



I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS

She's so Cheeky for a Commoner

Written by
INORI

NOVEL

2

Illustrated by
HANAGATA



I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS

She's so Cheeky for a Commoner

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY

Inori

ILLUSTRATED BY

Hanagata



Seven Seas Entertainment

HEIMIN NO KUSE NI NAMAIKINA! 2

© INORI. 2022

This edition originally published in Japan in 2022 by
AINAKA SHUPPAN, INC. Shizuoka.

English translation rights arranged with
AINAKA SHUPPAN, INC. Shizuoka.

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

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

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

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Kevin Ishizaka

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner

INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny

COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm

PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen

SENIOR EDITOR: Nibedita Sen

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-68579-709-6

Printed in Canada

First Printing: April 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 4

The Courting Commoner and Me

INTERLUDE

Uncomplicated (Rae Taylor)

CHAPTER 5

Tactless Rae and Me

INTERLUDE

Loretta (Kind Of) Runs Away from Home (Pepi Barlier)

INTERLUDE

Background Check on Rae Taylor (Pepi Barlier)

INTERLUDE

First Battle (Loretta Kugret)

INTERLUDE

The Means and the Conviction (Pepi Barlier)

CHAPTER 6

Sly Rae and Me

INTERLUDE

The End of My Lonely Battle (Lilly Lilium)

INTERLUDE

Conspiracy (Pepi Barlier)

INTERLUDE

Failed Assassination (Salas Lilium)

INTERLUDE

Suspicion (Misha Jur)

Afterword

Table of Contents

[Color Inserts](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 4: The Courting Commoner and Me](#)

[Interlude: Uncomplicated \(Rae Taylor\)](#)

[Chapter 5: Tactless Rae and Me](#)

[Interlude: Loretta \(Kind Of\) Runs Away from Home \(Pepi Barlier\)](#)

[Interlude: Background Check on Rae Taylor \(Pepi Barlier\)](#)

[Interlude: First Battle \(Loretta Kugret\)](#)

[Interlude: The Means and the Conviction \(Pepi Barlier\)](#)

[Chapter 6: Sly Rae and Me](#)

[Interlude: The End of My Lonely Battle \(Lilly Lilium\)](#)

[Interlude: Conspiracy \(Pepi Barlier\)](#)

[Interlude: Failed Assassination \(Salas Lilium\)](#)

[Interlude: Suspicion \(Misha Jur\)](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

[Zerobooks Universal](#)

[Zerobooks USA ONLY](#)

[Zerobooks IOS](#)

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

[Jnovels.com](#)

[Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with](#)

Chapter 4: The Courting Commoner and Me

“**E**xcuse me. Are you trying to let my skin burn in the sun? Hold the parasol straight.”

It was an evening just on the verge of summer. We were returning to the dormitories after having finished our Academy Knights work for the day. The sky was beginning to darken, but the sunbeams still remained strong, so I reprimanded the commoner for falling short in her duties. *Goodness. Lene would never have been so... Oh, what does it even matter?*

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Miss Claire. You’re just such a perfect ten that I lost focus.” The commoner scrambled to reposition the parasol.

“A perfect ten...? I haven’t a clue what you’re on about, but would you mind doing your job?”

“Apologies.”

“...Hmph.” I thought about following up with some harsh words, but I just couldn’t get in the mood. The reason was clear. Losing Lene had taken its toll on me. Much like Catherine, I’d grown up with Lene. She was like a sister to me. I’d known better than to think we’d be together forever, but losing her still hurt.

Ralaire, sitting on Rae’s shoulder, looked at me worriedly.

“Miss Claire?”

“What is it?”

“Once our holiday starts, how about I make you something sweet?”

“Where’d that come from? There’s no need for that.”

Ralaire began to jump up and down, perhaps recognizing the word “sweet.” I wasn’t particularly swayed, myself.

“Even the crème brûlée you love?”

“...That’s the recipe you gave Lene, right?” I thought back on the time Lene and I ate the crème brûlée the commoner had made for us. It made me feel sentimental to think about how we’d never have such a day again...

“Miss Claire?” The commoner interrupted my thoughts.

“What is it?”

“C’mon, chin up.”

“I am perfectly fine, thank you very much.” No matter how untrue this might be, I couldn’t very well let myself look weak before her. With a huff, I turned away.

“Miss Claire?”

“What?”

“Can I hug you?”

“What?!” Out of the blue, she’d asked something outrageous. Then again, that wasn’t exactly unusual, given her track record... “Of course you may not. What kind of servant asks their master for a hug?”

“Huh? Um, this kind?” she said, looking genuinely perplexed.

“What are you looking so confused for?! I’m the confused one here!”

Goodness, this girl...

As strange as it was, this ridiculous conversation had me feeling somewhat like myself once more. Lene might not be here anymore, but I still needed to keep it together or she’d laugh at me next time we met.

“Miss Claire?”

“What? And isn’t this the third time we’ve done this little exchange now?”

“It’s the fourth, actually.”

“Oh, so you’ve been keeping count, I see! Well, what do you want?!”

“I like you.”

Her unfiltered declaration of affection made my heart race slightly. In the same way Lene would shower me with love when I was feeling down, the commoner was trying to show me she cared, in her own way. It was kind of her, though I’d have appreciated it more if she forewent the teasing.

