrel at suddenly being spoken to. She was a slender young girl, wearing a black wimple that all but hid her silver hair and red eyes.

"I have some questions about this church. Do you have some time?"

"Oh uh... This is the hour for prayers," the girl said, clearly implying we should ask someone else.

"Then I'll wait until you are finished." Claire was oblivious. She'd been acting so righteous lately that I'd forgotten she was an arrogant villainess too.

"Uh, umm... well..."

"What is it?" Claire had a fierce stare and an overpowering presence.

"Oh! I-I'm sorry..."

"You haven't done anything wrong."

"I-I'm sorry."

"Again. In any case, I shall be waiting for you to finish."

"O-oh, yes..." The nun shot her eyes over to me for a moment, as if crying for help, but she returned to her prayer after I shook my head.

There was silence.

The nun looked completely in her element while praying. The fear she'd shown moments ago was gone, and instead, she looked like an ecclesiastical painting. Upon closer inspection, she had an attractive figure and pretty face. She seemed younger than Claire and me, but there was something about her that felt off.

“What are you gawking at?” Claire said.

“I wasn’t gawk—oh! Are you jelly, Miss Claire?!”

“What are you talking about?! I am not jelly! What is jelly?!”

“Be quiet in the prayer hall, mollusks,” the young girl scolded us. Claire and I couldn’t believe our ears.

“Huh?”

“Oh! Th-that... I’m sorry! Lilly sometimes says thing she shouldn’t...” So her name was Lilly, and she wasn’t *entirely* as meek as she seemed. Oh no. I had a soft spot for cute girls with a shy stutter.

“Lilly?” said Claire. “I believe I’ve heard that name before... In any case, are you done praying now?”

“Y-yes... I apologize for making you wait,” Lilly said, straightening her posture.

“I wish to ask you about the Church. Will you speak to me?”

“Th-the Church? It might be better if you speak to the public relations manager at reception...”

“I don’t wish to hear what the Church tells everyone. I want to know the truth about everything that happens here. Including the problems.”

“Oh, oh...?” Lilly looked puzzled.

“Miss Claire desires to address the issue of peasant poverty,” I said.

“P-poverty...?”

“Yes. She was hoping the Church might facilitate those efforts.”

“I-I see. There is certainly some truth to that. I-I would like to help you, but—” She turned her head and looked at me hard. “I-I’ve seen you somewhere before, yes?”

“I was actually just thinking that I’d seen *you* before, Lilly.” But I couldn’t for the life of

me recall where.

"Not the most original pickup line, now is it?" Claire piped in.

"N-no! I had n-no intention of—"

"That's right. I only have eyes for you, Miss Claire. Oh, Miss Claire, are you jelly? This time I think you really are jelly."

"I am not jelly! I don't even know what language that word came from, but stop it!"

"I said to be quiet in the hall of worship, senile eggplants!" Lilly barked.

Claire fell stone silent. So did I.

"Oh, no, no... I'm so sorry..." Lilly's insults were so bizarre that it was hard to believe they were accidental, but she sounded genuinely contrite.

An elderly man approached us. "Is something wrong, Miss Lilly?"

"Oh, Bishop Rhona. These people wish to know more about the Church, so I was going to speak to them."

"Miss Lilly, you needn't bother with such mundane tasks."

"B-but she is a noble... It's not every day that the daughter of the Minister of Finance wants to talk to me."

It seemed my hunch was right. Lilly held some sort of position in this church.

"I haven't introduced myself yet, but m-my full name is Lilly Lilium. I am daughter of the Bauer Kingdom chancellor, Salas Lilium, and I serve as cardinal at the Spiritual Church," she said with an awkward laugh. "Pl-please, allow me to tell you what you wish to know. The Church—"

Claire stopped her. "You can skip the establishment of the Church. I am well versed in history."

"I-I see," Lilly replied. "Then I will move on to our guiding principles."

According to Lilly, the Church believed all people were equal in the eyes of the spirits. It sought the blessings and benefits of the spirits and prayed that be shared among all people.

"There are noble families in the B-Bauer Kingdom, but there is no social status in the eyes of the spirits."

"And yet the disparity between rich and poor is very real," Claire pointed out.

Lilly nodded. "Y-yes. That is why the Church is attempting to redistribute some of that wealth."

The Church had two main sources of income. One was donations from aristocrats, which it attempted to redistribute to the poor as charity. The other was the clinic, which asked people to pay according to what they could afford.

"So, the Church depends on the royal family and nobility to survive?"

"N-no, that's not the case. The Church also owns land throughout the country, and even does some business," Lilly explained, adding that it was actually involved in a wide range of activities such as collecting taxes on its land, and dairy and crop farming. "Th-this allows the Church to maintain a certain degree of independence from the ruling powers of each country, which enables our goals to be fulfilled."

"I see..." Claire nodded as she listened intently.

"Do you take donations from commoners?" I asked.

"Of course. But such donations are generally minor, and the greater ones are usually from prosperous merchants."

"So, they don't contribute much to the Church?"

"N-no, quite the opposite. The most important thing we receive from commoners is their faith. Faith is vital. It is what makes the Church a real church."

"Is faith really that important? I'm an atheist, so I don't really get it."

"Huh?!" Lilly was speechless at my modern Japanese sensibilities.

“Rae, that was terribly rude. Apologize.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“N-no. I think I understand what you’re trying to say. There are communities in the lands owned by the Church where nonbelievers live. There are people there who say the same sorts of things as you, Rae.” Lilly continued, “B-but religion is real. Religion gives power to people who would not have had any, otherwise. To put it in a way that someone unfamiliar with religion might understand... Well, it is a well-scripted fairy tale that has been cultivated over the course of history.”

“Cardinal Lilly,” said Bishop Rhona, “if the Pope heard what you just said, she would faint.”

“Y-yes, you’re right. Sorry!”

She was correct, though. Religion depended on things that couldn’t be verified, but that belief, and history, also gave it real power. And that power was supported by the faith of the people.

“I-I think that religion can also provide a system of values,” Lilly said.

“A system of values?”

“W-well, I mean, what to value and what not to value. How to express the relationship between things with and without value.”

I’d read somewhere that Japanese people tended to think of religion as a “foreign” thing. But religion could interact closely with daily life and serve as a set of guiding principles for how to live that life—like doctrines against eating pork, for instance.

“I’ve always thought religion shows people how to live better,” Claire said.

“Hmmm,” I said. The problem was when people’s ideas of what constituted “better” came into conflict—but this world seemed relatively free of such religious wars or disputes, so I decided not to get into it.

“Let’s get to the point,” Claire said. “How does the Church feel about the poverty in Bauer? I see it as a path to eroding faith in the aristocracy and fomenting corruption in its ranks.”

"I-I don't know much about such complicated things, but I think you are correct. However, I do not think this will last for long."

"You mean...?"

"Prince Yu said as much. The aristocrats will soon fall."

Claire paled at Lilly's words. "What does he mean by that?"

"I-I am unsure of the details. B-but Prince Yu seems to think that the development of magical tools will usher in an era where an individual's skill will speak louder than their lineage. He said that when it comes to that, the nobles won't be able to stand up to the commoners who outnumber them..."

This was, more or less, what Yu had said to us when the Commoner Movement was picking up momentum at the Academy. At the time, Claire's only reaction had been pure denial, but now she could no longer abjure the truth of his words.

"I don't believe the nobles will simply stand by and see their titles abolished," Claire said.

"O-of course, there will likely be resistance. But I do not think they can withstand the tide of history."

"In that case, how can the aristocracy be abolished?"

"Th-there are many countries who have already done so. For example, a country called Phrance in the west."

"How did they...?"

Lilly paused for a moment. "Th-there was a revolution."

"A revolution?"

"Th-there was an uprising of the peasant class, and they tore down the nobility by force. In other words, it was a civil war between the new powers and the old."

"Are you saying there will be a civil war...?" The blood drained from Claire's face.

"I-I don't think that will necessarily happen in the Bauer Kingdom. But looking at the tides around the world, I think the time when a minority of elite hold all the wealth is coming to an end." In Claire's eyes, meek, delicate Lilly probably looked like an oracle delivering a prophecy of death.

"After a revolution, what happens to the former nobles?"

"It depends on the country, but most are reduced to being citizens of the same status as the commoners. Some are executed."

"Miss Claire!" I rushed to support Claire as she tottered.

"I-I'm fine. Just a bit dizzy."

"Let's stop here for today. It's too much information to take in at once," I suggested.

"I-I think so too," Lilly agreed. She looked guilty to see her words so shock another person.

"Yes. This is plenty for today. Cardinal Lilly, may I come speak to you again?"

"Yes. If an aristocrat like you is willing to come talk to me, then I will do my best to make time as well."

"Thank you very much."

We thanked Lilly and the Bishop, and left the Cathedral. The carriage ride home was very quiet.

"Rae... About what the Cardinal said. What did you think?"

"It was complicated... and I'm hungry."

"You're doing it again. I know your results from the Academy aptitude test. I know you aren't as ridiculous as you pretend to be." Claire sighed. "I wanted to learn how the Church worked, but the conversation went in a direction I didn't expect. Especially about the revolution... To think something so savage could occur."

Savagery was subjective, of course. Some might consider the behavior of the royals and nobles far more barbaric.

“I wonder if we nobles are fated to disappear...”

“Even if you were no longer an aristocrat, I would still protect you, Miss Claire.”

“But she said that nobles were being executed...”

“That depends on the revolution. If you assist the revolutionaries, they may have reason to be grateful,” I offered, but Claire wasn’t hearing it.

“Are you telling me to betray my people?!”

“‘Traitor’ makes it sound like a bad thing. Think of it as being an ally to the common folk.”

“I am an *aristocrat*!”

“Didn’t you say you want to abolish poverty? What are you willing to give up for that cause?”

Claire stopped short, a complicated look on her face. She genuinely wanted to do something to address the pain of the people, but she had never considered that she might have to give up her own nobility in order to achieve that.

“Miss Claire, you received a great deal of new information all at once today. This isn’t something you can solve with ease. Let’s set it aside for tonight, eat, and get some rest.”

“Yes... you’re right...”

Even so, Claire remained deep in thought for the rest of the ride back. I wondered if she would be able to sleep that night.

Still, all said and done, today had gone pretty well. Now Claire understood the concept of a revolution. And she understood she had the option to stand on the side of the people.

A revolution... was coming. This much was certain. I knew that from my knowledge of the game. But I wouldn’t let things turn out the way they did there.

I would never let Claire be executed.

*Miss Claire, I will protect you no matter what.* I swore this in my heart to Claire, who still had her head against the window of the carriage, deep in thought.

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After that, we visited Cardinal Lilly daily for some time. While Claire heard many things that shocked her, it seemed to me like she was seeking out an ideal society. For my part, I indirectly provided her an overview of Japan's democracy to help develop her understanding.

During one of these discussions, I left to visit the ladies' room when we took a tea break. On my way back, I overheard something unpleasant.

"Miss Lilly is meeting with the daughter of the Minister of Finance now?"

"I know... It's disgusting."

Two nuns, who'd probably been ordered to fetch tea, were talking about Lilly behind her back. I hadn't planned on eavesdropping, but I couldn't help but keep listening.

"It must be true that Lilly is a homosexual, then."

"How immoral... and while engaged to Prince Yu too."

It was then that I remembered where I had seen Lilly before. She was the character betrothed to Yu. It had taken me this long to remember because she didn't even appear in the game, just the character reference guide, which never even gave her a name. Her description in the guide said she had a secret. Was that secret her sexual orientation?

"She's only cardinal because her father is the chancellor, despite her perverted inclinations."

"Apparently there's more. Some expect her to be the next pope."

"What a stain on the Church that would be."

I couldn't restrain myself anymore. "Isn't that a little arbitrary?"

The filth the nuns had been whispering a minute ago was suddenly all swept away, replaced by expressions of demure devotion.

"And who are you?"

"I am Miss Claire's servant," I said. And, with absolute frankness, "Is same-sex love really such a terrible thing?"

"Ummm..." One grew evasive.

"At the very least, I don't think it natural," the other responded.

The one who'd avoided answering me signaled the other to stop, but apparently, she'd decided this was the hill she would die on. Nuns had a certain amount of status and power in this world. More than commoners, at the very least. Even the daughters of nobles sometimes became nuns. There was no reason for this woman to fear a mere maid.

"Natural? What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Think about it. Same-sex partners can't produce children—it's a relationship that bears no fruit."

"If birthing children is a condition of legitimate love," I said, "then heterosexual couples who are unable to conceive must not be valid either."

"Well..."

"And if being natural is desirable, should you refuse medical treatment when you're sick? Medical science defies the course of nature in every instance of its use."

The nun probably didn't expect me to debate her like this. She grew red in the face and started tripping on her words. "Such sophistry..."

"Please, tell me specifically which part of what I said was sophism. Otherwise, I'll take your dispute as nothing more than an emotional argument."

"It doesn't matter what sort of glib answers you come up with. Homosexuality is not normal, and it is practiced only by a heretical few!" So she had switched to the numbers argument.

"I'll accept that there are fewer homosexuals than heterosexuals. But what does that prove? What is wrong with a number being smaller?"

“It’s proof that it’s not *normal*!”

“All right, so a higher number means something is ‘normal’? But you haven’t yet explained why the ‘abnormal’ smaller number ought to be considered bad.”

“Well... because...”

“Do you think happening to belong to a majority means you have the right to attack someone in a minority?”

“Argh... Never mind your logic! This—this heresy, it’s *disgusting*!”

“And there it is. Pure physiological disgust. You can’t understand it, and you don’t want to understand it, so you simply attack it.”

“And what’s wrong with that?!”

“But wouldn’t your own Church object to such rank discrimination? I thought you taught equality under the spirits. Are you sure these values of yours aren’t in violation of the Church’s teachings?”

The nun stopped short, the color draining from her face.

“I don’t want to refute or show you contempt,” I said. “I only want you to be freed from your bias against homosexuality.”

There was silence.

“I won’t even ask you to understand, then. But can’t you at least respect them?”

“Are you a homosexual too?” she asked, some of the hostility leaving her voice. This nun wasn’t a bad person. As I’ve said before, hers was the prevailing opinion in this world. All she did was give it voice.

“Yes,” I said.

“I... I cannot acknowledge this yet. But I believe I understand what you want to say. I will think on it. When—if I devise a rebuttal, then perhaps we might debate again.”

“Thank you very much. That’s enough.”

She turned and left with the nun who had been standing by, trembling.

Whew. I'd been gone much longer than I planned and gotten involved in a complicated discussion to boot. I needed a Claire refill, and fast. I was going to hug her so hard once I got back to her.

But when I turned, Lilly was right there, behind me. She didn't say anything, just stood there, dumbfounded.

And jewel-like tears dropped from her eyes.

"Wh-what happened, Miss Lilly?!"

"Much..."

"What?"

"Th-thank you... very much..."

Lilly sobbed, wrapping her arms around me. Confused, I hugged her back. She was about two heads shorter than me, and her dainty body was surprisingly light. I had wanted a cheering dose of Claire, but, well, Lilly smelled nice too.

"I always thought my feelings were a crime... but you..."

Lilly was crying her heart out. Well, it seemed like those nuns hadn't just been spouting rumors—I had no doubt now that Lilly was queer.

"No one has ever affirmed m-my feelings before... It was so cool, the way you said exactly what you think, Rae..." Lilly looked up at me with her tear-stained face.

She was really cute.

*Remember, you have Claire...*

"I-I think I might be in love with you, Rae," Lilly said.

Just then, there was a sound behind Lilly.

Oh no.

Claire stood there, arms folded, incandescently livid.



"Here, Rae. Say ahhh?" Lilly had latched on to me, trying to get me to drink from her cup.

"Cardinal Lilly, that is *improper*," my beloved Claire reprimanded as she tilted her own cup elegantly to her lips. Calm as Claire seemed on the outside, I knew the cup she kept putting to her lips had been empty for a while now.

"I-I'm sorry. But I've found the person of my dreams. I will marry Rae!"

"You can't marry someone of the same sex in this kingdom," Claire said.

"I-In that case we'll just be lovers."

"That won't do either now, will it?" Claire said. I thought I saw a vein popping on her temple. She set her cup down with an uncharacteristic rattling sound.

"Are you jelly, Miss Claire?!" I gasped.

"I am not *jelly*! And you, Lilly—what about your engagement to Yu?"

"O-our engagement was decided by our parents. It has nothing to do with our feelings."

"But that's what marriage is, isn't it?"

Marriage in the Bauer Kingdom was pretty different from the way marriage operated in modern Japan. In this kingdom, it was primarily an alliance between houses, and while that might have been partially the case in Japan's past, nowadays we did things pretty differently.

"I-I would rather have love than marriage. In that way, Rae is perfect."

There was a sharp sound as Claire's teacup hit the desk. "Oh my, this cup was cracked. The handle came off. Will you please get me a new one?"

"Y-yes. But... that's strange. This cup is brand new..."

It was pretty obvious what had happened, given that cup's handle was partly melted. If Miss Claire was losing control of her magic, this was bad. I needed to firmly and

clearly turn down Lilly.

"Miss Lilly, my heart already belongs to another," I said.

"What?! Is that true?"

"Yes. I have already devoted my entire life to Miss Claire," I said. When I did, Claire lifted her chin with a proud look on her face. She was so cute.

"Miss Claire, is that true?"

"I have no such intentions, but this person is free to think whatever she likes," Claire said with a confidence that partially stemmed from hiding her embarrassment and partially from already being the winner.

"O-oh I see! In that case, I still have a chance!"

"O-oh? Umm..."

"If Rae's love is still unrequited, I will win her over."

"No, I mean I—"

"I-It's fine!" Lilly insisted. "I heard that women are better off with people who love them, rather than people whom they love!"

Claire and I both put our heads in our hands at Lilly's sudden increase in intensity. When we first met her, we'd thought her a timid, meek little creature, but we now knew that she had an aggressive, impulsive side too.

"Also... Master Yu likes someone else, not m-me," she said almost under her breath. I sensed a hint of loneliness in that utterance.

"And who would that be?"

"I-I don't know. But he told me that there is someone he has liked for a long time."

I suspected it was probably Misha. Despite the desires of the game's design, I hadn't approached Yu, so the only likely candidate was her. They were childhood friends, after all, and he'd said, "for a long time," so it made sense.

"Rae, what can I do to make you fall in love with me?"

"I can't. I only have eyes for Miss Claire."

"N-no! I won't give up. This is... the first time I've felt this way. I-I finally know love," Lilly said, looking at me as if she were dreaming. I wasn't sure how to react.

"First loves never last," I said.

"Th-then Rae's love for Claire won't last either, right...?"

"No, because it isn't my first love."

"Huh?!"

"Huh?!"

The two of them looked at each other.

"Rae, you've been in love with someone other than me?" Claire asked in a brittle tone.

"Ahhh. Uh... well, yes."

"Oh, *really*. Hmm."

"What was your first love like, Rae?" Lilly asked.

"I'm not giving you any ideas, Miss Lilly."

"I want to hear too," Claire said firmly.

"It's really not an interesting story. There was a girl that I was close to, and I liked her, but she turned me down."

"I-I want to know more!" Lilly exclaimed.

"Stop grumbling and tell us everything."

Ugh... It wasn't a very pleasant story. "I'm telling you, it's really boring. Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Yes, please," Lilly begged.

"Hurry up with it," Claire demanded.

"Ah... fine. It happened when I was in junior high..."

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"Now remember, this guy's a complete and total nerd. I wanted to say, 'don't make me laugh' when he asked me to go out with him, but really, it wasn't funny at all."

"Don't say that, Misaki. He must have been doing his best."

"Aww, you're so sweet, Kosaki. To even have sympathy for a mega-nerd like that..."

"Th-that's not true... Rei, you agree, right?"

I turned around when I heard my name. A girl with short hair, dyed brown, and another with a black, medium-length bob were looking at me. We were in a classroom at Yurigaoka Academy Junior High, my name was Rei Ohashi, and my two best friends were having fun chatting about random stuff.

"Rei?"

"It's nothing. Well... Misaki has all the guys chasing her, so she has really high standards," I finally said.

"That's true." Kosaki nodded furiously in agreement.

Misaki was the queen bee of our class. She got good grades, was athletic, bright and outgoing, and good at expressing herself. Kosaki and I were her sidekicks. Kosaki was timid, the kind of girl other people rode roughshod all over; but she and Misaki had bonded over their similar names. They were known at school as the "Saki-Saki Combo". If Misaki was a beautiful rose, Kosaki was a dandelion blooming by the side of the road.

The only thing I had going for me, meanwhile, was my height. I was ordinary in every other way. If I had to compare myself to a flower, I'd probably be a Canadian Goldenrod. I didn't like being in the spotlight, but I had somehow been drawn into Misaki's clique, though my reasons for being there were starting to change.

"I wonder," Misaki said. "I mean, nerds like that think all girls are two-dimensional."

"Y-you're being judgmental, Misaki."

"But it's true. My older brother had a bunch of manga that he let me read. It was bad."

I didn't really read manga or watch anime, but I thought she wasn't being entirely fair to assume all nerds were perverts who either fantasized about girls or idolized them. I didn't say that out loud, of course. I wasn't the best at reading the room, but I was sharp enough to realize that contradicting Misaki would be dangerous. Kosaki had been forgiven her tiny objection just now because she was Misaki's favorite.

"Anyway," Misaki continued, "some girls are nerds too. They read those... what are they called? Boys' Love manga? The ones where guys are doing it with other guys? Gross."

That shocked me, even though I wasn't a big yaoi reader. The opposite, in fact. I forced myself to look away from Kosaki, whom I had been glancing at repeatedly.

I had been infatuated with Kosaki of late. She was adorable, like a cute little animal, and I was still a girl who liked cute things. At first, I'd thought that was all it was. But the way she flipped her hair, the color of her lip gloss, her bashful expression—every little thing she did made my heart flutter.

I wasn't completely clueless. I'd read about lesbians in yuri manga, and I recognized myself in them. At that time, though, I still thought there was something wrong with the way I felt, and so I did my best to hide my feelings. Being an outlier at school made you a target, and more than anything I didn't want Misaki to find out what I was really thinking.

"Someone like her?" Misaki pointed to another girl, who had naturally curly hair and wore glasses. "Katano is always drawing, isn't she? Stuff like that nasty manga."

"That's not true," Kosaki protested. "She's really good."

"Kosaki, why would you defend someone like that?" Misaki retorted in a voice much louder than the one Kosaki had used. Katano must have heard them, but she continued quietly concentrating on her drawing. "What do you think, Rei? Isn't it gross?"

"Hmmm... I don't really know much about that stuff," I said.

"Right? It's impossible to understand. It's so sick."

I'd tried to give a neutral response, but Misaki had twisted it into affirmation. I wondered what Katano thought of me. When I glanced up at her, she was looking my way, and our eyes met. Flustered, I looked away.

"What is it, Katano? You have something to say?" Misaki said threateningly, noticing Katano looking at us.

"Not really..." Katano replied meekly, then went back to her drawing.

"What's up with her? Creepy," Misaki spat out.

"Misaki! Jeez... Sorry, Katano," Kosaki interceded.

Guilt welled up in my chest, But I couldn't go explaining to Misaki what I'd really meant to say, not now. I'd just be giving her ammo to use against both Katano and myself.

"This is exactly why I hate nerds," Misaki complained. "They can never read the room."

She kept going, ranting about all nerds, including Katano. I thought she was going too far, but I didn't dare protest. I was too afraid of being cast out of the fragile social network of our class. Even the littlest thing could get you ostracized.

Still, I envied Katano. She could say what she wanted without worrying about upsetting the balance. She had strength that I didn't. I was jealous of how she seemed not to fear solitude.

*If I could be like her, then Kosaki and I could—*

I shook my head to chase away the dangerous thought I almost had.

"What is it Rei?" Kosaki tilted her head, looking at me.

"Nothing, nothing." I laughed to throw her off.

*It's like they say, right? Young girls who are as close as we are sometimes feel something similar to romantic love. When I get older, I'm sure I'll like boys just like everyone else. I'm not abnormal.*

I was young and afraid. But people can't stay children forever, and it wasn't long before I learned that the hard way.

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"Hey! Ohashi," a male teacher called to me after class one day.

"Yes?" I stopped packing up my things and walked toward his desk.

"Sorry, but can you take these printouts to Katano's house?" He handed me a stack of papers. The top one was for parent-teacher conferences. "She's home with the flu. If she doesn't get this printout in time, her parents may not be able to come."

"Why me?"

"You live closest to her house. There's the address."

I started to notice the class watching this conversation with curiosity.

"Can't you just take pictures and email them? Ask someone who knows her."

"Well, I don't know her email address. If you know someone who does have it, you're welcome to ask them to do it. Thanks," the teacher said, getting up to leave.

"Hey, wait..."

But he was gone. I shrugged and resumed getting ready to go home, a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"What a disaster. You can't go to that mega-nerd's house," Misaki said.

"Misaki, don't call her that," said Kosaki.

"Ha ha ha... Well, it can't be helped. See you at school tomorrow," I said awkwardly. I hurried through saying goodbye to the Saki-Saki Combo and left the school.

It turned out the Katanos lived surprisingly close to me—pretty much kitty-corner to my house. Since my dad had to move a lot for work, I didn't have any childhood friends around. We might have said hello to the neighbors when we moved in, but I hadn't met every single one of them. I would never have known Katano lived there if my teacher

hadn't sent me to her.

I dropped my stuff at home and then picked up the bundle of printouts to take to Katano's house. I took some deep breaths in front of the door. For some reason, I was extremely nervous when I rang the doorbell.

"Yes?" said a voice over the intercom.

"I'm Ohashi, a classmate of Shiko. I came to deliver the printouts we got while Shiko was absent."

"Oh, thank you. Please come in." The front door unlocked itself. I'd planned to hand off the printouts and leave, but flustered by Katano's mom's invitation, I couldn't just stand there gaping. I went inside.

"Hello," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

"Come in, come in. I'm so glad to see Shiko does have such a good friend!"

"No, I—" What was I planning to say? That I wasn't actually her friend? I stopped myself mid-sentence and instead decided to do what I'd come for. "Here are the printouts. Parent-teacher conferences are coming up, so the teacher asked that you please work out the schedule."

"Thank you. I'm sorry, but will you take them to Shiko's room? I can't take my eyes off the stove right now," her mother said.

"Oh... I don't know where her room is..." I said confused.

"On the second floor, in the back."

I couldn't escape. I decided to just hurry up and hand them off. I climbed the stairs and stood in front of the room at the end of the hall, where a doorplate read "Shiko." I knocked three times.

There was no response. I knocked again, but there was still no response. Was she sleeping? What was I supposed to do?

*Wait.* This was perfect. If she was asleep, then I could just put the printouts on her desk, tell her mother goodbye, and be on my way.

“Excuse me...” I said in a tiny voice, opening the door as quietly as possible. “...Wow. Amazing...”

Katano’s room was the epitome of nerd rooms. There were anime posters on the wall and rows of manga on bookshelves. A glass display case was filled with figurines and other kinds of merch that I’d never even known existed.

I caught myself. Glancing over, I saw Katano sleeping soundly in her bed. I didn’t want her to wake up while I stared at the wonders of her room. This was my chance.

The room might have been overflowing with anime merchandise, but the space around her desk was clean and neat. When I went to set down the bundle of printouts, I accidentally moved the computer mouse, waking up the computer from sleep mode.

“This is... a manga?”

The image that appeared on the screen was that of two naked girls, looking into each other’s eyes. I’d heard people were drawing manga on computers lately. The illustration was what fascinated me. One of the girls looked shy and had a bob cut, while the other was tall, with an open, honest expression. Even though they were both naked, strangely, I didn’t find the picture vulgar at all. In fact, it was drawn with a delicate touch that made it beautiful.

“I used Kosaki and you as the models.”

I heard a barely audible voice and flipped around to see Katano sitting up in bed in her pajamas, looking at me.

“Oh... no... Ah... I....!” I was utterly confused.

“It’s okay. You came to bring me the printouts, right?” Katano was calm, which helped calm me down too.

“Sorry I looked without asking,” I said.

“Nuh-uh. I didn’t ask if I could use you as a model, so I guess we’re even,” Katano said, laughing a little. She looked much cuter without her glasses. And happier than she was at school too.

“What do you mean by models?” I asked.

"It sounds like Misaki thinks I'm a yaoi fan, but it's actually the opposite. I'm into yuri," she said, taking the conversation in a direction I hadn't expected. Katano went on to tell me that she was writing a manga with the theme of love between women. "Do you think it's disgusting?"

"I... don't think it's disgusting." I hadn't planned to tell the truth, but the words came out anyway.

"I suppose that's true," Katano mused.

"What's... true?" I asked, immediately regretting it.

"I mean, you like Kosaki, don't you?"

"Huh?!" Looking back, my expression must have been comical. But it wasn't funny at the time. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to hide it. I told you, I'm into yuri. I don't have any problems with that sort of thing."

The matter-of-fact way she said that scared me. If Katano knew about my crush on Kosaki, my social life at school could end tomorrow. I desperately tried to deny it. "No... not me! I'm not some kind of weirdo!"

"Weirdo? Is it weird?" Katano stayed very calm, even though I was getting worked up. "Isn't anyone free to like whomever they like?"

I was too dumbfounded to string together a sentence in reply. Ignoring me, Katano took some books from her shelf and put them in a bag with a picture of an anime character on it.

"Try reading these, if you want," she said.

I looked down. The book on top looked like a novel. There was a drawing of a beautiful young girl on the cover.

"I'm sure it will help you relax."

For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to refuse. Maybe, deep down, I wanted someone to affirm what I was feeling. Whatever the reason, I accepted the books.

"Let me know what you think after you read it," Katano said and then crawled back into her bed. Her breathing was heavy with sleep again in a minute. Still dazed, all I could do was leave and go back downstairs.

"Oh? Are you leaving already? You're welcome to stay for dinner," Katano's mom offered.

"No... I think my mom is making me something."

"Oh? Well, next time, then."

"Yes. Goodbye."

I left Katano's house.

That night I read the books Katano loaned me. And then—

My world changed forever.

\*\*\*

The day after I visited Katano's house, I stayed home from school with the flu. I'd probably caught it from Katano. Even though I had a fever, I engrossed myself in my borrowed novels.

What Katano had given me was a series titled *Between Prayer and Love*. It was set at a prestigious all-girl Catholic high school, and the main character was a devout Christian student who had feelings for one of her upperclassmen. The books dealt with the struggle between her conservative faith and her queerness, and her gradual growth over time. Her platonic relationship with her favored upperclassman was developed in fascinating detail, as were her heartwarming friendships with other girls, and the books had elaborate illustrations to boot. I was utterly captivated.

The series had one character who was openly queer. Her name was Hijiri, and she was one of the main character's upperclassmen too. Hijiri was always there to validate the main character's feelings, explaining to her that same-sex love wasn't a sin. The main character resisted at first, but she slowly came to accept herself. Reading her journey, I felt like my own feelings were being affirmed alongside hers.

A few days later, I was in bed with a cool compress on my forehead, reading the book

Katano had loaned me for the umpteenth time. My fever was gone, but my father was a worrywart who insisted that I rest, so I had nothing else to do. Then the door opened unexpectedly.

“Rei, you have a visitor,” said my mom.

“Mom, knock next time,” I said.

“I did knock. You just didn’t notice.” Must have been too absorbed in my book. “What should I do? Do you want her to come up? She said her name is Katano.”

I was quiet. I’d assumed it was Misaki or Kosaki, and... to be honest, I was a little afraid of seeing Katano. There was something mysterious about her. But I did really want to thank her for the book.

“Just for a bit,” I said.

“Okay,” my mom said, going back out. Soon after, someone knocked on the door three times.

“Come in.”

“Hello. Oh, you look better than I expected,” Katano said, dropping her bag onto the floor. “This is... a pretty plain room, isn’t it?”

“Don’t look at it. I already know.” I didn’t like feminine furnishings, at least not at the time. I liked cute things, but I was so big and awkward that I never felt like they really suited me.

Maybe I would get some more, now.

“The novel was good,” I said.

“Isn’t it? What part did you like?”

We chatted for a while, discussing each of the characters and what we liked about them, and commenting on our favorite highlight scenes. It was the first time I’d ever talked this passionately about a book to anyone. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it.

"It looks like you've treated more than just your influenza," Katano said eventually.

"Yeah... Maybe I can face my own sexuality now."

The series was still ongoing, so we didn't know what the main character would ultimately choose. Unlike her, I had never been strongly possessed of any particular faith, and so I had no intention to keep denying my own feelings.

"It's all thanks to you, Katano. I am really grateful," I said.

"Then call me Shiko. It's unfair if I'm the only one using a given name."

"You're right. Thank you, Shiko."

"You're welcome."

In a way, I felt like Shiko was my Hijiri. Like Hijiri did for the main character in *Between Prayer and Love*, Shiko showed me a path forward when I was struggling with my queerness. Calling her by her given name felt right. I was bursting with newfound confidence, sure that I would never lie to myself again.

And yet.

When I returned to school the next day, something was off. When I said hello to someone, they ignored me. The girls who I would normally hang out with shut me out of their circle. At first, I thought it was just because I'd been absent for a while, but this was clearly something else.

They were avoiding me.

"Hey, Kosaki. It's really rare to get the flu during this season, isn't it?" Misaki said in a loud voice, looking in my direction.

"Y-yes..." Kosaki sounded uncomfortable, but she was looking my way too.

"Hey, didn't someone else get the flu recently too?"

"W-well, yes."

"Hmmm... how suspicious," Misaki said, her voice dripping with venom.

Then a boy joined in. “Maybe they did something to transfer it?”

The entire classroom broke into laughter. The normalcy that I’d been so desperately trying to maintain was crumbling right before my eyes.

“No...!” I cried. “I haven’t done anything like that!”

“Why are you freaking out, Rei?” Misaki asked. “Who said we’re talking about you?”

I felt like a mouse being toyed with by a cat. “Shiko said this would happen,” I stammered. “That you’d get the wrong—”

“Shiko? Are you calling that nerd by her first name now? You must *really* like her.”

“N-no! That’s not true!”

“Then what? Why are you two such pals all of a sudden?”

“I just... got some advice from her...”

“Advice? About what? How to be good in bed?”

Crude laughter sounded all around me in the classroom. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

And then—

“How can you be this stupid? What are you, some kind of monkey?” A sharp, clever voice cut through the laughter. Katano stood up at her desk, looking over at us.

“What is it, Katano? Something wrong?” Misaki asked.

“You’re being absurd. You’re so pathetic, you make me sick. How old do you think you are? Did your body grow up while your brain stayed in kindergarten?” Shiko pulled no punches. Misaki was speechless, caught off guard by such ferocity from someone who was normally so meek. Shiko seized the opportunity to push harder. “Anyway, Rei has someone she likes. And it’s not me. If you were really her friend, you’d know that.”

“What do you know about it?!”

"Oh, whatever. Just stop trying to drag me into your little kindergarten games. I'm not going to stoop to your level."

"You!"

It looked like Misaki and Shiko might come to blows any moment.

"Stop! Will you just stop?! I hate this," Kosaki cried. "Misaki... I hate it when anyone in our class fights... and I hate it most of all when you fight with someone..."

She burst into tears, rendering everyone in the classroom silent. Misaki, Shiko, and every other student in the classroom looked at Kosaki in amazement.

"Tsk... Fine. C'mon, stop crying. Sorry, everyone." Misaki clicked her tongue and hugged Kosaki. The boys who had joined in the teasing also dispersed in groups of two or three.

Realizing that things had settled down, at least for the moment, I breathed a sigh of relief. Shiko had already returned to her own seat and was reading a book. She sure could switch gears fast.

But then—

*I wonder if this is the end of my peaceful days.*

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Just as I expected, I was snubbed by Misaki's group from the next day forward. Even though I had feared being alone so much, now that it had actually happened, it wasn't so bad. In fact, it was refreshing to not have to keep up the charade of superficial relationships. Okay, it made things hard when it came time to pick partners for gym class or the school trip, but overall, my life was less complicated now.

I started partnering with Shiko a lot during gym class. We weren't always the odd ones out in the exact same way, but we wound up together a lot. I used to go straight home after school, but now I started visiting her manga club and talking about manga with the other members too.

My relationship with the Saki-Saki combo remained fraught. Misaki openly avoided me, but Kosaki and I occasionally studied in the library together. Even so, Kosaki was

concerned about what Misaki thought, so she wouldn't speak to me out in the open much anymore. The only contact we had was in the library. I allowed myself to admit that I enjoyed these monthly "dates" with the person I liked (even if I knew only I thought of them that way).

One other thing changed. I decided I wanted to create something, probably thanks to Shiko's influence, so I started writing fanfiction. Drawing really challenged me, but the written word just worked for my brain. I found it relaxing, despite my complete lack of skill. Shiko and her manga club buddies were huge nerds who had plenty of great manga, games, and anime to recommend. I read, watched, and played them all, then wrote fanfiction about the characters I liked.

"Yeah, I think it's good. It's pretty rough, but really passionate."

"Yeah. It's got this really fresh feel to it."

"You should watch these sentence structures a bit, though."

"I see..."

I was back at the manga club, and its members were reading my latest work. This was back in the days before the "Cool Japan" campaign, and otaku interests were still niche rather than mainstream. Most people had the same scornful opinion of fannishness that Misaki did. I considered myself lucky to have found such kindred spirits, let alone people who would read my terrible first drafts and give me honest feedback.

"Hey, Rei, have you read the latest *Prayer-Love?*" Shiko asked. This was the shortened nickname fans used for the series she'd loaned me.