“Yes, yes. And I hate you,” I replied, as was our routine, after calming my beating heart.

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

“Perfect for what?!”

“Oh, jeez. Don’t make me say it out loud, you perv.”

“You started it!”

I was forced to have this nonsensical conversation with her until we finally reached my room at the dormitory. She unlocked the door and opened it for me. Catherine had hidden herself, as per usual. I hoped I could release her from the tight confines of this room one day.

“Miss Claire, you have a letter,” the commoner said, holding out a sealed letter.

“Who is it from?”

“Manaria Sousse.”

“Sister?!” I exclaimed, surprised to hear such a name. I approached the commoner with intensity unbecoming of a young lady, snatched the letter out of her hands, and checked the sender myself. I saw the familiar, graceful handwriting on its cover and knew that it was indeed Manaria who’d sent this. The wax seal bore the crest of the Sousse royal family as well. There could be no doubt.

“Open it for me.”

“Yes, Miss.”

I returned the letter to the commoner and had her unseal it for me. Inside was a single slip of paper. It was refreshingly fragrant; perfume had likely been used on it.

I began to read the letter with intense concentration. In it, Manaria apologized for being out of contact as of late and said she was transferring to Bauer as an exchange student.

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

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

“In that case, I’ll wait too.”

The commoner said something, but I was too lost in my thoughts of Manaria. “My sister... She’s coming to the Academy.”

“By ‘sister,’ do you mean the Lady Manaria?”

“That’s right. She’s the First Crown Princess of the Sousse

Kingdom, and a woman I greatly admire.”

“Is that right...” the commoner said dispiritedly.

“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.”

Perhaps I’d said something that hurt her feelings? No, wait, why would I care about the feelings of a commoner? Ralaire wore a quizzical expression as she looked at the commoner.

“Shall we head to the cafeteria?” the commoner suggested.

“Yes, let’s... But my heart is so full right now, I don’t think I’ll be able to eat much.” While it caused me great sorrow to have lost Lene, fate had brought me someone else I cared deeply about. Life had its downs, but also its ups.

“Uh-huh, sure. Can we be off already now?”

“...You *are* dissatisfied, aren’t you?”

“Huh? No?” Despite her words, her face clearly expressed protest.

I asked, “Could it be you’re jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Wha—you sure folded easily!” To think she really was...

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

“Yes, yes, that joke again. Shouldn’t you be giving that one a rest already?”

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

“You can’t, because there’s clearly no way you are. Although...” I recalled a certain legend. “Place the Flower of Flora on the scales. Only then will your true feelings be known.”

I tried repeating my favorite passage from the legend, only to receive a cold glare from the commoner. Ralaire tilted her head as though she didn’t understand.

“Is that Poesie Amour?” she asked.

“Oh, you know of it?”

Poesie Amour was an ancient legend passed down 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 tilts 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. The lines I had just recited were the lines the maiden said to the men as she presented them with the scale.

“Do you like such stories, Miss Claire?”

“I don’t dislike them. There’s nothing wrong with romance.”

Come to think of it, my first love had been Manaria...though that had been the result of a series of misunderstandings.

Looking a bit sober, the commoner said, “I don’t dislike love stories either, but I’m not a fan of Poesie Amour.”

“Oh? And why is that?” I cocked my head to the side. With her—presumably—having nothing on her mind all day but racy thoughts, I figured she’d love Poesie Amour.

“The maiden could have easily chosen one of the men and been done with things. To force them to compete is just plain evil,” she said bluntly.

She had a point—but at the same time, she was missing the point entirely.

“That’s not true at all,” I said. The commoner didn’t understand the maiden’s feelings at all. It was up to me to teach her. “The maiden was surely unable to choose. When you love many, it’s difficult to tell whom you love more.” This was perhaps a childish thing to say, but I fully believed in my theory. “One cannot know how much they love another. At best, one can only desire another to make their love clear for them. Such passionate feelings are undoubtedly contained in this legend.”

I wanted to experience such love. I wanted to be loved by someone

to the point they left me at a loss as to how I felt.

“Miss Claire?”

“What? Wait, how many times are we going to have this little back-and-forth today?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Why, you are just so...! Ugh!” Hearing her completely disregard all I’d said made me get heated for a moment, but I soon calmed down. “Well, I guess I can’t expect someone who makes a joke of love to understand such subtleties.”

At the very least, it was clear I couldn’t expect love like that depicted in Poesie Amour from the commoner. Without wasting another moment, I left for the cafeteria.

“As I’ve already said, my love for you is not a joke.”

I heard her from behind me, but I knew better than to be deceived. *You say that, but in the end, you’ll leave me just like Lene.*

The pain of losing someone had made me a coward, but it would be a little longer yet before I realized that.

“Anyway, I look forward to being your classmate, Claire.”

“As do I, Sister!”

After classes, I brought Manaria to my usual arbor. Pepi and Loretta tactfully chose not to accompany me, but the commoner brazenly invited herself along. Honestly, the nerve of the girl. Couldn’t she tell I wanted to spend time alone with Manaria?

I looked at Manaria, admiring, once again, just how handsome she was. Most women had long hair these days, but she dared to instead go for a short style that somehow still had a feminine charm. Her platinum blonde hair was glossy and practically glowed in the sunlight. Her expression was mischievous, like a cat’s, and her composure befit royalty.