"Not yet. I was going to buy it on the way home."

"I see. You should prepare yourself. Something big happens."

"What? Oh, I want to know!" I was looking forward to reading it, but Shiko's expression was dark. "Is it bad?"

"I won't spoil it for you. Just read it."

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“Agh...”

Like I told Shiko, I bought the new volume of *Prayer-Love* on the way home and read it right away. I soon found out why Shiko had worn such a disappointed expression.

The upperclassman whom the main character was in love with was named Shoko, and she was a well-bred lady born to an old family that went back to the Muromachi period. She was willful and eccentric, but very likable, easily the most popular character in the series. The last volume had ended with the heroine confessing her feelings to Shoko, and we’d all been waiting to find out what happened next.

But tragedy struck in this new volume, and Shoko was hit by a car on her way to meet the heroine in the park at night. The scene where the main character found Shoko’s body was so heartrending that I cried, a testament to the author’s skill. The book ended with Hijiri holding the main character as she grieved.

“I wonder if this means she’s going to end up with Hijiri...?” I said.

Much as the book had moved me, I wasn’t a fan of this new twist in the tale. I didn’t know what to do with the gloom that consumed me. The Rei of the past would have had no way to express her frustration, but luckily, I had the perfect hobby now.

I would write fanfiction where Shoko lived.

Writing alternate versions of canon events was common practice in fanfiction. It required a love and understanding of the original material but provided the perfect meeting point between your hobby and your own desires.

“If I were the author, this is what I would write,” I said, and I stayed at my computer late into night, completely absorbed in the version of the story as I retold it.

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“You really did it...”

“I think your story works super well, Rei.”

“I think I like the original better, but yours made me cry a little too.”

The next day, the manga club read my fanfic and gave me their thoughts. Everyone had

read the latest book by now and been shocked by it, so they all had something to say.

"What did you think, Shiko?" I was grateful to hear their thoughts, but I wanted to hear Shiko's opinion most of all.

"I... I like both, but I think I prefer the original too."

"I see..."

"I'm sorry. It's not that I dislike yours."

"Yeah, I know. Thank you for reading it." I was just grateful that she'd read it and given me her honest opinion. "Shiko, do you ship the heroine with Hijiri?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm not as upset by what happened in the latest volume. You were rooting for her to end up with Shoko, right?"

"Yeah..." I said, slumping my shoulders in disappointment.

"I'm sorry." Shiko gave me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"I don't like what happened in the latest book, but it helped me realize something," I said.

"I see. So you're going to do it?"

"Yeah. I want to tell Kosaki I like her."

In my fanfic, the heroine told Shoko her true feelings earlier than she did in canon, which altered the course of events so Shoko never had her accident. It wasn't a particularly inventive change, but I wasn't all that good at writing yet. I'd still poured my entire soul into the fic, trying to get across the message that you should express your love before it's too late. You never know how much time you have left with someone you love. The latest *Prayer-Love* had taught me that.

I didn't think Kosaki would die anytime soon, of course, but one of us might transfer schools, or we might go our separate ways after we graduated. She might even start seeing someone else. I needed to tell her how I felt so I wouldn't end up like the main character in *Prayer-Love*.

“It’s about time.”

“You’re really going to do it?”

“Good luck!”

The manga club members encouraged me. I had already confided in them about my sexual orientation, and they’d accepted me, which was another thing contributing to my recent happiness.

“When are you going to do it?”

“Maybe tomorrow. We’re staying after school to work in the library.”

“I see. You can do this, Rei,” Shiko said.

If I’d paid more attention to her face, I would have seen that she wasn’t happy with my decision at all. But I didn’t realize that until much later.

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“I like you, Kosaki. Would you go out with me?”

“Huh? Wha?! What?!”

We were in the library after school. I chose a moment when we were alone to finally tell Kosaki that I liked her. I couldn’t think of anything but the same old tired lines, so I just came out with it. Maybe I actually didn’t have any talent with words.

Kosaki looked at first like she didn’t understand. Then, as she absorbed what I was saying, her face grew troubled. “Huh? You like me... You mean not as a friend?”

“Yeah. In a romantic way.”

“So, it’s true you like girls?”

“I don’t know if I *only* like girls. But I like you.” I couldn’t back down now. “Don’t you have fun when you’re with me?”

“I’m not saying I don’t!”

“Do you hate me?”

“No, I don’t hate you. But...”

“Don’t you think we’re on the same wavelength?”

“Well, maybe, but...” Kosaki wasn’t giving me the answer I was looking for, and I was getting flustered. That was why what she said next made me so happy. “I think... I need some time. Do I have to answer right now?”

“No, not at all. I’d much prefer you take your time rather than say no right now. Please think about it.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. I’m sorry for catching you off guard.”

We smiled at each other.

“Were you surprised?” I asked.

“How could I not be? I mean, I thought if you were going to say you liked a girl, it would surely be Katano.”

“Shiko?”

“Aren’t you guys super close now?”

“I guess so,” I said. I didn’t have any romantic feelings for Shiko, though.

“Did you know that Katano is actually Misaki’s childhood friend?” Kosaki asked.

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. I guess it’s pretty complicated.”

“What is?”

“It’s really not my story to tell... I bet Katano would tell you if you asked her.”

Honestly, I didn't want to know that badly.

"Anyway," I said, "it's closing time. Let's close up the library."

"Oh, you're right. Rei, can you flip the sign on the door?"

"On it."

I felt relief as I walked home that night. I'd confessed, and then Kosaki and I had talked just like we always did. It hadn't been awkward at all. I even thought that maybe I had a chance.

I was wrong. Dead wrong.

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"Good morning," I said, as usual, as I entered the classroom the next day.

Not a single person replied.

In retrospect, I should have realized it then. But I was a fool in love, fresh off the high of professing that love. I looked quizzically around the class and headed to my seat.

Then I saw the graffiti on my desk.

"What... is this?" Words were scrawled all over my desk in permanent ink. One phrase came up again and again. *Ohashi Rei is a lesbian.*

My stomach dropped. I looked around frantically for Kosaki, and I found her sitting next to Misaki, who was eyeing me and laughing viciously. That was when I understood. Kosaki had told Misaki what happened.

Of course she'd want to consult someone about something as big as another girl saying she liked her. And of course the first person she'd go to would be Misaki. And of course this was how Misaki would respond. This wasn't Kosaki's fault. I mean, she was partially to blame, but in the end, the fault was mine.

I understood, now. Reality didn't tie things up as neatly as fiction did. Friendship couldn't always be trusted. Queer love wouldn't always be understood or accepted.

I don't remember exactly what happened next.

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"Rei, are you all right?"

The next thing I did remember was Shiko, with a worried look on her face. School had already ended for the day, and I was sitting at my desk, lit by the evening sun. At some point the graffiti had disappeared. I learned later that Shiko spoke to the teacher and asked him to get it cleaned up.

"Shiko..."

"It's horrible. Unbelievable." Shiko was furious for me. She denounced the things that had been done to me as unfair and defended me from every angle.

"Thank you, Shiko."

"You don't need to thank me," Shiko said, her eyes moist. I knew exactly what was coming. "Hey, Rei. Would you consider me, instead of Uchiyama?"

Uchiyama was Kosaki's last name. I knew that much, but I didn't really understand what Shiko was saying.

"I like you, Rei," Shiko said more simply. I must have had a confused look on my face.

"Me...?"

"Yeah." Shiko nodded and hugged me.

If this *had* been a novel, maybe I would have come to love Shiko at that point. Instead, my emotions had frozen over like ice. I didn't feel anything.

No—that's not true. The first thought that crossed my mind was that *this* was the reason Shiko first spoke to me, and that *this* was why she'd worked to separate me from Misaki and Kosaki.

I thrust her away.

"Rei..."

"I'm sorry," was all I could say before I ran.

I was at my limit. I didn't want to think or do anything else; I just wanted to get away from there. When I got home, I skipped dinner, shut myself in my room, and cried and cried.

I thought the world was full of nothing but hurt.

After that, I didn't go back to school for a long time. My parents were worried, but I was afraid they would shun me like my classmates did. I couldn't bring myself to tell them I was queer, and therefore, I also couldn't tell them about the bullying (if you could call it that) that kept me out of school. It was about a month after I stopped going to school that I finally opened up to my parents.

"I see..." My mom looked surprised at first, but it only took her a moment to recover and give me a hug. "I may not be able to understand everything about you, but I am always on your side."

I've never forgotten what it was like to hear her say those words. I might never have recovered, if not for that moment.

My father was silent, and he wore a complicated look on his face, but a few days later, he took me to a support group for queer people and their families. I knew then that he was trying really hard to understand me, and that made me happier than anything.

Thanks to the support of my parents, I was able to go back to school after two months. Listening to the stories of other queer people set me free. I knew I was lucky, compared to most.

Even so, the way my first love had ended always stayed with me.

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I told this entire story to Claire and Lilly, altering or excluding details where necessary to conceal that it had happened in my past life.

Claire's reaction was immediate. "That's *horrible*. I'm furious to hear it. Rae, tell me where these people are. I'm going to set them on fire."

"I'll help, Miss Claire," Lilly volunteered.

Well, that was a bit extreme.

"It's okay," I said. "I didn't know it then, but Misaki's home life was really rough at the time. She was going through a bad patch. We actually became friends again after we graduated. We even formed our own Cryptid Club."

"Cryptid Club?"

"Yeah, we went hunting for the tsuchinoko."

"Tsuchinoko?!"

"Um, sorry, forget it." Some Japanese folklore was just never going to translate. Back to the topic at hand. "Anyway, there was a lot going on in our lives back then."

"It sounds to me like this Misaki person is just evil." Claire was still furious.

"It's more complicated than that," I soothed, trying to calm her down.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Lilly asked.

"Besides her problems at home, Misaki actually liked Shiko. But she couldn't accept that about herself."

"R-really?"

"Yes. The reason she banished me from her group was because she thought I would steal Shiko from her."

"Wh-whoa... so it was a love triangle?" Lilly moaned.

"No, a love square."

"What do you mean?!"

"Kosaki liked Misaki."

"That's... so complicated..."

Rei liked Kosaki, Kosaki liked Misaki, Misaki liked Shiko and Shiko liked Rei—in short,

it was right out of a soap opera. I borrowed a pen and paper to draw the love square out for my companions.

“What an absolute mess,” Claire said.

“Y-yes,” Lilly agreed.

“Well, we were all very young...”

“You’re still only in your mid-teens!”

“Ah, I was so young.”

“Not was! Use present tense!”

Oops. I’d fallen down the nostalgia hole. “Anyway, all three of them eventually made up. Finding out about Kosaki’s true feelings was the most interesting part. We used to think she was our little angel, but really, she was pretty devilish.”

“I had a feeling,” Claire said. “She sounds like the kind of person who thinks her adorable features entitle her to get away with anything.”

“Miss Claire, you’re exactly right.”

Everything Kosaki said or did was calculated. Her bashful smile, her mild demeanor, wanting everyone to get along—she did it all on purpose, even the part where she got us to treat her like a darling pet. Everyone underestimated her. Once she had someone eating out of the palm of her hand, she’d use them as she pleased.

“In the end, Kosaki and Misaki got together. Oh, and it was Ko and Mi, not Mi and Ko.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“Every couple has an order their names must be said in!” I stopped myself. I was letting my nerd show. “Well, that’s the story of my first love. I told you it was boring.”

“It wasn’t boring,” Claire said.

“Y-yes. It was very informative,” Lilly added.

“Oh really?”

In truth, the incident with the love square had laid the foundation for the person I became. I’d only gotten geekier from there, and I’d started to make impulsive rushes at people I liked—but that had been during my later years at university, so I couldn’t tell these two about it.

“You’ve had a rough time of it,” Claire said.

“No, not really. And I can afford to laugh about it now. What do you think, Miss Lilly? Was it disappointing?”

“N-no. I think it actually made me like you more.”

“What?! That was not what I’d been hoping for. “The point is, first loves rarely work out, and it’s even harder for queer people. That’s why you must prepare yourself for rejection.”

“R-rejection?”

“Yes. And that’s why I can endure Claire rejecting me all the time.”

“N-no, that only happens because you’re too brazen!” Claire stammered.

“Miss Claire’s first love was Manaria, right?”

“No! Sister... was just so incredible. I misunderstood.”

“How did we get here, anyway? What were we even talking about to start with?”

“The issue of poverty...” Claire’s eyes glazed over.

“It’s okay to go off on a tangent sometimes,” Lilly comforted us while Claire and I tried to pull ourselves together. “B-but to go back to what you were just saying, Rae... Ideals don’t always line up with reality, do they?”

“What do you mean?”

“Th-the Church has many ideals that we would like to see made reality, but politics get in the way,” Lilly said, suddenly sounding like a middle-aged lady. “I-I believe the

Church is coming to the end of its ability to work with politicians."

"But we can't give up on our ideals," Claire said. "If we do that, the people lose out."

"Then chase those ideals," I urged. "Work to make them a reality."

"Rae..."

"You're not alone, Miss Claire. I'm not much help, but I'm here for you."

"Thank you."

Claire and I looked at each other, sharing a moment of connection. But then—

"If you're going to make out, get a room, you pustules!"

We looked at Lilly.

"Oh... I really didn't do that on purpose, please believe me!"

"I believe you." Honestly, her involuntary swearing was enchanting.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality, Cardinal Lilly. Please let us know if there is anything we can do in return," Claire said.

"It's my pleasure to help you learn about the Church, Miss Claire!"

"What is your biggest challenge right now, Miss Lilly?" I inquired casually.

"Ch-challenge?"

"Yes. You've helped us a lot, so we'd like to return the favor."

"Ah... That makes me so happy to hear."

"Don't start making out with her," Claire muttered.

"W-well..." Lilly said. "I'm researching something I could use your help with. It's called the Crosswise Curse..."

"Ohh, that's the one that affects someone's gender, right?"

Obviously, curses and such didn't exist in Japan, and this one in particular had some dubious implications outside of its fictional status in the game. The curse made a person appear as a gender other than their true one, and *Revolution* used it for comedic leverage. This frankly troubled me a bit, given some of my personal experiences... but more on that later.

In any case, the topic of cross-dressing and so forth interested the game developers and the players alike—as might be obvious from the cross-dressing café we constructed at the Foundation Day Festival, where the princes took on the role of beautiful maids. I have to admit the special illustrations from that event are pretty amazing.

My heart still fluttered when I thought of how Claire dressed in a tuxedo for the café. So dashing!

"Oh, but wouldn't the power of the Church's relic—the Tears of the Moon—cancel out the curse? Or at least dampen its effects."

"Y-you know about the Tears of the Moon?!" Lilly gasped. "That's one of the Church's greatest secrets!"

"Oh..." I confess: I had forgotten.

The Tears of the Moon was a magical tool that absorbed moonlight during a full moon prior to activation. It had the ability to negate a variety of magical effects, similar to the barrier at the Academy dueling grounds—except the Tears of the Moon's negation was permanent. The considerable power of this magical tool could rescue people from all sorts of terrible magical aftereffects, and therefore it was one of the most highly protected secrets of the Spiritual Church. It required two people, both at the cardinal level or higher, to handle it, and otherwise it was kept in the vault where the Church housed religious artifacts. In other words, bringing it up out of nowhere was a pretty huge oops on my part.

"Wh-where did you hear about the Tears of the Moon?!" Lilly pressed.

"Er, ummm... Master Yu told me." At this point in time, the only people I knew who were related to the Church were Lilly and Yu.

"Th-that can't be. If Master Yu knew of a way to reverse the curse, then why wouldn't sh—ah!" Lilly put her hand over her mouth, flustered.

"Cardinal Lilly, What did you say?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no, no..."

"Is Master Yu afflicted with the Crosswise Curse?" Claire asked, joining me in staring intently at Lilly.

Lilly let out a sigh as if she had given up. "I-I will tell you—but only because it seems Rae may know a way to reverse this curse. Please, please do not let what I am about to say leave this room. If it gets out, your lives will be in danger."

"Understood."

"Got it."

We were no doubt walking into true peril, but we nodded.

Defeated, Lilly started talking. "Th-the truth is..."

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"Ah. So you heard about Yu, then?"

"I did."

When I returned to my dorm room that night, Misha was back. She had stayed in Euclid longer than us, and her pure white skin was now a bit red. Apparently, she was the kind of fair that didn't tan, only burned. It's a common affliction among white people, but Misha's skin was especially fair, so she inevitably suffered.

I had immediately told Misha everything that had happened at the Academy in her absence. Lilly had insisted we keep Yu's curse an absolute secret, but... Well, Misha was involved, so I couldn't help revealing the truth to her. Or, I thought that was what I was doing.

"You already knew? About Master Yu?" I asked after Misha confessed.

"Yes. When we were small, I did a great deal to help Yu conceal the truth."

"I didn't know anything about that."

Right, so, the thing was... To put it simply, Yu was, in truth, a girl.

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Yu was the only child of l'Ausseil Bauer, the current king, and Queen Riche; Rod and Thane had been born to a different mother. In the Bauer Kingdom, succession was determined based on order of birth, so Yu was third in line to inherit the throne. Even so, when Queen Riche found out she was pregnant, she believed that one day her own child would rule the country.

"On October 10<sup>th</sup>, she gave birth to twins, one boy and one girl," Misha said quietly. She had soundproofed the walls of our room using her high-aptitude wind magic, and even so she spoke in a small voice so as not to be overheard. As Lilly had assured us, this was a dark and jealously guarded secret in the kingdom. We could take no chances with eavesdroppers.

"But, as you know, the time just after birth is one of great danger for infants. The boy died almost immediately."

With medicine in this world still mired in the Middle Ages, the infant-mortality rate was high. Healing magic was no cure-all either, as it couldn't always touch illness and infection. In the days while Queen Riche was away from the palace and in the Church for her birth, the boy died. Upon losing her long-awaited boy, the one she believed would succeed the throne, Queen Riche fell into despair, which led to a grave mistake.

"Lady Riche hired a... certain individual to nurse the babe. In truth, the nursemaid was hired to inflict the curse."

As a result, the baby princess was cursed and was perceived by all to be a prince. That babe was Yu.

"Does the king know of this?"

"Indeed. Lady Riche considered concealing the truth from the king, but she ultimately couldn't manage to do so; he rules this country."

Even so, it wasn't until after Yu was officially introduced to the public as the third prince that Queen Riche revealed the truth of Yu's curse. For fear of losing face, the king resolved to treat Yu as a prince, and ever since, Yu's gender status had been treated as a state secret.

"But... isn't it true that the light of the full moon reveals the true self of those afflicted by the Crosswise Curse? I can't believe they managed to hide it so long."

"The royal family has a great deal of power to hide that which it doesn't wish others to know. The secret was only shared with those who had been vetted with utmost care and who were deemed cooperative in their aim to conceal Master Yu's condition," Misha said. "I was one of those people."

She went on to explain, "For generations, my family were aristocrats of highest status, and we maintained close ties with the royal family. In my childhood, I was always told to keep an eye on Master Yu."

In other words, Yu and Misha weren't just run-of-the-mill childhood friends. They were, in a sense, accomplices.

"But when our house fell from grace, that relationship fell with it. The only reason my family wasn't entirely stamped out, the reason we were allowed to merely lose our noble status and live as commoners, is that the king took on our debt as a form of hush money," Misha said, her expression never changing.

"In the meantime, His Majesty ordered the Church to study the Crosswise Curse in secret. However, his aim is not to reverse the curse, but to solidify it. He wishes Yu to not only appear as a prince, but to *be* one."

In short, they wanted to fulfill the queen's original goal. Was that even possible? Perhaps it was, with the magic in this world.

When I asked, Misha's expression finally changed, growing more and more distorted with distress. It was rare to see her thoughts show so clearly on her face.

"I don't know what's possible," she said. "All I know is that Yu hates it. Everyone sees Yu as a boy, but she's a girl. Growing up, she was eternally confused. There was a gap between us—between what Yu knew to be true and what everyone else saw."

I knew something about this kind of issue, in which a person feels their gender doesn't

match others' perception of them. In Japan, it's called gender dysphoria. You might call it a problem of a mismatch between one's heart and body, which can create all kinds of problems for the person afflicted. Society can make people suffer for this in all kinds of ways, especially when they try to show their true selves in their daily lives.

"Yu always expressed envy of the dresses I wore, or the length of my hair. Once... she even put on makeup in secret and asked me whether I thought she looked strange," Misha recalled with some bitterness. "And I... No. She was lovely."

On the day of the Academy festival, when we were getting dressed for the cross-dressing café, I'd thought Yu was having more fun than the rest of us, but I hadn't guessed at all the layers underlying that moment. Yu hadn't been delighted by any sense of absurdity. Rather, she had been overjoyed to fulfill a desire that otherwise had to be hidden. I'd always thought Yu cunning; I now understand she had no choice but to be. Yu was cursed with a double life.

"Rae... You said you can reverse the curse?"

"Yes. In a way."

"How?"

"The Crosswise Curse is, well, a curse, and there's a magical tool the Church keeps in its vaults that can negate curses."

"I... am not going to ask how you know that."

I was glad Misha was good at reading delicate situations. Although, her main motive here was probably to avoid obstructing anything that might solve a problem for the person she loved.

I grimaced. "The only problem is, the palace and the Church both want Yu to be a prince, don't they?"

"Yes. Or I should say, that is what the palace wants."

"Huh? Not the Church?"

"The Church values women, you see."

Oh, huh, she was right. I've touched on this before, but the Spiritual Church considered women to have greater inherent ties to mystic powers and consequently tended to see them as more religiously important. Unlike Catholicism on Earth, women could hold high positions in the Church as well. For example, Queen Riche had been a cardinal before she ascended the throne, and of course, there was Cardinal Lilly.

"Misha... Which do you agree with?"

"My wishes in this matter are utterly irrelevant."

"They are a little. You like Yu, don't you?"

"Who told you that...?" Misha wanted to deny it, but I didn't give up.

"No one had to tell me. I just know. I'm your friend."

"I think I'm your friend," Misha murmured, "but at times I think I don't understand you at all."

"So, tell me, what do you think?"

Misha seemed to understand that I wasn't going to let this go, and her voice went soft. "I... I am attracted to boys, so there is a part of me that would be happy, were Yu to become one."

"Mm-hmm."

"But Yu's desires in this matter are far more important than mine. I want Yu to live a happy life, free of pain, no matter what."

"Hm... Are you saying you like Yu for Yu?"

"That seems melodramatic, but I... Perhaps."

Misha looked frustrated with herself. I figured she understood herself to be straight, but I suspected she had queer feelings.

Those words that turn up in narratives now and again, "I'm not attracted to gender, just people"—I'm not sure they're the most realistic. People love to hear it, or even to say it, but I don't think it always pans out that way in reality. But of course, everyone

is different when it comes to what they like in people, and how they become attracted, and it's really not nearly as clear-cut as I've described it.

"In that case," I said, "I appreciate your support as I do what I can to ensure Yu is recognized as a girl."

Misha frowned. "I told you, my opinion is irrelevant. The palace would never permit Yu to live as a girl. Especially not Lady Riche."

"Why not?"

"Rae, I told you—Lady Riche's dearest wish is that her own child ascend the throne. She wanted it so badly that she had her own newborn infant cursed. This goes beyond mere stubborn ambition."

Misha was right. Even in the game, in the Yu route, Queen Riche considered it unthinkable for her son (or to be accurate, her *daughter*) to marry a commoner. She needed Yu to marry a woman suitable for a king, and she never accepted the main character. In the end, in the midst of the confusion of the revolution, Yu spirited the main character away to elope.

I grinned. "Then I guess you'll have to elope, Misha."

"Now what are you talking about?"

"Misha, if you want to marry Yu, are you prepared to elope?"

"Of course not," Misha answered without hesitation.

Great, now I looked silly. "N-no?"

"Think, Rae. Yu and I were raised as nobles. We wouldn't stand a chance at living a good, fulfilling life if we left it all to elope."

"But... you've lived as a commoner all this time."

"Yes, but only because of the palace's discreet support."

"Are you sure about that?"

In my opinion, Misha had a good head on her shoulders, and I was pretty sure she could have a great life no matter what she put her mind to.

But that was the end of our conversation that day. It was time for bed. I played our talk in my mind again and again as I lay under the covers.

I'd never realized Yu had such a dramatic backstory. So there were facts about this world that even a *Revolution* mega-fan like me didn't know. Yu's gender troubles hadn't been mentioned in the fan disk, let alone the character reference guide. Maybe someone had decided it wasn't "appropriate" subject matter for the game's target demographic, and so it had been buried in the programming.

When I'd taken the culture subject test, I'd been confident I knew more about this world than even the game developers, but now I knew I was mistaken. There could be dozens, even hundreds of bad endings or hidden settings that I didn't know the first thing about.

In any event, I needed to find a way to reverse Yu's curse... and then maybe convince Misha to confess. After a great deal of mulling and reflecting, I found my answer.

"The only option is the magic of shock and awe."

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"One, two, three, four! Now bend forward—Rae, you're behind!"

I was desperately trying to move my body to the somber music being played. But exercise wasn't exactly my forte, and I was struggling to follow the priest's directions.

"Everyone, stop. We'll start from the top," the priest said. We returned to our original positions and began the dance again.

The ceremonial dance we were currently practicing was usually performed by nuns at the Harvest Festival. Why, you might ask, was I practicing with them? The answer was simple—Lilly had asked us to.

"A-actually we don't have enough people..." she'd said. "We're looking for some volunteers."

"There's really no one at the Church who can step in?"

"N-not just anyone can perform the dance, you see. The dancers must possess a certain level of magic..."

Apparently, a highly skilled mage had recently left the Bauer Cathedral. The Church had a number of skilled water magic wielders, but they were all currently out in the field, providing healing services in the wake of skirmishes with the Nur Empire.

"Please, would you help us?"

"You've done a great deal for us, Miss Lilly. We'd be happy to help, but would it really be all right for us to participate in such a ceremony? We're not nuns."

"I-It's true that the dance is usually performed by nuns, but we're in a critical situation this year." They really had to be in dire straits if they were loosening the requirements. Lilly blushed, suddenly coquettish, and added, "As f-far as I'm concerned, a chance to dance with my beloved Rae would be a dream come true."

"Hmmm..."

I was torn. Lilly really had done a lot for Claire, but the ceremonial dance would require a ton of practice that would cut into my precious Claire time.

"Whyever not? Lend her your aid, Rae," Claire said as I hemmed and hawed.

"Miss Claire?" I wondered what made her say that. "But I don't want to lose out on spending time with you."

"In that case, why don't I join too?"

"M-Miss Claire, you would do that!?" Lilly clearly hadn't been expecting Claire to suggest such a thing.

"Is that acceptable?"

"O-of course it is! It would be an honor! Oh, wow, wow... I must notify the Bishop..."

Lilly went on to explain that it would mean a great deal to the Church to have an influential aristocrat with high magic power, like Claire, participate in the dance. But—

"Please don't turn this into some political matter, do you hear me?" Claire said, sternly.

“I-I’ll do my best,” Lilly sat up straight. “Still, Miss Claire... you really aren’t like what the rumors say.”

“What rumors?”

“Oh... Well, um...”

“Ah, well. They’re probably true,” Claire said self-deprecatingly, tipping her teacup to her lips.

“N-no they’re not! You’re an amazing person, Miss Claire! You aren’t arrogant or selfish at all—oh.”

“So that’s what.” Claire chuckled, having successfully tricked Lilly into slipping.

I wondered, uncharitably, how Lilly had made it all the way to being Cardinal. Didn’t her loose lips make it dangerous for her to know Yu’s secret?

“Well, Cardinal Lilly, I would say you are also quite unlike what the rumors say,” Claire said with an evil laugh befitting her villainess character.

“Ha ha ha... I get that a lot...” Lilly responded uncomfortably.

“How do people perceive you, Miss Lilly?” I asked.

“As a saint.”

“Huh?” I stared blankly at Lilly, then looked back at Claire. “No way.”

“Rae... that’s rude.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Lilly. I just blurted out what I was thinking.”

“Th-that’s a poor apology...” Lilly, meanwhile, was tearing up. Really? “I-I understand. I am no saint.”

“Where did that rumor even come from?”

“Chancellor Salas.”

Ah, that guy. I'd almost forgotten Lilly was his daughter. "I don't like him."

"Whyever not?" said Claire. "He is of the most upstanding character!"

"Because of how he treated Lene."

"Oh... Well, that can't be helped. He said what was natural for an official in his position—though I understand how you feel," Claire soothed. What was up with her today? She was being sweeter than usual. "I certainly don't intend to speak ill of someone before their daughter."

"Sorry, Miss Lilly," I apologized again. "I just blurted out what I was thinking."

"Th-that's still a poor apology..." Lilly was full on crying. It was like we were stuck in some kind of conversational loop. "A-anyway, will you join in the dance?"

"If Miss Claire will be participating too, then I have no reason to refuse."

"I would love to join."

"Th-thank you so much!" Lilly stood up with sudden force. She pulled her wimple back over her hair and bowed deeply.

"Cardinal Lilly, you needn't do that. It isn't so very meaningful."

"I-It is! The Harvest Festival is one of the Church's most important rituals. If we were unable to perform the ceremonial dance, it would be the most disgraceful thing to happen since the Church was founded."

She looked up at us with a smile.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart. May you both be blessed with divine protection."

This wasn't the flighty, careless Lilly we were used to. In that moment, I thought I understood a little of why people called her a saint.

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That was how we came to be practicing the ceremonial dance—which was way harder

than I expected.

"Lift both hands slowly—now, ring the bells once. Bend your knees slowly—now stop in the half-sitting posture. Now, ring the bell once."

The ceremonial dance was performed in costumes of light, fluttering silk, with a bell-adorned fan in hand. There were a lot of slow movements, and it was really hard to maintain my posture through them. The fast movements were difficult too, but I was learning at this age that moving slowly didn't make things easier (although in this world I was only sixteen).

"Rae, you need to build up your strength," said the priest. "At this rate you might not make it through the dance."

"Yes." I was already regretting agreeing to Lilly's request.

"Miss Claire, you are wonderful. Your movements are so precise."

"I'm trained in ballroom dancing. I can handle this sort of thing." Claire, of course, was killing it. Naturally.

"Everyone, a ten-minute break. Make sure you're drinking enough water," the priest said, and half of the dancers promptly collapsed on the floor.

"If you're this tired already, you must not be exercising enough."

"No, Miss Claire—I think you're just extraordinary."

In addition to taking ballroom dancing lessons since she was little, Claire was also trained in the art of self-defense. She had more stamina than the average man. I, raised in a peasant home, could only fight things like Ralaire's mother, Chimera, and Louie, because of my magic.

"You'll start training tomorrow. As the priest says, you won't last in your current physical state."

"Maybe you could train with me, Miss Claire," I said, thinking that this would be as good a time as ever to get in shape.

"R-Rae, I heard you are skilled in water magic. Is that true?" Lilly asked me bashfully.

“Yes. What about it?”

“Er, ummm... In that case, I think you can use recovery magic if you get tired.”

“I didn’t think of that. I’ll do that next time.”

“Absolutely not. I won’t abide that sort of cheating. You must train,” said Claire.

“Ahhh.”

“A-actually, the nuns who dance all use recovery magic...”

“That may be, but I can’t overlook the fact that Rae is unmotivated.”

“I’m not unmotivated,” I protested.

“Silence,” she snapped.

Yes, this was my reward.

“Still, at this rate...” Claire trailed off.

“At this rate...?”

“Nothing...”

What was she trying to say?

“Break’s over, back to work. Time for the second half of practice. Line up!”

The dancers returned to our positions at the priest’s command. As she walked away from me, Claire finally let a sad whisper slip from her lips.

“At this rate, how will I be able to dance with Rae?”

Needless to say, I danced my heart out during the entire second half of practice.

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“See, your arm is dropping. Do it like this, here.”

It was early the next morning, and Claire and I were in a corner of the Academy's courtyard. Claire was sitting on a blanket spread out over the grass, and I was practicing the ceremonial dance next to her, over and over again. My naive, optimistic heart had hoped she would guide me through every little hand, foot, and hip movement—but the reality was completely different.

"Miss Claire, what is this?"

"A training harness for dancers," she answered matter-of-factly, as if clothes with weights sewn into them were completely normal.

"Ummm... where did you get it?"

"I sewed it last night," Claire said, proudly.

Wait, so she'd made this by hand? I'd hoped for something sweeter for her first handmade present to me. Sniff.

"Now, once more from the beginning."

"I need a break..."

"Don't be lazy."

Easy for her to say. It was exhausting to do the dance with all these weights on. I sank down to the ground right where I stood.

"And no using healing magic to recover," Claire warned.

"I know. Because I won't be building up my strength."

"That's right."

You couldn't use magic to recover from physical training if you wanted that training to yield any benefits. I think they call it supercompensation in the sporting world.

"Hey, you're going to get the harness dirty. Come over here," Claire said, patting her lap.

What, really? "Miss Claire, are you sure?"

“About what?”

“You want me to lay my head in your lap?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Claire looked puzzled. “See.”

“Oh...”

When I got close, she pulled my arm and laid my head down in her lap. Was I dreaming?

“What’s that face for?”

“Well I... I’m confused.”

My lovely Claire. Claire, the villainess. She’d put my head in her lap? Me, the heroine? It was impossible.



"Whenever I complained about ballroom dancing practice as a child, my mother did this for me," Claire said, reminiscing. I reflected on my sinful heart and urged her to continue with just my eyes. "It's not like I could move like this right away. At first, I hated it so much."

"You, Miss Claire? But you never give up."

"Should I tell you how I got to be this way? You see, whenever I learned how to do something, my mother would praise me. That made me want to try many things."

Such was the unexpected way in which I learned why Claire hated to lose. I'd studied every piece of information I could about her, including her mother's death, but there was still so much I didn't know.

"When I wanted to give up on ballroom dancing, my mother spoke to the teacher. Instead of scolding me, she put my head on her lap, and even though I was only a toddler, she explained to me the significance of learning to dance," Claire smiled happily.

"She was always like that. She never scolded me. Instead, she'd gently explain to me what it meant to be a noble. I've lived my life wanting to become the kind of noble she talked about." Claire didn't stop there. "I never thought factors outside my control might take that away from me..."

"Does that mean you're not ready to give up your title?"

"I... I don't think I *can*. I want to do something about poverty because I was shocked by my first experience of it. In other words, I couldn't handle actually living like that, you see?"

"I see..."

"Now, stand up. Time to continue."

"Just a little longer... Miss Claire, your thighs are so soft."

"Stand up!"

"Miss Claire."

“What is it?”

“Peasant life isn’t so bad once you get used to it.”

“I don’t know...” Claire chuckled.

“I will convince you.”

“I don’t think you will, but I look forward to you trying,” Claire said before returning to our lessons. For now, I concentrated on moving my body, all the while thinking of how I could change Claire’s stubborn mind.

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“What *I* want?”

One morning not long after that, instead of attending class, Claire and I went to the palace asking about Yu.

Normally, any audience with a member of the royal family required applying for a meeting using a designated procedure and waiting for the request to be accepted, all of which took a great deal of time. Seeing Yu at the Academy was an exception to the rule.

However, today, we had passed a message on through Lilly: *There is a means by which to resolve Prince Yu’s condition.*

We were granted an audience right away.

As far as appearances went, Claire was designated as a witness and I was being presented as a doctor, of sorts.

If I was going to change anything about Yu’s life, I first needed to know what Yu wanted. I had asked Misha, yes, but indirect impressions tend to get distorted. I needed to ask Yu.

“This is not a matter of *want*, Master Yu.”

I had wanted to speak to Yu freely, so I had requested we be left alone, but since this was an issue that affected the entire country, we weren’t. Chancellor Salas was with

us. I wished it could have been anyone else. Salas just kept finding new ways to earn my contempt.

Salad—I mean, Salas—looked directly at us and continued. “It pains me to say this, but Yu must remain a prince. The matter has long since surpassed the question of what he wants for himself.”

His tone clearly implied he thought this entire meeting a farce.

“We understand what you’re saying, Master Salas. Of course we grasp the complexity of the issue,” Claire said in a mollifying tone. “However, setting that aside, if we don’t know Yu’s true feelings, we won’t be able to provide the necessary emotional support when it finally becomes possible to confirm his manhood.”

Claire continued, urging Salas to consider planning for the future in every regard to ensure the success of the royal family. Every time I saw her engage in politics like this, I was blown away by her deft, intellectual arguments. Her usual haughty arrogance and selfish attitude were nowhere to be seen. In this instant, Claire was the perfect noble lady.

“In other words, you consider knowing Yu’s true feelings a matter of planning for the future, regardless of what might come to pass?”

“That is correct.”

Salas put his hand to his chin, thinking. He looked quite striking in that pose. He shared his silver hair and red eyes with Lilly, and his cold, clean features had earned him a large fan base both inside and outside the palace. He even consistently ranked pretty highly among players of the game. Just as a lot of guys will fall over themselves for beautiful women, a lot of women fall over themselves for beautiful men.

Not that he had an iota of an effect on me.

“I think there may be something to this argument. Well, Master Yu?” asked Salas.

“May I speak frankly, then?” Yu looked contemplative. “Personally... if it were possible, I would like everyone to know I’m a girl.”

“Master Yu...” Salas’s face creased with concern.

"Don't look at me like that, Salas. There's nothing that can be done about it, so here I am, performing the perfect prince you all see me as. But I can't change my feelings," Yu said apologetically.