After exchanging pleasantries with me, she looked toward the commoner. “And I look forward to getting to know you, Rae.”

“Sure...” The commoner replied disinterestedly.

“Commoner, show some respect! You should be happy Sister Manaria even spoke to you at all!” I exclaimed. She had been like this with the three princes as well. It was galling to think she would treat royalty so disrespectfully.

“Eh. Honestly, I’m a hundred times happier to have you speak to me,” the commoner said.

“...There you go again.”

The commoner seemed intent on making a joke out of everything. Even Ralaire, up on the table, seemed exasperated with her. What a troublesome girl she was...

“Lene, set her straight for me... Ah.” I looked over my left shoulder like I always did, only to realize Lene was, of course, not there. Manaria gave me a quizzical look, while the commoner’s gaze was pitying.

“Lene was that maid girl of yours, right?” Manaria said. “Where’s she gone? I don’t see her around.”

“...Due to some unfortunate circumstances, she’s no longer in my employ.”

“Oh...I see.”

I didn’t have it in me to explain the full details of what happened. I felt as though doing so would truly be putting Lene behind me, and I didn’t want to do that just yet. Manaria seemed to grasp that and didn’t pry any further.

“Oh, right. I stopped by the Alpes on my way to Bauer and found a place that made some rather unique sweets.”

“Oh really? What kind?”

Manaria tried to change the topic, and the commoner played along. They were likely trying to be considerate of me...or at least Manaria was. The commoner? I doubted she was capable of such tact.

Ralaire seemed to react to the word “sweets,” being ever the adorable glutton.

“I’m a bit curious as well,” I said. “What kind of sweets were they?”

“I had a feeling you would want to know, so I had a pâtissier learn how to make one of them. I’ll have them make some for us now.”

Manaria gave one of her escorts some instructions. We waited, enjoying the commoner’s tea, until one of Manaria’s servants returned

with a cart.

“Here we are. This is one of the sweets the place served. They called it tiramisu.”

“T-tiramisu?!”

“What’s wrong, commoner?”

“O-oh, it’s nothing...”

So she said—but she couldn’t fully hide the surprise on her face, or what I presumed was happiness. I couldn’t guess why just hearing the name of the dessert would make her so happy, but she was unmistakably delighted.

“Try it and let me know what you think,” Manaria said.

Before cutting into it with a fork, I admired the tiramisu’s exterior for a moment. Its sliced side revealed many layers of dough and cream, and the top was sprinkled with what looked to be cacao powder. It wasn’t the daintiest dessert I’d seen, but it certainly looked typical of Western sweets.

I applied my fork, cutting off a piece with no resistance whatsoever. I took a bite and tasted an astoundingly rich cream, as well as cheese. The full-bodied flavor of liquor was abundant, as was a gentle sweetness from the ample sugar used.

“It’s delicious!” I exclaimed.

“Isn’t it? I just knew you’d like it.”

“What was this place called?” I sensed potential in this sweet, which rivaled even the chocolates of Broumet. It would be a good move for me to scope them out, become their patron, and use them to climb the rungs of high society, but...

“Heh heh, that’s a secret for now. If I told you, I’d lose out on the fun of being able to treat you like this.”

“Don’t be so unfair, Sister! Please, tell me!”

“Aha ha ha! Oh, I don’t know. Should I?”

“...Get a room,” the commoner murmured.

“Hm? Commoner, did you say something?” I asked.

“Nope, not a thing. Anyways, would you two happen to know the source of this sweet’s name?” She broached a new subject as though to

avoid follow-up questions.

“I can’t say I do,” Manaria answered. “I’m familiar with the etymology of most things, but I can’t quite place tiramisu.”

“I can’t say I’m familiar either,” I said.

“I see. Well, tiramisu means ‘cheer me up’ in the language it comes from, and such a thing was just what Miss Claire needed. Thank you, Lady Manaria.” The commoner bowed deeply.

“Oh, you flatter me, Rae. I had no idea it had such a meaning, I just wanted to treat my Claire.”

“Even so, it remains a fact that you are to be thanked for making her smile now.”

“...Is that right?”

“It is. Thank you, truly.” The commoner thanked Manaria a second time.

“What’s going on, commoner?” I asked. “...Did I really look that dejected?”

“You are very experienced at keeping up appearances, so I doubt there are many who noticed how you feel.”

“...How cheeky. Do you mean to say you count yourself among the few who understand me?”

“I do.”

“Then tell me, if you understand me so well, what am I feeling right now?”

Hearing my challenge, the commoner smiled broadly and said, “You feel as though the scales of your heart are teetering uncertainly, with what you’ve lost weighed on one side and what you’ve regained on the other.”

“Wh-what nonsense are you prattling on about...?” Flustered by receiving such a rare, genuine smile, I quickly admonished her. She was right, but I couldn’t very well admit that!

“Interesting... You two are pretty close, huh?” Manaria said.

“P-pardon!?” I exclaimed. “In what way do we look—”

“Yes, we’re madly in love.”

“Commoner!” I yelled, flustered yet again.

“Aha ha ha ha!” Manaria let out a roar of laughter. “I see you’ve found yourself a nice maid.”

“Huh?! In what way is *she* supposed to be a nice maid?!” I yelled. Even with my dear Manaria, I couldn’t help but protest.

“She’s different from all the superficial, disloyal servants you’ve complained to me about in your letters. She tries to understand you, like Lene did.” There wasn’t a hint of teasing in her voice. She was sincere, filled with nothing but fondness and concern for me.

“...What does that matter? One can never truly understand another,” I said.

“Perhaps. But even if that is so, I think it’s still important to at least try. At the very least, Rae and I have always made the effort to try to understand you, and I’m sure Lene did as well.”

“Sister...”

Her words resonated. I usually struggled to accept what other people said, but Manaria was special. My affection and reverence for her brought down the walls of my heart.

“...How pretentious.”

“Wha... Commoner!”

“Aha ha ha! Yeah, I did get a bit performative there. But you can’t woo a woman without *some* smooth-talking, Rae.”

“...What? Are you saying the way I do things is wrong?”

“There’s merit to the kind of brute-forcing you do, but it’s better to mix things up now and then. Surprise your target by showing them a wholly new side of yourself.”

“Whatever...”

...I’d very much prefer it if you two didn’t talk about picking up women right in front of me, I thought with mixed feelings.

Having wrapped up that topic, Manaria took a sip of her tea. “Still, I’m glad. It’s good to see Claire’s found someone she can open up her heart to.”

“But I most certainly haven’t!”

“You grasp our relationship well, Lady Manaria,” the commoner said.

“Oh, you be quiet!” I exclaimed.

Our tea party continued with more of this back and forth—Manaria would bring up something, I would respond, and the commoner would make some inane joke. All in all, it was quite a good time. It might’ve lacked the elegance of most noble gatherings, but I was able to freely enjoy myself for the first time in a while.

“The Scales of Love...? That thing from Poesie Amour?”

“Yes, that’s right. Those scales are used in the final section of the ceremony.”

I was at my usual arbor, along with Manaria, Yu, and Thane. The commoner was serving us. She lacked Lene’s tact, but she was undeniably better at making tea and snacks, as vexing as that was to admit. She was even able to reproduce the tiramisu Manaria had brought the other day, shocking the both of us. Yu and Thane were mainly here because they’d heard about the commoner’s tiramisu, so I was grateful for that, I supposed.

Currently, Yu was explaining the Amour Ceremony that would be held soon to Manaria. As he had deep ties to the Spiritual Church, he was familiar with these kinds of ceremonies. Manaria listened to him with great interest.

“And here I thought the Poesie Amour was just legend,” she said. Perhaps because they were similarly placed in the line of succession to their respective thrones, she spoke more freely with Yu than with Rod.

“Poesie 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. “With the discovery of magic stones, we’ve only recently begun deliberately designing what we call magic tools. But items with strange powers have appeared all throughout history.”

Before people learned of magic stones, such magic tools were often

treated as divine.

“Then the Scales of Love use magic stones as well?”

“...It would appear that way,” Thane said with a nod. He seemed largely apathetic to the conversation, his gaze not straying from his tiramisu. He had already eaten one. Perhaps he had a sweet tooth...? Maybe I could benefit from learning how to bake from the commoner.

“How are the Scales of Love used in the ceremony?”

“Well, it’s a sort of duel, I suppose. You might even call it a battle for a bride.” Yu grinned. “As is written in Poesie Amour, love has long been a seed of war. The Amour Ceremony is the battle for a bride as spoken of in the legend’s verses.”

“Oh, so they make offerings?” Manaria said jokingly. She really was well learned, being familiar with legends of cultures outside her own.

“Actually, yes,” Yu said. “Offerings of love are placed on the scales, and their weight decides the victor of the battle.”

Manaria seemed a little surprised that her joke had actually hit the mark. “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. It’s no surprise your instructor couldn’t cover everything in detail.” Yu finished his tea, and the commoner silently poured him another cup. After thanking her, he continued. “Anyways, when I say the ceremony is a battle of weight, I don’t mean physical weight. The scales are set to compare the effort the item took to obtain. In other words, they tip in favor of the weight of love.”

“Oh really? So offering up the Flower of Flora is on the table?”

“Yes, and based on the ceremony’s history, the Flower of Flora is the heaviest offering on record.”

“Which is keeping with the legend, then.”

Very few people had actually seen a Flower of Flora in person. I’d only seen it depicted in reference books and paintings—a mystical blossom that gave off a pale light.

“You seem curious about the ceremony. Are you interested in participating, Manaria?” Yu teased, alluding to Manaria having someone she liked.

Huh? Is Sister in love? The idea made me somewhat agitated, but I didn't let it show. I was a noble, after all.

"No, but it's interesting, and a little romantic too. Can't say I hate the idea of putting my love to the test."

"Sister, ladies like us aren't the ones who put our love to the test. That's for the boys who fight over us," I said. I couldn't help but think, however, that I'd probably feel lonely if she went and found herself a lover.

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

"Wha... Master Yu!" I exclaimed.

"Oh my. Is that what's going on between you two?" Manaria said, joining in on the teasing.

"Don't be silly, Sister. This commoner is just teasing me with her advances." Indignant, I raised my cup to my lips.

"I've told her my feelings are real many times, but I just can't seem to get through to her," the commoner said.