"As of now, I'm able to be seen as myself once a month, under the light of the full moon, and in those moments, I finally feel a balance between my mind and soul. If—*once* I am put into a male body, I am sure I will never feel that peace again," Yu said, all the while maintaining a perfect princely demeanor. But regardless of Yu's tone, these words were unmistakably the truth.

Being queer in my previous life, I had met people with all sorts of queer experiences. A number of those people had struggled with gender dysphoria, and some had found wellness and peace in changing their mode of dress, or taking hormones, and other such things.

I don't think that was enough for everyone, not all the time. I mean, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japan's advanced medical technology could do a great deal, including surgically, but sometimes that still couldn't totally cure a person's dysphoria.

However, even treatment aimed at merely alleviating symptoms can be absolutely critical, even lifesaving. In my opinion, that made all these changes utterly worth it.

"Claire, Rae, your thoughts?" Salas asked.

"Does Rae have permission to speak?" asked Claire.

"It's fine," I said. "I'm just here to get it done. I don't need to—"

"Thank you very much," said Claire when Salas nodded. "Rae."

"Yes... So as I see it, there are two options."

Salas perked up and leaned forward, hopeful. "Let's hear them."

"One is to continue with things the way they are."

"But... what would that solve?"

"It would satisfy the palace's need for Yu to be a prince, and Yu could continue to, on occasion, be true to herself. There is a sort of balance here."

"And the other way?" Salas prompted, looking a little disheartened.

"The other would be for Yu to embrace her life as a girl..."

"Were you listening to a word I said?" Salas snapped. "That is simply not an option."

"Obviously, Yu would be disinherited."

"What is this?" Salas spluttered.

I remained firm. "It's Yu's obligation to play the part of heir that complicates things. So, if Yu were to cast off the restraints of that role..."

"Are you suggesting the palace exposes the years of this deception? The scandal?"

"Not at all. After Yu has been disinherited, the palace would announce the prince had taken ill, and Yu would be taken to the convent. Yu would stay there with a number of attendants, secluded for a time, but there, we could at last resolve the curse."

"Do you understand what you are saying?" Salas bellowed.

Maybe I had rushed into this a little.

"That means..." Yu said, "I would have to spend the rest of my life confined to the convent?"

"Not quite—it wouldn't be confinement. To start, you'd have to hide, but once your hair had grown out, and especially if you put on some makeup, you could go out as a new nun with none the wiser as to your royal lineage."

I knew life in the convent would still be a bit difficult, especially to start. Yu would have to be a little patient.

"Rae," Salas snapped, "what about making the prince a boy in truth?"

"I don't think you can."

"When you requested this audience, you—I only granted it because I thought you would have a real answer," Salas dropped his shoulders, annoyed.

But it was a real answer.

"Master Salas, is it not a solution if Master Yu is able to live as her true self?"

"Of course not. The will of the palace is for Master Yu to be a man."

"Even though there are two other heirs?"

"Listen to me, Rae Taylor. It may be easy for you to throw around words like 'disinherit,' but disinheritance is a punishment for royalty who have committed the most severe crimes. We could not impose such a fate on Master Yu."

"I believe forcing Master Yu to continue like this is a far crueler fate," I said, doubling down.

"You go too far!" Salas grimaced. "If Claire were to say such a thing, it might be permissible, but you, a commoner—you have no business discussing this private matter in the palace."

"So you're going to force Master Yu to bear the consequences of Lady Riche's reckless selfishness for the rest of her life, even though she's done nothing wrong?"

"This meeting is *over*," Salas snarled. "Leave."

"Master Salas!" I snapped back.

But I was interrupted by a soft voice.

"Rae... I'm grateful for your attempt. But the world won't change for wishes," Yu said with a smile. She looked like she could disappear at any moment. After putting up with this farce for over a dozen years, Yu was giving in.

"Rae, that's enough," said Claire, gathering herself again. "Master Yu, Master Salas, thank you very much for your time."

"There will not be another discussion of this matter."

"Understood..."

There was so much more I wanted to say, but Claire pulled me away and we left the

audience chamber.

Outside, it was raining. We waited in front of the palace gates for a horse and carriage to retrieve us.

“Rae... You...” Claire started to say in a frustrated voice.

“Miss Claire, don’t tell me you think this is acceptable!” I said, unable to hide my anger.

It started to rain harder.

“I don’t think it’s acceptable,” Claire said tightly. “But as Master Yu said, the world will not change for a wish.”

“You would say that? You were the one who said you didn’t want to run away from ideals—did you not mean that?”

“And when did you grow so high and mighty that you imagined you could speak to me in this way?!”

“What does status have to do with this?! Claire, if we can’t even save one person, then saving our kingdom is a pipe dream!”

“Rae!” Claire said sharply.

I turned around. I’d said too much. “I’m sorry...”

“Whatever has gotten into you?” Claire asked, bewildered. “This isn’t like you at all.”

“I... My friend. Misaki. She... or, well, he... was forced to live as the wrong gender.”

I’d known this was part of my problem. The whole time we were trying to help Yu, I couldn’t stop remembering Misaki. He had been told he was a girl as a child, but he’d known he was a boy.

“Just like Master Yu, no one around him understood, and he was forced to live a lie... until, one day, he killed himself.”

Claire gasped. I was looking down, so I couldn’t see her, but I heard it.

"He didn't die just because no one listened. He died because he was afraid of how he might be hurting others. And that—"

"That... is awful."

After we went searching together for tsuchinoko, Misaki would often cry to me. Why hadn't he been born in a body everyone would recognize as a boy's? Why did he have to suffer over something that everyone else took for granted? If he were a "normal" boy, he could have made Kosaki so happy, and so on, and so on.

"I did my best to help Misaki," I whispered, "but in the end, I wasn't enough to heal his wounds. And there was no curse to lift. But with Yu... We can *help* Yu. And still—"

"That's enough. Come now," Claire said, and then she hugged me.

I couldn't help myself. I clung to her.

"I still remember," I said, voice shaking. "At the funeral, I watched Kosaki cling to Misaki's coffin, crying."

"I see."

"But the world... Misaki's parents blamed him. They called him weak, said he was wrong to feel how he did."

"I see."

"I don't ever want that to happen again. After they're gone, it's too late," I babbled. But I wasn't crying.

"Yes," Claire was being kind, as if soothing a baby, and she kept holding me for a long time.

Before we knew it, the rain was coming down in sheets, and we couldn't hear each other anymore. Claire held me tight until the carriage came.

The rain never stopped that day.

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Practice continued for the ceremonial dance. Classes were going to resume soon, so we needed to get the majority of it down while still on summer break.

“You’ve improved quite a bit, Rae.”

“It’s thanks to Claire’s loving whip.”

“Would you stop calling it that?!”

“You’ve certainly built up enough stamina to handle the moves. But...” the priest trailed off. “You have absolutely no sense of rhythm, Rae.”

It was true. I—well, the player character—had no dance skills whatsoever. In the game, she realizes this when she needs to dance with the princes in a social setting and keeps treading on their toes. In the game, the prince just laughs it off. Also, you could get a still shot of Claire blowing her nose somewhere off to the side during this particular event. She was so cute.

“Y-you’re still doing much better now than when we first started,” Lilly jumped in to reassure me.

“But we don’t have much time left.” Claire was right.

“It’ll all work out,” I said.

“Of course you’d say that,” Claire lamented. But it really would be fine. I’d pulled myself together in more ways than one and made all the necessary preparations. “By the way, I heard from Master Yu. We’re clear to go ahead.”

“Is that so?”

I’d concocted a plan to resolve Yu’s problem and put it in motion by having Claire send the prince a letter. If Yu’s answer had been no, the plan would have been dead in the water—but the answer was yes, so we were good to go. All the pieces were in place.

All but one.

“I wonder if she was the one who talked Yu into it?”

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"Hey, Misha," I said later that night, when we were in our dorm room.

"What?"

"Do you have any intention of becoming a nun?"

"Huh?" Misha looked over at me, understandably startled. "Where did that come from?"

"Do you?"

"Of course not."

"I see..."

Misha turned back to her desk, muttering under her breath, "What is she talking about now?"

"But would you do it if it meant you could be with Yu?" I persisted.

Misha stopped writing, probably because she was having trouble concentrating. "Rae, what are you thinking?"

"About the happiness of my best friend."

"You can't trick me."

"I'm not trying to trick anyone." I climbed out of bed. "I might be able to do something about Yu's situation."

"How?"

"Well, it's the same as what I already told you before with the curse stuff."

"That's not what I mean. How are you going to convince the court?"

"Shock and awe."

"Are you planning something crazy again?"

"You make me sound like an evil mastermind." I had nothing but good intentions. Well, mostly. I wasn't the biggest fan of the royal family. "Actually..."

And with that, I explained my scheme to her.

"What are you thinking?" she demanded.

"I think this is the only way."

"You realize that if they discover your involvement, you *will* be executed, yes?"

"I won't let that happen."

Misha put her hand to her temple, as if her head hurt. "Why are you so set on this?"

"I told you already. For my best friend."

"A half-truth at best, wouldn't you say?"

"Of course not."

"Liar," she declared. "You aren't my friend."

I was taken aback. "Why would you say that?"

"You aren't Rae Taylor," she said. "Not the one I know."

I was starting to grow anxious. "Wh-what are you talking about, Misha?"

"It was like the day we enrolled in the Academy... you became someone else."

Uh oh. I didn't like where this was going.

"Until that day, you were strange, I admit, but you were still, at heart, an ordinary girl. But ever since we came here, you've been a completely different person." Her cold, red eyes pierced through me. "At first, I blamed the stresses of our new environment. But, no. It's something else, something more, and I see no sign of you changing back. You've become another person."

"Misha, do you hear what you're saying?"

"Of course. I know it's ridiculous. But it's the only explanation." Misha wasn't backing down. "So, who are you? What happened to my best friend, Rae Taylor?"

I couldn't bluff my way out of this one. I had always thought Misha aloof—I never imagined she would study me like this. What could I do? What would make her understand?

"I am Rae Taylor."

"That's your answer? Then I regret to inform you, but I won't be going along with your plan. And I *won't* help you endanger Yu."

It was useless. I wouldn't get anywhere just bulling my way through this.

"Okay... Okay." I took a deep breath. "I'll tell you the truth. But I don't think you'll believe me."

"I'll be the judge of that."

And so, for the first time, I told someone everything I knew—the entire story, from start to finish. That I remembered being a different person, in another world, and that in these memories, this world was the setting of a game I had played. That I'd somehow been transported to this world to be the game's heroine, and that I'd been struggling, since then, to save Claire.

Misha looked flabbergasted, but she listened to the end without interrupting. "This world is the setting... of a game?"

"Can you believe me?"

"Honestly... it's outlandish. Perhaps beyond me. You said the world you came from is more technologically complex, didn't you?"

As Misha only possessed scientific knowledge equivalent to that of medieval times, it was tricky to communicate some concepts to her—like what a video game even was—but I took my time and did my very best.

"So, you... are Rae Taylor, but not Rae Taylor?"

"I think so. Kind of. I remember my life as Rae Taylor, but I also remember my former

one. So... I guess that's why I seem like a different person to you."

Misha fell silent for a while, no doubt chewing over whether my story was fact or fiction. When she finally opened her mouth again, it was to say, "You truly believe revolution is imminent?"

"I do."

"And when that happens, the royal family will be eliminated?"

"Yes."

"I see... In that case, my answer is this." Misha sat up straight and faced me. "I will help you. I will believe what you have said."

I collapsed on the bed from relief. "Oh, thank God..."

"Were you so very nervous?"

"How could I not be? You might have thought I'd lost my mind."

"I suppose that's true," Misha said, "but taking everything into account, what you said makes a great deal of sense, in retrospect."

"For example?"

"Your test results. You never were very good at studying."

"That's the most mortifying possible reason for you to believe me."

"There are others. The fact that you counteracted the Nur Empire poison."

"Oh... right. Cantarella. Yeah, I was really glad I could do that." Thane would have been a goner without me. "But, well, Misha. I'm glad you believe me. You're... taking this unexpectedly well."

"Unexpectedly? Your story isn't as foreign as you might think to the people of this world."

"What do you mean?"

"You describe your world as one ruled by science. Ours is ruled by magic. In fact, you remind me of a legend about a lost spirit."

"Oh, huh, I remember that." I had read it somewhere, hadn't I? A legend describing how mysterious people with special powers sometimes appeared out of nowhere, and how these were the lost children of spirits.

"Does that not describe you?" Misha asked.

"I guess it does, yeah."

In fact... Rae Taylor's parents weren't biologically related to her. She was their foster child, though they had raised and loved her as their own. Perhaps this somewhat explained my exceptional magic abilities.

"Well, I believe I understand a great deal more, now. Thank you for telling me, Rae."

"I feel better too," I confessed. "I was really nervous."

"Were you? Then it must have been especially hard when you told your parents."

"Huh?"

"Huh...? You mean you haven't told them yet?"

"No?"

Misha put her head in her hands. "This is precisely the sort of thing you ought to explain to your parents straight away."

"R-really?"

"Yes. They didn't say anything when you were visiting?"

"No, nothing in particular."

"I suppose they're open-minded." Misha sighed. "Goodness, it's getting late. Don't you have practice again tomorrow? Will you be all right?"

"Oh, yeah, no problem. I'll use magic to sleep soundly tonight."

"Yes. Please do so. I'll wake you in the morning. Good night."

"Good night." I turned off the light and got into bed, then used the water magic sleep spell on myself, and it worked immediately.

I hadn't planned on telling anyone about myself, but at least now I had Misha's consent. All I had to do was wait for the show to start. I prayed it would go well.

No—I would *ensure* it went well.

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The Harvest Festival was upon us. The capital filled with people that night, and dozens of stalls lined the streets. Food and decorations featuring autumn crops flew off the shelves as the capital welcomed the busiest time of the year.

In a chamber in the great cathedral, I prepared for the ceremonial dance. I had changed into my costume and now waited for my turn.

"Rae, do you have what you need?" Lilly asked.

"Yes. Everything is going smoothly."

"I-I'm nervous..."

A passerby would assume we were discussing the ceremonial dance, but our words carried hidden meanings.

"Miss Claire, Miss Lilly, you know what you need to do, right?"

"You needn't even ask."

"Oh, yes."

Everyone needed to do their part in this plan. Even Rod and Thane were part of it, though they weren't with us. While Lilly's penchant for blurting things out kept me uneasy, I could only trust her from here on out.

"Lilly, don't forget the—" I started.

"I-I have it right here." Lilly held out two bracelets, which I promptly slipped on.

At that, I left the two of them and approached the priest in charge of the ceremonial dance.

"I'm so sorry, your holiness," I said. "May I please use the restroom?"

"The dance is about to begin. Can't you hold it?"

"No, I really can't."

"Fine, then. Hurry up."

"Thank you very much."

I bowed once and left.

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The ceremonial dance took place on festival grounds. A large marble stage stood in a central position, and the seats surrounding it were completely sold out. Including standing room, a few thousand people gathered to watch. I didn't think the people way in the back could even see the stage, but more and more seemed to join the crowd. After all, the ceremonial dance was thought to bring good luck to attendees.

The royal family sat in the seats reserved for distinguished guests near to the stage. King l'Ausseil, Queen Riche, Rod, Thane, Yu, and even Salas were there.

A low bell gonged across the bustling festival site—the main cathedral bell. Finally, it was time for the ceremonial dance to begin. A wave of silence passed over the crowd. The light of the full moon illuminated the stage, accented by flaming torches, and a sense of mystery hung in the air.

The dancers—including Claire, Lilly, and I—gracefully took the stage in their gossamer silk garments. We wore fine, silver tiaras on our heads and held bell-decked fans in our hands. We formed a circle on the stage and kneeled. The high sound of a flute sang through the silence. Next, the low beat of a large drum resonated through the air. Stringed instruments joined in harmony and small drums set the rhythm.

Then the ding, ding, ding of our bells rose up. The dancers tied the music together as

accompaniment, ringing the bell fans in our right hands. We started to move, slowly. The costumes were made to let us move freely, with pieces fluttering to accentuate our dance. The sleeves and hems drew lovely lines with the arc of our gestures.

The musical performance, at first quiet, grew fiercer with the dance. However, the dancers remained delicate and graceful. That gap roused a sense of wonder in the audience. It was as if the music commanded the dancers to dance with greater urgency and ferocity, but we resisted.

“That dancer is a vision!”

Even though speaking was forbidden during the dance, someone unconsciously cried out in admiration. Everyone who heard them knew who they meant. One dancer was a head taller than everyone else. While her movements synchronized with the others’, she clearly stood out.

“What is it...? It’s like she’s crying but happy...”

“Like her emotions are in conflict.”

The slow movements made us look like we were bound in chains. But for some reason, each sweeping gesture of the arm, each step of the foot, captivated the audience. Someone wrote later that the one dancer’s movements made it seem like she had, for the first time, allowed herself some forbidden feeling.

“That’s Rae Taylor, right? You know, the commoner they allowed into the Royal Academy.”

“Oh, that girl. But she’s not a nun, is she? Why is she performing the ceremonial dance?” The audience started to get confused. But—

“Who cares about that. She’s breathtaking.”

What’s that they say? Don’t sweat the small stuff. The crowd opted to do just that, bowled over by the dancer’s expressivity.

They wanted to keep watching forever. But alas, the song came to an end. The dancers gathered in the center and danced as if struggling, or perhaps rejoicing.

And then—

Ding.

We rang our bells loudly at the end and spread our arms wide, then knelt on the stage. After a moment of silence, just when the crowd was about to burst into applause—

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“Listen, my people!”

The dignified voice booming through the venue was none other than the dancer that had left such an impression on everyone: “me.” However, the voice wasn’t mine.

The first one to realize this was Queen Riche. “Wha... Yu?!”

“I” bit into the bracelet around my wrist, tearing it away. The person who looked like me instantly transformed into Yu.

Well, that’s not entirely accurate.

While tall, Yu’s silhouette was curvy. Breasts pushed against gossamer silk. To put it bluntly, this body was unmistakably feminine.

“What is the meaning of this?! Who is this beside me?” Queen Riche turned to the Prince Yu seated beside her.

“My deepest apologies, Lady Riche. It’s me.” When I removed my own bracelet, the Prince Yu seated by the stage was revealed to be yours truly.

“Rae Taylor?! What is the meaning of this?!” the queen howled.

“Master Yu gave me my orders. I don’t know the reason. The prince simply told me to sit here with the royal family in his place.”

Of course, I had been the one to make this proposal, but we had to lie about whose idea this whole charade had been in order to ensure my safety. The bracelets Yu and I had worn were magical tools provided by Lilly that allowed us to take on illusory forms. They weren’t relics possessed by the Church but her own personal belongings.

Meanwhile, the audience was starting to get the idea.

“What do you mean? Isn’t that Prince Yu?”

“But she’s a girl.”

“Prince Yu is a girl...?”

However, their chatter abruptly stopped. The people had lost their voices.

*Good job, Misha.* She remained hidden, but we owed this moment to her. Only she could silence such a large crowd.

“I am deeply sorry for misleading you all, but this is my true form.” Now, the only sound anyone could hear was Yu—also Misha’s work. “I have been deceiving the entire kingdom. I am, in fact, a girl. I will no longer lie to you, or to myself. I wish to live out the rest of my days as my true self, the girl you see before you.”



Riche was moving her mouth, trying desperately to speak, but no words rose to her lips. Salas also strained to bark orders to his underlings, but he had no voice, so good luck to him!

“My people, please, forgive me,” said Yu. “In recompense for my years of deception, I hereby abdicate my seat in the line of succession.”

As Yu said this, the queen fainted. Apparently, the shock was too much for her.

At that moment, everyone’s voices at last returned. Chaos erupted around me.

“This was your doing, Rae Taylor,” King l’Ausseil said to me. For some reason, his tone was not accusatory but gentle.

“Whatever do you mean?” I said.

“Well... I’m sure you know nothing about it. Nothing at all,” King l’Ausseil said, chuckling wryly. “In the end, perhaps it’s better this way.”

And with that, the king left, saying only, “Salas, take care of this.”

“Hmph,” Salas rushed to give orders to his subordinates.

I was arrested.

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“You look better than I expected,” Claire said.

“It’s because you’ve come to visit me,” I answered. The sight of her face filled me with delight. I wished I could reach through the bars to hug her.

“And how has prison been?”

“Not so bad, thanks to you.”

A week had passed since the Yu incident, and I’d been locked up the whole time. The investigation itself was going in our favor, largely because everyone, including Yu, had kept their stories straight. Yu confirmed that I’d acted on her instructions, and Claire and Lilly backed her up. Rod and Thane did the same. More importantly, King l’Ausseil

himself was apparently on my side, as was most of the palace.

"Well, my food was poisoned, though," I said. Likely retaliation from someone in Queen Riche's camp. Thankfully, I diligently cast antidote magic on everything I ate.

"What?!" Claire exclaimed. "I'm relieved you're all right, but..."

"It's all thanks to Misaki."

"What do you mean?"

"He showed up in my dreams."

*"I see you're still completely incorrigible,"* he'd said to me in his usual gruff tone. I hadn't heard it in so long. Dream Misaki laughed awkwardly. *"Thank you for saving someone who knows what it's like. Now don't be an idiot. Make sure you check your food."*

That was all he said. He disappeared right after, giving me no time to respond.

"Is that... something that can happen?" Claire asked.

"Well, it was probably just my mind manifesting my unconscious desires," I admitted. Even so, I held that meeting close to my heart.

"I told you this was dangerous."

"You were right," I acknowledged. Claire had opposed my scheme more than anyone else, though I'd brought her around in the end. "What's going on in the world?"

"It's gone almost exactly as you planned."

Claire continued on, explaining that Yu had been sent to the convent and she was now living freely as a girl.

In an attempt to resolve confusion, the palace had announced that Yu had been struck with a curse and that the shock of this had driven Yu mad. Yu had then entered the convent under the guise of receiving magical treatment. She was partially confined for now, but as I had explained to Yu before, her movements wouldn't be restricted for long.

"I have brought a message from Yu," Claire finished. "She said, 'Thank you. I will be sure to repay you.'"

"Oh, is that so? And how are things with the curse?"

"Well, that has been something of an ordeal. Everyone assumed her return to her true form was temporary at first."

Those who'd known of the curse had assumed Yu appeared as she did at the ceremonial dance because of the light of the full moon. However, in truth, we had broken the curse with the Tears of the Moon just prior to the performance.

The Tears of the Moon required two magic users of considerable power to wield, but it turned out that between Lilly and Yu, we had just who we needed. Lilly had been investigated for her role in all this, but she had explained she simply couldn't refuse a request from Prince Yu.

"Also, as Miss Lilly possesses considerable status, she cannot be so easily punished."

"What about Misha?"

"She is negotiating with her parents."

Misha wished to leave the Academy and join Yu in the convent, but her parents were resisting. Well, it sounded like her mother was on her side. She kept pointing out that the Jur family has plenty of capable heirs, so they could let their daughter do as she pleased. She had also been swayed by Yu, who had specifically asked Misha to remain by her side in the clergy.

"Since it was her parents' fault that Misha's childhood was so rough, it seems like they feel obligated to give in a little."

"Is that so?" In that case, it was only a matter of time until Misha's wish was granted too. "But how have you been, Miss Claire?"

"I am perfectly fine. Except, of course, for the embarrassment of having my servant arrested."

"That's it? You're not lonely? You don't miss me?"

"Well, aren't you confident?" she said.

But she didn't deny it. Tee hee.

"Did Master Dole say anything?" I asked.

"Nothing." Claire cocked her head to one side. "I thought for sure he would fire you, but that hasn't come up at all... Exactly what do you have on my father?"

"It's not like that. Master Dole is just a kind man."

I was lying, of course. I couldn't tell her the real reason.

As we talked, the prison guard came over to us. "Forgive me, Miss Claire. His Majesty wishes to speak to Miss Taylor."

"He does?" I asked with some concern. Maybe the king wasn't quite as much on my side as I'd thought.

"What could he possibly plan to ask her?" Claire demanded. "We have already confirmed she only acted on Lady Yu's orders."

"Either way, I must ask you to leave," said the guard.

"Fine, then. I shall return shortly," Claire said.

And with that, she left.

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I was taken to the royal audience room, my hands bound behind my back. A criminal being granted audience with the king had to be unprecedented. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Let me see your face."

I raised my head from my prostrated position to see King l'Ausseil, two guards, and no one else. Queen Riche and Chancellor Salas were nowhere to be seen.

"I asked everyone to leave," the king explained, seeing my confused expression. "I am

here to hear the truth.”

*Ah, I see.*

“I have been pained by Yu’s suffering,” the king continued. “She has been forced to deny herself for the sake of others’ egos.”

Lady Riche’s ego, namely. Not that he mentioned that. He was, after all, a monarch, and as I understand, they’re rarely forthright.

“I only know what I’ve already told you,” I said.

“You’re quite clever. I like it,” the king said, stroking his beard. He looked satisfied.

The sinking feeling inside me grew. I didn’t care what happened to me, but consequences from this moment could well spread to the princes, Lilly, and my beloved Claire.

“You shall be released today,” said the king.

“Thank you very much.” I heaved a sigh of relief, thinking my fears groundless.

But King l’Ausseil wasn’t done.

“You will also be stripped of your right to attend the Royal Academy.”

“What?!” Wait a second! “Your Majesty, with all due respect—!”

“Starting today, Rae Taylor, you will be an officer of the Secret Service. You will report directly to me.” The king smiled. “There are very few people in this court whom I can trust. I am in need of your assistance, Rae Taylor.”

Stunned into silence, all I could do was stare back at him.

# CHAPTER 7

## THE PALACE

“SECRET SERVICE?” I eventually managed to say. “I don’t know what that means. What does Your Majesty wish me to do?”

King l’Ausseil regarded me for a long moment, as if testing me. When he finally spoke, it was to completely change the direction of the conversation. “What is your opinion of our current political situation?”

“I think it is far too complex for a mere commoner to comprehend.”

“Don’t be modest. I know your grades at the Academy. I’m aware you possess a deep understanding of this country’s inner workings.”

Obviously, I couldn’t tell him it was all just memorization from playing a game.

“I believe Your Majesty’s attempts to encourage meritocracy have been successful,” I said instead. “Not just for royalty and nobles, but for the talented people from commoner backgrounds who are being promoted to positions of power.”

“And yet, the Commoner Movement,” the king sighed. “We are stagnant, Rae Taylor. The aristocrats wield too much influence over government officials, and they resist every opportunity for change. I wanted us to reach for the future. That was why I introduced policies to elevate talented commoners.”

“Have you not seen that begin to happen?”

“We’re off to a decent start, yes, even if it’s slow. But the essential structure, the hereditary oligopoly in which aristocrats benefit from the oppression of the commoner class, hasn’t changed in the least,” the king said. “Hence, I need you.”

“I apologize for repeating myself, but what does Your Majesty wish from me?”

“You will expose the crimes committed by powerful nobles.”

"I decline," I said immediately.

The king frowned. "Why is that?"

"My food's already being poisoned. I have no wish to make more enemies."

"Do not lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

"You seem perfectly healthy."

"I counteracted the poison."

"Then you have no real objection."

Ugh. This was hard—wildly so. It was difficult to get anything past this man, which, I supposed, made sense. He *was* the king, and the foremost politician in this country.

"At least listen to what I have to say," said King l'Ausseil. "I don't believe the entirety of the aristocracy is complicit, but two in particular I suspect of underhanded dealings."

"Ahhh..."

"First, the Chancellor, Salas Lilium, and second, the Minister of Finance, Dole François."

I stopped short.

In the game itself, the king didn't have much of a presence. Other than having put the new policies of meritocracy into motion, he seemed like a pretty generic monarch. If anything, he came across as kind of dumb, because—depending on the route taken by the player—he could make strategic blunders like stoking the flames of the Commoner Movement and precipitating the loss of his own throne. He might have been acting with the people's best interests in mind, of course, disregarding his own fate, but I'd always gotten the impression he was more unable to control the nobility.

But if he already knew of Salas and Dole's activities... I had to reevaluate my opinion of his abilities.

"What can a lowly commoner like me possibly do to challenge aristocrats important

enough to hold positions such as Chancellor and Minister of Finance?"

"You are close to both their daughters," the king said.

In other words, he wanted me to use Lilly and Claire.

"Again, I decline."

"I see. In that case, I have no choice but to investigate not only you but Lilly and Claire for treason in this business with Yu."

"We were only following Lady Yu's orders."

"So you say, but a case could be made for a version of events in which you three kidnapped my child." He was threatening me.

"I don't think Master Dole or Master Salas would stand by and let that happen."

"Likely not. But, as king, I can overrule the two of them when necessary."

I didn't answer. Was he bluffing? If he was capable of bringing such power to bear on Dole and Salas, then why did he need my help to investigate them at all? That said, the Yu affair had caused an unprecedented scandal for the monarchy. In the unlikely event that the king was being serious, then Claire might well be in danger here.

I couldn't be arrested for this, not right now. I'd happily suffer whatever fate it took to save Claire, but the king had frankly terrible timing. Soon, Claire would be in all too real danger, and until then, I couldn't leave her side.

"I understand," I said stiffly. "I accept the position as a member of your Secret Service."

"Good." The king nodded in satisfaction.

I accepted for several reasons, really, one of which being that the more I thought of it, the more I realized that this position might be turned to good use. I had already begun deploying countermeasures to rescue Miss Claire from the coming crisis, but I might be able to make something of this role as well.

"I have but two requests," I said.

“Speak.”

“First, please afford Miss Claire and Lilly the same privileges. I cannot execute Your Majesty’s orders without their full cooperation. This is absolutely necessary.”

“Hmph. Very well. I expected you to object to their mere involvement.”

“The matter far exceeds my ability to handle on my own.” He was right; I didn’t want to involve the two of them. But I had no choice.

“And the other request?”

“In the event that I find evidence of injustices committed by Master Dole and Master Salas, I ask that Your Majesty grant Miss Claire and Miss Lilly immunity”

“Hmph...”

“Destroying their noble houses may be unavoidable, but if Miss Claire and Miss Lilly will be punished for their fathers’ crimes, then I refuse to cooperate any further.”

The king thought for a moment. He stroked his beard, deep in thought. “Very well. The two girls will not be held accountable.”

“Thank you very much,” I said. Honestly, if he was already this ready to grant me what I asked, this whole thing might go better than I’d hoped. “Before I begin the actual investigation, what sort of authority does the Secret Service have?”

“They are not omnipotent. Powers and privileges are appointed as required by the job at hand. What do you require?”

“The bare minimum would be the authority to inspect the subjects’ finances and the authority to make arrests.”

“Hmph. Agreed.”

“One more thing. This one’s quite important. I would like to be granted the authority to make plea bargains.”

“Plea bargains?”

Oh. Maybe they didn't yet have that idea in this world?

"In the event that a criminal admits to their crime," I said, "*and* cooperates with the investigation by naming their accomplices, they may be given a reduced sentence or be acquitted of their wrongdoing."

"And what would you do with the authority to offer such bargains?"

"A few things. Most importantly, it would help me secure information to move forward with the investigation of more serious misconduct."

I was already generating a strategy for how to pursue Dole and Salas, and I laid it out for the king.

"I see," he nodded. "In that case... you will find this useful."

As I looked at him in confusion, the king called over one of his guards and took what looked like a playing card from him. He handed the object to me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"A magical tool that allows one to record conversations. It cannot be duplicated, which makes it invaluable for important transactions and investigations," he said. "It is a rare item; handle it with care. Now, is there anything else you require?"

"Not at this time," I answered.

He looked surprised. "Aren't you going to ask about compensation?"

"The guarantee that Claire and Lilly will not be held accountable is enough compensation for me."

"You have no other desires?"

"I wouldn't say that..." It was just that nothing mattered more to me than guaranteeing Claire's safety.

"You said the same during the Chimera incident at the Academy, didn't you?" the king mused.

"You spared Lene and her brother's life. I have received all the reward I require."

"If more people were like you, this would be a much better country."

That was going a bit too far. I was very aware that I was a weirdo. If everyone were like me, before long, the Bauer Kingdom would fall to ruin.

"Now then, when you begin your investigation, you must speak with Rod," the king said. Apparently, Rod had been in charge of the investigation thus far. I was then granted authority to meet freely with the eldest prince, as well as released from prison.

*But how am I going to explain this to Miss Claire? What a royal pain.*

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"You must be joking!"

The first thing I did with my newly reacquired freedom was search out Claire. I might have been stripped of my enrollment at the Academy, but Claire didn't know that yet, and the king had said I was allowed to stay in my dorm room at the school. However, when I explained the king's request, Claire reacted exactly as I expected.

"My father would never behave in such a shameful manner!"

"Well, the king just wants me to conduct an investigation," I said. He'd actually said they were highly suspect, but if I told Claire that, she might just storm the palace.

"The fact that he would suspect my father makes *me* suspect the king's sanity! Has the François family not always protected the kingdom's treasury with utmost honor?!" Claire revered her parents like gods. To her, Dole, her father, and Melia, her mother, were the platonic ideals of aristocrats.

"M-Miss Claire, this might present a valuable opportunity," Lilly said, looking petrified. I needed Lilly's cooperation to carry out the king's mission, and she'd happened to be in Claire's room when I showed up. I hoped she wasn't neglecting her priestly duties.

"What could you possibly mean, Cardinal Lilly?"

"I-I also don't want to believe my father is doing something corrupt. That's why I think

we should prove our fathers' innocence." That was an optimistic way of looking at it—though the burden of proof *was* on the prosecution. "Wh-what sort of crimes are our fathers suspected of?"

"I'm not that far yet," I said. "The king told me to speak to Rod."

"Then let's be off," Claire said with a snort. She looked ready to confront the prince on her own.

"It's too late today. I'm sure you'll both receive official instructions from the king tomorrow, so let's wait until then."

"I can't wait that long," Claire said impatiently. "Anyway, why is Cardinal Lilly involved in this?"

"What?" I said. "Well, I thought that since we have to investigate Master Salas, we could use Miss Lilly's help—"

"You really don't understand how dangerous this is, do you?" Claire demanded. "Prying into the affairs of powerful people isn't something to take lightly!"

She was right. Especially as, thanks to my memory of *Revolution*, I already knew exactly what both Salas and Dole were up to.

"I-I can use water magic. I'm sure I can help."

"It is far too dangerous," Claire insisted. "Rae has me to guard her."

Who was guarding who now?

"B-but I'm worried!" Lilly protested.

"You have nothing to fear," Claire insisted.

"I-I don't know what you'll do to Rae if I leave you two alone!"

"That's what you're worried about?!"

"Huh? Are you going to do something to me, Miss Claire?" I asked sweetly.

“No!”

“Why not?!”

“Why are we even talking about this?!”

“Y-you won’t touch Rae?!” Lilly stammered. “Have you taken leave of your senses?!”

“Oh, you exhaust me! Both of you!”

It had been a while since Claire and I had bantered like this. Ah, yes, this was what I’d been missing.

“I suppose it can’t be helped,” Claire conceded at last. “I consent to Cardinal Lilly joining us, but please, be extremely careful.”

“Y-yes, of course,” said Lilly.

“You too, Rae.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After that conversation, we called it a night.

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We visited Rod at the palace after class the next day. The eldest prince’s room was spacious and handsomely furnished in warm, fashionable colors that evoked his affinity with the fire attribute. Claire’s family home astounded, but it had nothing on this room. Lilly, who lived an honorable life of poverty at the Church, looked especially uncomfortable in the midst of this luxury.

As for me? It’s rude to get hung up on comparisons, so I’ll plead the fifth for now.

“I don’t care for small talk, so let’s get right to the point. Salas and Dole are embezzling,” Rod said plainly. He always reeked of confidence, but today his certainty was especially clear.

“Master Rod, you say this because you have definitive evidence, correct?” I thought Claire would blow up, but she started with sheer logic. Perhaps she had cooled off

overnight.

"No, I don't."

"Y-you don't?" Lilly said, sounding almost disappointed.

"Well, wait. The only thing I don't have is *definitive* evidence. I have loads of circumstantial evidence," Rod said, pulling out a notebook. "Salas and Dole are both smart. They haven't exactly left a paper trail."

He showed us records proving that, at the very least, money tended to disappear around Salas and Dole. He also showed us a list of nobles suspected to be tangentially involved.

"Can't you just arrest those people?" Claire asked, suggesting she believed her father was innocent.

"They may be the ones getting their hands dirty, but they're not the masterminds. It'd be like cutting off a lizard's tail—it'd just grow back," Rod explained. "We learned that the hard way. Took in a batch, but more just cropped up in their place." He fixed his gaze on me. "So, what are you going to do?"

"May I have a copy of these materials?"

"I figured you would say that, so I had one made." Rod rang the bell on the table. A servant came in with a stack of papers, which I took.

"Thank you, Master Rod. We will be going now," I said.

"Wait one moment, Rae Taylor," Rod said, stopping me as I rose to leave. He'd used my full name for some reason, which gave me a bad feeling.

"What is it?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I just... thought I should ask you while you were here." It wasn't like Rod to hesitate.

My apprehension intensified. "I really don't want to hear it."

"Don't say that."

"May I leave?"

"Not yet," he said. "Rae Taylor, would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

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I didn't know what to say. My expression must have been utterly dumbfounded. Everyone else froze too, but Claire recovered first.

"Have you gone mad, Master Rod?!" she practically screamed.

"A-are you suggesting a commoner marry into the royal family?!" Lilly asked.

"Yeah. What about it?" Rod answered coolly.

In other words, he'd just proposed to me. If I were a normal commoner, it probably would have been the happiest moment of my life. Or maybe I'd have thought he was mocking me. As it was, I thought neither. The only thing in my mind was: What could I possibly have done to lead him on?

I really didn't feel like I'd had much contact with Rod. I might have caught his attention a bit during the first test at the Academy, and then when I beat him at chess. But I stayed by Claire's side almost all the time, and I really hadn't done anything during the game's events to earn his affection. Maybe I'd made a mistake somewhere?

"Just to confirm," I said, "are you making fun of me?"

"No, I'm serious."

"Hmmm..." I frowned. "What is it that you like about me?"

"Your personality. Your abilities. At first, I didn't think you were all that special," Rod said. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

"Did I do something to change that?"

"You preemptively prevented an assault on the school, you cured Thane when he was poisoned, you saved the Aurousseau family from execution, you caught Manaria off guard, and you resolved the ghost ship incident in Euclid," Rod rattled off.

When he put it like that... Wait a minute, how did he know the truth of what had happened in Euclid?

"No... almost all of that was Claire's doing..." I said.

"Is that true, Claire?" Rod asked her.

"No. It was Rae," she answered.

Wait, what?

"What really decided it for me was Yu," said Rod. "You resolved a complex problem the palace had been wrestling with for years."

"I really didn't do that alone..."

"Don't be modest. I know you were the mastermind."

Ugh—I really wasn't trying to be modest!

"I need someone like you at my side, not a dull noble lady who grew up coddled by a rich family," Rod concluded. "So, how about it?"

"How about it? I decline."

"Rae?!" Claire said. "Do you understand what you are saying?!"

"What? I was proposed to and declined."

"But you could become the queen!"

"Well, I don't really want to be queen."

From my perspective, I didn't understand Claire's abject confusion. Her face was in complete shock, like she couldn't believe what she was looking at.

"But it's an honor beyond your wildest dreams!"

"It's not an honor for me."

“Why?!”

“Because I like *you*, Miss Claire.” Had I not conveyed that to her yet?

“Ha ha ha! That’s right. I should’ve known that’s what you’d say!” Rod slammed his hand on the desk, laughing. He looked thoroughly entertained. “Claire, it seems Rae values being with you over marrying royalty.”

“Please forgive her insolence,” Claire stammered. “She’s just confused by the suddenness of it all. I am sure that once she’s calmed down and thought things through, she will see things differently.”

“No, I’m perfectly calm—”

“Be silent, for one minute,” Claire interrupted me, sounding almost woeful. “Master Rod, please do not withdraw your proposal just yet.”

“Of course. No matter what Rae thinks, my feelings won’t change.”

“Thank you very much. Please, let’s continue this another time.”

“Of course.”

“It’s time to go! Rae, Cardinal Lilly.” Claire seized our hands to lead us out of Rod’s room.

“W-wait a second, Miss Claire...”

I started to protest, but she glared at me so hard that I swallowed my words.

We parted ways with Lilly at the entrance of the palace. Claire didn’t open her mouth to speak again until we were in the carriage, headed home.

“Rae... You took that joke too far,” she said, in a tone of fond concern that I’d never heard her use before.

“Joke? What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about! Rejecting Master Rod’s proposal!”

“I can’t marry someone I’m not even interested in.”

“Marriage isn’t just about what you *want!* If you were to marry into the royal family, imagine how happy it would make your parents...”

I hadn’t even thought about it from that angle. To a modern Japanese person like me, marriage was a fundamentally private matter. In this world, however, it was a contract between families, and at the level of royalty, it was almost always entered for political reasons.

“I can’t say for certain...” I said, “but I think my parents would respect my decision.”

“Of course they would. Your parents are wonderful. But are you content to let them spoil you so? Don’t you want to make them happy?”

“Well...”

This was really driving home the difference between Claire’s values and mine. To Claire, marrying advantageously meant repaying the family who had raised her. My casual refusal of Rod’s proposal had, to her, been so unimaginable that it looked insincere.

What could I do...?

“But, Miss Claire... I only want to marry you.”

“Rae, listen carefully,” Claire said seriously. She straightened her posture. “I understand that you are in love with me. I think it wonderful, even. But marriage is a completely separate issue.”

“Not to me.”

“No. Love may be indulged to a certain degree of freedom. But individual desire is irrelevant to marriage.”

“Miss Claire...”

“You *must* accept Rod’s proposal. Being married would not obligate you to end your relationship with me. On the contrary, if you were to become royalty, our relationship might even—”

“Miss Claire!”

I think that was the first time I’d raised my voice to interrupt Claire. She stopped short, startled.

“To me, marriage is just as—no, even more—intimate than love,” I said.

“Rae...”

“No matter what you say, I have no intention of marrying anyone other than you, Miss Claire.” Maybe she would never understand my point of view. But this was a hill I was willing to die on.

“Rae, think about it carefully. Women are not permitted to marry each other.”

“Then I won’t marry anyone. That’s it.”

“Even if I marry someone else?”

“Yes...”

I really didn’t want Claire to belong to someone else. I’d denied my own feelings in the past, but Manaria had forced me to get past that. Even so, that didn’t mean I was willing to marry someone other than Claire. Especially not someone like Rod. The thought was unfathomable.

“I thought I was finally starting to understand you,” Claire said.

“Thank you very much.”

“But now,” she continued, “I realize how very much I don’t.”

That one comment cut me to my very core.

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Autumn arrived, and the fragrance of sweet olive floated in on the wind. It was an autumn fragrance in Japan too, and I gladly embraced that familiarity in *Revolution*. Only a Japanese developer would have thought to include it in the game. Some people in modern Japan thought the scent belonged solely in the domain of bathroom air

fresheners, but this world didn't share those prejudices, and saying you liked the smell of sweet olives didn't get you odd looks. I inhaled deeply of it as I walked down the road.

Unfortunately, my mood wasn't as sweet.

I started my investigation right after we spoke to Rod, though it seemed only I planned to do any actual investigative work. Claire and Lilly were more concerned with clearing their fathers' names. I decided to start with a noble who had dealings with both Dole and Salas. The man procured military supplies for the kingdom, and according to Rod, he had shady accounting practices. His name was Wedge Thompson.

We were currently on our way to Wedge's mansion.

We were on our way...

I was silent.

So was Claire.

"U-ummm..." Lilly started, as if mirroring our awkward faces.

I knew how she felt. Since meeting up at the Academy, Claire and I hadn't said a word to each other besides hello.

"Th-the weather is so nice today!" Lilly finished.

"Except that it's cloudy?" Claire said.

I didn't answer. In fact, rain looked imminent.

"What did you two eat for breakfast? Lilly had rye bread and corn potage."

"I overslept this morning, so I skipped breakfast," I said.

"O-oh I see..."

"Yes..." I swallowed. "Umm... Miss Claire?"

"What is it?"

“Oh... it’s nothing.”

Her curt reaction brought me to a stop. How pointless of me.

Lilly continued to try her best to clear the bad air between us, but ultimately, we arrived at the Thompson mansion with the same dark clouds overhead. I had hoped things would improve before this.

“Augh?!”

An adorable scream interrupted my thoughts. I looked down to see Claire spread-eagled on the ground.

“Argh! Now I have to fight with both Rae and my shoelaces?!”

Upon closer inspection, the laces on her pumps had snapped.

“Rae, she just compared you to a shoelace. How does that feel?” Lilly asked.

“I want to dye myself red and wrap myself around a pinky.”

On my left hand, of course.

Claire had been surprisingly levelheaded of late, but she still tended to fly off the handle and overreact at trivial inconveniences. Rod’s proposal had strained things between us, but I couldn’t help finding her devotion to her different values endearing. Even watching her fall flat on her face in what would generally be referred to as disgraceful behavior endeared her to me.

She disagreed with my ideas about marriage, but she wouldn’t force me to do anything I didn’t want to. She wanted to respect me, in her own way. So what was I going to do about it?

This stiff, uncomfortable atmosphere just didn’t suit us. I decided to change the mood.

“I am infatuated with my clumsy Claire,” I declared.

“Clumsy?! What do you mean, clumsy?!” Claire erupted, as if I’d given the signal to start jesting.

"Please just stay there for a moment." I took a strap from my bag and split it thinly to make a temporary shoelace.

"You're so skilled..." Lilly said.

"I owe it all to Miss Claire." I removed the broken shoelace and ran the strap through the eyelets.

"What does it matter, if I'm still clumsy...?"

"Of course it matters! Your clumsiness gave me a precious glimpse of your underwear!"

"What are you talking about now?!"

"Oh, umm... could it be my true desires...?"

"Don't play dumb with me!"

I was infatuated with my angry Claire too.

"N-not fair! I want to play yuri-yuri too!"

"Wh-what is yuri-yuri?"

"R-Rae told me. When girls cuddle together it's called yuri."

"Who do you think you are, teaching Cardinal Lilly such things?!"

"Heh heh," I giggled as I stood, sticking my tongue out a little, and then extended my hand to help Miss Claire up. "Miss Claire, let's make up."

"I wasn't aware we were fighting."

"Absolutely right. But our difference of opinion led to a bit of sensitivity, don't you think?"

"I suppose you're right." Claire took my hand, and I heaved her up. "Ahh?!"

"Mmm, this feels so nice," I said as Claire's delicate body landed in my arms. "I want to

hold you forever!"

"L-Let go of meee!"

"M-me too, me too!" Lilly cried out.

"Miss Claire, let's set the topic of my marriage aside for now."

"Huh?! Rae, you're going to get married? To whom?! D-did you finally realize how I feel?!"

"Lilly, be quiet for just a minute."

"Ohh..."

"Even if I do get married, it won't be right away. I need more time to think, and either way, I don't want this to ruin my relationship with you."

"I don't want my relationship with you to be ruined either," Claire admitted.

"Then let's put a pin in this for now," I suggested.

"I suppose it can't be helped..." Claire smiled as if she had been released from something. "Now then, let's finish this job quickly, shall we?"

"Right! Sweet, modest Miss Claire is nice, but at the end of the day, I need my Miss Claire to be bold in bed!"

"Bold in where now?!"

"Just like you're being now!"

"What in the world are you talking about?!"

And just like that, we returned to our usual antics. I was relieved. She really did know how to make me feel better.

"J-just... get a room already... you ugly shellfish..."

I fell silent, as did Claire.

"I-I'm sorry! It wasn't on purpose!" Lilly wailed.

"I'm used to it at this point," I said.

"The sudden change can be quite refreshing, actually," Claire said.

"Anyway, let's be off. In the name of Lady Claire François, I officially declare this the start of our Corrupt Noble Regulation mission."

"Does that not make it sound too dangerous?!" Claire exclaimed.

"Pl-please don't leave me behind!"

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"Well, well, Miss Claire and Miss Lilly. Welcome to my humble abode."

Wedge Thompson, head of the Thompson barony, greeted the three of us with a smile. He was younger than Dole and a bit pudgier.

The Thompson manor couldn't measure up to the François estate, but it was large beyond the means of a lower-ranked noble. The interior was decorated with gaudy artwork that reeked of nouveau riche taste. Wedge play-acted the role of aristocrat as he led us to the parlor down the hall, prattling on about which piece of art was whose masterpiece and how many millions of gold it had cost. Claire and Lilly cringed all the while.

"Well now, what sort of business did you wish to discuss today?" Wedge asked Claire as we all sat down in the parlor. He never looked at me, probably assuming I was nothing but their servant. I mean, true enough, but that's not the point.

"Actually, I have been appointed to the king's Secret Service," Claire said.

"Yes, I heard. What a wonderful achievement to be appointed to such a role as a woman," he said.

So he was well connected enough to have heard the news.

"We've come to investigate the Thompson manor."

"Well, well... That's concerning, isn't it?" Wedge conspicuously winced. "Don't tell me you think some manner of illegal affairs have been conducted in this house?"

"We have our suspicions. Enough to warrant an investigation."

"Well, well. This certainly isn't what I expected to hear from an intelligent girl like you, Miss Claire," Wedge said. His exaggerated gestures seemed to suggest Claire's words bordered on slander.

"We hardly enjoy this. If you have nothing to hide, Baron Thompson, then please, cooperate with our investigation."

"Fine, then. Investigate whatever you like," Wedge chuckled. His countenance was confident, as if he silently dared us to find anything.

"Now then, can you please show us documentation of your finances from the past ten years?"

"Of course, ma'am. I will retrieve them from the safe. Please wait here."

Wedge rang a bell to call a servant and gave him some orders. The servant, an older man, glanced at us for a moment, but said nothing and nodded before leaving the room.

"Please, enjoy some refreshments while you wait."

"O-oh, thank—" said Lilly.

"No, thank you. We haven't come to make a social call," Claire sharply interrupted Lilly, who had looked excited. I hoped again that Lilly wasn't neglecting her cardinal duties.

"Heh heh... Don't say that. Did you see Broumet has a competitor now? It's called Frater, and they make the most wonderful treats. The main restaurant is in the Alpes, but they recently opened a branch in the capital."

"I very much doubt they could outdo Broumet."

"You should try for yourself and see. I think their work at least as good as Broumet's, and their flavors are more complex than the average maid can devise," Wedge said. As if on cue, maids brought out trays with teapots and ramekins. "This is crème brûlée,

Frater's most popular dish. I don't believe many people in the capital have yet tried it."

"I have tried crème brûlée before. *She* made it for me," Claire said, telling me with her eyes that she was rapidly losing interest.

"You what?! N-no, Frater's creations are completely unlike anything an amateur could concoct. Please, just try it."

Wedge had probably intended to use the crème brûlée to win us over, never imagining Claire's servant could already make it. Not that I cared, but he really took every opportunity to insult me, huh? And he seemed to be the only person in the room who didn't notice Claire's mounting irritation.

"If you insist, then I suppose I will try it."

Claire lifted the spoon and made eye contact with me for just a moment. I nodded. We had already discussed in advance that I would cast antidote magic on any food offered to us during our investigation. Once I confirmed that my magic had been applied, Claire finally took a bite of the crème brûlée.

"Well... it's not bad," she said nonchalantly.

"I-It's delicious!" Lilly exclaimed, surprise and excitement writ large on her face.

"It's exquisite, isn't it? I was so surprised when I came upon it. My wife adored Broumet, but now she can't get enough of Frater. Frater's prices are far more reasonable, as well—"

"Still, I do prefer the crème brûlée my maid makes for me," Claire declared in an uninterested voice.

This brought Wedge's excited chatter to a halt. His face went white. "H-how could that be?"

"R-Rae can make it better than this?" Lilly boggled.

"Why, yes. Rae, please." Claire offered me a bite of crème brûlée on a spoon.

"You realize this means we'll share an indirect kiss?"

“How shameless! That’s enough, just try it.”

“As you say.” I took the bite without hesitation. Then I dramatically licked the spoon clean. I mean, I had to properly sample the flavor. “Hmm... Not enough cream. I imagine they added too much milk in its place.”

“What?!”

“And the sugar on top isn’t properly caramelized. I think whoever made this worked from a perfectly good recipe, but they need more practice.”

“Y-you! What would you know?!”

“Baron Thompson, I apologize for my poorly mannered servant. And yet, I agree with her appraisal,” Claire said in a calm voice.

“Oh, no! I didn’t mean to criticize you, Miss Claire!” Wedge switched to an appeasing voice, but his eyes couldn’t hide his irritation. This was getting tense.

Still, I was happy. I recognized this crème brûlée recipe—he said he had found it in the Alpes? Frater... It was a good name for a restaurant.

While I contemplated this, a knock sounded at the door. The older servant returned, holding a stack of papers.

“Now then, let’s take a look.”

With the refreshments cleared away, Claire took the stack of papers. I reached for the accounting books, trying to memorize what I saw.

“Miss Claire, *you* may have been appointed to the Secret Service, but you can’t expect me to show my family’s finances to a mere servant,” Wedge complained as I opened his ledgers.

“She is a member of the Secret Service herself. Did you not hear that there were three new inductees?”

“Th-this servant?!” Wedge’s eyes rolled in agony.

“Is there a problem?”

"N-no. Please excuse me."

"Very well, then. Rae, get started."

"Yes." I began with the ledgers, grateful I could count on Claire to come through for me.

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While theoretically based on medieval Europe, the fact that the world of *Revolution* had been designed by Japanese game developers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century meant that elements of Japanese culture could show up when you least expected it. I noticed one such element as I looked through Baron Thompson's ledgers: the financial statements used double-entry bookkeeping. I'll spare you the details, but suffice to say, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japan used the exact same system of accounting. A lucky thing, as a ledger in the actual style of the Middle Ages would have been Greek to me.

"How's it going? I trust you're not finding anything out of the ordinary?" Wedge asked, his smile dripping with smug confidence.

"We have learned a great deal," I answered instead of Claire.

"Oh, have you now?"

Despite having learned of my Secret Service officer status, Wedge clearly had no intention of being polite to me. That actually made things easier.

"For example, the Thompson family has been in dire financial straits for the past few years."

"Indeed. Our territory's harvest has been very poor the last few seasons, which left us in quite a strained position." Wedge shook his head as if to convey what a headache it had been.

"A-and yet s-somehow, you're able to afford luxurious furniture and purchase expensive desserts..."

"Miss Lilly, you may not understand this, since you live in the Church, but nobles use things like furniture and treats to evaluate each other. If an aristocrat lowers the quality of their lifestyle, they lose respect with their peers."

“I-Is that right?”

“Are you just about finished? I don’t have all day. I would like to ask you to conclude, if you’re done.”

In other words, he wanted us out. Time for the real show to start.

“Miss Claire.”

“Are we really doing this...?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Hmph. Fine, then.” Claire let out a big sigh, but her determination showed through.

I stood and produced a pill case decorated with the François insignia. “Stand down! Stand down! Do you not see this crest?!”

Wedge stared up at me, eyes wide. “Wh-what are you talking about...?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?! You are in the presence of Claire François, daughter of the Minister of Finance!”

“I am well aware—”

“Yes, she of highest standing! Stand down! Stand down!”

Wedge, utterly bewildered, looked to Lilly for help. “Do you happen to understand what this is?”

“I don’t really get it either...”

I sighed. I supposed none of them had the frame of reference to understand my pitch-perfect Komon Mito impression.

“Miss Claire, is Rae all right?” asked Lilly.

“I wasn’t sold on this, to tell you the truth, but Rae insisted...”

Alas, even Claire was confused. How disappointing.

"Well, whatever," I said. "Wedge, you window dressed your accounts, right?"

"Excuse me?"

"I mean you cooked the books to make your financial situation look worse than it really was for reporting purposes."

He looked stunned. "On what basis do you make this accusation?!"

"I have your tax records as previously provided to Master Rod. The numbers in these books entirely differ."

Wedge had underestimated us because we were girls. His prior confidence likely stemmed from the assumption that we wouldn't be able to read his ledger. Unfortunately for him, I'd been a corporate drone in my previous life. In fact, I'd worked in the Financial Auditing Department of a general trading company. In a word, reading ledgers was my specialty. The window dressing going on here was practically cute compared to the rampant corporate evils of Earth.

I had no calculator with me, but as it turned out, Lilly could do mental arithmetic in a flash. With her at my side, I'd reviewed the ledger top to bottom.

What about Miss Claire, you might ask? What skills did she bring to the table? Why, I couldn't possibly ask an angel like her to trouble herself with such mundane work.

"Baron Thompson has been evading taxes," I said. He pocketed the unreported revenue; a common method of feathering the nest. I wrote down a number. "This should be about how much he owes. Combined with the underpayment penalty—it's quite a bit. It would ruin you."

When I showed him the number, Wedge's face paled. "H-how can you prove my tax records were not tampered with?!"

"We could always bring Master Rod here."

"Hah..." That stopped him.

"Now then, Baron Thompson. Would you care to explain?"

"I... admit it..."

Wedge hung his head, dejected, and told us everything he'd done. I recorded his confession with the magical tool the king had provided me.

"What... are you going to do to me?"

"We shall report our findings to the palace, and you will be questioned. Be prepared for the worst," said Claire. "At least, that's what I would want to say, but there is a chance you will be pardoned, is there not?"

Wedge perked up as soon as Claire said those words.

"Not pardoned, Miss Claire," I said. "Offered a plea bargain."

"Ah, yes. Depending on the circumstances, your sentence may be reduced."

"I'll do anything! I'll tell you anything!" Wedge took the bait hook, line, and sinker.

"Rae, what was it you wanted to ask him?"

"Right. The ledgers include some ambiguous entries that seem to indicate secret payments made to high-ranking nobles. Who were the recipients of these funds?"

Claire nodded and turned to Wedge. "Who did you funnel money to?"

"Th-that..."

"Do you plan to let the House Thompson fall to ruin on your watch?"

"Count Yale..." Wedge said in tones of utter surrender.

On a completely unrelated note, condescendingly interrogating a powerful man she'd brought to his knees was a good look for Claire. Kind of like an evil queen.

Now then.

Our strategy was basically this: We would investigate the minor nobles implicated by what Rod had found, offer them plea bargains in return for information, and use that to find our next leads. Count Yale possessed far more wealth and influence than Baron Thompson, which brought us one step closer to Dole and Salas.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Claire said. "The palace will contact you with further instructions. We will put in a good word for you in the name of reducing your sentence."

"I am ever so grateful for your generosity, Miss Claire," Wedge said from where he prostrated himself on the floor before Claire. His arrogant, pompous air had all but disappeared.

"And with that, the case is closed!" I said happily as we left.

"What was that charade back there?" Claire demanded.

"That?"

How could I explain my pop culture references?

"There are a whole lot of servants in a mansion, right?" I asked.

"Indeed."

"We can't keep the staff quiet. With someone as important as Miss Claire visiting and all the commotion, people might have gotten the impression something untoward was going on."

"I see. So you did have a reason then."

Well, I might have pulled that reason out of my butt—I'd just wanted to play with Claire.

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We made good progress on our investigation after that, arresting ten corrupt nobles. News of our activities spread fast, and nobles with something to hide rushed to conceal incriminating documents. However, ledgers couldn't be rewritten overnight, and we also had the findings from the investigation Rod had been conducting for years. With my ability to sniff out window dressing, their attempts to cover up their wrongdoings went to waste, and Claire and Lilly started to gain popularity among the commoners due to their work taking down corrupt nobles.

That was when a problem occurred.

"We still haven't found any evidence leading to Master Dole or my father..." Lilly mumbled as she organized documents in the private room we'd been provided by the palace.

It was true. There'd been a couple times when I felt like we were almost there, but we always ended up one step short. Dole and Salas were being very careful. We'd even heard from one mid-tier aristocrat that they'd tried to bribe him but found no evidence whatsoever to support that claim.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that our fathers are innocent," Claire said wryly.

As we contemplated that, our spirits flagging for a moment, the door swung open.

"Yo. It looks like you're working hard."

"Master Rod..."

"Thank you..."

"Whoa. You look like you're in a bad mood, Claire."

"The investigation has hit a dead end."

"Well, I figured as much." As the person in charge of the investigation until we were brought on board, Rod understood the difficulties we faced. "What if you just bit the bullet and spoke directly to Dole and Salas?"

"But we have no evidence."

"No definitive evidence, but there's some circumstantial stuff. Besides, if his own daughter were to confront him, maybe he'd let something slip?"

I saw the logic of Rod's argument. More to the point though, we lacked a shred of any other ideas.

"Well, I'll let you guys decide for yourselves," Rod continued. "I have my own work to do."

"M-Master Rod, what are you working on?" Lilly asked.

"Have you heard the two rumors plaguing the capital right now?"

"Oh, those absurd tales," Claire scoffed at once, but I didn't know what he was talking about.

"What rumors, Miss Claire?"

"Rae, how can you be so sharp and also so utterly airheaded?"

Ah, how I loved it when she scolded me.

"O-one rumor is about angry ghosts. The other is about Thane's birth," Lilly offered.

Claire explained further. "People have been saying that the spirits of the mountains are on the prowl, looking for corrupt nobles to punish. Probably spread by the masses in reaction to the scandals we've brought to light."

Oh, that. It made me a bit nervous, but I held it in.

"The other rumor is that Thane isn't truly King l'Ausseil's child. Ugh... commoners can be so deluded," Claire said angrily.

I didn't know how she currently felt, but in the game, she started out in love with Thane. It had to be infuriating to hear people say such things about the person you liked.

"Setting aside the rumors about Thane," Rod said, looking uncharacteristically serious. "There was in fact a documented incident of the mountain spirits lashing out in anger."

"R-really?"

"The Spiritual Church called it the Taboo Flame."

"Oh, you mean from Mt. Sassal—the volcano?"

"That's right."

I mentioned earlier that the Academy baths were connected to a hot spring. The capital was located in an area of volcanic activity, and Mt. Sassal was the volcano closest to the city.

“Mt. Sassel erupted several hundred years ago, during a time when the capital suffered from rampant misrule,” Rod said. Apparently, the eruption had wrought devastation upon the city. “Personally, I don’t think we’re in danger of something like that happening again. But it’s made the people anxious, so we’re looking into it.”

“What about the rumors about Master Thane?” Claire inquired.

“I can’t comment on that. If you want to know more, go ask Thane,” Rod said, evasively. “That reminds me, Rae. Have you decided to accept my proposal yet?”

“No, not at all.”

“Rae!”

“Ah ha ha! That’s fine. I don’t mind you playing hard to get.”

I wanted to ask him why he was so immature for his age. “We’re busy right now, Master Rod, and so are you. Please stop messing around.”

“Okay, okay. Anyway, regarding the rumors, let me know if you hear anything else of interest. See ya,” Rod said, moving to leave.

“Wait a second, Master Rod,” I said.

“Huh? What is it?”

“There is a small village at the foot of Mt. Sassel, right?”

“Yeah, there is.”

I knew he would know. He knew everything about the kingdom’s geography. The village was on the exact opposite side of the mountain from the capital.

“That village should be evacuated.”

“Why?”

“If the volcano does erupt, they’re right in the path of the lava,” I explained.

Rod stroked his chin. “I see what you’re saying, but I don’t think they’ll consent to

being evacuated over a rumor about eruptions and angry spirits."

"I suppose so..."

"Well, I'll look into it. See ya." With another wave, Rod ducked out of the room.

"Rae, you..."

"Stop, Miss Claire. Remember, we decided to put a pin in the marriage discussion?"

"Yes, we did." Claire looked like she wanted to say more, but she held her tongue, respecting my request. Ahh, true love!

I noticed Lilly was silent too.

"What is it, Miss Lilly?"

She had a very serious look on her face. "W-well... it's nothing."

"It's clearly not nothing. You've gone pale," Claire said.

"Th-the Taboo Flame... worries me. I wonder... if the volcano really will erupt...?"

"There's no way for us to know. The spirits of the mountain are beyond human understanding."

"W-well... that may be, but..." Lilly said, "In our records, past eruptions did terrible damage. Shouldn't we prepare, somehow?"

"Cardinal Lilly, the royal family and the nobles have plans in place for such events," Claire pointed out calmly. "The capital stockpiles grain in case of poor harvests, and we keep troops and disaster relief squadrons ready to deploy in an emergency. Even if the volcano *does* erupt, quite a lot can and will be done."

Claire was correct. Yet I knew it wouldn't be enough.

After all... I also knew we didn't have much time until the volcano erupted.

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"Hey, isn't that Master Thane?"

When we finally decided to call it a day, we saw Thane on our way back. He lingered alone in the courtyard right by the main palace gates, facing a painting of the royal family.

"Hello, Master Thane. What brings you here?" Claire greeted him on behalf of all of us. Thane glanced over somberly and then looked back at the painting.

"I was just looking at the portrait of my mother," he said.

I followed his gaze to the portrait of the former Queen Lulu.

"Lady Lulu was beautiful. This painting doesn't do her justice, though. It doesn't capture the way her inner beauty shone through," Claire said.

She wasn't just paying Thane lip service; the former queen really was exquisite. Her silver hair shone and her ethereal red eyes captivated. I'd never dare say something so improper out loud, of course, but she made me think of a courtesan—heartbreaking and fragile.

The Bauer Kingdom had gained stability when Lulu became queen, and she was remembered as the country's radiant savior. Unlike Queen Riche, who was tied closely to the Church, Lulu had come from an Alpecian background. She'd helped the Bauer Kingdom establish an alliance with the Alpes that allowed them to successfully drive back the Nur Empire.

"My mother wasn't just beautiful. She was also kind..." Thane said sadly, not taking his eyes away from the portrait.

"You loved her so deeply," Claire said. As Dole's daughter, she'd visited the castle from a young age and shared memories of the former queen.

"Yeah, but I don't remember her very well..." Thane said in a self-deprecating way. Queen Lulu had been unable to recover from Thane's birth, leaving her bedridden. "I wonder... if she hated me?"

"Impossible. What mother could hate her own child?"

"But her life ended prematurely because of me. In her final years, she could barely get

out of bed, let alone go to the social events she loved so much."

According to the game's character guide, Queen Lulu had loved high society life, with its parties and events. She had been right at home in the palace, surrounded by noble schemes and plots. Thane understood being bedridden had deprived her of those joys, and in that sense his sentiment was understandable.

"This may be hard for a man to understand, but a woman's child is always special to her," Claire said in an attempt to comfort Thane. Unfortunately, she was just repeating platitudes. I knew some mothers found themselves unable to love their children—not that I was going to bring up that inconvenient truth in front of Thane.

It wasn't clear if Claire's words actually provided Thane any comfort. He continued to stare at the portrait of Lulu with his usual sullen expression, and we fell silent for a moment.

"M-Master Thane, I think what Miss Claire said is correct." Lilly offered a lifeline. Or maybe she just couldn't stand the silence anymore. "M-my father once told me that Lady Lulu loved the princes in an extraordinary way."

"Salas said that?"

Lilly nodded.

"He said Lady Lulu especially doted on Master Thane, because you weren't born healthy."

Thane's had been a difficult delivery for a number of reasons. Lulu hadn't just wound up bedridden; the prince had also been born premature and had often been sick as a child.

"It seems you might not have understood each other," Claire said. I felt the same way, but one of the people involved had already passed. The truth was lost forever.

Thane didn't respond. He was normally a quiet person, but he was especially quiet today. Wait a second...

"Master Thane, are you here because of the rumors spreading around town?"

"Rae!"

“Huh? Ah...”

“So, you heard them too, huh?”

“Master Thane, please pay no heed to idle rumors spread by commoners,” Claire said firmly.

“Y-yes that’s right!” Lilly chimed in.

“But... the king is often distant with me. He treats me differently than he does Rod and Yu.” Thane’s voice was flat and bitter. “I used to think it was because I was unworthy of my rank, but if the rumors are true, that would explain a lot.”

“Master Thane...” Claire said carefully.

“I can’t... It’s not like me to vent like this.”

“If you find us suitable confidants, we are happy to listen.”

“I appreciate that, but in the end, I am a prince. Someone in line for the throne cannot behave like this.”

“It is the duty of a king’s subjects to support him,” Claire pointed out.

“Yes... If I were to become king, I’m sure you would be very helpful, Claire.” Thane finally gave us his rare smile. It didn’t happen often, which made it all the more powerful.

“Miss Claire, what are you getting all googly-eyed about? Did you forget you have me?” I said, unfiltered, proving myself again incapable of reading the room.

“G-googly-eyed?! And just what are you suggesting?!”

“Well, you’d look like that at your missing half, right?”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it!”

“You’re all perverts, the lot of you...”

“Cardinal Lilly, hush!”

“I’m sorry!”

The somber mood evaporated as we squawked at each other again.

“Ha ha... Watching you guys makes my worries feel silly,” said Thane. “I’m sorry if I’ve caused you concern. I’ll be fine.”

“I wasn’t even that worried,” I retorted.

“Rae!” Claire scolded me. “Master Thane, if there is anything we can do, please let us know.”

“I-I can’t do much, but I’ll do anything I can!”

“Thanks,” Thane said and left.

Was he really all right? I wondered.

“He’s really hurting,” I murmured.

“You’re so daft! If Master Thane wasn’t such a kind person, your head would be on the chopping block right now.”

“Well, I wouldn’t talk like that to just anyone. Unlike Miss Lilly,” I said, doing my best to lighten the mood.

“H-huh?”

Yes, I worried for Thane, but Claire came first. I had to do everything I could to keep the mood light, so Miss Claire wouldn’t be tempted to conceal her feelings.

Such was the path I chose.

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We knocked on a door as plain as its owner’s personality.

“Welcome. Please enter.”

“Excuse us.”

Claire led the way, followed by Lilly and me. We were visiting the office of Salas Lilium, Chancellor of the Bauer Kingdom. The first thing I noticed in Salas's office was the infinite number of glass-blown items. A variety decorated the shelves and his desk, ranging from paperweights to strange devices to large constructs of some kind.

"Is this blown glass?"

"No, it's ice," said Salas, who sat at his desk, writing something. "It doesn't melt, courtesy of my ice magic."

According to the extra game material, Salas had medium aptitude in water attribute magic. It wasn't very good in combat, but I'd read something about his specialty being more on the mental-manipulation side of things.

"It's a hobby. I'm not especially good, but sometimes people purchase my work—though they're usually more interested in who made it than the craftsmanship." Salas laughed. He was being modest; I saw some exquisite pieces in the collection. "We can skip the formalities. You're here because I'm suspected of fraud, correct?"

Salas showed no signs of shame or anxiety. In fact, he wore a smile.

He was right too. We'd decided to take Rod's suggestion to try speaking to him directly, though we didn't have high hopes of success—largely because we'd already failed at trying the same thing with Dole right before we came here. *"Claire, I really thought you were smarter than this,"* he'd said as we left his office. I'd known him for a liar, but Claire's expression had been complicated, to say the least.

She'd remained subdued since our meeting with Dole. Instead, Lilly took the initiative now.

"F-Father! Be reasonable!" she chided.

"Lilly, not so loud. What part of me is being unreasonable?" Salas asked, with confidence to spare. He rose slowly from his chair and stood before the three of us.

"Th-there has been testimony from nobles friendly with you, Father. You asked them for bribes!"

"Is that so? And where is the evidence?"

“D-don’t play dumb! Do you know how many people have testified against—”

“So, you *don’t* have any evidence?” Salas’s voice was soft but powerful.

“Er...”

“Can we search your quarters?” I asked.

“You’re welcome to, but any documents related to the government are off-limits.”

“We have been granted full authority to investigate.”

“Authority to conduct a *financial* audit, yes. Records related to matters of government can only be accessed by order of the House of Lords. You are not authorized to view them.”

Ugh. He knew how to corner us—legally speaking, anyway.

“Whatever you’re able to show us is fine, then,” I said. “Please allow us to examine your ledgers.”

“Of course.”

We spent some time examining his books, but no matter how closely we scanned them, we found no discrepancies whatsoever. His accounts were immaculate—disgustingly so.

“May we examine that safe?” A solid-looking safe sat next to his desk.

“You may not. It contains confidential information relating to government and foreign policy.”

“You expect us to believe that?”

“If you don’t, feel free to go acquire the necessary permission to view those documents.”

He didn’t budge. With no direct evidence to suggest Salas’s guilt, we were out of ammo for the time being.

“Father... I’m hurt,” Lilly suddenly said as we were about to leave. “It’s true we have no real evidence, but after all the research we’ve done, we know. We know you’ve conducted yourself corruptly.”

“This is what you might call a false accusation.”

“No matter how you deceive us, you cannot deceive the eyes of the spirits. Eventually, you will be judged. I will pray you are able to confess your crimes before that happens, Father.”

“Lilly...”

“Goodbye.” Lilly started to leave the room, and we followed on her heels.

“Wait,” Salas called out. “Lilly, I hope you will remember one thing.”

She looked back at him, unsure of what to expect.

“Prayer alone gets nothing done. If you wish to succeed, you must get your hands dirty.”

“Is that what you did, Father?”

“Something of the sort. But...” Salas hesitated. “Lilly... you are a pitiful child.”

I wouldn’t understand his meaning until it was too late.

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“In the end, it turned out exactly how Rod said it would,” Claire said glumly. She was right; it was like cutting the tail off a lizard. “It’s so frustrating, to get this far and still have no evidence...”

“I-I feel the same.”

Claire and Lilly were both earnest people with fathers who were, they were beginning to accept, committing crimes. No wonder they were anxious.

“It’s not like we’re out of leads,” I said, and they both looked at me.

“Do you mean other nobles?”

“No.” We’d never catch Dole and Salas that way. I already knew that for a fact. And I also knew what we needed to do. “I think we should try to reach out to the Resistance.”

“The Resistance?” Claire repeated.

Lilly went silent.

They both looked at me questioningly.

“The Resistance, or in other words, revolutionaries.”

Both of their faces went white as they stared at me, stunned. Claire and Lilly belonged to the privileged class. Any revolutionaries were their natural foe.

“Have you gone mad?! I can’t be involved with those people!” Claire exclaimed.

“I-I agree!”

“Then wait here, both of you. I’ll go alone.”

“You’re part of my household! Do you really think the revolutionaries would meet with you, knowing that?!”

“Yes, I do,” I said. Claire looked like she wanted more explanation, but I shook my head. “Anyway, leave the rest to me.”

“You can’t! I won’t forgive you!”

“Miss Claire...”

“It’s too dangerous! What if something happens?!”

“I’ll be okay,” I said, but I could tell she wasn’t convinced. What had gotten into her? “Well, how about this? Let’s go to the Resistance with the aim of negotiating ways to avoid violence down the line. We can discuss the corruption amidst the nobility while we’re there.”

“Are those people even capable of civil conversation?”

"I don't think we need worry about them kidnapping us. They're still a small organization, and real revolution is still a far-off dream."

Claire didn't answer, so I went on.

"We may be connected to the nobility, but we're also working to hold corrupt nobles accountable for their crimes. I don't think the Resistance will flat-out refuse to talk to us."