"Oh dear. Then your love is unrequited, Rae?" Manaria asked.

"For now, but not forever."

"You better stop that nonsense right now, you hear me?" I silenced the commoner with my gaze. She seemed happy about it, though. Honestly, what was up with her...?

I noticed Ralaire trembling atop the table and fed a piece of tiramisu to her. She happily ate it up.

I said, "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."

"Aw, Sister!"

She played along with my little joke. *This* was humor done properly. The commoner could learn a thing or two from us.

"Oh, come to think of it, Manaria was Claire's first love, wasn't she?" Yu said.

"Master Yu!" I exclaimed. "That's ancient history now. There's no

need to bring it up.”

“I remember. You thought I was a boy back then, didn’t you?” Manaria said.

I was mortified to have my embarrassing past dredged up. It had all happened when I was staying at Manaria’s family estate—the home of Earl Larnach—when I was younger. I’d just lost my mother and was broken with grief. My mother and I had argued the last time I saw her, and I never got a chance to apologize. That fact had torn me up at the time—and still did to this day.

For some time after my mother’s passing, I had closed myself off. My father had no time to comfort me while dealing with the consequences of losing his politically gifted wife, so I was entrusted to House Larnach, who were kin. That was where I met Manaria.

“Your words saved me,” I said.

She had seen me being crushed by my feelings of regret and guilt and said, “*No one thinks this is your fault, Claire.*” She had grasped the fact I blamed myself, something not even my father could do.

“*I swear here and now that I will always protect thee,*” she had said, quoting the vow of love from Poesie Amour. Of course, she wasn’t actually in love with me. She just wanted to cheer me up because I was such a crying mess. But I didn’t know any better at the time, so I fell for her on the spot. I mean, how could I not? She was so easily mistaken for a dashing young boy back then!

“But that’s exactly what I love about you, Miss Claire,” the commoner said.

“What are you on about?! What kind of non sequitur is that?!”

“My apologies. My love for you just overflowed for a moment there.”

So she said, but she always acted more or less like this. I had serious doubts she made any effort to contain herself at all.

“I see. You really like Claire, huh?” Manaria murmured, looking at the commoner with an amused smile.

Manaria had a bad habit of teasing those she was interested in, much like a naughty little boy—and it would appear she had yet to kick that habit. She had enough restraint to keep herself from doing anything *too* extreme, but, well... Let’s just say I did not envy those on the receiving

end of her whims.

“Unfortunately, Claire said she likes me better.” Manaria pulled me close and wrapped her arms around me.

“Oh? What brought this on all of a sudden?” I said. A wave of nostalgia washed over me. She used to hug me like this quite often in the past.

...The commoner was making quite the face. Even Ralaire seemed a bit worried.

“Claire, would you believe me if I said I like you?” Manaria said.

“Of course. I already believe that.”

“Heh, I see.” She beamed. I still adored her—just not in a romantic sense.

“...Rae, you’re spilling the tea,” Yu said.

“My apologies.”

The commoner had made a mistake. How unlike her. Ralaire scurried to avoid the hot tea spreading across the table.

“...Is something the matter? You look pale,” Thane said.

“It’s nothing. Thank you for your concern.”

Stupid cheeky commoner, getting Thane to fret over her... But really, was she all right? She certainly did look pale...

“...Claire and Manaria really seem close,” he said.

“That they do. Would you like more tea?”

“...Rae, that’s the milk pitcher, not the teapot.”

Something really did seem off with the commoner. Perhaps Lene’s absence had caused me to push her too hard. Finding myself uncharacteristically worried for her, I considered the possibility of giving her some time off.

“Um, Miss Claire? I don’t know how to broach this, but, um...”

“What is it, Loretta? Please, speak your mind.”

I was having tea at the usual arbor with Pepi and Loretta, as well as the commoner (and Ralaire). Manaria wasn't present. She'd been called to the Royal Palace for a tea party. I wanted to go along as well, but Pepi and Loretta said they wanted to talk to me in private, so here we were instead.

Loretta's expression was stiff, making *me* nervous by extension.
“It's...about Lady Manaria.”

“Oh, I see. What about her?” I felt my tightly wound nerves begin to relax upon hearing she just wanted to talk about Manaria.

“Um, well... Is she trustworthy?”

“...What do you mean by that?” Inadvertently, my voice turned cold. “Are you implying she's not? Even from you, Loretta, there are some things I cannot excuse. I did not think you would be so—”

“Miss Claire...”

“What, Commoner? Can't you see I'm busy?”

“Please, calm down. You're scaring Miss Loretta and Miss Pepi.”

I looked at the two. Now that the commoner had brought me back to my senses, I saw they were cowering with fear. *Oh dear. How unbecoming of me.* And right after I had told Loretta she could speak her mind... Even Ralaire seemed somewhat frightened.

I said, “I'm sorry, Pepi, Loretta. I lost myself for a moment there. Please, continue.”



“...It’s okay. I expected you might get angry,” Loretta said.

“We know just how much you care about Lady Manaria,” Pepi said.

It was true. I held Manaria in high esteem. She’d pulled me from the depths of despair after my mother’s passing, but even if she hadn’t done so, I’d have considered her a wonderful person.

It appeared Pepi and Loretta saw her differently, however.