"S-so you think those people have proof that our fathers are corrupt?" Lilly, unlike Claire, sounded interested in the plan.

"Cardinal Lilly, we aren't even sure if our fathers *are* guilty yet—"

"I will guarantee that. They are definitely involved," I said.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Claire. I can't explain why, not yet."

"Rae!"

"Miss Claire, let's trust Rae."

"Cardinal Lilly... you..."

"My father said it himself. If you want to succeed, you must get your hands dirty," Lilly said. She let out a forced laugh. "Although I don't know why he called me pitiful... I want my father to pay for his crimes. If he cannot surrender on his own, then I will find the evidence."

Everyone would be judged for their crimes, eventually.

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We found ourselves in a slum a short distance from the capital. Two stout men stood before the entrance of a battered, ramshackle building. Claire, Lilly, and I observed from a distance.

"Are you sure you don't want to turn back?" Claire asked.

“We’ve already come this far.”

“Y-yes, that’s right. We even have disguises,” said Lilly.

We’d changed out of our school uniforms. We were confident we could defend ourselves if we had to, but we didn’t want the Resistance to be wary of us if we caused a commotion. So, we’d donned peasant clothing—pretty old clothing, at that. We also had hoods covering our eyes to make our age less obvious.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Wait, Rae... Ugh.”

“L-Let’s go, Miss Claire.”

We started to approach the building, determined.

“Excuse me.” I called to the men at the gate, who looked at us suspiciously. Up close, one was tall and brandished a sword on his waist. The other was short and stout, and held something that looked like an axe. They both looked well versed in conflict.

“What is it?”

“No kids allowed in here.”

“We have business with the chief,” I said. “It’s an emergency.”

“I told you, no kids allowed. Go home,” the tall one said threateningly.

Hmph. I guess we weren’t going to be able to get in the front door. But I had a trick or two up my sleeve.

“How are the Luster siblings?” I asked.

“You... Where did you hear that name?!” The guard’s face suddenly went white.

“Are you going to let us see Arla?”

The guards went quiet for a moment.

“Hey, how do they know the chief’s na—”

“Shut up. You make sure these kids stay put. I’ll ask the chief,” the tall guard said and then disappeared into the building.

“Hey, Rae, what’s going on? Have you met these people before?”

“No.”

“Then how can you just rattle off their names?”

“Miss Claire, sometimes women have secrets.”

“This is no time for jokes—”

The guard returned. “The chief will see you. Enter.”

“Thank you very much.”

The moment we were through the gate, it locked behind us.

“Hey!” Claire cried.

“Miss Claire, it’s fine.”

“But!”

“Please trust me.”

“I... I will.”

Claire didn’t look happy about any of this, but she listened to me, at least for now. She looked ready to burst at any moment. I had to be careful in more ways than one.

The inside of the building proved cleaner and more organized than anyone could ever have imagined from viewing its exterior. Furnished with only the bare minimum in terms of furniture, it still met the standard of commoner towns. We proceeded to the hallway from the gate and then to the farthest back room.

“Chief, this is them.”

"Thanks."

A tall woman with drab, loosely pulled-back blonde hair turned to us. Her face—actually her entire body—was covered in burn scars.

"There's much I want to ask you, but first, let's have you remove your hoods," she said with a thin smile. This burn-riddled woman was Arla Luster. She stared at us with icy eyes, and even Claire, usually uncowed, shrank a bit under the pressure.

When we did as we were told and removed our hoods, Arla's expression changed slightly. "Do you understand where you are?"

"The right wing of the Commoner Movement," I said. "We know this is the headquarters of The Resistance."

"Where did you hear that?" Arla asked, amused.

"From nobody. Please rest assured that none of your members betrayed you."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I *need* you to believe me, Arla Manuel."

The second I said that, I felt a small pain at my throat.

"Rae?!" Claire and Lilly cried in unison.

They both drew their magic wands, and I held up my hands to stop them. A sword had appeared; its point pressed to my neck. Arla had moved so fast I hadn't even seen her draw her weapon.

"You... Why do you know my family's name?" She was unnerved, now. I could tell.

"I cannot tell you that. However, I know almost everything about you. I know what you're doing and what you're going to do."

"If you know that much, do you think you're going to get out of here alive? Do you have a death wish?"

"No. We came to propose a transaction."

“A transaction?”

“Can you please lower your sword? It makes it difficult to speak.”

At that, Arla stared at me, wary, for some time, but she finally let out a deep sigh and lowered her sword.

“I will listen to what you have to say. After that, I’ll decide whether or not to let you live.”

“Thank you very much.”

I’d succeeded in getting Arla to the negotiation table. But the hard part was yet to come.

“I know you are lacking in funding for your activities,” I said. “I will give you two million gold.”

“Oh really? And where will you acquire such funds?”

“You needn’t worry about the source. In return, I want you to tell me where I can find proof of infidelity between the late Queen Lulu and Chancellor Salas.”

“What are you...? How much do you know?”

“As I said, I know almost everything.”

“Infidelity between m-my father and the late queen?! What are you saying, Rae?! ” Lilly cried, unable to contain herself.

“Well, well, well. So, you’re Cardinal Lilly? That must mean you’re Rae Taylor, correct?” Arla smirked, as if to say “gotcha.”

“Spare us the poor acting,” I said. “You knew exactly who we were the moment we removed our hoods.”

Arla clicked her tongue as I called her bluff.

“And Miss Lilly,” I said. “I’m afraid Master Salas had an affair with the late queen. The result of that affair was Master Thane.”

“Wh... wh-wha?!”

In other words, the rumors about Thane were true. He was the child of the late Queen Lulu and Salas, making him and Lilly half-siblings. The proof? Salas, Thane, and Lilly all shared silver hair and red eyes.

“You’ve figured that much out without any evidence?”

“Yes. But you know where such evidence is, don’t you, Arla?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you started the rumor spreading through the streets about Master Thane.”

“It seems you really do know everything...” Arla chuckled, raising both arms as in surrender. “Does that mean you also know who I am?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You are Arla Manuel, the firstborn daughter of former Count Manuel, former attendant of Master Salas,” I said.

Arla’s only response was ironic laughter.

“Explain yourself, Rae,” Claire demanded.

“I-I want to know too.”

“Would you like to explain, Arla?”

“No. I’ll answer any questions you might have, but you do the talking.”

“Very well, then,” I said. “First of all, as I just said, this is Arla Manuel. She’s the daughter of Count Manuel, who was a close confidant of Salas’s.”

“You mean the count who went bankrupt about ten years ago?”

“Y-you know about that, Miss Claire?”

"Of course," Claire said. "I'm a noble. We make it our business to know the fortunes and powers of other noble families."

"R-really?"

Claire and Lilly both belonged to the nobility, but the difference between purebred aristocrats and ecclesiastical nobility always ended up making itself apparent.

"Count Manuel was well known and well liked," Claire continued. "My father said he was known for honesty in his dealings."

"Th-then why did such a person go bankrupt?"

"Much like the people we've been investigating, he was found to be using shady accounting practices."

"You call that shady accounting?!" Arla cried out. Judging by her expression, she immediately regretted it.

Claire looked surprised at Arla's outburst, but she continued. "When Count Manuel's corruption came to light, it caused a huge scandal. No one could believe it."

"In actuality," I said, "Master Salas framed the Count. Salas made him take the fall to protect himself—made him one of the lizard's tails, if you will."

"B-but why is the daughter of a former noble working with, um, the Resistance?"

"Hatred for Salas, and by extension the entire aristocracy, perhaps?" I looked at Arla.

"That's right," she answered in a low voice. "My father was a gentle and honest man, and the other nobles knew it. And yet, they abandoned him on Salas's word. Such a world should not exist."

"Was that when you made up your mind, Arla?" I asked.

She nodded slowly.

"Revenge won't solve anything," Claire said.

"Are you speaking from experience, girl? I don't care about the revolution. The only

thing I want is to see the streets run red with noble blood," Arla said with a cold chuckle.

"I'm sure I sound naive to you. But I'm not giving up on my ideals," Claire declared.

Claire and Arla were both right—and they were both wrong. The world wasn't black and white, only shades of grey. Even so, a thirst for revenge alone wouldn't propel the Resistance to success.

"Where's Irvine?" I asked.

"You know my brother too? He's out fundraising today. We need more money."

Arla's younger brother, Irvine, oversaw the Resistance's finances. If Arla gave the movement the heart and soul, Irvine gave it a brain. Together, the siblings would eventually be the spark that set the revolution alight.

"Let's get back on track," I said. "I think your father told you where to find evidence of Salas's infidelity, Arla. How about it?"

This was the question I'd come here to ask. In one route of the game, the protagonist investigated Salas for proof of corruption, much like we were doing now, but the exact nature of the proof you could acquire was randomized from one run to the next. The variables only locked in after the player had this talk with the Resistance.

"Cash first. I won't talk until I see the cash."

"I guarantee you will get the money. I will transfer it from XX in the usual way."

"You are XX?!"

XX was a mysterious patron from whom Irvine regularly received large donations. Their real identity was—not me, actually. I'll get to that later, though you may have figured it out from hearing Irvine's name.

"No," I said. "But they're a friend of mine."

"If you're truly a friend of XX... I'll tell you." Arla sighed. "I believe it's in the safe in his office. However, no one can open that safe except for Salas." She laughed, as if to tell us we'd just wasted our time.

"In the safe?" I said. "Thank you very much."

"W-wait a second! So you know it's in the safe, but you don't know how to open it?"  
Claire objected.

"S-so we're right back where we started?" Lilly added.

"No," I said. "This is all we need."

"Wait, Rae! Are you sure?!"

"It's okay, Miss Claire. As long as we know the evidence is there, we can figure it out."

"Are you asking me to trust you again?"

"Yes. I hope I've given you enough reason to do so."

We were done here. Claire looked ready to explode, and Lilly looked frightened, but we needed to bid Arla farewell and take our leave.

As we turned to go, however, Arla called out to me. "Rae Taylor, are you not interested in joining the Resistance?"

"Ridiculous! How can you ask such a question? The answer is no!" Claire burst out.

"I was asking Rae Taylor," Arla responded.

"I speak for Rae!"

"Settle down, Miss Claire. Let's have that argument in a better place and time," I soothed.

"This isn't a joke!" Claire looked like she had more to say, but I turned to Arla.

"My answer is no."

"And why is that? Did being adopted by nobles make you acquire a taste for luxury?"

"Not at all."

"In that case—" Arla started.

I held up my hand to stop her mid-sentence. "All of me belongs to Miss Claire. If Claire decides to join the revolution, then I will reconsider."

"Rae..." Claire smiled, relieved. I wanted to hug her.

"I see... You may regret this," Arla said.

"I won't."

We said our goodbyes and left the Resistance hideout. Claire and Lilly seemed despondent, probably still viewing this as another dead end, but I knew we had a lot to do. We knew where to find the evidence. Time for the next step.

Everything was going according to plan.

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"You lot again?"

We pushed into the Chancellor's office to find Salas in a meeting with a subordinate and a man who looked to be a soldier. The room, filled with glass-like sculptures, also included four people in armor, who stood looking at us. The emblems on their armor identified them as belonging not to the imperial army but Salas's personal guard.

"I'm in a meeting right now. If you have business with me, please make an appointment and return at that time," Salas said, trying to shoo us out.

"We must speak with you about the issue from the other day. You would do well to send these fellows away." I wasn't backing down. Claire and Lilly looked on with worried faces.

"We have nothing further to discuss."

"On the contrary, we've received some new evidence from the son of Count Manuel."

Salas's face changed the moment he heard that name.

"I'll say it again," I repeated. "Please clear the room."

Salas let out a great sigh. He ordered the soldiers to leave, making a big show of being put out, but I wasn't fooled. I saw the sharp flash in his eyes. Once the room was clear save for the four of us, he sat, put his elbows on his desk, and clasped his hands together in the classic evil genius pose.

"And? What are you going to say this time? That I'm corrupt?" he asked.

"You, Master Salas, are suspected of infidelity with the late Queen Lulu."

"Ridiculous."

"You manipulated the queen, then used your affair to threaten her."

"And how do you think I did that?"

"With this." I pulled out the magic recording tool the king gave me. "You recorded yourselves being intimate with a magical tool exactly like this. Then you used it against her."

"Why would I ever do something so foolish? I'm not *quite* that eager to ruin myself." Salas's confident smile never wavered.

"At the time, you were a young noble of middling status. The queen risked losing far more than you did. But, more than that... Lady Lulu was in love with you."

Salas had risen to his current position thanks to the full support of the late queen. There was no doubt that he was up to the task politically, but a mid-level noble didn't become Chancellor of the entire nation on his own steam.

"You really do have an active imagination, don't you? I'll ask you the same question I did last time. Do you have evidence?"

This was where I would get him.

"Yes, I do."

"Oh. And where is that?"

"In your safe, right there."

Salas raised his right eyebrow.

"You threatened the late queen in order to gain your position. But after the queen passed, the blackmail you held became a weapon against yourself. So you kept it hidden in the safe."

"You're not making sense. Even if I did have an affair, I would have destroyed the evidence right after Lady Lulu's death."

A worthy point. However—

"The magical tool you used to record your blackmail material is extremely rare; they can usually only be procured with government permission. You, on the other hand, got yours on the black market."

"If the tool is contraband, that's all the more reason to destroy it."

"No. You used the same magical tool to record multiple political dealings that are important to you personally. That's why you won't destroy it, despite your relationship with the late queen."

The king had told me the recordings made by the magical tool couldn't be duplicated or reproduced. This also meant that Salas couldn't transfer certain recordings onto a different tool.

"False accusations," Salas said.

"Is that so? In that case, let me investigate your safe."

"How many times are you going to make me say it? This safe contains important secrets regarding the government and foreign policy. If you want to search it, you'll need permission from the House of Lords."

"But that's not going to happen, is it? You have dirt on pretty much every member of the House."

"They won't grant your request, it's true, but not because I have *blackmailed* them—simply because your accusations are baselessly incoherent." Salas laughed in triumph.

But I wasn't done. "That's why I've decided to invoke the Royal Prerogative."

Salas's face suddenly went white. "Th-the Royal Prerogative?"

"You know what that is, right? A special power the king can invoke to overrule the House of Lords."

He was silent. I continued.

"The Royal Prerogative will allow us to open that safe. When that happens, you're finished."

Salas's expression was grim. "The king can't recklessly invoke something as significant as the Royal Prerogative. Do you really think he'll risk it with no guarantee of finding anything?"

"I will provide that guarantee."

"Dare I ask?" Salas no longer had his confident expression, but he wasn't backing down yet.

This was it.

*"Lady Lulu, this is wrong,"* I began to recite. *"I know, Salas. But I'll brave hell if it means being with you."*

Claire and Lilly wore dubious expressions. Salas's face expressed nothing but shock.

*"We are sinners... but we shall be sinners together.' 'Ahh, Salas. My love... ' Shall I continue?"*

"You..." Salas growled. The intellectual, refined gentleman had disappeared, leaving behind only a cornered criminal.

"I just recited the beginning of the conversation recorded in your magical tool. I would be happy to recite the entire thing. How about it?"

"You... why...?"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that this is enough detail to persuade the king. Now, Salas, what would you like to do? I recommend turning yourself in."

The Chancellor said nothing, his face wracked with fear. He was probably running through scenarios in his mind, trying to think of a way to avoid prison. However, I knew what he would do next.

Finally, his face distorted. "If my crimes become public, House François will go down with me."

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"Huh?" Claire started at the unexpected mention of her family.

"My tool contains recordings that prove Dole's corruption. Do you not care what happens to the François name?"

"Nonsense! My father would never—"

"Sweet, naive girl. He raised you like a princess, blind to his true nature."

"I will not stand for you insulting my father!" Claire looked about ready to physically attack Salas.

"Miss Claire, please calm down," I tried.

"Calm down?! Are you saying you actually accept what Salas is saying?!"

"I am not accepting it. But Salas is telling the truth."

"Wh-what did you say...?"

"Can you prove it to us?" I said to Salas. "That you have clear evidence of Dole's corruption?"

"Why not?" Salas said, standing from his desk and moving toward the safe. He unlocked it, hiding the dial from us with his body, and took out a magical tool like mine but more worn with age.

He activated the tool with magic power.

—*This is all that splashed over this month?*

—I'm very sorry, Master Dole. The inspector has been breathing down my neck of late.

—Heh, of course he has. I know you're pocketing some yourself.

—You're taking a number of bribes from other nobles as well, aren't you, Master Dole?

—Don't speak so carelessly. I simply receive contributions from those who wish to share.

—Oh, is that so? In that case, I'd like to stop my donations.

—Of course. You can stop being a high-ranking noble, while you're at it.

—I can't have that. So, I guess this is a bribe?

—Think of it however you want to.

“That's enough!” Claire screamed.

“Miss Claire...”

“I-I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it... But... But!”

I hugged Claire as grief overcame her. My chest tightened in sympathy.

“Well then, shall we negotiate?” Salas had us where he wanted. “If you don't wish for Dole's crimes to be made public, I'll need you to hold your tongues.”

“Miss Lilly and I are not members of the François family,” I said.

“You really shouldn't try to play dumb. I know exactly what relationship you and Claire share. You're not going to hang her out to dry.”

I didn't answer. He was right enough. No point in arguing back.

“E-even if they won't, I can file a complaint against you, Father!”

“No, you can't. Not you.”

“I-I can!”

"No, you can't," Salas insisted. He was implying something, though I wasn't sure what.  
"Now, what say you?"

He looked at us, waiting for an answer. I started to open my mouth.

"The answer is no!" Claire burst out.

I was shocked to my core. "Miss Claire..."

"If my father is involved in something illegal, I can't stand by. In fact, I'll be the one to report his crimes to the king," Claire said. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but they shone clear. This was the true Claire.

"Idiot... You would bring down your own house?"

"An aristocrat must govern herself most strictly. Corrupt nobles are no better than the parasites that the Commoner Movement calls them!" Claire stood undaunted.

Salas looked completely taken aback. Although they were both aristocrats, they were as different as night and day.

"Salas Lilium," said Claire, "if you are a true noble, then resign."

"No, I don't think so," Salas shook his head. "Do you have any idea what I went through to get here? I will not let my family fall now."

That dangerous gleam had reappeared in his eyes. Claire and Lilly braced themselves.

"Okay, fine," I said, breaking the tension. "Let's keep it to ourselves."

"Rae?! What are you saying?!"

"Miss Claire... I'm sorry." I put my finger to her forehead, and she collapsed.

"R-Rae?!" Lilly cried.

"It's okay. She's just sleeping." It was the same spell I had used on her during the Commoner Movement's invasion of the Academy.

"Hmph. At least *you* understand how things work," said Salas.

“I do not agree with you one bit, but my priority is Miss Claire.”

“I wonder,” Salas chuckled, seemingly satisfied with my answer. “So, we agree to mutually hold our tongues?”

“Yes.”

“And you can convince Claire?”

“Leave that to me.”

“Hmph.” Salas looked like he had his doubts, but he didn’t say anything else.

“I’m disappointed in you, Rae!” Lilly scolded me. “Of all people, I never thought that you... I never thought you would say something like that!”

I shouldn’t have been surprised by this, and externally, I wasn’t. To Lilly, whom people called a saint, who carried strong moral convictions born of her faith—my actions were completely unacceptable. However, internally, I was flustered. I had forgotten to plan for Lilly’s objections.

“Ahh, please don’t worry,” Salas said. “Lilly can’t do anything to stop us.”

“What do you mean?”

“You convince Claire. I’ll take care of Lilly.”

I didn’t really understand, but neither could I press the issue further—Lilly flew out of the room before I had a chance to say another word.

“Are you sure she’s okay?”

“I guarantee it. I promise you that she can’t do anything. I won’t let her.”

Well, if Lilly did talk, Salas faced the most danger, so he was probably right. I had to trust him for now, much as it made me sick to think of it.

“Then, our deal is complete?” Salas held out his hand.

“I have no intention of colluding with you.”

“Is that so?” He smiled slyly, and my disgust grew.

“I have one piece of advice for you,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Your recording device will disappear from your safe tonight.”

“You’re making no sense again.”

“You’re right. It’s up to you whether you want to believe me or not.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“That’s all. Goodbye.”

I picked up the sleeping Claire and left the room.

*Convince Claire? Impossible.*

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“What have you done, Rae?!“ Claire cried out the second she woke up in her dorm room at the Academy.

“Calm down, Miss Claire.”

“How am I supposed to calm down?! I can’t just let this go! How can you call yourself my partner?!”

Normally, I would have teased her for that word choice, but this wasn’t the time. I was already on thin ice; I needed to explain, and fast.

“Miss Claire, I’m not letting anything go. I intend to make both Salas and Dole pay for their crimes.”

“Huh?” Claire’s tone softened as if she had never even been angry with me in the first place. “B-but Salas persuaded you...”

“I was only pretending. I had another objective.”

“Objective?” Claire’s face was full of questions.

“Yes. But more importantly, I need you to help me find Miss Lilly.”

“Cardinal Lilly? What happened to her?”

“It was my fault for not explaining my plans to her beforehand. She thinks I accepted Salas’s terms, just like you did. She ran away.”

“What a mess,” Claire sighed. “You should have told us what you were planning...”

“Anyway, we need to find her,” I said.

“Fine, then. Let’s split up.”

“No. It’s too dangerous to do that right now.”

“Dangerous?”

“I’m sorry, Claire... I don’t think I have time to explain.”

I grabbed Claire’s arm and pulled her off the bed, putting my body between her and the window.

“Please protect me, Miss Claire.”

“Huh?!”

There was a small sound as the window unlocked itself. Finally realizing what was happening, Claire drew her magic wand and prepared herself. The window slid open quietly and six men slipped in.

“Who are they?!”

“Salas’s assassins.”

Probably some of them were members of the personal guard we’d seen in his office, though now they wore neither armor nor emblems. Their bodies were wrapped in black cloth and white masks covered their faces.

I wasn't the only one who'd pretended to be convinced. Salas had never intended to buy our silence.

"A real fireteam, huh?"

"A what?"

"I mean they'll do whatever it takes to silence us."

"Yes, that's probably true," Claire nodded, holding up her wand and facing the men.  
"Let's do this. I am Claire François. I will not run nor will I hi—"

"Aieee! Murderers!" I screamed, interrupting her monologue.

I knew this scene from playing the game. The main character fights the assassins with her love interest by her side, which always made me wonder why she didn't just call for help. This was the middle of the Royal Academy. There were people all around us in the dorms. Why fight two-to-six when I could just shout for aid?

"What on earth was that?"

"Who's screaming?!"

"Are you all right, Miss Claire?!"

As I'd hoped, other students started pouring into the room. In the game, this would have ruined the player character's chance to bravely fight alongside her interest, but I wasn't about to risk Claire getting hurt. I'd learned something from my mistakes during the Commoner Movement, after all.

The assassins were clearly caught off guard, but they made no attempt to flee. Perhaps Salas had something to leverage against them too. Money, the lives of their family members—whatever it was, it clearly motivated them to face death. They fought to the end and, when it became clear they stood no chance of victory, took their own lives.

"How horrifying..." Claire muttered as she gazed at their bodies. She obviously meant Salas.

"Ah, it must be nice to be so naive," said an inappropriately cheerful voice.

The door slammed shut on its own. Someone pounded on the other side, but it didn't open. In the next moment, all the students trapped in Claire's room with us started dropping like flies—dead.

"There!" Claire cast a powerful flame spear in the direction of where the last person had fallen. The spear was immediately snuffed out.

"Hey, you two." A figure in a black mask was suddenly visible where the spear had disappeared. "Nice to see you again."

I remembered that mask—that foreign voice. "You, I saw you that night..."

The night of the Commoner Movement, this was the assassin who had nearly murdered Thane.

"You did, didn't you?" said the figure. "I got a little overconfident back then, but I'm back for my revenge."

I hadn't foreseen this. Why was this guy showing up again *now* of all times?

"Rae, think later. We need to take him out now."

Claire was right. "Yes, ma'am."

"Oooh, I'm so scared." The black-masked man chuckled, and he readied a knife.

"Be careful, Claire. He might have cantarella on that blade," I warned.

"Got it." Claire kept her eyes focused on the target.

"Hmm... You think so?" the man said vaguely.

"If you're not going to come at me, I'll come at you!" Claire waved her wand, propelling another flame spear at the masked assassin's feet.

"Hah. Useless."

Right before it struck the assassin, the flame spear disappeared just like the last one had. What kind of magic was this?

"What's the point of announcing your attack? If you're going to strike—" The man disappeared before he finished his sentence. "Do it like *this!*"

He had closed the distance between himself and Claire in the blink of an eye, and he swung at her.

Claire somehow dodged and drew back, but it was close—far too close for comfort, even for Claire, who was skilled in martial arts. I didn't think I would have been able to react in time.

"Freeze!" I initiated the Judecca water magic that I had used against Manaria to stop him from moving. If I could just connect it to Earth Spikes and complete Cocytus—

"I told you, it's useless."

For a moment, I thought the masked man had been frozen, but he recovered instantaneously. Was it possible he could use Spellbreaker, like Manaria?

"Hmm," he continued. "Still, two against one is rather inconvenient."

"You're the one who came after us—" Claire started.

"Just following orders. I'm not here because I want to be. Ah, now there's an idea. Let's wrap up here, shall we?"

The masked man suddenly bolted toward the door, not slowing an ounce when he got there but breaking it down with a kick. The students out in the hall scattered from the shock of the door splintering open, and he used the opportunity to slip between them and run.

"Wait!" Claire cried.

"Miss Claire, no! We need to make sure Lilly is safe!" I stopped her from giving chase. If Salas had sent assassins to kill us, there was no telling what he might do to Lilly.

Or so I thought.

"Rae! Miss Claire!" Lilly appeared amidst all the commotion, rushing to us through the crowd that had formed.

"Oh, thank goodness..." Claire breathed. "You're safe."

"Miss Lilly... What are you doing here?" I was relieved, but I couldn't help also being confused.

"I-I just was thinking that Rae wouldn't give in to my father without good reason... So I wanted to come ask you why you did it, but you were being attacked!" Lilly bawled.

"Don't worry, Miss Lilly. Miss Claire and I are both safe. I'm so sorry for making you worry."

"Y-yes, you should be..." Lilly didn't stop crying. I patted her head to comfort her.

"Rae, let's explain what's going on to the dorm monitor" Claire said. "We also need to get Cardinal Lilly caught up."

"Yes."

The dorm was a hive of activity the rest of the night and into the next day. We were too busy trying to get things under control to take any real action until the next afternoon.

But our counterattack was yet to come.

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The next day, we requested an audience with the king and were granted it immediately. These were extreme circumstances.

When we made it to the palace and entered the audience chamber, both the king and Salas were already present. The queen was not. Rumor had it that she hadn't left her bed since Yu gave up her right to succession. A number of royal guards were also in the room.

"You're late. What are you thinking, making His Majesty wait?" Salas said pompously.

"I'm very sorry. We had an errand to run," Claire said in measured response to that caustic tone.

"Now, what's this all about?" the king asked. Of course, we had already explained the situation to him when we requested an audience. Everything to come would be an act.

"Your Majesty, we are here to report the crimes of Chancellor Salas," Claire said boldly. Salas's expression did not change.

"And what crimes might those be?" asked the king.

"Your Majesty," Salas interrupted, "these are nothing but false accusations."

"Th-they are not false," Lilly objected.

It looked like Salas intended to feign ignorance, probably because he knew the king had not yet invoked Royal Prerogative.

"Are you still trying to accuse me of infidelity?" Salas sneered.

"No, we're not," Claire replied to Salas's evident surprise. She went on, "Salas's crime... is instigation of foreign aggression."

"Wh-what did you say...?"

I saw that sharp flash of light in Salas's eyes again. Claire ignored it and continued.

"Salas is communicating secretly with the Nur Empire."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's completely unfathomable," Salas shook his head, looking annoyed.

The king, meanwhile, leaned forward, listening quietly.

"Your Majesty, the violent fallout of the Commoner Movement is not solely the fault of your policies. Salas has been working with the Nur Empire to instigate conflict."

"Absurd. Your Majesty, please pay no heed to such idle gossip."

"We have proof. Don't we, Rae?"

"Yes." I pulled the item out of my bag.

"I-Impossible..."

Salas was struck dumb as he beheld the item in my hand—an old, time-worn magic

recording device. I activated the tool with magic power, and a conversation began to play.

—*If I help foment rebellion in the kingdom, the empire will guarantee me a position of power in the new administration?*

—*Yes, this I promise.*

—*How do you wish to go about this?*

—*Use the foolish king's own policies. Spur the Commoner Movement to acts of violence.*

—*Ahh, I see. Simple, really. Commoners are fools, after all.*

“That’s enough.” The king held up his hand, and I stopped the magical device. Salas stood there, frozen, all the color drained from his face. “Salas, what have you to say for yourself?”

“You... How did you get that?!” Salas demanded, indignant.

“Why, from the safe in your office, of course,” said Claire.

“Impossible! I’m the only one who knows the combination!”

“Well, that’s where Rae’s genius came in. Right, Rae?”

“Yes. Well, not my genius but hers,” I said, turning my bag upside down. A nearly transparent, amorphous being oozed out.

“A m-monster?!”

The royal guard drew their weapons at Salas’s scream, but the king motioned for them to stand down.

“She’s a familiar,” I said. “See? Her core is gold.”

“Hmph. I see.” The king hadn’t even flinched at the sight of my monstrous friend. He was no coward.

I scooped up Ralaire and showed her to Salas. “Does she remind you of anything?”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“The ice sculptures in your office.”

“Ah...”

I’d covertly released Ralaire in Salas’s office on our last visit, where she’d used her mimicry ability, undine, to blend in with the objects in the room. The reason I’d told Salas that his recording tool would disappear was to make him paranoid enough to check it was still there before he left for the night—in other words, to make him use the dial while Ralaire watched. Later, I collected Ralaire, who could now perfectly mimic Salas’s safe-opening movements.

No scorn for former monsters. My baby was smart.

“You... deceived me...”

“Mmhm.”

“G-give up, Father!”

The guards surrounded Salas. Salas was a medium aptitude water attribute caster, but he supposedly hadn’t been in combat for many years. Even if the guards couldn’t take him, Claire and I could. He couldn’t win.

“It is time to pay your debts, Salas,” said Claire.

“Heh heh...”

We all stared at him in confusion.

“Heh heh... Ha ha ha!” Salas cackled. Had he gone mad? “Ahhh... you got me. Very impressive, Claire François, Rae Taylor.”

“And me,” Lilly shot back.

“No, you really didn’t do much at all. Think about it, Lilly. Did you ever do a single thing that might cause your father harm?”

What was he talking about? It sounded like nonsense, but as I thought back, I realized

that Lilly had never taken substantial actions against Salas or any of the nobles.

"What's your point?" I demanded.

"I just find it amusing, that's all. What is it like to be betrayed by someone you thought was your ally?"

My eyes went instinctively to Lilly, who looked bewildered, like she didn't know what her father was talking about. Maybe he was just desperate?

"Lilly," Salas ordered, "save your father, now."

"Wh-what are you talking about?! You need to pay for his crimes!"

"Very well, then, In that case, you must pay too. For your own crimes!"

"What are you talking about?! I have no idea what you mean!"

"Lilly... you're such a pitiful child. Lord, have mercy."

That final phrase seemed to have been a trigger of some kind—the second it reached Lilly's ears, she collapsed.



“Cardinal Lilly?!” Claire flew to her side, panicked. I had a fiercely bad feeling about this.

“Get away from her, Claire!” I cried out, forgetting her title.

As I pulled Claire away from Lilly, a silver aura pouring off Lilly tugged at the curls of Claire’s blonde hair.

In the next instant, a familiar, uncannily cheerful voice spoke to us. “Now, now. There’s no need for this.”

“You...”

“Hey, Rae, Miss Claire. It’s been quite the day.” The voice and expression were unmistakable. The voice, in particular. It belonged to the assassin—the man in the black mask.

“Salas! What have you done to Cardinal Lilly?!” Claire demanded.

Salas ignored her. “That commoner was a dual-caster, right?”

“Answer my question!”

“I am. My specialty in my Academy days was suggestion. And my area of interest? Artificially reproducing the abilities of a multi-caster,” Salas explained with a dark smile.

“Guards, apprehend Salas and Lilly,” the king ordered, and the guards moved to surround them.

“You think this riffraff can stop me?”

I don’t know where she’d been hiding it, but Lilly flashed a small knife and the guards nearest to her went down in the blink of an eye. Only the most formidable warriors were selected for the King’s Guard, the very best of the best. Few could hope to take any of them on one-on-one. Neither Claire nor I would stand a chance.

In other words, to fell such guards in an instant... Lilly was extraordinary.

“Cardinal Lilly, stop!”

"It's useless. That's Lilly, but it's not her," Salas chuckled. "I was trying to artificially create a dual-caster. I was only partially successful, though."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Salas continued lecturing like he was explaining things to a failing student. "I originally intended to imbue individuals with a second attribute—but in the end I could only do so by embedding a second personality within that person. You see, the new personality naturally came with a new magical attribute."

"So the masked assassin was Miss Lilly all along?"

"Correct. And she relayed everything your little investigation uncovered to me!"

This explained why the ledger we'd examined the first time we visited Salas's office had been so eerily perfect. Lilly had told him just what to expect.

"But she looks completely different!" Claire cried. "How—"

"It's probably a magical tool. Remember the one Lilly lent us so I could switch places with Yu?" I'd wondered at the time why she happened to possess such a convenient thing. "Does the original Lilly know about this?"

"No, she doesn't. If she did, I imagine she would try to take her own life."

He was a monster. A cruel, cruel monster who'd turned sweet, gentle Lilly into an assassin he could deploy to do his dirty work.

"Now, Lilly," Salas ordered. "It's time to kill all these people."

"That's quite an ask. Claire and Rae won't go down easily," the transformed Cardinal retorted.

"I'm sure you're up to the task."

"Of course I am. But I can't guarantee your safety while I do it."

"Hmph..."

Lilly sounded like a completely different person when she spoke to Salas like this.

Something about her tone reminded me of the swear words she sometimes involuntarily let slip—maybe those too, were a by-product of the artificial dual-caster embedded within her.

“In that case, Lilly, let’s make escaping the priority,” Salas said.

“I will not let you escape!” Claire snarled.

To my surprise, Claire already had the François family crests floating in the air. She was ready to fire her Magic Ray.

“Salas, Cardinal Lilly. I cannot modulate the effects of this spell. Surrender, if you want to live,” Claire warned as she moved into a position where they were both in her line of vision.

“Well, what now?” Lilly asked Salas.

“Cardinal Lilly, stop! If you make one more move, I will fire!”

“Go ahead and try.” Lilly kept moving, and she felled another guard with her knife.

Claire hesitated for a moment. Then she took a breath. “I’m so sorry!”

She cast Magic Ray—but the spell didn’t touch Lilly.

“Wh-what?!”

Somehow, Magic Ray fizzled and disappeared like a mirage. Negating a flame spear was one thing, but if Lilly could render even Magic Ray useless... She had to be using Spellbreaker.

“Lilly here is my masterpiece,” Salas said proudly. “She wouldn’t stand a chance against Lady Manaria, but her magic is in no way inferior.”

“Is that Spellbreaker?”

“Nothing quite so eccentric. In this form, Lilly merely has a high-aptitude wind attribute. Her specialty is manipulating time.”

Time manipulation! Of course. When we first encountered the masked man during the

Commoner Movement's assault on the Academy, he had restored a magical bell that I'd destroyed. So he'd turned back time to do it.

"You called her your masterpiece," I said. "Does that mean there are others?"

"Of course. What parent would test an unverified process on their own child? I didn't start on Lilly until I'd perfected my technique. Let's see, how many orphans did I break before I got here? Ten? Twenty? No, many more." Salas confessed to this horrendous truth with utter calm.

"You fiend!" Claire glared at Salas and unleashed her Magic Ray at him.

"Oof." Lilly, who'd finished off the last of the guards, deactivated the spell once more, dispersing it.

"Rae! You get Salas! Rapid fire!"

"Got it!" I conjured twenty ice spears and surrounded Salas with them.

"Whoa. You've done this before, huh?" said Lilly.

Even if Lilly could counter my ice spears, she had to stick by Salas's side to block everything we threw at him. This way, I could at least slow them down.

On and on, Claire and I continued to rain spells down on them, and Lilly continued to counter every single one. It might have looked like a stalemate, but that wasn't the case.

"Give up, Cardinal Lilly!"

"Why?"

"You'll run out of magic before we do."

It was true. Lilly was alone. Claire and I had each other, and we were casting elemental spears, the most basic of combat spells. I didn't know how much magic power time manipulation used, but it had to be more than magic spears.

"Miss Lilly, please stop."

"Tsk. I'm not doing this because I want to."

"That's all the more reason!"

"But—" Lilly stopped.

"I may not be perfect, but I am her father," Salas said, pulling out a bottle of potion from his breast pocket.

"Is that cantarella?!" For a moment, I feared we were about to reenact our awful battle with Louie. I was wrong.

"Of course not. It's quite a potent draught, and it allows an individual to fully recover their magical power" said Salas, handing the bottle to Lilly.

"Sounds rare—you can't have another."

"Maybe not, but I've got this." Lilly downed the potion and then stared hard at the empty bottle, which refilled before our eyes. She'd turned back time on the bottle! "Voila—just gotta think outside the box."

This was bad. Very bad. With an unlimited supply of potions replenishing Lilly's magic, we didn't stand a chance. Claire continued to keep her eyes on Lilly, not letting her guard down for a second.

And then the ground shook with a terrible violence.

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Everyone was caught off guard by the sudden tremors. I was probably the only one who didn't wonder what they were, but I was hardly undisturbed.

*It's too soon! This isn't supposed to happen yet!*

Anticipating what would come next, I pushed Claire to the ground and shielded her with my body. Every piece of glass in the audience chamber shattered, and small, bright stones flew in through the windows—pyroclasts, burning earth.

Mt. Sassel was erupting, just as Rod and Lilly had feared.

"What in the world..." I heard Claire whisper in confusion.

I raised an earth magic barrier to protect us from the flames and debris, and we waited long minutes for the quake to run its course. Fire and rock continued to rain down upon us, but eventually, the ground grew still again.

"I think it's okay now."

The premature timing of the eruption worried me, but this particular earthquake wouldn't have any aftershocks—if things were still on course.

I moved off Claire and stood up to survey the situation. The once-beautiful audience room was in ruins. The furnishings were smashed to pieces, and burning cinders littered the floor.

"Your Majesty!" cried one of the guards, drawing our attention to King l'Ausseil, who had fallen from his throne. He lay collapsed on the floor, bleeding from a head wound.

"Rae, heal him!" Claire cried.

Before she even said the words, I was on the floor next to the king, trying to use healing magic. But it was too late.

"I can't... He has already passed."

"What...?!"

This part was in line with the game. The king died at this point in fiction too.

"Where are Salas and Cardinal Lilly?!" Claire exclaimed.

They were nowhere to be seen. I knew from playing the game that Salas used the commotion to escape, though Lilly had never showed up in this moment, not even as the masked assassin.

And yet.

*I was trying to avoid this...*

Mt. Sassel wasn't supposed to erupt for a few more days. If we hadn't had to battle

Lilly, and I'd been at full power, I could have used protective magic on the entire room.

Was King l'Ausseil fated to die, no matter what I did? Was there no changing that part of the game? And why had the eruption happened so fast...?

"Rae... Rae! Get it together."

I realized I was looking up at Claire. When had I ended up on my knees?

"Forget about Salas and Cardinal Lilly for a minute," Claire said. "We have quite a lot to do."

"Miss Claire..."

"The last time Mt. Sassel erupted, it caused a massive famine and water shortage. The kingdom will soon be in crisis, and King l'Ausseil isn't here to see us through it."

That was right—the damage done by the eruption itself would be nothing compared to the aftermath. Volcanic ash had by now covered the entire capital, and it would ruin the crops in the middle of harvest season. What I knew from playing the game, Claire had learned by studying history.

Clever, capable King l'Ausseil was gone. We had to choose a new sovereign.

"Guards, contact the head of the House of Lords. Call an emergency meeting. Then ensure the safety of Master Rod and Master Thane."

Dazed, I watched Claire issue perfect rapid-fire instructions to the guards. Suddenly, I felt my cheek burn with pain.

"Get it together! You said you would support me—was that a lie?!" Claire stared me in the eye. The dainty little hand she'd used to slap me was red from impact.

This fragile girl and her brittle soul were fully ready to bear the brunt of dealing with this crisis. Who would aid her? There was only one answer.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I'm fine—I'm here."

"Good," Claire said, and she hugged me for just a moment. I realized she was shaking and hugged her back, holding her close. "We shall overcome this."

"Yes!"

We threw ourselves into the work posthaste. Claire's quick thinking saved us time, marshalling the kingdom's resources at once. We did, however, receive one piece of news that stopped us in our tracks.

Prince Rod could not be found.

# FINAL CHAPTER

## REVOLUTION

THE DAMAGE DONE by the eruption proved dire. Since most of the city's wealthy estates sat directly on the slope of the mountain, the aristocrats had taken more casualties than the commoners, and the lost included many members of the House of Lords. Congress would have stalled out altogether if not for the Chairman miraculously making it and Lord Dole flexing his power.

An emergency session of both houses convened, with blood relatives filling in for dead or absent members. The first topic of discussion: who would inherit the crown. King l'Ausseil's firstborn prince and heir, Rod, had gone missing during the eruption. According to his inner circle, Rod had been en route to the village at the foot of the mountain, intending to personally convince the residents to evacuate.

He'd been trying to do the job I set him to.

*With the most terrible timing...*

Possibly, the eruption had caught him. After five days of no word, the likelihood of his survival continued to dwindle. Despite their utter disarray, the House of Lords knew the situation called for immediate measures, and they decided Thane should take the throne. A monarchy was ill-equipped to respond to a natural disaster while its throne sat empty.

But it couldn't be so simple.

"Honestly... what is my father thinking?"

We were back in the dorms at the Academy. Claire sat in a chair, her brow furrowed as she read the newspaper. Printing technology had progressed quite a ways in the kingdom, and while the habit hadn't yet spread to the working class, aristocrats commonly purchased newspapers.

Claire had wanted to keep pursuing the issue of Dole's crimes, but I had convinced her to hold off for now. For better or worse, Dole was an effective politician. We needed

him.

"What does it say?" I hesitated to say anything, but Claire looked like she might explode if she didn't get a chance to vent.

"Thane was passed over for the throne," she spat.

She tossed the paper aside, and I picked it up to take a look. Just as Claire said, Thane's succession had been stalled before he could take the throne. The article said that noble supporters of Rod, including Dole, would temporarily run the government instead.

"The ruler of a kingdom is the king. The only thing the aristocrats should be doing is working to select the next king as quickly as possible," Claire said, grinding her teeth.

The article seemed to share her disapproval. Some people were even accusing the aristocrats of staging a coup d'état. It didn't help that most of the House of Lords members who had been killed in the eruption had supported Thane and Yu. Although, when Yu surrendered her claim on the throne, most of her supporters had switched over to Rod. Thane had always been the least popular prince.

"We must face this crisis as a united front," Claire went on. "Their feuding will only frighten the citizenry."

Volcanic ash and projectiles had destroyed the crops around the capital. People were hoarding goods in anticipation of product shortages, and prices were skyrocketing. Dole's provisional government—at least, that's what he called it—was distributing supplies, but there was no telling how long they would last.

I hadn't expected the eruption to happen this early, but I knew what came next. Naturally, I'd done my best to prepare. I'd used the money I earned from my business with Broumet to purchase nonperishable food items in bulk through Tulle Trading Company—the company I stopped by before summer break—and stored those supplies. I'd also experimented with cultivating potatoes, which hadn't caught on as a food in this world, and buckwheat, which could grow even in poor soil. I'd even tried to use Broumet to introduce a trend of seaweed salads. I'd furthermore been the one spreading rumors about the volcanic eruption being caused by angry spirits. But in the end, this was all I could do.

A volcanic eruption is an unfathomable disaster, and it affirms or negates a nation's collective efforts. Even 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japan would be hard-pressed to deal with a

disaster of this magnitude, and I wasn't a whole nation, just one young girl with foreknowledge of the future. I'd done everything I could to prepare, but there was much work ahead.

"I'm going to go see Thane," Claire said. "Rae, go ahead and send word."

"I don't know if that's possible," I said.

"Why?!" Claire snarled back at me, as if I had woken a sleeping beast.

"Miss Claire, you are the daughter of the man blocking Thane's ascension to the throne. Thane's supporters see you as their sworn enemy."

"Argh..."

Normally, Claire would have realized this without me pointing it out to her. She wasn't herself.

"Miss Claire, please go easy on yourself. Ever since the eruption, you've been working too hard."

It was thanks to Claire's swift orders at the palace in the immediate aftermath of the eruption that the nation hadn't spiraled into complete chaos. Between the volcanic eruption, disappearance of Salas, death of King l'Ausseil, lost members of the House of Lords, and inflation of agricultural products, the country was on the brink of collapse, and Claire was helping to avert disaster. This was partially because she had her father's backing, but no one could doubt that she made excellent decisions under pressure.

"I only did what needed to be done. My father's the one not fulfilling his duty!" The newspapers were rife with speculation that Dole planned to take the throne himself. Claire, who still held to her shining ideals of an aristocrat's obligation to the people, couldn't sit by as her father flouted that responsibility.

"Miss Claire, you have done everything you possibly can. You need to take a break. You've barely slept at all these past few days." I could see fatigue starting to show on Claire's lovely face. Her skin was breaking out, and she had circles under her eyes. She was working so hard, dismissing all chances to rest, and was even skipping her beloved baths.

"I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine, but—" Claire moved in closer and leaned against my shoulder. "I'm... just a little tired. May I sit here for a little while?"

"Uh, Miss Claire?!"

"I'm glad you're here, Rae. I wouldn't have been able to do this alone."

"Miss Claire, are you all right? You just complimented me. Is something wro—"

"I'm showing affection. Isn't that what you call it?"

"Umm, I suppose..."

"Lene used to let me do this."

"Oh... I see." So she was just seeking comfort as a friend. I was a tiny bit disappointed, but I couldn't complain.

"I'm proud of my noble lineage, but sometimes... really, only sometimes... I dream of being freed from this sense of duty."

"That's an understandable desire. You could quit, you know. From being an aristocrat."

"I can't do that. I've lived in the lap of luxury my entire life. That means I have a duty to serve the people as best as I can, especially in this time of emergency."

"You're such an earnest person, Miss Claire." That was one of the things I liked about her. "Okay, tell me this. I don't care if it's nonsensical, just tell me... Is there something you would want to do if you weren't a noble?"

"Well..." Claire thought for a long moment. "I should like to learn how to cook and sew."

"That's hardly what I expected. You want to do peasant things?"

"You've taken such care of me. If I were no longer an aristocrat, such tasks would be the only way I could repay you."

I was so surprised that my eyes bulged a bit.

"What does that look mean? Oh, I haven't taken a bath in days. Do I smell?"

"No, not at all. You actually smell nice." I was just taken aback by her unexpected words.

"Liar. This is perfect timing, actually. Let's take a bath."

"As you wish."

We headed toward the Academy's baths. Unfortunately, it turned out the hot spring's waters had been disrupted by the eruption, so the baths were nonfunctional.

"Oh, curses!"

"Settle down. Settle down, Miss Claire."

To talk Claire down from her temper, I ended up fetching a tub of hot water and towels to her room. We ended the night with me giving her a sponge bath, just like we'd done when we visited my home.

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The bad news kept rolling in.

"My father has lost his mind!" Claire blurted out after reading the morning paper.

"What happened?"

"It says he's raising taxes."

Claire handed me the paper in disbelief. I took it and ran my eyes over the article. It said that the provisional government was raising taxes as a post-eruption measure. They declared they needed a larger budget to deal with the damages suffered in the eruption.

"The people are already suffering from price gouging! And now they're raising taxes?!"

Even someone as uninterested in politics as I was could see this was a horrible plan. To Claire, who had studied statecraft since childhood, Dole's decision looked like the ultimate folly.

"This won't end well," she said.

“What does that mean?”

“The citizens will protest.” Claire didn’t know it, but her prediction was spot-on. If things went like they did in the game, the protests would start next week. “Hopefully that will make my father and the provisional government realize they’re looking at a complete civil uprising. It happened after the last eruption too.”

And it wasn’t going to end with riots either. If things progressed as they did in the game... A terrible fate awaited Claire and the other aristocrats.

“Do you remember the word Lilly used?” I asked. “Revolution?”

“Yes...”

“I think that’s what’s coming,” I said.

Claire laughed self-deprecatingly. “It wouldn’t surprise me. Especially if the aristocrats keep making these foolish decisions.”

“Miss Claire, what do you plan to do?”

“What do you mean? I’ve already done everything I can—”

“Miss Claire.” I held a small notebook out to her.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a list of my assets, maintained through the Trade Guild.”

“When did you...?” Claire flipped through the ledger, seeing herself listed as the next of kin—and the staggeringly large balance. “Where did you get all this money?! You couldn’t have saved this much from being my maid!”

“I had some other jobs.”

“How?! You’re by my side every day and night!”

“Yes, but the jobs I had didn’t require my physical presence.”

Claire looked unconvinced. I pushed on, regardless.

“What do you think we should do with all this money?”

“What should... we do?”

“How about distributing food and supplies?” I asked.

Claire scrunched up her face at my suggestion. “The provisional government is already doing as much. It would be more efficient to give them the money and let them allocate it as they will.”

“Do you trust the provisional government that much, Miss Claire?”

“Well...” Claire’s expression turned grim.

“Besides, Miss Claire, you should be the one handing out the supplies.”

“Me?”

“Yes. To show the people that not all nobles are corrupt.”

Claire fell silent, clearly thinking deeply about my words.

What I said was, oh, about half-true. The real reason I wanted Claire to be seen handing out rations was to buy her goodwill in the people’s eyes. It was the same reason I’d accepted King l’Ausseil’s request to investigate corruption among the nobility—so the people could see Claire bringing retribution to the guilty. She’d come a long way from the selfish villainess she used to be, but at the rate Dole was going, Claire was at risk of going down with her father’s ship. She didn’t believe in the same things Dole did, and I needed the people to see that.

“I used to think it hypocritical for aristocrats to bestow charity on the poor,” Claire said, laughing at herself in that same self-deprecating way. “But it isn’t. Not if it’s for the people. Are you really all right with this? You must have worked terribly hard to save up this much money.”

“I have no use for it, except to be useful for you.”

“I’m afraid I’m starting to believe that you mean such things.” Claire chuckled. “Let’s use my personal assets too. If we put them together, we should be able to procure quite a significant amount.”

"That sounds perfect. I wonder if we could get Yu to help us as well?"

"Yu? Isn't she confined to a convent right now?"

"She's still an important figure for them, and she was formerly in line for the throne. Without a king, I don't think the provisional government can stop us from seeing her."

"I see what you're saying. The Church already has systems in place for distributing aid to the needy. They can help us do more than you and I could alone."

"Exactly." I'd factored this into my calculations too. I didn't just want to paint a picture of Claire opposing Dole—I wanted the Church to come across as opposing the aristocracy.

"Fine. Let's get going, then. If I write a letter, will you deliver it for me?" It looked like Claire was back to herself.

"Of course, Miss Claire."

Helplessness is a terrible feeling. Taking action gives you hope. This new plan restored Claire's energy, and she secured Yu's cooperation even quicker than we hoped. We started distributing food by the very next day. The evening paper, covering the donations, credited both the Church and Claire. It described her as having a "noble heart," and mentioned that she held to a different philosophy from those who ran the provisional government.

Claire showed up herself to help distribute the food, collecting used wooden bowls and serving the people with her own hands. The evil villainess was long gone. The peasants who lined up for food all freely expressed gratitude sans grudge or reluctance.

Naturally, not all of them were so easily won over. Many accused Claire of pulling a stunt to rehabilitate Dole's political image. But that didn't last long. The provisional government put out a statement saying they did not condone aristocrats acting alone and ran it in a major newspaper. This public criticism of Claire's actions thinned the number of objectors who assumed she could only possibly be allied with the provisional government.

Bit by bit, things were starting to change. Some canny businessmen still hoarded supplies for profit, but eventually, some started to help Claire distribute rations to the

people—including Tulle Trading Company, Broumet, and Frater.

"We're as yet a small operation, but it looks like we've gained a number of supporters," Claire said, reading the newspaper in her dorm room the next week. She flipped to the advertisements section, looking for groups she might recruit to her cause. Over fifty such charitable individuals and groups were out in the field as we spoke.

The world turned.

At times, it turned too quickly.

"Miss Claire, look!"

Claire shifted her gaze to where I was pointing out the window. Outside, peasants were gathering in a group.

"Throw out noble corruption!"

"No new taxes!"

"Bring back the monarchy!"

We were looking at a protest.

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We observed the demonstration in detail from the school dorms, which faced the main street of the capital. People held signs and proceeded toward the assembly hall of the House of Lords. So far, no one seemed to be carrying weapons. The movement was still at the protest phase and hadn't yet developed into a riot.

"I'll stop them!" Claire started to rush out of the room.

I stopped her. "No. It's pointless, and the timing is terrible."

"Why?! As of now, I hold the people's favor. My words have far greater impact than those of any other aristocrat!"

"It's true that if you go out there now, you may be able to calm things down this once."

“Yes, you see?!”

“But after that one time, if you keep defending the provisional government, the people will just think you were on the aristocrats’ side all along. Their trust in you will crumble.”

Claire’s face twisted in frustration. She slammed her hand on the desk—a pretty extreme move for someone with her upbringing. “They’ll *think* I’m on the aristocrats’ side? I *am* a purebred aristocrat!”

“Is that what’s most important to you, Miss Claire? Or is it helping the people?”

“Argh!” Claire was a smart person. Her temper flared easily, but she grabbed hold of herself quickly, listening to my rational argument. “Yes, you’re right. You *are* right, Rae. I don’t care nearly as much about my status as I do about setting an example.”

“And in order to do that, you can’t make your move yet. We need to watch and see. It’s still possible the provisional government will change their minds.”

“I hope so,” Claire said, gazing anxiously at the crowd she could see from the window. “But where is this coming from all of a sudden? I’ve been reading the papers, but nothing in them called for a protest.”

“I’m not sure, but it’s possible someone’s instigating things.”

“The Resistance!”

“On the surface, yes. But it goes deeper than that. Salas, and perhaps even the Nur Empire are pulling some strings.”

These protests were strange. A few small, spontaneous demonstrations were one thing, but looking out the window, I saw at least a thousand people in the crowd today. It was hard to believe that a protest of this size had arisen with no meetings or advance preparations.

“You think the empire is involved?” Claire demanded.

“Yes.”

She thought that over for a moment and then narrowed her eyes. “I’ve been going

along with it so far, but I seem to have reached my limit. Rae, where are you getting this information?"

"I just overhear things here and there."

"Stop lying to me. You don't just stumble onto information as important as this." Claire's questioning switched to a gentler tone. "Rae, I trust you. Will you please just finally come out with it? How do you always know things that you shouldn't?"

She was being sincere. If I kept deceiving her now, she might lose that trust in me.

It was time. I prepared myself.

"I don't know if you'll believe me..."

"Just try and tell me."

"Okay, then. I am not from this world."

Claire frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I came from another world, from a country called Japan."

"Japan..."

"Yes. I lived there, for a time, and I think I may have died there as well. Regardless, I somehow found myself in this world."

Claire looked like she was absorbing this, so I continued.

"I can predict, to a certain extent, what will happen in this world because I learned about it in my former life."

"This world... and in your former life?"

"Yes. In my last life, there was a book of something like... like prophecies, predicting what would happen in this world." I left out the part about it being a game. I'd been a bit careless with Misha, and I worried about what might happen to Claire if she were told she was a character in a story.

“So, you can predict what will happen next?”

“Yes.”

“Then what will?” Claire inquired fearfully. Her anxiety told me that she accepted what I was saying—at least to an extent.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Knowing the future inevitably means tampering with it. I can’t say more than I have. If you know what’s coming, your actions may alter the future I expect. I’ve done everything I can to change our future for the better without changing too much and thereby losing that advantage.”

I was going to change the course of fate. I was going to ensure Claire’s survival.

“That’s all I have to say.”

“I see...” Claire nodded slightly.

“Do you accept it?”

“That’s all I can do. I’ve witnessed the results of your foresight with my own eyes time and time again.”

“Ahh, trusting me is all you can do? This must be love...”

“Are you even listening to me?” Claire flicked me on the forehead. Ow! “So you were a lost spirit, Rae?”

“I suppose so.” Misha had brought up the same story when I’d told her everything—the legend of mysterious children who appeared out of nowhere, bearing strange powers.

“I wonder if all lost spirits are visitors from your world, Rae?”

“I don’t know. But the world I used to live in had no magic.”

“Is that so? But your magic is so potent.”

“I don’t really know how that works. Maybe it’s one of those things that only God knows.”

“Perhaps so. In any case, if the empire is involved in these protests, we must intervene.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m going to advise my father. If the Nur Empire is behind these protests—”

“Then the provisional government will declare that these protestors are colluding with an enemy nation.”

There was literally nothing we could do. The Empire was cunning. This was why I hated both politics and family drama; if this weren’t a matter of life or death for Claire, I would have packed up and fled to another country long ago.

“Is there nothing we can do? Don’t you have any bright ideas, Rae?”

“Not just yet. Things need to change a little more.”

“But if we don’t do something, then the revolution—”

“It’s okay, Miss Claire.” I kept my voice calm. “I will protect you. No matter what happens.”

It was the truth. Just not *all* of it.

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The peasant protests continued, and the crowd filling the street in front of the assembly hall grew by the day. The voices that criticized the provisional government and called for the return of the monarchy grew stronger and stronger. But the provisional government, especially Dole, showed no shift in attitude.

“Yes, come on. Line up! We have plenty for everyone!”

“Don’t rush—there’s enough to go around.”

Despite our anxiety about the protests, we continued to distribute food. More and more people were going hungry due to the increase in taxes, and our lines grew longer. We were still able to accommodate everyone, but if any more people joined the lines, we would soon run out of supplies.

Then, one day...

"There were fewer people today than yesterday, right?" Claire asked, seeing our leftovers.

"Yes."

We brushed it off as a one-time thing, but then it happened again. And again. Every day, the number of people lining up for Claire's food distribution gradually decreased.

"What is going on?" Claire asked. It wasn't long before her question was answered in the newspaper. The headline read:

"Resistance Establishes Revolutionary Government: Abundant Rations Soon to Come." Apparently, the revolutionaries had set up their own government in opposition to the provisional government.

*We're at this point already...*

This was still within the parameters of my predictions. Many of *Revolution*'s routes ended with a tragic love story between the chosen prince and the main character, culminating in the middle of the revolution. But it also had a revolution route, where, rather than hook up with one of the princes, the main character led the revolution herself.

What had just happened resembled the revolution route—but led by Claire, not the player character. Unlike in the game, rather than me, Claire had the support of the people.

*Now I just need to stay on course.*

It wouldn't be long before a certain person and I could realize our greatest ambitions.

"Rae, are you listening?"

“Argh?!”

Claire suddenly pulled my ear, making me turn to look at her. She looked pale.

“The revolutionary government has put us in a state of crisis. At this rate, our kingdom...”

“It’s okay, Miss Claire. Things are going according to plan.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Please, Miss Claire, continue distributing supplies.”

“I... I understand.”

And so, we showed up as usual to distribute food. As it turned out, however, the very next day, almost no one came. Claire was troubled, but I remained calm.

“Doesn’t this mean that the people now support the revolutionary government?!” she demanded.

“Possibly. But that’s not a problem.”

“How is it not a problem?!”

“Excuse me. Is this Miss Claire François’s food drive?”

A group of men had showed up together. Their clothes were too expensive to belong to peasants, but they didn’t look like nobles either.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“We are from the revolutionary government,” said the man who seemed to be in charge.

Claire’s expression was suddenly grim. “How may I help you?”

“Miss Claire François, we admire your attempts to aid the people. But from here on out, the revolutionary government will be handling the distribution of food and supplies. We were hoping you would cooperate with us.”

"Cooperate?" Claire sounded suspicious. "You said you're from the revolutionary government, correct?"

"Yes."

"I remember seeing you before. You were a subordinate of Chancellor Salas, were you not?"

"Yes." He did not deny it.

"And you—" She turned her eyes to one of the other men. "You were one of the former Baron Thompson's guards. And *you* were in the service of Count Yale. Why are you three in the revolutionary government?"

"They lost their jobs because you brought down their employers, Miss Claire," I said.

"But we made sure to provide new positions for everyone!"

"And we were grateful for that," said one of the men. "However, we received a much better offer of employment—under former Chancellor Salas."

"Salas?! Where is he?!" Claire demanded.

But the man shook his head. "I cannot tell you that."

"He's working with the Nur Empire!"

"The Nur Empire is aiding the people in taking back this country."

"No! The Nur Empire doesn't care for this country at—"

I shushed Claire with my hand. "When you say 'cooperate,' what do you mean?"

"We would like to buy your food supplies. We have a decent amount ourselves, but the more, the better."

"Fine. In return, we have some conditions."

"Let's hear them."

"Please do not involve Miss Claire in whatever the revolutionary government has planned."

"That might be difficult... Dole is a major member of the wicked provisional government, after all." The man shook his head.

But I didn't give up. "I didn't mention Dole. I only asked that you not involve *Miss Claire*."

"Hmm?"

"You know what Miss Claire has been up to, right? Miss Claire loves the people. She's not like Master Dole or the other aristocrats."

"In other words, you'd like us to simply overlook her?"

"That's right."

The man pretended to think it over. Miss Claire was trying to protest through my hand, which was still over her mouth, but I needed her to be quiet for a bit.

"And just how much stock can you provide?"

"Here." I showed him our supply list.

He neglected to hide his surprise for a moment but swiftly resumed his poker face.  
"That's not much for—"

"Okay, then forget it."

He went quiet.

If memory served me right, the revolutionary government didn't have enough in the way of food supplies right now. In order to get the support of the peasants, they put out newspaper ads saying they would provide ample food rations, but they were subsequently overwhelmed by the number of people taking them up on the offer. They needed enough to tide them over until the Nur Empire came in with reinforcements, and I was betting on that shortfall.

"Fine. I promise we will not touch Miss Claire."

"Thank you very much. If you break that promise, please understand that all support from XX will cease immediately."

"What on earth is XX?"

"Arla and Irvine Luster will understand what it means."

"I understand. We will provide instructions for sending the food at a later date."

With that, the soldiers left.

"Puaah. Rae! What do you think you're doing?!"

"The ends justify the means, Miss Claire," I said, trying to reassure her.

"The ends?"

"We need to get closer to the revolutionary government if we want to know what they're thinking and what they intend to do. Providing them with supplies earns us their trust."

"I will not join the revolutionary government!"

"Of course not. What we need to do is mediate between the provisional and revolutionary governments, trying to find a point of compromise. You're the only one who can do that, Miss Claire."

"What? Me?"

"Yes, and it will be a difficult task. Can you do it?"

"Who do you think you're talking to? I am Claire François, daughter of Dole François, Minister of Finance. I can do that much before even sitting down to breakfast," she said, laughing bravely.

"Thank you."

"I... I apologize, Rae. I criticized you without knowing what you were thinking."

"Don't mention it."

She really didn't need to. If anything, I needed to apologize to Claire.

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"It's been a while, Claire. How lovely to see you."

When we entered the revolutionary government's camp, it was Salas Lilium, former Chancellor of the Bauer Kingdom, who came up to greet us, smirking all the while. Claire and I had come to discuss a potential accord between the revolutionary and the provisional governments. While not a representative of the provisional government, Claire was Dole's daughter.

"Let's let the past go, shall we? Water under the bridge. I hope we can reach a mutually beneficial arrangement." Salas reached out to shake Claire's hand.

Behind him stood rebel soldiers, mostly made up of Salas's private security team—and Lilly. We needed to proceed cautiously from here.

Arla and Irvine, strangely, were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps Salas had taken over the diplomatic side of things.

"What are the revolutionary government's requests?" Claire said abruptly.

"Now, now, let's not jump ahead. I think it's customary to start negotiations like this by laying some groundwork, don't you?"

"I believe all parties involved are already quite familiar with each other. Let's get to the point."

Salas was at an overwhelming advantage in these negotiations. No matter how exposed Claire had been to politics as the daughter of the Minister of Finance, Salas was the former Chancellor. It was likely he'd outmaneuver her if these talks lasted too long; Claire moved forward with speed in the attempt to deny him that chance.

"Fine, then," Salas said. "Our demands are simple. Abolition of the aristocracy and sovereignty for the people."

"I thought the people were demanding the monarchy be restored?"

"At first, yes. But now, they've realized this is their chance to actively participate in

governing the country.”

Such was the goal of the Commoner Movement. I found it ironic that King l’Ausseil’s commoner-focused policies and the aristocratic backlash to them had inspired a movement that aimed to strip power from nobles and royals alike.

“Do you really think those demands will be met?” Claire asked.

“We intend to make sure they are. No matter what it takes,” Salas said, undoubtedly implying they were prepared for an armed uprising.

“The provisional government has the army.”

“We have more people. And justice is on our side.”

“Are you telling the people to die for justice?”

“I would never ask such a thing of them. After all, if they die, it will be the army killing them, not I.”

In fact, imperial soldiers had infiltrated the revolutionaries, including a number of former private guards of the aristocrats arrested during Claire’s investigation. Combined with the peasantry, the revolutionaries outnumbered the kingdom’s army by a long shot. A number of them could even use magic, making them a truly formidable force. The army commanded by the provisional government, on the other hand, would be hesitant to attack their own people, whom they were sworn to protect.

“Salas. What *is* your ulterior motive?” asked Claire.

“What do you mean?”

“The revolution is but a means to an end for you. You don’t care for the people; you only want their power, don’t you?”

Salas remained calm, despite Claire’s acidic tone. “Even if I did, there is no question that this revolution is good for the people. If I were to end up at the top of the new administration as a result... that would merely be a bonus.”

He stared us both down.

"Please tell Dole to cease his selfishness and hand over power for the people's sake."

"That buffoon—he truly is full of himself for a criminal," Claire fumed later. We stood in the assembly hall, waiting to meet with the head of the provisional government and convey what we'd learned.

Unsurprisingly, once Dole was brought up to speed, he denounced the revolutionaries' demands as "idiotic."

"These impertinent peasants misunderstand the goodwill of the king," he declared.

"Precisely. We need to teach the peasants a lesson here, once and for all," someone else agreed.

"But, Father," Claire argued. "The revolutionary government has the support of the people. If we attack them, we disregard the people's wishes."

"The support of common folk does not confer righteousness. It is the nobility who decide right from wrong." Even Dole was uninterested in what Claire had to say.

"Father! You are out of line. Sovereignty lies with the king. Why must you block Thane from ascending to the throne? Why take the government into your own hands?"

"You know very well that this is only a temporary measure, Claire," Dole said in a tone that sounded like he was talking to a whiny child. "Thane is still young. In order to overcome this conflict, the nobles have been obligated to offer their assistance."

"If that's true, then all you need to do is put Thane on the throne and select a prime minister from the House of Lords!"

"Claire, there was no *time*. With the eruption of Mt. Sassal, and the commoners in revolt, the situation required urgency."

"Father..."

I wondered if Claire noticed that all Dole did was repeat the same excuses he gave the public. He had never had any intention of giving up power.

"At any rate, how is the provisional government going to respond?" Claire asked.

“We demand an end to the protests and the immediate dissolution of the revolutionary government.”

“You *have* to meet them halfway, or there will be war!”

“Then so be it. We have no desire to hurt the people, but for the restoration of order, it may be inevitable.” The other nobles in attendance nodded in agreement with Dole.

Claire kept at it, trying desperately to sway their minds. “If you wish to address the root of the problem, the dissatisfaction first arose when the provisional government increased taxes. Can you not reverse the increase at the very least?”

“Of course not. The impact of the eruption only grows, even today. We need money for restoration.”

“In that case, isn’t it up to the nobles to donate their own coffers?”

“We are already doing just that. The nobles’ taxes have increased as well.”

But the rate at which the kingdom taxed the aristocracy was identical to that for the commoners. Taxation that registered to them as mild hardship could devastate a peasant family.

“Father... We are nobles *because* of the people.”

“No. The people endure because of we, the nobility.”

With those words, I could tell from Claire’s face that, at long last, she had lost all hope for her father.

“Rae, you said the negotiations would be difficult. But this... this is beyond what I ever imagined.”

We were in the dorms again, and Claire flopped onto her bed.

“Both sides dug in their heels. Is compromise even possible?” She sounded like she might cry; a vanishingly rare moment of weakness from the normally stone-stubborn Claire.

“There may not be,” I said. “In which case—”

"I know. Armed conflict. I want so terribly to avoid that if we can... Oh, Rae. Come here."

Claire motioned to me. I approached, wondering what she wanted.

"Aaagh! Adults are the most selfish people in the world!" she cried out, grabbing hold of me as I approached her. Then she hugged me tight, as if I were a body pillow.

"M-Miss Claire... this makes me very happy, I assure you, but I can't breathe."

"Mmm!"

She had her way with me like that for three whole minutes. My honor was besmirched forever. Oh no, how *terrible*.

"The negotiations have only just started," I said. "Let's not lose hope yet."

"Mmnn. I'm thirsty, Rae. Please get me some tea."

"Yes, ma'am."

For her, I headed to the kitchen.

*I'm sorry, Claire. No matter how persistent you are... I'm afraid you'll be disappointed.*

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Claire worked incredibly hard.

She went back and forth, again and again, between the provisional and revolutionary governments. She listened patiently to the unyielding demands on both sides, searching for a point of compromise. I hated seeing her so worn out, but I put up with it, knowing that this, too, would soon come to an end.

And then the day came.

November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in Kingdom Years. The protests escalated to an armed uprising, and conflict broke out between the revolutionary army and the forces of the provisional government, which numbered only half the former's size. All of the newspapers reported that the revolutionary army had the advantage.

"I didn't make it in time..." Claire said, deflated, as she watched the crowd battling imperial soldiers from her dorm room window.

I grabbed her hand and squeezed tight, trying to comfort her. "You did everything you could, Miss Claire. You couldn't help that this happened."

"But if I had only tried *harder*..."

"You tried as hard as you possibly could." My attempts to comfort her weren't working. Claire had a strong sense of responsibility, and as someone who understood the sentiments on both sides, this was too much for her heart to handle.

"All that remains for me to do now is admit defeat as a noble of the old era," Claire said resolutely, the color returning to her face.

"No, Miss Claire. You will stand on the side that denounces what came before."

Claire looked at me strangely. As I met her eyes, I straightened. The time had finally come to tell her everything.

"Rae, whatever are you talking about?"

"Miss Claire, you will see off the old era from your place in the new one."

"You're being ridiculous. I am the daughter of House François. I am the quintessential symbol of the world that preceded this one," Claire said through a stiff smile.

"You aren't. Master Dole is."

"It's the same thing."

"It is absolutely not. You will spearhead the movement to convict Master Dole and the old ruling class—the aristocracy."

"Wh-what are you saying?!" Claire was furious, and I understood why. It had to sound like I was asking her to betray the rest of the nobility. "You want me to depose the architects of the old era and then brazenly live my own life free of my connection to them?! Absolutely not, never!"

I'd expected this reaction. There was no way Claire would ever agree to this, not

without knowing the full truth.

"This was Master Dole's design as well."

"Huh?! W-wait a second. My father?" Her fury washed away in a second. I perfectly understood the confusion that rose in its place. "Wh-what do you mean, Rae?!"

"It was your father who set the course of this revolution."

"Just what are you trying to tell me?!"

"Let me start at the beginning. It's long, so please, take a seat."

I motioned for her to sit down. Claire did as I said, hungry to hear what I had to say.

"As you already know, the politics of the kingdom were corrupted beyond repair. Most of the nobles cared only for personal gain, vying for power with no intention of allowing meaningful change."

"Yes... But what does that have to do with this?"

"A few nobles were still devoted to ensuring the country's future. One of those was Master Dole."

"Father? But he sidelined the royal family to take power himself..."

"Master Dole sacrificed himself to lead the corrupt nobles. He did so to ensure the commoners could finish it all today."

Claire was speechless—understandably so. Dole was a master of diversionary tactics. His displays of contempt for peasants and reverence for other nobles were so convincing that not even Claire had seen them for what they were—an elaborate act.

I went on, "There was a time when your father unquestioningly accepted the superiority of the nobility. That all changed with your mother, Melia."

"When she died?"

Melia had passed away on Claire's fourth birthday. Dole had also been in the carriage accident that killed her, but while he had survived, Melia hadn't been so lucky.

"Melia's accident was contrived by another powerful noble. It was murder."

"No...!"

"That day, Master Dole decided things had to change. He continued to play the role of a corrupt noble while secretly supporting the revolution. Do you remember the day I became your maid?"

"Yes... You said something to my father, and from that moment, his demeanor changed."

"This is what I said to him at that time: 'Irvine Manuel, March 3rd, five hundred thousand gold.' That information pertained to the financial support Master Dole was secretly providing to the Resistance."

Only Dole had known of the money he'd given Irvine, Arla's younger brother and treasurer of the Resistance. He couldn't fathom how I'd come by that information, but I'd used it all the same to make him agree to my being Claire's maid.

"After everyone left the room, I told him, 'Master Dole, your cause is admirable. But I am concerned that Miss Claire will be caught up in it.'"

"Why would you think that?" Claire demanded.

"Master Dole planned to sacrifice not only himself but you, Miss Claire. He loves you from the bottom of his heart, but he had given up on saving the country any other way."

That was where I'd come in.

"I offered Master Dole another choice. I gave him an option that would let you live, Miss Claire, even when the aristocrats were defeated. Master Dole accepted my plan, as long as it meant his daughter could survive."

What I presented to Dole was the scenario in which Claire would separate from the old era of aristocrats and join the new era, those who convicted the old.

"Everything I've done up to this point was for this plan. It was to improve your reputation, distance you from the rest of the nobility, and find a way for you to live in the new era to come."

"So, then—you! You knew this from the beginning?!"

Claire's face was pained. An echoing pain sharpened in my chest, but I continued.

"Yes. I knew the revolution would happen and that the result would be the downfall of the aristocrats. None of that could be prevented."

"But I—I trusted you!"

"I'm so sorry, Miss Claire. I will accept any punishment you choose."

The moment I said that, Claire lifted her arm toward me in anger. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the blow.

But the pain in my cheek never came. When I opened my eyes, Claire held the same position, but she was crying quietly.

"You and my father... You didn't even consult me..."

Claire wasn't stupid. She couldn't forgive what Dole and I had done, but she couldn't easily blame us either, knowing we'd acted to protect her.