“What do you two think of her?” I asked.

“...I think she’s a little scary,” Loretta said.

“Me too...” Pepi agreed.

“Scary...? But you two both seemed to adore her when you were with her.” They had practically fought for her attention. It was honestly somewhat embarrassing to watch.

“That’s what’s so scary,” Loretta began. “Even when she’s not really doing anything in particular...”

“She just draws people in! It’s like her very presence is magnetic,” Pepi finished her friend’s words.

“Is that all? You two are overthinking things.” I smiled to try to dispel their worry. “You’re both drawn to her simply because she’s that splendid of a lady.”

“Is that really it...?” Loretta said, unsure.

“It is. A truly graceful lady like her fascinates people even when, as you put it, she is doing nothing in particular.”

“I see. You do possess such a quality yourself, Miss Claire...” Loretta said. She and Pepi still seemed a bit unconvinced, however.

Sensing something off about the mood, Ralaire looked up from the biscuit she was nibbling at the corner of the table. I stroked her head reassuringly.

“Hey, what do you think, commoner? About Lady Manaria, I mean,” Loretta asked.

“Do you agree with Miss Claire?” Pepi asked.

They must have been really desperate for a second opinion if they were turning to the *commoner*, of all people.

“Hm, let me think...” the commoner began. “Lady Manaria is

certainly a unique individual, but I don't think she's using hypnosis magic or anything like that."

"Right..." Loretta said.

"Well, yeah, I figured," Pepi agreed.

"I think what Miss Claire said is about right. Lady Manaria's every motion is so elegant that one can't help but be captivated by her."

"See? Even the commoner agrees," I said.

"That being said..."

"...Commoner?" I'd thought she was in full agreement with me, but she continued.

"I *do* think Lady Manaria is doing it on purpose. She is intentionally trying to draw people to her."

"Excuse me? And what do you base that claim on?!"

"I base it on the fact that Lady Manaria needs to create connections here in Bauer."

"Ah." I was momentarily stunned by understanding.

The commoner continued. "As she's said herself, Lady Manaria has been effectively exiled from her country. That being the case, she doesn't have many options available to her."

"What do you mean?" Loretta asked.

"Quit beating around the bush and get to the point already!" Pepi said.

"Well, she can either leave her home behind and seek a new life here in Bauer, or..."

"Or bide her time and prepare for the dispute over the Sousse crown, is it?"

"Indeed, my ever-brilliant Miss Claire."

What the commoner was saying was essentially this: Manaria claimed to be well rid of her familial squabbles, but in truth, she was building power so she could return to Sousse and take back the throne when the time was ripe.

"You're reading too much into things," I said.

"Perhaps. I do get the impression Lady Manaria doesn't really care

about her right to the throne,” the commoner said. Before I could get a word in, she continued, “That said, making connections is still important when you’re starting a new life. I’m sure she’s actively trying to widen her circle, even if it’s not to take the throne.”

There was logic to what she said. Regardless of Manaria’s motives, it was a fact that she could not rely on support from her homeland. It followed, then, that she would actively try to establish new connections.

“I see. Still, there’s one thing that puzzles me,” I said.

“Whatever could that be, my beloved Miss Claire?”

“Cease your buffoonery at once, commoner. As I was saying, I can’t seem to understand why you three, well...why you three appear so bothered by Sister.”

All three of them—Loretta, Pepi, and even the commoner—seemed a bit wary of Manaria, hence this discussion.

“Well, that’s because...you know...” Loretta looked to Pepi and the commoner.

“Yeah...” Pepi nodded.

“It’s just you who doesn’t get it, Miss Claire,” the commoner said with a sigh.

Despite Pepi and Loretta typically never getting along with the commoner, all three seemed to be on the same wavelength now. Whatever was going on?

“Aha ha ha ha! The three of them are worried I’ll snatch you away, Claire.”

“Sister?!” I exclaimed, surprised.

“Hello, Claire. And hello to you three as well. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but with the topic being what it was, it was a little hard to barge in. Sorry.”

I wondered how long she had been listening in on us, standing there in our collective blind spot. Pepi and Loretta tried to stand and apologize, but Manaria just told them it was fine. She asked if she could join us, then took a seat.

Unsurprisingly, Pepi and Loretta had gone pale. Even if there was no ill intent behind their actions, they had gossiped behind the back of foreign royalty and been caught... The commoner seemed plenty

indifferent, however.

“Allow me to apologize, Loretta, Pepi. I am, in fact, endeavoring to expand my connections and have unsettled you because of it. Forgive me.” Manaria lowered her head, making Pepi and Loretta flustered.

“Y-you have nothing to apologize for!” Loretta said.

“If anything, it’s us who should apologize!” Pepi said.

The two stood from their seats and bowed.

Manaria accepted their apology with a smile. “I don’t intend to come between any of you, but me and Claire go way back. I want to be close to her, just as you do. That’s all.”

“O-okay!”

“We understand!”

Manaria grinned wryly at their frantic replies and petted Ralaire. “There’s no need to be so stiff. As I’ve said before, I can no longer be considered royalty. Please, speak freely with me.”

“Oh...”

“Should we really...?”

It would appear such a thing was hard for Pepi and Loretta to do all of a sudden. Seeing this, Manaria said, “It would be great if we could be friends as well. I’ve always been curious what my dear Claire’s friends were like. Would you two be willing to be my friends?”