"Miss Claire, you need to join the revolutionary government now. I've already arranged it with Arla. Soon, the royal family will pass the Royal Standard to the revolutionary government. When that happens, the aristocrats will become the rebels. You will convict them."

She remained silent.

"Miss Claire?"

She stood and walked toward the window. Outside, the battle continued.

"Rae... What sort of life will I have, once I am a commoner?" she asked suddenly.

I was taken aback, but I thought for a moment. "Well... At first there will be a lot to learn. Like when you spent time at my house during vacation."

"Yes," Claire nodded without turning around.

I went on, "But you'll get used to it quickly. And I'll always be there to take care of you."

"I see... So you will live with me?"

"Of course. I will work hard and do everything I can for you."

"Yes. I think I will need that," Claire said, and she fell silent again.

I was uneasy, so I kept talking to fill the silence. "Let's get a dog."

"I prefer a cat," she responded to my useless suggestion.

"Do you want a yard?"

"Yes, and flowerpots."

"How many children should we have?"

"We can't have children."

"Then let's adopt."

"I want two cute little girls."

As long as we kept talking, I could tell myself she was on board.

Then, abruptly, she said, "I believe you would never let me be unhappy."

It was like a dream come true.

A... dream?

"—'no.'"

"Huh?" I had missed the rest of what Claire was saying. "Miss Claire?"

"I said 'no,'" Claire said, turning to look at me with a clear expression, like a burden had been lifted. Her cheeks were still wet with tears, but her eyes were strong and shining.

“What are you saying, Miss Claire? This is the only way.”

“No. There’s another way. I can choose to fall with the old era and my peers.”

It was my turn to be confused. “No... It’s pointless! That wouldn’t make anyone happy!”

“No, probably not.”

“Master Dole—and me too, we did all this so you can *live*—”

“Yes, and I am grateful for that,” Claire smiled.

A chill ran through me.

“Wait... wait a second. Are you angry with us for not telling you what was going on? Please, I apologize. But if we had told you—”

“I’m sure I would have refused.”

No, no, no. I had done something wrong, I must have. I hadn’t seen this coming.

“I am sure you and my father were thinking of me the entire time. I understand that. And I am not angry”

“Then why?!”

“Because—” Claire paused for a moment and looked at me directly in the eye. “I am an aristocrat.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“An aristocrat enjoys their stature and luxuries in exchange for acquitting their duties when called upon to do so. The reason I have been allowed to live such a selfish life is so I could, once more, when this day came, fulfill my duties.”

“You don’t have to! Not anymore!”

“No. I will see to my final obligation—and that is to submit to the will of the people, as an aristocrat and as a relic of the era coming to an end.”

I had underestimated her. I should have known, but I had failed to understand Claire as a person. I had failed to realize what it meant to Claire to be noble.

“Miss Claire, please think it through. We can make a future together—”

“I’m so sorry, Rae. I cannot grant your wish.”

“But you—you promised me. You said you wouldn’t give up, until the very end,” I said, referring to the promise she’d made me on the day of the Academy Knights entrance exam.

“Ah, you’re right. I remember that. It feels like so long ago.”

“No... no... Miss Claire, you can’t go!”

“I’m very sorry, Rae.” Claire came closer to me. She brought her lips to mine.

“To apologize for breaking my promise, I offer you my first kiss.”



That was when I realized it. Claire was really leaving me.

"Goodbye, Rae. Be well," Claire said, and she turned to leave. I wanted to follow her, but I couldn't. I couldn't think of a single word to make her stay.

"Miss... Claire..."

I had done every last thing I could to keep this from happening. The only thing I had ever thought of was how to save Claire's life, and now it was all for naught.

I remembered what Dole had said to me when I presented my plan to him.

He said, "Your plan is perfect. But... I don't know if my daughter will accept it."

The thoughts I couldn't capture in words trickled as tears down my cheeks.

I couldn't even tell you the taste of our first kiss.

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I allowed myself a single day of devastation after Claire left me. Shocked as I was, I wasn't ready to give up so easily.

I went first to the palace. To prove the righteousness of their mission, the revolutionary government had declared their intent to reinstate the royal family and their support of Thane as King l'Ausseil's heir. In response, the royal family had passed the Royal Standard—the symbolic right to rule—to the revolutionary government.

Much as they resented the brazen aristocrats who had challenged their rule, the royals would never have legitimized the revolutionary forces who aimed to abolish the monarchy if not for the Nur Empire. Word had reached the capital of imperial troops closing in on the empire's border with the kingdom. On hearing this, the royal family acquiesced to the revolutionary government in hopes of swiftly resolving the domestic situation and thereby averting a civil war the empire would take advantage of to invade.

As a result, Thane currently sat on an unstable pedestal. The revolutionary government supported his succession, but Dole and the other nobles still blocked his way to the throne.

"I see," Thane said when I spoke to him. "So Claire chose to fall, herself."

"Claire isn't like those other, corrupt nobles. She shouldn't be executed." I pleaded with Thane with my eyes, begging for Claire's life. In the past, a commoner would never have been allowed to meet with royalty, but Thane had granted special permission for us to speak.

"You are correct. But it is a difficult issue." Thane wore a bitter expression. "Regardless of Claire's individual character, she remains the daughter of Dole François, leader of the noble faction. Even if I forgive her, I doubt the revolutionary government will do the same."

"But—"

"The royal family is in a precarious position at the moment. We have next to no real power. For all intents and purposes, the revolutionary government is calling the shots."

"But the Nur Empire backed the rebels. Did you know that?"

"That's not exactly right," Thane gently corrected. "Salas and his followers have ties to the empire, yes. But the leaders of the Resistance, Arla and Irvine, are strongly opposed to the empire."

"But...!"

"Well, listen. Do you know how the revolutionary government is distributing rations to the people?"

"Of course."

"The reason they can do that is because the Nur Empire continues to provide them supplies. If we force them to cut ties with the empire, the people will starve."

In other words, Thane valued the lives of the people above all other matters. To Thane, ensuring the people didn't starve was far more important than who ran the country, and who suffered for its past sins.

"Arla's people aren't exactly letting Salas run rampant either. They're using him. When the time comes, I believe they'll find ways to expel Salas and the other imperial sympathizers." Thane gave me another tight smile. "Again, I have very little power

here. I may be the next king, but that's more symbolic than anything, now. I do wish I could do something for Claire, though..."

"I see..." I said. Thane was fighting against the changing times too. His expression was entirely emblematic of royalty in name only; he had been rendered powerless and left full of regrets.

"Forgive me. Would that I could help you more."

"No, I'm sorry for asking for the impossible. Thank you."

My first idea had failed, but I wasn't giving up. Not yet. Next, I visited the convent at the Spiritual Church.

"Hey, Rae. Thanks for coming," said Yu.

"It's been a while, Rae," said Misha.

I had come to see Yu and Misha. Yu was still theoretically confined for her health by order of the royal family. Some still claimed she suffered deleterious mental effects from a curse, but in reality, the political faction supporting Thane had gone to great lengths to ensure she remained off the political table. Thane didn't seem to be directly involved in this, but politics are never so simple.

I was pleased to see Yu looked healthy and happy. Likewise, Misha looked so perfect in her habit that it was like she'd been born to wear it, and she and Yu seemed like a perfect match, side by side.

"I can guess why you're here. Is it Claire?" Yu asked.

"Yes," I nodded.

"I want to help, but like Thane, there's not much I can do," Yu said, furrowing her brow apologetically. "The eruption and civil strife have caused many commoners to turn to religion for comfort, and as a result, the Church is rapidly consolidating power. I don't think the revolutionary government can afford to ignore us."

"In that case—!"

"But," Yu interrupted, "Cardinal Lilly holds ultimate authority in the Church—and, of

course, both Salas and the Nur Empire back her power. I'm sure this was Salas's intent all along."

"I believe Master Thane is being optimistic," Misha said. "There's a real risk that the revolutionary government will be taken over by the Nur Empire."

"Can't you advise Thane of the danger, Yu?"

"I have, many times. But he won't listen. My brother is naive, and the people around him won't give him accurate information. Nevertheless... I don't quite understand. He's normally so clever. Why would he dismiss the threat of the empire?" Yu frowned. "In any case, I will keep pleading Claire's case to him, but to be honest, I wouldn't count on Thane. Dole and Claire have come to symbolize the aristocracy and aristocratic politics. From the revolutionary government's perspective, they're the ideal scapegoats. And even if they weren't, the Nur Empire surely has them at the top of their list of aristocratic threats to eliminate."

"I'm sorry, Rae," Misha said.

The conversation had lowered my spirits. But my friends had promised to help me. That had to be enough for now.

I thanked them and left the convent.

I visited a number of other places after that, trying and trying to devise a way to save Claire, but I struck out on every count. Salas and the Nur Empire's forces were rooted deep in this country, and people turned me away wherever I went.

I was powerless and alone. I didn't want to give up, but I was stuck. I ran all over the capital, stopping only when I made myself sick with exhaustion.

"This must be how Claire felt when she was facilitating negotiations between the aristocrats and the people..."

I'd done nothing but watch as she worked herself to the bone, certain it would all be resolved in the end. I'd been so sure that Dole and I were going to keep her safe.

"Miss Claire..."

It had only been a few days since I last saw her, but it felt like months. The person who

had always been by my side was gone. I thought my chest would burst.

“I want to see you, Miss Claire.”

As I sank into terrified doubt, an epiphany struck me—I knew where Claire was being held.

This was my last chance.

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Claire was being kept in the Second Hall of the former assembly hall of the House of Lords. It was a historical building that had been designated a national treasure of the kingdom. Gothic ornamentation adorned the main gate, and four guards stood outside.

“You there! Halt!” one of the guards called out to me as I casually walked toward them. I ignored him and headed toward the gate.

“You’re Rae Taylor, right? You are not permitted to approach this building. Leave.”

The soldiers formed up, clearly trying to intimidate me. I suspected their armor was magic-resistant and that the swords they held were magical tools, unusual as it seemed to bedeck regular soldiers with powerful magic items.

“I just want to see Miss Claire. Will you let me pass?”

“No. We were given strict orders not to.”

“I see...” That left me no choice. “Then I will go through you.”

I opened up a pitfall with earth magic. The heavily armored soldiers disappeared into the ground—and rose back up into view right away. Not only that, they now floated in the air. Wind magic, huh? I’d heard wind attribute mages were often selected to be armed guards, so the weight of full-plate armor didn’t slow them down. It reminded me of Thane’s fighting style.

“You can’t get by that easy!”

“Stop this pointless resistance!”

“Pointless resistance? No.” I held up my wand and cast water magic. “Judecca! Earth Spike!”

I froze the four guards in place and then impaled them with earthen spikes. It was the combo magic Cocytus that had I used when fighting Manaria. She had responded with ease because she was Manaria, but no one seeing it for the first time could counter it in time.

The four soldiers succumbed immediately to this, the strongest spell available to the player character. If they hadn’t had magical armor, it would have killed them.

“What?! What’s going on?!”

“Intruder!”

The soldiers inside the building heard the commotion and rushed out. Every single one of them wore magic-resistant full-plate armor. What a pain.

Massive tiger traps emerged from the ground, ensnaring the guards’ feet and sticking them to the ground. “Ergh...!”

“Just stay where you are,” I said, passing by them into the building.

It wouldn’t be so easy.

“Hey, hang on,” said a familiar, cheerful voice. I watched the traps dissolve back into the ground. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Miss Lilly...”

Lilly appeared in the entranceway, looking as if she had just taken herself on a casual stroll.

“We knew there was no way you wouldn’t show up after hearing Claire was captured. That’s why I was sent here.”

“Give Miss Claire back to me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Claire came here on her own. *And* we promised we wouldn’t touch her. How are we supposed to ‘give’ her back?” Lilly cackled. The sweet Lilly I

knew was gone. Now, she just looked hateful.

“Say what you like. If you don’t let me pass, I’ll force my way in.”

“Go ahead and try. Time to make these guards earn their keep,” Lilly said.

At her command, twelve guards rushed at me.

“Judecca!”

The guards stopped, frozen. I immediately followed up with Earth Spike.

“How cute.”

However, Lilly canceled out my freezing magic before I could complete Cocytus. Once able to move again, the guards quickly avoided Earth Spike. They were well trained. Not quite as good as the King’s Guard but good enough to take down almost any enemy in these numbers.

And now they had Lilly’s backup too. While Lilly didn’t use attack magic herself, she made my spells disappear in an instant. It was like fighting Manaria all over again.

“Wait—I’ve got it!” I cried.

“Erk...!”

I blocked the sword swinging at me with my magic wand. My hand-to-hand combat skills were, ah, lacking. If I was going to stand a chance, I needed to use magic.

“Judecca!” I sent freezing magic at the guards again, but Lilly countered it in a second. At this rate, I would run out of magic power.

So, there was only one thing left to do.

“Ralaire!” I scooped Ralaire out of my pouch and cast Judecca on her. The magic didn’t freeze Ralaire—instead, it made her rapidly expand to five times her original size.

Mm-hmm! Water slimes had the special ability to absorb water magic.

“Wh-what is that?!”

“A monster!”

“It’s a water slime!”

Ralaire let out her Hateful Cry, paralyzing the guards.

“Ralaire, swallow Lilly!” I ordered.

“I told you it’s useless.” Lilly avoided Ralaire with ease. Water slimes just weren’t very agile, and there was no way even my baby could outmaneuver Lilly, Salas’s masterpiece.

This was my only chance. Once the guards recovered from Ralaire’s Hateful Cry, I was done. I had to take out Lilly before they could.

“Absolute Zero!”

This was the ultra-high-aptitude water-attribute attack spell that I hadn’t yet been able to use when I’d fought Manaria. It was violent magic that instantaneously froze the target and then shattered it into pieces. I aimed at Lilly’s wand as I cast.

But once again—my spell disappeared into thin air.

“I *told* you it’s useless.” Lilly closed in on me with terrible speed, grabbed the arm that held my wand, and threw me to the ground.

“How many times must we do this?” she laughed, standing over me. Ralaire tried to pounce on her, but Lilly returned my familiar to her original size with a graceful flick of her wand. “Now, I suppose I could just kill you here.”

“Ugh...!”

There was no escaping. I didn’t have the skill to free myself from Lilly’s grip; I didn’t think Claire could have done it either, in my place. *Is this where it ends?*

I bit my lip in frustration, feeling helpless.

“Erk... you!”

Suddenly, Lilly let me go and seized her head, face twisting in agony. I didn’t know what was happening, but I wasn’t looking a gift horse in the mouth. I knocked her away

with an ice bomb, scooped up Ralaire, and ran into the building.

Finally, I—

Wait...

I was blinded by a flash of light. When my vision returned, a straight line was burned into the ground between the building and me, as if to block my way.

This mark. It could only be her.

“Miss Claire?”

I turned my eyes up to the window, broken, on the second floor directly overhead. Claire stood there, her expression resolute, as if denouncing me. Her Magic Ray had burned the line into the ground.

This... this...

*This is rejection.*

Claire didn’t want to be rescued. It didn’t matter what I did—all my struggles were in vain.

Another flash. As I stood there, shocked to my core, another ray streaked across the ground before me.

She was sending me away.

“Miss Claire, do you... do you hate me so?”

Claire disappeared from the window, not answering my question. I fell to my knees in despair.

I don’t remember what happened after that.

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After being so thoroughly rejected by Claire, I descended into a kind of half-life. I left the Second Hall in a daze, walking like a living corpse, not feeling the passage of time,

nor seeing what I did. When I finally came to, I lay in a room I didn't know.

"It seems you finally woke up." Manaria pinned me with a stern look.

"Lady Manaria...? What are you doing here?"

"I heard revolution was brewing in Bauer, so I rushed over. What happened to Claire?"

"Miss Claire..."

I haltingly explained everything: How I'd tried to break Claire away from the aristocrat forces and almost succeeded, and how Claire had decided she couldn't go along with it and would instead accept her fate along with the rest of the aristocrats.

"I see. No wonder you looked so down in the dumps."

"I'm sorry..." Her provocation made me feel nothing at all. Nothing mattered, not anymore.

Manaria looked discouraged by my lack of response. "You're giving up? You *just* told Claire not to do the same thing, but it's okay for *you* to throw in the towel?"

"But... there's nothing else I can do."

"Jeez... if I'd known you'd end up like this, I would never have entrusted Claire to you. I could have done a way better job."

"You probably could have." I wasn't taking the bait.

Manaria let out a huge sigh. "I asked you before, and I'm going to ask you one more time. Is your love truly so weak?!"

Her tone wasn't inflammatory anymore. If anything, it sounded like she was trying to soothe me. Color me confused.

"No matter how much I love her, some love is just never returned," I said, though even I could hear my sulking.

"I see. Well, you should have no problem forgetting Claire, then." Manaria pulled me close and put her face up to mine. She had boyish features but a beautiful face. She

slowly moved closer, and I became vaguely aware that my lips were going to touch hers.

*I remember, now. Claire did that too...*

It had been a nightmarish kiss, one absent of any emotion or feeling. That—that kiss—

*Is that my last memory with Claire?*

The moment that thought crossed my mind, I realized I had thrust Manaria away.

“That’s right...” Manaria smiled like the Cheshire Cat.

“I’m sorry, Manaria.”

“Don’t worry about it. Now, if this were anyone else, I’d probably tell them to give up. But I believe that you and Claire have a bond that can’t be put into words.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I lost to you—to both of you.” Manaria smiled mischievously. “A couple to whom *I* gave my blessing? There’s no wall you can’t climb.”

“But Claire and I—”

“Did you tell Claire you love her? Did you tell her everything that’s in your heart?”

“I thought I did...”

“Really? I’m sure you told Claire what you *did* for her, but did you ask for her to be yours? In your own words?”

I didn’t know. That parting conversation felt like a bad dream in my memory. I wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

“As you’ve seen, logic can’t stop Claire now,” Manaria said. “If anything can, it’ll be your own selfishness.”

“My... selfishness?”

"Rae, you're extraordinary. I don't think I could engineer half the plans and preparations you have, let alone devise a way to save Claire and then actually execute it. But you should allow yourself to *fight* with Claire. Even just once. You may act the clown, but you're an intensely rational person while Claire is an emotional one. You did your best to stay calm for her, didn't you? Don't do that, not this time. And don't try to fix things—just let her see your raw emotions."

"My raw... emotions?" Would that make Claire come back? I didn't know. But it was my last chance.

"So, what are you going to do? If you say you're going to go rescue Claire, you have my aid."

"I..."

"Yes?"

My numbed heart began to beat again. "I... am going to save Miss Claire."

Manaria laughed, looking satisfied at my response. "That's my Rae." She patted me on the head.

"I am not yours, Lady Manaria. All of me belongs to Miss Claire."

"If you can talk to me like that, you're doing fine." Manaria gave me a tight hug and said, "Let's get started, then. Operation: Take Back the Princess."

The newspapers reported that Claire would be publicly tried alongside Dole. The trial was a sham, of course—just a flimsy facade for what would be a public execution. Claire and Dole were kept under heavy guard at all times, making today our only chance.

The trial was to take place in the district court, separated by a fence from the courtyard of the assembly hall. I stood in the front row of the gathered crowd.

"There they are!" someone in the crowd called out.

"Miss Claire..."

Claire and Dole were led on stage, both garbed in expensive-looking mourning attire—

perhaps to highlight the fact of their nobility. Their faces were resolute.

“Announcing His Majesty!”

Thane, who had been officially crowned the day before, entered the hall. The royal family might have seemed to be restored, but in truth, they’d lost nearly all power over the actual governance of the Bauer Kingdom. Like many countries back on Earth, Bauer would now be a constitutional monarchy and its king a figurehead, at best.

Thane showed no emotion, but that was par for the course for him. I couldn’t tell how he felt.

“Let this trial by the people begin!”

Salas made that declaration. I saw Arla and Irvine by the gate too. Salas scanned the crowd and continued speaking. “Dole François and Claire François stand before you, charged with the crime of using their status as aristocrats to exploit the people!”

Ha. He was one to talk.

“They also betrayed the royal family, attempting to seize power for themselves! These are unforgivable acts!”

The crowd roared as Salas fanned the flames of their discontent. I could barely contain my anger at these easily swayed masses, as those who had hailed Claire as a hero just days ago who were now ready to kill her.

The so-called trial commenced. Salas read out the list of crimes Dole and Claire were charged with and deemed them guilty on all counts. Then, he asked Dole if he had any objections.

“I have nothing. I dedicated myself to the kingdom. If the kingdom is to fall, then I shall fall with it,” Dole said, closing his eyes.

“He admits to the crime! There will be an execution!”

The soldiers entered at Salas’s signal, swords in hand. Dole knelt and faced the crowd, head bowed to expose his neck. The closest soldier lifted his blade to swing it.

Just then, a challenge echoed through the court.

“I object to this trial!”

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“Who is that?”

“A student from the Royal Academy. What was her name? Rae Taylor?”

“Why is she speaking up now?”

Amidst the clamoring and commotion of the crowd, I climbed the fence and dropped into the courtroom. It wasn’t graceful, but I didn’t have time to worry about that.

“Guards, throw her out,” Salas ordered.

“Wait,” said a young man in the audience. “This person has been an invaluable contributor to the Resistance and revolutionary government. You’ll not force her out.”

“But, Lambert...”

Yup. It was Lambert Aurousseau, older brother to Lene, who’d been exiled from the country during the Commoner Movement.

“This is a time of transition. Shouldn’t we address any potential seeds of future discontent?” Lambert said loudly and then turned to face me. “You have your stage. The rest is up to you.”

“Thank you kindly.” I looked to the crowd and raised my voice. “I object to this trial. An even more dastardly villain has taken the stage—one who has exploited the people and caused national disaster!”

“What is this idiocy? Who would you accuse of such crimes besides Duke François?”

“I will show you now. Lene!”

“Yes.” Lene stepped forward from the crowd, causing another wave of commotion.

Claire opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Isn’t that the young lady who owns the Frater Trading Company?” someone

whispered.

"And isn't that her husband, Lambert?"

After Lene and Lambert had been exiled from the Bauer Kingdom, they had started a company in the Alpes. That was the Frater Trading Company. Frater had "invented" the dish known as crème brûlée, which in turn had become an explosive hit. They had gone on to develop many inventive new dishes, becoming the darlings of the restaurant industry. The name of their company, "Frater," was the word for "siblings" in the old language of this country. It could also denote allies, or friends, but it was clear what it meant to these two.

I had reunited with Lambert and Lene a few days ago. They'd been investing heavily in the Resistance and been invited to attend the trial as a result.

"Dole François is not a rebel but a true patriot," Lene announced.

She went on to list all the details of Dole's political accomplishments, including the secret actions he had taken to support the revolutionary government by destabilizing the provisional one. She also described Claire's arrests of corrupt nobles and Dole's financial contributions to the Resistance—all of it information I had given her, of course.

Dole and I had chosen my investigatory targets with care. Yes, they'd been engaged in illegal activities, but social reform hadn't been our only goal—we'd also taken down families we knew would get in the way of the revolution. Dole had always planned tens of moves ahead, just like a chess grandmaster.

"When Miss Claire, Rae Taylor, and Cardinal Lilly brought corrupt aristocrats to justice, it was with Dole's support and guidance. He has also donated funds to the Resistance under the name XX since the start," Lene finished. "Dole François is a true patriot who would do anything for this country."

"Ridiculous! He still tricked the provisional government into betraying the royal family!" Salas screeched.

"Are you in a place to make such accusations, Salas?" interrupted a cool alto voice.

"Yu!"

“I thought she had lost her mind!”

“She looks so beautiful.”

Yu appeared in the courtroom, wearing a habit and flanked by nuns. Her fluffy blonde hair had grown out a little. She looked radiant, finally allowed to be the woman she was.

“Yu, what are you doing here?” Salas demanded.

“Funny that. I have the same question, Salas. After all, you’re the real criminal here.”

As Yu dropped this bombshell, the entire court was shaken into whispers.

“Criminal? Salas?”

“Maybe Yu really did go insane.”

“Maybe, but I can’t read her at all—”

The crowd was buzzing, confused. But the sound of Yu’s voice cut clearly through the hubbub—all thanks to magic wielded by my best friend, Misha.

“Salas Lilium is a traitor. He has been working with the Nur Empire, trying to seize control of the country for himself.”

Yu’s accusation pierced Salas directly, but he was a canny old politician. As the crowd settled, Salas spoke. “What are you talking about, Lady Yu? You still seem to be suffering from some manner of hysteria. You ought to return to the convent, where you can find some peace.”

“Our investigation is already complete. Rae?”

“Yes.” As Yu gave me my cue, I produced my final trump card. “This magical tool holds proof of all Salas’s dealings with the empire. Everyone! Do not allow him to trick you!”

I turned the volume up all the way and played back the incriminating conversation of Salas’s treachery. Misha used her wind attribute to amplify the sound for all to hear.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

“I thought the revolutionary government were our allies?!”

“What’s going on?!”

The crowd erupted in commotion, like a nest of hornets that we had kicked. Salas did his best to make excuses, but no one could hear him over the din. Then, abruptly, he pulled what looked like a whistle from his breast pocket and blew on it, hard. The sharp sound cut through the roar of the crowd, and a group of men appeared as if summoned.

“Salas’s private army!”

His private troops were composed of the former personal guards of fallen noble houses. They were fully armed, and now, they surrounded the court.

“Take control,” Salas ordered.

“Not so fast!” An awe-inspiring voice rang out across the courtroom.

“Master Rod!”

“He’s alive!”

The missing prince was back—and leading the royal troops. Upon closer inspection, Rod was missing an arm, but his expression was energized.

“Sorry I’m late. But the hero has to make a dramatic entrance, right?” Rod said, and he let out a cocky laugh.

The volcano had erupted while he was in the middle of evacuating the village at the foot of the mountain. He’d taken a near-mortal wound while protecting the villagers and, with no one in the village capable of using healing magic, had wound up incapacitated while his injuries healed the old-fashioned way. It had been touch and go for a while, but he’d survived, and the loss of an arm hadn’t affected his personality at all.

“Hey, Salas,” he said. “Give it up. Most of your men have already bent the knee to me. You just can’t compare, you know?”

“Heh heh... Are you going to keep getting in my way until I kill you?” Salas snarled

venomously. “I’m still not done! Lilly!”

“Ah, this again?”

Lilly appeared from the shadows at the back of the court, garbed in pliable black leather and a black cape.

“Kill Dole, Claire, and the princes!” Salas ordered. “As long as they’re gone, we can get away!”

“You make it sound so easy. I mean, I’ll do it, but...”

Lilly drew her knife, looking fed up. I knew she had poisoned the tip of her blade. The room fell into utter chaos as Salas’s men faced off against the soldiers commanded by Rod, and commoners rushed to get out of the way. In a situation like this, Lilly might just be able to assassinate someone important.

But my allies and I weren’t going to stand by and let that happen.

“Shame on you, Salas, for turning a girl into this! Spellbreaker!”

Manaria appeared in front of Lilly. It didn’t matter how strong Lilly was in her transformed state; if we forced her to revert, she’d be powerless.

However, despite Manaria’s incomparable skill, even a genius like her couldn’t undo the enchantment in an instant.

“The spell is too complicated...!” Manaria cried.

Her work *was* having an effect, though. Lilly was locked in place, a look of agony on her face.

“Stop,” she croaked. “Stay in there! This is *my* body!”

It sounded like her murderous black-masked alter ego was trying to resist the original Lilly. I called out to the Lilly I knew, my friend who I knew was trapped in there. “Miss Lilly, please come back!”

“Rae... No, *stop!*”

Lilly broke free of Manaria's hold and closed the distance to me in the blink of an eye. If I was wrong, I was dead—but I took a leap of faith and held out my arms to her. Lilly spasmed and then collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. When I held her close, she slowly opened one eye.

“I-I... tried...”

That was all she said before losing consciousness. I gently laid her body down, stroked her hair, and then stood.

“Now even Lilly has deserted you. This is the end, Salas!”

“Argh... Damn it all!” Salas clicked his tongue, annoyed. As far as I knew, he had no more cards left to play. But he wasn’t finished. “Rae Taylor!” he snapped. “Open your eyes!”

I looked at him—sheer impulse. I knew right away that it was a trap, but it was too late. Our eyes met, and the world around me started to twist and melt together.

This was Salas’s power of suggestion.

“Ha ha ha!” he cackled. “You will be my second Lilly—”

“You think I’d let that happen?”

Manaria’s voice cut through my daze, and my vision cleared again.

“Once I learn how to counter a spell, I never forget. Pitiful,” Manaria said. She aimed the tip of her magic wand at Salas. “This is truly the end, Salas Lilium.”

Salas wailed and shrieked, resorting to alligator tears in his final desperation, but he was done and he knew it. Checkmate. The crowd bustled and roared around us, the people’s voices rising until they were a thunder.

“What’s going on?”

“Who’s the bad guy here?”

“Who are we supposed to execute?”

*“Silence!”*

A sound louder than the entire crowd filled the air. The entire area fell silent at once.

“So Salas was a villain, then. So what?” roared Arla Manuel. “He didn’t create the revolution—we did! And the revolution didn’t create him!”

The crowd murmured in agreement.

“The aristocrats abandoned us,” Arla continued, gesturing at Claire and Dole. “They left us to starve! Someone must pay for their crimes, and who better to represent all noble scum than these two?”

“Kill the aristocrats!”

“Long live the revolution!”

The crowd cheered along with Arla, gathering strength and conviction. I yelled out in concern, but Arla wasn’t listening.

“You, the people, listen—” I tried.

It wasn’t working. There was so much I wanted to say, but no one could hear me over the sound of people baying for Claire and Dole’s heads. As I struggled to figure out what to do—

I heard a quiet sound in the sea of noise. The pluck of a beautiful string.

Thane was playing the harp.

At first, the sound was drowned out by the anger of the crowd, but then it started to reach people close to Thane, and then their silence spread. Like a wave flowing outward, the harp’s melody gradually replaced the jeers throughout the court. Some people threw rocks at Thane, while others sneered, but Thane ignored them all and kept playing. He just sat there and played, blood dripping down his face, and eventually, his harp was the only sound anyone could hear.

When he finished the song, he said quietly, “My people. Listen to this girl, just this one time. She has something to say.”

His deep baritone was befitting of a king. Now the crowd, and even Arla, were quiet and listening.

"Rae Taylor, what do you have to say?" Thane prompted me.

"Thank you, King Thane." I turned to face the crowd again. "Beloved people. What is your desire?"

I selected my words carefully, controlling my facial expression, as I looked to the people around me.

"Do you just want to kill aristocrats?" I asked. "I don't think you do. What you truly desire is *stability*. Am I right?"

The crowd looked restless. Murmurs of objection trickled through them.

I continued, "Do you want to kill Dole and Claire, who worked harder than anyone to bring peace to us, the people?"

As I'd expected, the objections started at once. "We the people—!"

"You can't fool us with empty words!"

"What's your name?" I asked.

The boy I addressed clammed up at once. I switched targets.

"How about you, then, who threw the rock? Or you, next to him?"

"Uh..."

"You have names. You're citizens of this kingdom. I want to hear what you have to say. Do you really want to kill Master Dole and Miss Claire, right here and now?"

There were more murmurs, but no direct objections. Asking individuals for their names had temporarily disrupted the mind of the mob.

"Certainly, many aristocrats disregarded the needs of the commoners. But these two are different." I could tell the people were finally starting to listen to me. "If you execute them, will you be able to tell your children what you did with pride? Will you be able

to tell them of the righteousness of the revolution?"

The person who'd taught me how to talk like this, to hold a crowd's attention, was, of course...

"Miss Claire, you too."

"Huh?" Claire looked like a pigeon nailed by a BB gun.

"Once peace is restored and everyone lives happily, if Miss Claire were dead, who would remain to appreciate Dole's sacrifice?"

"Th-that..."

I pushed on before she could prepare herself. "Is it noble to take the blame for a crime you did not commit?! Is it noble to die like a dog?!"

"Wait, Rae. Let me speak—"

"Instead of dying for temporary honor, why don't you live for me?"

"Rae, I—"

"Shut up!" I looked Claire directly in the eye. "Listen to what I want for once!"

"R-Rae..."

*"Shut up! Miss Claire! Shut! Up!"*

Something snapped inside of me, and I found myself unable to say anything else. So, instead, I just cried, sobbing like a spoiled child. Claire looked bewildered, but I didn't care one bit.

"If you're going to squabble, do it somewhere else," Arla said, making a face like she'd just swallowed a fly. "Someone get her out of here."

"No! I won't leave Claire, not ever again. If Claire is going to die, then so am I!"

"W-wait, Rae!"

"Augh!" Arla groaned. "All right. Fine, all right, stop with the screaming and crying. No one's going to be executed."

"Huh?"

"See for yourself."

Arla pointed to the crowd.

"You're right... I guess if the aristocracy is abolished, they won't be a problem anymore."

"Miss Claire saved me from starvation, you know."

"Me too. The aristocrat I served was corrupt, but Miss Claire found me a new post after she had him arrested. She saved my whole family."

Once again, things were changing.

Arla cut Claire's bindings and continued to look off in the distance.

"The people have started thinking for themselves. I don't need to pull them by myself anymore."

"Arla..."

"My mission is complete. As long as the system of titled nobility is abolished, I don't care what else happens. I won't take your life. Most of your lot aren't going to make it in this new world, anyway." Arla laughed. "I look forward to the day I see a former aristocrat begging a commoner for a loan. Well, get out of here. You can't welcome the dawn of a new era dressed in mourning clothes."

"Thank you very much..." Claire said and led me out of the court.

"You really are impossible," Claire scolded me. We were in a park near the assembly hall, and I'd been made to sit on my knees. "You should be sorry for causing so much trouble to so many people."

"Umm... Miss Claire? You usually look like you secretly want to praise me when you do things like this, but you didn't actually say thank you or apologize..."

“What are you whining about?!”

“Nothing!”

“You’re always so reckless, Rae!” Claire lectured angrily. How had I ended up here?

“Well, don’t be too hard on her, Claire.”

“Master Thane—no, Your Majesty!”

“Is the trial over?” I asked.

“It’s been canceled, yes,” he said. “It was Salas’s idea to make an example out of you in the first place.”

“That reminds me, Your Majesty. I forgot to thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“The harp. You were incredible.”

“You truly were,” Claire said. “Everyone was mesmerized.”

“Oh, that... That was nothing. It was just a gamble.” Thane seemed reluctant to talk about it.

“Who taught you to play like that?” I asked.

“My mother... When she was still alive, on her sickbed.”

“I see. Your Majesty... you are still so very loved by your mother.”

Thane’s eyes widened in surprise at my casual, unthinking comment. He wiped a tear away.

“Y-Your Majesty—” I stammered.

“Your Majesty, what’s wrong?!”

“It’s nothing. Nothing at all... It’s just... she’s always by my side.” He said it almost as if

he were talking to himself. I knew what he meant, though. Queen Lulu had been with him for many years, and now he might finally be able to let her go.

"Rae, Claire, great job. I knew I had a good eye," Manaria said, approaching us. She was accompanied by Lene.

"Claire... How have you been?!"

"Sister! And Lene!" Claire smiled, looking delighted to see them both. Lene grabbed Claire and held her tight, crying.

I understood what they shared. I understood, but still—

"Are you jealous, Rae? You're still welcome to be my wife," Rod said as he joined our growing gathering.

"I refuse."

"I know." He laughed. His cheerful, positive attitude seemed completely untouched by the traumas he'd endured.

"Rae... Miss Claire..."

"Miss Lilly."

Lilly stood some distance away, flanked by a soldier on either side.

"I wanted to apologize," she said. Apparently, her true self had at last gained the memory of the deeds she had committed as her alter-ego.

"No. It wasn't your fault, Miss Lilly," I said.

"Rae is absolutely right. Salas used you," Claire added.

But Lilly shook her head. "E-even so, what I did was unforgivable. I will accept whatever punishment the people decree."

"Very well. Be sure to atone for your crimes, then," said Claire.

"Miss Claire, that's harsh—" I started.

"And once you've done that, be sure you come back to us. We will always be waiting for you."

This made Lilly smile. Tears started to pour from her eyes.

"Thank you, Miss Claire," Lilly said as the soldiers led her away. "Please let me come join your fights again someday."

"This is quite the party, huh?" Rod said, looking about at the assembled cast of characters. He was right. Lene and Lambert were there, as were the three princes (well, two princes and their sister nun), and even Manaria.

"It means the union between Miss Claire and Rae is blessed," Misha said, sounding emotional.

"Not quite," Yu interjected. "It's more accurate to say that everyone here was saved by Rae and Claire. We are the fruits their relationship has borne."

Lambert and Lene nodded in agreement.

Hmm. Claire and I had certainly been through a lot together, and we had done a great many things. Maybe this was their way of telling us none of it had been a waste.

"Hey, Rae. Wasn't there something you wanted to tell Claire when you saw her again?" Manaria said teasingly, pushing Claire forward.

Claire slowly walked toward me.

"Oh, ummm... Miss Claire?"

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Er... it's nothing."

"If you have something to say, say it."

I steeled myself. "Miss Claire!"

"What do you want?"

I took Claire's shoulders with both hands and said it. "Please marry me!"

Claire looked startled for a moment. Then her face turned red. "You're asking me this now? In public? Isn't that something you're supposed to do when we're alone?!"

"Really? Then let me try again."

"Fine. I'll allow it."

"No, not that."

"Huh?"

I ignored the confused look on Claire's face and put my lips to hers.

She froze.

Everyone around fell silent.

"I wanted a first kiss whose taste I could remember," I said, laughing.

Claire blushed crimson all the way to her ears. "Ahhh. You are so, so, so! Rae you are so Rae, you're always so—so Rae!"

"I think you've turned my name into a strange adjective."

Coming to her senses, Claire smacked me lightly. Ah, it was such a way to remember I was alive.

"I won't forgive you if you don't make me happy..." she mumbled.

I gazed at her. Everyone around us watched with bated breath.

"What? Say something!" she demanded.

I released my own breath, and everyone around us broke out in cheers of celebration. Embarrassed by all the smiling faces around us, I took Claire's hand and tugged her away until we were running.

"Where are we going?!"

"Anywhere! We can go anywhere if we're together!"

I'd kicked that tragic ending in the pants. Now we could go write our own story.

Claire and me. Just the two of us.

# EPILOGUE

“MOTHER RAE!”

“Come quick!”

I was reading through my journal on the terrace when I heard my daughters calling to me. It was evening, just around sunset.

“May, Aleah, what is it?” I asked.

“Mother Claire—”

“—messed up again in the kitchen.”

Oh dear, not again. Just when I thought she was really improving. “Thank you for letting me know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Please don’t scold Mother Claire...”

I didn’t know what to make of our five-year-old daughters already worrying about their mother, but I lifted Aleah into my arms. I looked into her big, round, concerned black eyes and said, “It’s okay. I won’t scold her.”

“Wheee!”

“No fair! Pick May up too!”

“Okay, okay.” I lifted May high into the air and then ushered them both inside the house.

When I entered the kitchen, Claire was despondently wiping the floor. A small pot waited on the stove, speckled with the remnants of an egg, and milk and cream sat next to that. I also spied sugar and liquor on the counter.

“I was trying to make crème brûlée,” Claire said. “And then the pot exploded...”

"As usual, I have no idea what you did. Show me your hand."

Claire held out her hand for me to check. She used to have the dainty hands of an aristocrat who'd never known physical labor, but they had faint calluses now. I still took care of most of the groceries, but she helped where she could. She maintained an immaculate post-bath skincare routine, so her hands were far more beautiful than mine.

"You're not burned. That's a relief."

"No, it's not. I still can't get even a single dish right."

Claire was normally good at everything she tried, so she was having a hard time with the fact that she couldn't cook. She was practicing as much as she could, but with no success as of yet.

"Well, that's only one thing you're not yet capable of doing perfectly, Miss Claire. If you were a perfect cook on top of everything else, you wouldn't need me anymore."

"It's not just cooking. I'm a terrible seamstress too. I never thought embroidery would be so difficult."

She said that, but at least when it came to embroidery, her standards for herself were impossibly high. In truth, Claire's embroidery decorated our living room, and whenever Dole or Rod came to visit, they always asked if it was professional work. Selfishly, I hoped she never learned to cook.

"Mother Rae, Mother Rae?"

"What is it, May?"

"Why does Mother Rae call Mother Claire 'Miss Claire'?"

I hadn't thought about that. It had been habit at first, and then it had just stuck.

"See? It's weird. We're partners now, so you can just call me by my name, you know?" Claire said, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. For some reason I was embarrassed to call her just "Claire" out loud.

"Hey, Aleah, look, Mother Rae's face is bright red."

"It really is. She looks like an apple, May."

"Both of you, stop your teasing," I scolded. They were good girls, but they had a mischievous streak—like someone else I knew.

After the revolution, Claire and I moved away from the capital to begin our new life. While I'd proposed to her, and she'd accepted, same-sex marriage wasn't yet legal in the country. The new government under Arla was in the middle of drawing up a constitution, and Claire and I had been invited to provide our expert opinions, but while there was a lot of support for popular democracy and a pacifist foreign policy, we couldn't drum up much momentum for same-sex marriage.

There had been some confusion caused by the transition to constitutional monarchy, but we'd at least managed to stave off invasion by the Nur Empire, mostly because Salas and his accomplices had been arrested, and Manaria had brought reinforcements from Sousse.

Of course, our problems hadn't ended there. The Mt. Sassal eruption had done a lot of damage, particularly to crop yields. Fortunately, we'd received enough aid from the Alpes and Sousse that it looked like it would get us through the winter.

Claire and I had decided to stay at the Academy—not as students, but as instructors. Even though Claire was no longer a noble, she was an exceptionally skilled mage. The times were changing, and proficiency with magic was a valuable skill. The school had been searching far and wide for someone like Claire to train the exceptional mages of the future.

"What's wrong, Mother Rae?"

"Is there something on our faces?"

"No, it's nothing."

May and Aleah were orphans of disaster. The convents that took in orphaned children had quickly filled up following the eruption, leading them to be in desperate need of foster parents. Claire and I had been helping out with some Church business, but by a twist of fate, we'd ended up taking May and Aleah home with us. They were cheerful little girls who adored us, and in return, we loved them as if they were our own flesh and blood.

Maybe someday I'll tell you the story of just how we took them home.

For now, let me catch you up on some of our friends.

Rod surrendered his claim to the throne and became commander of the new government's army instead. He was a military genius, and I heard he was keeping the troops' noses to the grindstone working on ways to integrate magic with combat. To hear him tell it, he'd finally reached a level where he could hold his own against Manaria.

As king, Thane was the symbol of the Bauer Kingdom. He was as poker-faced as ever, but the people loved him, for whatever reason. He was busy trying to find a suitable queen, but he grew grumpy whenever the subject was raised. Apparently, the person he'd had his heart set on didn't return his feelings. As a king with a love for culture, he continued to hone his harp skills, and tickets to hear him play in concert were near impossible to secure.

Yu had finally been released from confinement, and she had set to work helping the kingdom regain its losses. It went without saying that Misha also dedicated herself to this work. They were a harmonious couple, and they were inspiring many other similar couples within the Church. That meant that some people who tried to join the Church for less than religious intentions, creating a bit of a headache for the elders.

Lene was making good use of her uncommon shrewdness as the proprietress of Frater. She was still attached at the hip to Lambert, who handled the business side, and their goal was to beat Broumet. She had mastered all the recipes I shared with her and was now thinking of completely original dishes. When she bragged to me about how she had discovered watermelon, certain I had never heard of it, I'd told her that salt brings out the sweetness, which had frustrated her.

Lady Manaria was now the queen of Sousse. There had been some concern about the succession when she revealed that she had no intention of marrying a man, but I was certain she would have no problem finding someone capable to follow her. As a side note, the court of Sousse had suggested Thane as a possible suitor for Manaria.

Lilly was ultimately not prosecuted for her crimes, due to the extreme circumstances of her situation. When she was officially pardoned, she disappeared from Bauer. She probably couldn't forgive herself, and I suspect blamed herself more than anyone else. I didn't know when she would be able to forgive herself, but I believed in my heart that

she would come back to us. At which point she'd ask me if I were looking for a mistress, probably.

Dole lost his title and status, being reduced to a commoner, but he was brought on as an unofficial political advisor for the new government. The revolution meant his position couldn't be made official or public, but apparently, he was contributing quite a lot. He'd shed his villainous persona in favor of being a good father and father-in-law to us. He doted on May and Aleah, who only knew him as their kindly grandfather.

Execution was considered for Salas, but he possessed enough valuable information that the new government decided to imprison him instead. Locked in the lowest level of a state prison, he served as advisor to the new government as well, much like the plot of a certain movie about a criminal psychiatrist. He had a perverse personality, much like the psychiatrist in the film, and was more likely to talk if the government agents sent to draw on his knowledge were women. I wasn't sure how I felt about this turn of affairs.

"Mother Rae, Mother Rae."

"What is it, May?"

"Ted's saying strange things."

"Hmm? Like what?"

Ted was a boy who lived in our neighborhood. He was sort of the ringleader for the children in the area.

"He said having two mothers is weird. He said that there has to be a father."

"Ohhh... Er, ummm..." I tripped over my words. I wasn't sure if this was an appropriate age to teach a child about queer families.

As I hesitated, Claire looked May in the eye and said, "There's nothing weird about it at all. Don't worry, May."

"Really?"

"But Ted's right. None of the other children have two mothers. And they all have a father." Aleah, the more mature of the two, wasn't letting it go. Both girls were at an

age where they asked a lot of questions.

"What matters isn't whether you have mothers or fathers," Claire said. "What matters is being with someone you love. That's the most important thing. Would you rather have a man here instead of me or Rae, Aleah?"

"No! I want Mother Claire and Mother Rae!"

"May too!"

And the two girls rushed Claire for a hug.

"Heh heh. You two are so spoiled." Seeing Claire smile made me smile too, and I reflected on my own happiness. "C'mon now, Rae will have dinner ready soon. Why don't you play outside until it's ready?"

"Okay!"

"Let's go!"

May and Aleah ran outside like the wind.

"They really don't tire easily, do they?" I said.

"Why do you sound so old suddenly? We aren't even really old enough to have our own children."

"Do you regret taking them in?"

"Don't be silly. I can't imagine a life without them now."

"But Miss Claire... do you regret becoming a commoner?" I asked offhandedly. I couldn't help but remember the time Claire had said she didn't think she could handle commoner life.

"I don't. Not for a moment. Besides, it's not like I could have stayed an aristocrat, whether I wanted to or not. The world changes, and things must change with it."

Claire looked off into the distance as she said this. She'd once been willing to martyr herself for her sense of duty and family, but now, she was by my side. I wondered if I

could be vain enough to think that, if given a real choice, she'd have chosen to be with me rather than live as a noble.

"For better or worse, humans are adaptable creatures," Claire said. "People can get used to anything."

"That's true. Then, I hope I get used to this soon. Right... *Claire*?"

"What? Really?" Claire looked closely at me. "What did you say?"

"It's nothing."

"Again! Say it again! I'll listen!"

"It's fine! I'll say it again after I'm used to it!"

"I can't wait that long!"

"Waaah, Miss Claire, you're so dominating! I love it, please don't stop."

"Don't talk like that where May and Aleah can hear you!"

And just like that, we were back to squawking at each other the way we always did.

"Hey, Miss Claire?"

"What is it?"

"We're so happy."

"That's right."

When I hugged Claire to me, she hugged me back gently.

"I love you, Miss Claire," I whispered.

Claire looked surprised for a moment. I expected a comeback like 'Of course you do', but instead, I got, "Yes. I love you too, sweet Rae."

And then she smiled, sweeter than crème brûlée. In that moment, I believed, from the

very bottom of my heart, that I could never be as good as she was.

I never have been, and I never will.

Time passes. Hearts change. No one knows the future, and yet—I was certain that my love for Claire would last forever.

Now and for all eternity, I choose the villainess.

# BONUS CHAPTER

## CURSES AND GOOD LUCK CHARMS

I OPENED MY EYES to an unfamiliar ceiling.

Groggy from sleep, I didn't know where I was for a moment, but then it started to come back to me. I sat up and took in the new furniture and the fresh, pristine wallpaper around me. This was my new home. The building was old, but I'd had the interior reform—er, renovated?—before I moved in.

Something moved next to me, and I looked down to see a serene, blonde angel nestled deep in the covers. Claire wasn't a morning person, but I was, which made it my job to get breakfast ready. I climbed carefully out of bed without waking her, changed into some simple clothes, and headed to the front door.

I regretted not putting on another layer when I felt the first winter wind wrap around my skin, but I decided I could handle it, young as I was. I drew water from the well, washed the sleep out of my eyes, and got started on breakfast. Today, we'd be feasting on rye bread, winter vegetables, and bacon with scrambled eggs. I wouldn't have minded some more variety, but this was easy to cook up, and I was done before I knew it.

I returned to the bedroom, sliding the door carefully open so as not to make a sound. Claire was still asleep. Her petite face was serene, framed by her golden curls—a world apart from the forceful person she was when awake. As I drank in the sight of the person I loved, I noticed a blush creep across her skin.

“Miss Claire... would you happen to be awake?”

Her features clearly twitched in surprise, but she continued pretending to be asleep.

“Miss Claire, please wake up. Your breakfast is getting cold.”

No answer. What was going on?

“If you won’t wake, I’m going to kiss you.”

I was sure that threat would rouse her, but she said nothing. Huh.

“Miss Claire, could it be that you *want* a kiss?”

She remained silent, but her face looked like she was waiting for something. I leaned forward.

“Okay, then. Please wake up, Sleeping Beauty.” I leaned in and slowly pressed my lips to Claire’s forehead.

“Rae! Shouldn’t you be kissing my lips?!”

“Good morning, Miss Claire.” I smiled at Claire as she threw the covers off her, eyes narrowed in displeasure.

“Good morning?! Is that all?”

“I prefer not to ambush people while they’re asleep,” I said, then pulled her slender shoulders toward me and put my lips to hers. Caught off guard, Claire didn’t even have time to close her eyes. Our gazes locked at close quarters, and, feeling mischievous, I held her there. Claire rolled her eyes in surprise and anger for a moment, then gave in and closed them.

I drank in the kiss, enjoying it to the fullest. This kind of intimacy was still new to Claire, and her innocence made my desire well up in response.

“Miss Claire, look!”

“Augh?!”

Trying to distract myself from my sinful thoughts, I put my hand, cold from the outside air, to her cheek.

“Rae... Are you incapable of kissing normally?!”

“That wasn’t normal?”

“No, that was clearly a nighttime kiss!”

“Does that mean you didn’t enjoy it?”

Claire's face was red all the way to her ears. "Shut up, Rae!" she said, throwing a pillow at me.

"Yes, I'm very sorry. I'll be waiting in the living room when you're done changing." Cute as it was to see her pout, I decided to retreat for now.

The effort it took to restrain myself when she was being this adorable—Miss Claire had no idea.

"We'll have to find some work pretty soon," I said as we drank our coffee together after breakfast.

"Yes. The savings you had at the Trade Guild are just about gone too."

Claire's aristocratic assets had pretty much all been seized by the state. She'd had some savings in the form of donations from the citizens—no one called anyone "commoner" anymore—and more offers on the table. While at one point Claire had almost lost her life to the revolution's judgment, many citizens thought of her as their savior. Between that and Dole's increasingly well-known hidden role in recent events, Claire was now seen as one of the leaders of the revolution.

I'd had a fair bit saved up too, but we had spent a lot of it on keeping people fed after the eruption. We'd spent most of the rest getting this new life started, and altogether our finances had reached a critical tipping point.

We nevertheless kept the fact that we were struggling to ourselves. If someone like Lene found out, she'd try to give us money without question.

"I hope there are some good jobs to be had, but with everything going on..."

"I'm not picky. We just need to be able to live a normal life," Claire said.

"Normal?" I chuckled. While we definitely lived more frugally than Claire had as an aristocrat, we also basked in quite a bit more luxury than the average citizen. I mean, no one our age had their own house.

"I know, I know. You don't have to look at me like that. You're going to say we need to cut back on our spending, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Rae, you've been making extravagant meals and trying to take care of me, but I can live with more simplicity."

"I'm glad to hear that, but..." We might have been overspending a bit, but I also felt like I didn't want to make Claire worry about money. I wanted her to have all the comforts she desired. "Regardless, we need to look for work. Is there anything you have in mind, Miss Claire?"

Claire thought for a bit. "I would like to try and become a teacher."

"A teacher?" That was a sound option.

"I don't intend to brag, but I'm confident in my ability to instruct people. I know the ins and outs of teaching etiquette too."

"I bet you do."

"I also understand magic, which is almost certainly going to become a core subject in the future."

"Definitely." When she put it like that, I couldn't think of a job better suited for her. I started to picture her wearing glasses...

"I actually just heard from Mr. Torrid," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. He asked if I would stay at the Academy as a junior instructor."

So she had connections too. "Let's do it! Miss Claire, you should definitely take that offer."

"Me? But what will you do?"

"I... hmm." I thought it over. "Maybe I should become an adventurer."

"An adventurer?!" Claire's smile turned upside down at my answer. "You can't go around being a hired goon!"

"Adventuring is a respectable profession."

“I am aware, but someone with your abilities should be doing more for society.”

“Really? If you set aside the magic, I’m not really good at much.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t forgotten that you beat me on the academic test at the Academy.”

Ah, true, I had done that. It felt like a lifetime ago, though it hadn’t even been a full year. “I cheated on that test with the aid of the prophecy I told you about before.”

“Still, isn’t it true that you have extraordinary academic and magical abilities?”

“I guess so...”

“More than anything, you are my partner. You must remain beside me.”

“It’s really hard for me to handle you doting on me like that,” I said.

“Don’t make fun of me! Ugh.” Claire took a sip of coffee and continued. “Anyway, Mr. Torrid said he wanted me to approach you too.”

“To be a teacher?” I asked.

“You don’t like the sound of it?”

“It’s not that, just...”

“Say it.”

“Honestly, I don’t think it suits me.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers. We’re lucky to have job offers at all, so stop complaining.”

“Is there a test to become a teacher?” I wondered out loud.

“You’re skilled enough that I’m sure they’ll hire you as soon as you accept. There is some initial training, though.”

“In that case, I guess I can’t say no.” I’d never thought of myself as a teacher, and honestly, I was filled with apprehension at the thought—but as Claire said, we couldn’t

afford to let this opportunity slide. “Let’s do it.”

Claire smiled with relief, which just made me want to kiss her. “I’ll get us some more coffee,” she said.

“I’ll do it—”

“Let me do this much. I can’t do anything else.”

Claire took our cups into the kitchen. Moments later, I heard her exclaim in surprise. I jumped from my seat and ran to the kitchen to see her standing stock-still in the center of the room.

“What is it?”

“Rae, look at that...” She pointed with a trembling hand.

This was certainly an unusual sight. Our sink, pots, frying pan, and metal furnishings were covered in rust. I picked up the frying pan to examine it more closely, and the pattern of the rust clearly wasn’t natural. It almost looked like bite marks.

“I know what this is,” I said.

“What?”

“A rust monster.”

Some game or another had, in a play on words, spelled the name of its final enemy as “rust boss” instead of “last boss.” This monster made metal items rust and then ate them. Unsurprisingly, it was the bane of adventurers everywhere.

“And it’s in our house?!”

“Yes, I think so. It doesn’t hurt people, so don’t worry. I’ll have Ralaire take care of it.”

“You’re always making Ralaire eat weird things... She doesn’t need more attributes.”

As suggested by the undine ability, water slimes could acquire the attributes of what they ate. Ralaire was a quick learner, and smarter than a cat or dog, so she had already acquired a variety of monster attributes. Not just cute ones either.

"What are you going to do if Ralaire starts eating frying pans?" Claire demanded.

"She's too well trained for that, don't worry."

"I wonder..." Claire peered at me with doubt in her eyes.

"Anyway, let's get this cleaned up," I said. "We'll have to buy replacements for the rusted stuff too."

"Yes, let's—"

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"H-hi, Rae. It's been a long time."

Our visitor was a young girl with silver hair and red eyes. Cardinal Lilly Lilium.

"You're on a journey?" I asked Lilly as I poured her a cup of coffee.

"Y-yes. I wasn't prosecuted because of the extenuating circumstances, but I know what I did is unforgivable."

"Well..." Claire looked like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

She couldn't even tell Lilly she was wrong. It was a fact that Lilly had taken the lives of many. Others might forgive her, but Lilly's faith made it hard for her to forgive herself.

"I-I've decided to go on a journey of atonement. Maybe that's naïve of me, but..."

The Spiritual Church had a story about a sinner who went on a journey of atonement and was forgiven by God at the end of it. Lilly was trying to face her sins in her own way.

"I understand. When do you leave?"

"Right away... but I had one last thing I needed to do, so I came to consult you," Lilly said. "M-many people who were impoverished by the disaster are coming to the Church for aid."

"We've heard. Children who lost their families, people who lost their homes... Right?"

Claire confirmed.

"Are you asking us to help the Church?" I asked.

Lilly shook her head. "I-I have a different request. There are these two twin children..."

She told us about a strange rumor that had begun making the rounds after the eruption—a rumor of cursed children who turned everyone and everything that came near them into magical stones. At first, the Church had dismissed this as fantasy, but then people with items of clothing and even body parts transformed into magical stones had started showing up. The Church investigated, and they had found the culprits—twin girls—living in a corner of a slum in the capital.

"Th-they have a special power in their blood."

Anything their blood touched turned into a magical stone. They were making a living by cutting themselves and using their blood to make magical stones they could sell.

"I-It took a long time for them to talk to us. They are quite traumatized..."

The twins, who were only four or five years old, had been abused by the rest of their family after their parents passed away. They'd been treated like geese that laid golden eggs, used to turn a profit, and told that their parents would come back for them if only they behaved. When those relatives were killed in the eruption, the girls had taken shelter in the slum. At least no one could hurt them—anyone who tried got turned into a magical stone.

"I-It's not like their blood can transform *anything*, though," Lilly explained. "People with powerful magic of their own are unaffected."

After a great deal of effort on Lilly's part, the Church had taken in the orphaned twins. Soon, however, they'd proved to be too much for the Church to handle. The girls were mistrustful, had a nervous habit of self-harm, and posed a threat to the clergy around them. Some people were even pushing for their execution.

"I-I can't leave them behind. But they're too young for me to take on my journey... R-Rae, you have special knowledge. Do you know anything about their condition?"

"I'm sorry. I don't." I was honored that Lilly would ask me, but unfortunately, I had never heard of anything like this.

“I-I see...” Lilly looked visibly disappointed.

“Don’t give up just yet. Can I meet them? I might know more once I see them in person.”

“That’s right,” Claire chimed in.

“You’ll help me?!” Lilly’s eyes shone at our words.

“We’ll do our best. I can’t guarantee we’ll find a solution, though.”

“Th-that’s plenty! Do you have time now?”

“Today... Sure, why not? We can buy kitchen stuff on our way home.”

And that was how Claire and I came to meet the strange twins.

“Hello, there.”

“Hi, girls.”

We greeted the twins warmly, but they just stared at us. They looked exactly alike; I could only tell them apart because one of them wore her blonde hair long, and the other had it cut short. Their brown eyes peered warily at us from behind Lilly, probably evaluating whether their power would work on us or not.

“H-hey, both of you! Say hello,” Lilly chided.

“Hi.”

“Hello...”

Their voices were exactly alike too, though the girl with short hair might have had a fractionally higher tone. Neither girl showed any real emotion, but the one with long hair seemed more guarded than her sister.

I kneeled so I was at eye level with them and asked, “What are your names?”

“Name...?”

“I don’t know...”

Surprised at the answer, I looked up at Lilly.

"Th-they won't tell us their names. Or perhaps they were never given any... We've been calling them Un and Deux..."

"That's horrible!" Claire burst out.

The twins looked startled, but she continued, "Listen to me. A name is a very important thing!" She thought for a moment. "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 girls looked at Claire as if they were under attack.

"Why those names?" I asked.

"Ah... uh. They were names I thought of long ago—for if I ever had daughters, so..."

She was an angel. A perfect angel sent from above.

"Cardinal Lilly," said Claire, "do you think we could keep the girls at our house for a while?"

"Uh... I don't object, but... is that okay with you, Rae?"

"I will never defy Miss Claire's wishes. But what are we going to do with them?" I was as confused as Lilly.

"We're going to teach them how to live normal lives, of course!" Claire answered.

"I-I appreciate the thought, but is that doable?"

"I don't care—we'll do it all the same. I can't stand by and let these children suffer like this!" It seemed Claire's maternal instincts were in high gear.

"But what about the issue with their blood?"

"We'll have to address that eventually, of course. But first, we must make sure that May

and Aleah can live as normal children. Rae, you look like you have doubts?"

"No... Not at all."

"You can't fool me. Listen, if we can't even take care of these children, how can we be teachers?"

I had my reservations, but Claire was so excited. I kept my mouth shut and just nodded.

"Is that okay with you, May and Aleah?" Claire asked.

They were silent.

"Respond!"

"Yes."

"Yes..."

They nodded stiffly in unison, like a matching pair of robots. What were we getting ourselves into?

Claire and I cleaned up our spare room for the girls' use. It was on the small side, especially for two children, but we'd deal with that later.

"How did you two spend your time at the Church?"

The girls looked quizzically at Claire, like they didn't understand the question. She tried again.

"Did you read books or play with blocks?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"You didn't do anything?"

This time, they nodded together. Claire put her head in her hands.

"What was Cardinal Lilly thinking..."

"Lilly has been very busy since the revolution," I said. Mostly because of Salas.

"That's right... It's not her fault."

"May, Aleah, is there anything you want to do?" I asked, kneeling to look them in the eyes.

"Rae, what are you doing? You did it at the Church too," Claire asked, motioning toward my knees.

"Children can feel intimidated when adults loom over them. If I come down to their level, it puts them more at ease."

"You should tell me things like that sooner!" Claire hurriedly knelt too. "Now, can you think of anything?"

They nodded again.

"And what is that?" I asked as gently as I could.

"Magic stones."

"Make them."

Claire and I were speechless.

"You don't have to do that anymore..." Claire said.

"Isn't there something else you want to do? Are you hungry?" I asked.

The twins shook their head.

"We can..."

"...only do this."

We didn't know what to say. This was serious.

"Okay. Then how about you play with us?" Maybe teaching them that would be the best start. "May, Aleah, do you like to play inside or outside better?"

“Outside.”

“Outside...”

Good thing I’d asked instead of trying to push something like playing house on them.  
“Okay. Then let’s play tag.”

“Tag?”

“What’s that...?”

I couldn’t imagine what kind of life they’d lived, to have never heard of tag at this age.

“One person is ‘it’ and chases the others, while the others run away. If the person who is ‘it’ touches you, then you become ‘it’, and you have to chase the others. ‘Do you understand?’

The girls nodded flatly.

With that settled, Claire and I took May and Aleah to the yard.

“I’ll be ‘it’ first,” I said, but the girls didn’t move. I gestured. “C’mom, you have to run away.”

Claire nudged them from behind to create some distance between them and me, but they moved sluggishly.

“Hey, I’m gonna catch you!” I warned as I started chasing the twins very slowly.

They still didn’t initiate movement on their own, so Claire pulled their hands to run away. Their expressions remained unchanging.

“I got you!” I announced as I tagged May.

She looked up at me, but she just stood there.

“Now you get to chase people, May,” I urged. “C’mom, Aleah, let’s run away.”

May stood there for a little while, but eventually, she finally started moving toward Claire—slowly at first, but when she got near Claire, Claire ran away faster, forcing

May to run a bit before she allowed herself to be caught.

"Well done, May. That was great!" said Claire.

"Great?"

"That's right. You're a wonderful girl, May."

May probably hadn't been praised much before. She took some time to reflect on Claire's words with a strange look on her face.

"Now I'm 'it'" Claire said and started chasing Aleah. Aleah ran slowly, and she was caught right away.

"Now it's your turn to chase, Aleah," she said.

"Yes..." Aleah nodded and started chasing Claire like May had.

Honestly, I felt a little left out.

"Oh, you caught me! You run so fast, Aleah."

I wasn't sure if Aleah realized she was being praised. She took in Claire's words with a strange look on her face.

"Well, this is worrisome..." I said, uneasy.

And yet, a few minutes later, I had to eat my words.

"M-May, let's take a break," said Claire breathlessly.

"No."

May clung to Claire, who stumbled, at which point Aleah tackled her.

"Run away."

"Run away..."

At some point in time, the rules to our tag game had changed, and May and Aleah had

become “it” together, both chasing Claire. You can’t underestimate kids. They had boundless energy. Claire had smiled at first, but they had rapidly exhausted her. She was really relying on the reserves built up by her years of training in self-defense and ballroom dancing.

“Let’s take a break, girls,” I called out to them. I had been making snacks in the kitchen since they left me out. I had tea in a pitcher, and my plan was to entice them with sweets.

“More tag.”

“More...”

Well, it looked like the girls liked the game.

“In that case, I’ll trade with Rae—” Claire started.

“No.”

“We want this...”

The girls had already grown attached to Claire.

I struggled to pretend not to be jealous.

“Aleah, you mustn’t call people ‘this,’” said Claire, crouching before them like I had taught her.

“Why?”

“It isn’t polite.”

“Polite?”

“That’s right. People shouldn’t be treated as objects. Treating them poorly is just as shameful as not wearing clothes.”

I was sure the girls didn’t understand everything Claire was saying to them, but Aleah nodded in response anyway.

"Then what do I call you?" Aleah asked.

"We don't know your name," said May.

Oh dear. They were right. I didn't remember telling them our names. Due to their circumstances, we had completely forgotten that formality.

"I am Claire. She is Rae."

"Let's be friends, both of you," I said.

They nodded—far less tentatively than before.

"Then let's play tag again," said Claire.

"Huh? Miss Claire, are you all right? You look so tired."

"I'm not, no—but apply some of your recovery magic and I'll be fine."

I hadn't thought of that. I quickly cast some of the requested water magic on Claire, and her body rejuvenated.

"Claire, are you okay?" asked Aleah.

"Can you still play?" asked May.

"I can! This time, I'm going to chase you. You better run, run away!"

The girls took off, and Claire pelted after them.

"They look like they're having so much fun..." I murmured.

It was a simple game, but the girls seemed to be having the time of their lives. Their expressions were still completely void of emotion, but there was something lighter in the air that made me suspect they were feeling better. They probably enjoyed Claire's reactions. I certainly understood that feeling.

In that case, I would set up the snacks and let them play as much as they wanted.

"Ahh—" May cried out as she fell down.

“Are you okay?!” Claire ran up to her. I also stopped preparing the snacks and flew to May’s side.

“You scraped your leg a little,” Claire said, checking for any other injuries and finding none. We were keenly aware of the curse coursing through this girl’s blood. It would always be our obligation to check her for injuries.

“That must have hurt,” said Claire tenderly. “You’re so strong for not crying. Rae, hurry and heal her.”

“Why?” asked May.

“Wh—*why*?” Claire demanded.

“Claire, you look sad,” said May.

“Of course I am. You’re hurt, aren’t you?”

“When we get hurt, everyone is happy,” said Aleah, coming up from behind us.

Claire’s face froze at Aleah’s words.

“Here.” May broke a piece off of her skirt—the part that had turned to stone due to her blood—and presented it to Claire. “Thank you.”

“What are you thinking?!” Claire burst out angrily.

“What...” murmured May.

“Thank you...” said Aleah.

“This is *not* reason to show thanks!”

“Why? We—”

“—were born to bleed.”

They spoke in eerie unison. This was the curse. This was definitely a curse.

“When we get cut—”

“—everyone is happy.”

“No!” Claire interrupted their heartrending words and pulled them close to her. “You were born to be happy! Never think that you were born to be injured!”

“But we—”

“—are cursed.”

“Forget the curse! May, Aleah, you were always in pain, right? It was hard, right?” Claire was crying. It was really such a rare thing to see her cry at all. But cry she did, embracing them and stroking their hair.

May and Aleah remained confused for a bit, but finally, they started to change. Their first true expressions were impatient, like they were trying to recall something but also were resisting the recollection.

“We—”

“—remember this.”

I had an idea of what “this” was. They remembered, somewhere, somewhen, that they had been embraced.

“Do you mean your mother?”

“Mo—”

“—ther?”

At that word, the hard masks they had maintained suddenly cracked.

“Ooh...”

“A-ah...”

As one, the girls began to sob.

“W-we—”

“—were waiting...”

They spoke in tones of delirium, crying all the tears they had saved up for years.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. You’re both such good girls... You really are so good...” Claire diligently comforted them, but they didn’t stop crying, and neither did she. They sat there, all three together, crying for quite some time.

“May, Aleah, I want to tell you something,” Claire said, letting go of them gently.

They blinked blearily at Claire.

“This is good luck to sing when you’re hurt,” Claire said, tending to May’s scrape.  
“Ouch, ouch, nope, nope, pain, pain, fly away”

They tilted their heads quizzically at Claire.

“How is it? Does it still hurt?” Claire asked, and May shook her head. “Really? Perfect.”

“Do it to me too.”

“You too, Aleah? Okay. Ouch, ouch, nope, nope, pain, pain, fly away.”

Claire’s chant was the most important kind of magic, the sort that worked not only on May’s scrape but also on the deep heartfelt pain the twins had endured.

“I remember that,” Claire recalled contemplatively as I poured her tea. We were having a little picnic in our yard. May and Aleah were playing tag with Ralaire.

Claire and I had decided to officially take the girls in. I say “officially,” but since same-sex marriage wasn’t recognized in the kingdom, all we could do legally was take them in as fosters. But they had long since become a critical part of our lives.

“Do you remember when the Academy was in an uproar over the Commoner Movement?”

“I remember everything that happens with you, Miss Claire.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” Claire flicked my forehead. It hurt. Ah, to reap the rewards of love. “During that commotion, I saw a beggar child in the town, and all I could feel was

disgust.”

She had really grown, although she now looked disgusted at her past self.

“Oh, I remember. I saw her not too long ago. She was wiping windows in a church. It seems like she’s being taken care of.”

“Is that so... I’m glad to hear it.” Claire closed her eyes, relieved. She glanced at me. “May and Aleah are finally showing their emotions, but if you hadn’t done something about the curse, they wouldn’t be laughing right now. But goodness, I never imagined rust would be the answer.”

“Who could have?”

That day May and Aleah finally cried, I’d noticed their tears didn’t turn Claire’s clothes into magical stones. Tears and blood are elementally related, magically speaking, so I realized the issue was tied to some unique element of their blood. Furthermore, if we could isolate what component of their blood needed addressing, we could resolve the issue.

As I’d contemplated, I’d remembered that red blood cells are made of iron. So, I’d wondered what would happen if we “rusted” the cells. After I had Ralaire eat the rust monster, I asked her to mimic its ability to generate rust in proximity to May and Aleah. With this consistent help from Ralaire, the curse in their blood had, for the time being, been alleviated.

“Well, it’s only a temporary solution.”

In the end, I planned to ask Yu to use the Tears of the Moon. We had used the Tears of the Moon for Yu’s own curse not a year ago, so it needed to gather more moonlight before it could be called on again.

Normally, folks outside the Church would never be allowed to deploy the Church’s most closely guarded relic for such a thing, so we had to leverage our connections and past contributions. But Yu owed us one, and the Church now owed us another because of Lilly, May, and Aleah. I was sure I could negotiate.

“Cardinal Lilly is still traveling, isn’t she?”

“I hope so.”

Lilly had gone off on her journey as soon as May and Aleah moved into our home. She had been so grateful to both of us and still sent us letters from time to time. It seemed she was in Euclid, so she was visiting my mother to get some clothes made.

That girl really was so adorable.

"Now that we have the twins, we really need to ensure some stability in our lives," said Claire.

"Let's do our best to be good teachers."

"Yes, but I was thinking on a more fundamental level."

I frowned, confused.

Claire cleared her throat, a most mature look on her face. "We need to show we are prepared to live happily ever after, as a family of four. So, I swear to God: I will always love May, Aleah, and Rae."

When Claire said this, she broke out into a tremendous smile, and I found myself once more overflowing with love for her. I held her close without saying anything.

"Mothers, what are you talking about?"

The girls had come looking for hugs too. These days, they didn't at all resemble the emotionless girls we had met months ago.

"We were just talking about how much you both laugh now," I said.

"We laugh because it's fun."

"You're weird, Mother Rae."

They looked at each other and laughed some more.

Augh, they were so cute!

They hadn't warmed up to me for a good while, but once I resolved their curse, they'd slowly opened up to me as well. It had been way harder for me than it had been for Claire, though. I still got pretty depressed when I realized that even Ralaire was more

popular than I was.

"Ralaire, hurry up!" May called.

"You're so slow," Aleah scolded.

Ralaire meandered up to us. She looked exhausted, probably because I'd made her play with the girls for so long.

"We don't lose to Ralaire anymore."

"We'll be able to beat Mother Claire and Mother Rae soon too."

Because my thoughts were full of how they'd been when we first met, my heart ached so fiercely now that I got to hear their innocent laughter.

"Mother Claire, what's wrong?"

"Are you hurt somewhere?"

Claire was clearly thinking the same thing, because tears pricked her eyes. She brushed them away. "Oh, it's nothing."

May and Aleah still looked worried.

"May, Aleah, why don't you do that magic for Claire?"

"What magic? Do you know, Aleah?"

"Oh, I know, May."

They whispered together. Claire tilted her head in confusion.

"Mother Claire!" May and Aleah said in unison, laughing. "Ouch, ouch, nope, nope, pain, pain, fly away."

# AFTERWORD

THANK YOU SO MUCH for purchasing the second volume of *I'm in Love with the Villainess*. I am the author, Inori. I'm really glad we were able to bring you the second volume. Chapter 4 to the Epilogue was a web series, but for this volume, I was able to add additional text at the end. Did you enjoy it?

Thanks to all of you, the first volume did well, apparently, and I'm honored that it even made it in the Amazon rankings. It's because of your support. Thank you. I'm stuck in a cliché, hoping that this volume will sell too. Please forgive me. But I want to go out to eat sometimes!

So this is the end of Rae and Claire's story for now. I think there is a lot that I still haven't written, but you can fill in the gaps with your imagination. If you go back and read the first volume again, I think you'll notice a lot of connections you missed the first time around, so please come and visit Rae and Claire again sometime.

Finally, I have some acknowledgements.

First, Nakamura-san in the editing department of GL Novel: Thank you for publishing the previous volume and this one. I'm really grateful for everything you did to complete it.

Also, thank you to Hanagata for the wonderful illustrations. As of writing this afterword, I haven't seen the illustrations yet, but if Hanagata is drawing them, I am sure they will be perfect.

And thank you to my partner, Aki. I'm done! Let's go celebrate once it's officially published.

And it goes without saying, but I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to all the readers who picked up this book.

If I end up with another publication someday, I hope you will read it too.

Thank you very much.

—INORI, MARCH 2, 2019



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