“Of course!”

“It would be our honor!”

“I’m glad to hear it. It seems I’ve found new companions.” She gave us a radiant smile, one that could make even a fellow woman’s heart flutter.

“...And what about me, Lady Manaria?”

While Pepi, Loretta, and I were entranced by Manaria’s smile, the commoner spoke up, having failed to read the mood.

With some amusement, Manaria said, “Sorry, Rae. What we’re fighting over is a little different from Pepi and Loretta.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Or are you seriously going to keep playing

dumb?”

“I haven’t the foggiest clue what you’re getting at.”

“Chickening out, are you? But that’s fine. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time.” Manaria smiled, amused from the bottom of her heart. “Moving on. Tea! I think I would like some more tea. It would be nice to unwind after my tea party at the Royal Palace.”

“Hee hee. Oh, Sister, you can be so silly. Len—*ahem*... Commoner, serve us some tea.”

“Right away.”

We went on to enjoy tea as normal. Pepi and Loretta, who had finally come to understand Manaria’s charm, seemed to enjoy themselves. The commoner maintained a poker face throughout, but knowing her, she was likely thinking something strange—not that I particularly cared.

I had completely failed to notice the growing discord between the commoner and Manaria.

I was still unaware of this secret discord when the two suddenly declared they would duel one another. I was made to preside over their match, and I saw my worst fear realized before my eyes.

“Dominator.” The area went silent the moment Manaria cast her spell. All magic was extinguished, the water spells the commoner tried to cast failing to take effect. And then...

“Commoner!”

The next instant, blood spurted from Rae as she collapsed. I ran up to her while she lay unmoving on the ground.

“Commoner! Rae! Pull yourself together!” Not caring about getting blood on me, I propped her up and gently slapped her cheek. She didn’t react. She was out.

“Move, Claire. I’ll heal her.”

“Sister...” I turned to see Manaria nonchalantly standing behind me. For the first time ever, I felt afraid of her. But this was no time for that—the commoner’s body was getting colder by the second. “Please, save

her!"

"But of course." She held her hand over the commoner's body and cast healing magic. I watched as the commoner's blood clotted; her bleeding stopped. Her pale face slowly regained its color. "She'll be fine now. Don't worry."

"Oh, Rae... Thank goodness..."

I was worried sick, having feared I'd lose the commoner after already losing Lene. I hugged her gradually warming body and let relief and anger wash over me.

"What were you thinking, Sister?!" My anger was, of course, directed at Manaria. She looked a little surprised, but I didn't stop. "Why did you go this far?! You could have just used Spellbreaker and your usual attack magic to beat her instead!"

"I couldn't. Rae is strong."

"I'm well aware she can fight, but she's clearly nowhere near your level! How could you use Dominator against her?!"

Dominator was Manaria's special technique—one that was at its most potent against other magic users. There wasn't a magic user alive who could endure it unscathed. Their fight had already been over the moment Manaria used Spellbreaker. The commoner hadn't had a chance of winning. Even so, Manaria had gone out of her way to put the final nail in her coffin.

"Why would you do such a thing?!" I asked.

"Because Rae wouldn't stop if I didn't. Do you *really* not understand?" Manaria brushed off my harsh words, returning some of her own. I didn't know what to say, not understanding what she was getting at. "You know she loves you, right?"

"...That's just the commoner's way of teasing me."

"It's not. She's serious about you. That's why she refused to give up. Her feelings for you are genuine, Claire."

"Even if that were true, you still took things too far! What if you had killed her?!"

"Have you forgotten? The barrier here weakens magic. Not even Dominator could be lethal...though I'll admit it turned out stronger than I expected. I didn't think Rae's magic aptitude would be so high."

“I’m appalled! How could you be so irresponsible?”

“You’re really worried about her, huh?” she said quietly. There was a tinge of sadness and something conflicted in her voice, as though she were watching something dear to her leave the nest.

I was stunned for a moment, but then regained my composure. “This girl is my maid. As her master, it is only natural that I be concerned for her safety.”

“Really now? I don’t recall you being the type to hold your servants so dear. You’ve gone through one servant after another—barring Lene, that is.”

“W-well, I...”

“Rae’s special to you, huh?”

“She is absolutely not!” I angrily exclaimed, feeling embarrassed.

“But you’d never be so worried about just any old maid. Do you even realize how you look right now? You’ve covered yourself in blood trying to help her.”

“Th-that’s...just because...”

“Because you’re her master? Please. The Claire I know would have grown fed up with her pathetic maid’s actions and left.”

I had nothing to say to that. Which was, perhaps, proof in and of itself that she was right...

“Please, stop it, Lady Manaria!”

“Don’t bully Miss Claire!”

Two girls came running from the spectator seats—Pepi and Loretta.

“Pepi... Loretta...” I murmured.

“Miss Claire still needs time to sort out her own feelings!”

“I get that watching them makes you feel impatient, Lady Manaria, but you’re being much too forceful!”

The two of them rebuked Manaria. Their voices were trembling slightly, to no surprise. They had to be scared. They might have grown closer to her recently, but they’d just watched her fight with her absurd strength. However, despite being scared, they still stood before her as though to protect me.

“...I see. Claire’s still at that stage, is she? I suppose I’ve gone a little too far, then.” Manaria seemed to regain her usual air of composure. “I apologize, Claire. And to you two as well, Pepi, Loretta.”

“N-not at all,” I said. “And whatever are you all talk—”

“Miss Claireeeee!”

“Are you okay?!?”

Pepi and Loretta leapt at me in tears. I still didn’t fully understand what had just happened, but for the time being I decided I would hug the two and try to calm them down. *Jeez! Now we’ll all need to change later.*

“Claire?”

“Yes, Sister?”

“You’ve made some good friends.”

“...Huh? Oh. Yes. Yes, I suppose I have.” I may not have quite understood what had just happened, but I did at least grasp that Pepi and Loretta came to my aid.

Hearing me agree, Manaria made a satisfied smile.

“Miss Claireeee! It’s okay if you take things one step at a time!” Loretta said through tears.

“Yeah, yeah! We’ll be there for you all the way, no matter how dense you might be!” Pepi said, through tears as well.

“Th-thank you, girls... Wait, what are two talking about?” I could swear there was a dig at me woven in there.

“Oh gosh... I can’t believe you can be this oblivious!”

“But that’s exactly what makes you so cute!”

“Again, what are you two going on about?!?”

Before I could get any answers, however...

“Mn...ngh?”

The commoner roused.

“Rae? Rae!”

“...Miss...Claire...?”

“Rae! Thank goodness...”

I never did get any answers from Pepi and Loretta, but I was fine

with that. I was just happy to see the commoner awake and well. It never did occur to me how strange it was for me to be happy at her wellbeing, but then again, I could be rather—as Loretta put it—oblivious.

“...Fire.”

The commoner used her Stone Cannon spell to mow down the monsters, leaving only magic stones behind in its explosive wake. She then gathered those magic stones as though dealing with a chore, her expression flat. It was strange to see her ever-expressive face be so dead.

Several days had passed since Manaria and the commoner dueled, and the Academy was proceeding with preparations for the Amour Ceremony. More specifically, we were preparing the area around the ceremonial grounds by clearing the monsters that had gathered there, lured in by the magic stones the Scales of Love used. Monster extermination was typically the job of the military, but since there were just so many monsters, the students helped out every year. Thankfully, the monsters weren’t too strong and could be handled even by the students. That said, many of the first years weren’t used to fighting monsters yet, so the first-year students worked in teams. I was in a team with Manaria and the commoner.

“You’re not pushing yourself, are you?” I asked worriedly as I watched the commoner continue to indifferently butcher monsters.

“No, I’m fine,” she replied curtly. She pushed her way through some undergrowth in search of her next prey, then spotted an amorphous green slime. Green slimes were mild-mannered monsters that survived by blending into greenery. They were perfectly harmless if left alone. Even so, the commoner fired her Stone Cannon spell again, mercilessly annihilating the creature. With its core pierced, the slime turned into slush and returned to the earth.

I felt a shiver run up my spine. I was shocked she could be so ruthless when the slime resembled Ralaire so much. *Come to think of it, Ralaire’s been in Misha’s care more than the commoner’s as of late.*

“Oh wow, she’s really going at it,” Manaria teased. She put her arm over my shoulder and grinned at the commoner.

“Sister, please. It’s not safe. We should be focusing right now.”

“We’re fine. It’s not like any of the monsters around here can give the three of us any trouble.” She said it with confidence, not arrogance. Truthfully, she was likely capable of taking down every monster in the area all by herself.

“But we have someone here who’s only just made a recovery.” I was referring to the commoner, of course. I still hadn’t forgotten the sight of her bloody, fallen body.

She’d been strange ever since that day, like her head was in the clouds. She’d been acting rather cold too.

“I’m fine,” the commoner said.

“Are you really...?”

Even now, she was as cold as could be. Before, I only needed to speak to her to make her gush with glee, but now she didn’t so much as smile. She may have insisted she was okay, but I wasn’t so foolish as to believe her.

“C’mon, Claire. No more slacking off.”

“Oh, r-right.”

“Look, there’s a Grand Wasp over there. You can handle it yourself, right?”

Manaria elegantly urged me back to our duties. For some reason, she seemed intent on keeping me away from the commoner as much as possible. We still had a job to do, however, so I pushed my disordered thoughts aside and focused on the task at hand.

It took me a while to realize the commoner had slipped away.

“Hey, you.”

After we’d just about finished our monster hunting for the day, I called out to the commoner. A brief look of clear displeasure flashed on her face for a moment, but she relented and came over to me.

“Can I help you, Miss Claire?”

“Yes, you may. What do you think you’re doing leaving my side? Are you not my servant?”

The commoner had ignored our hunting team grouping for almost the entirety of the day. Such behavior was troubling for a servant of mine.

“I don’t see the problem. You had Lady Manaria to protect you.”

“This isn’t a matter of whether I was protected or not. As my servant, you have a duty to serve me.”

“I apologize,” she said, but she didn’t look apologetic in the slightest. In fact, her mind seemed entirely elsewhere. Out of habit, I reprimanded her.

“Do you *really* understand what you did wrong? You are aware you’ve only just recovered? It’s reckless for you to be going off on your own.” Truthfully, I was worried for her. She had been badly injured, and now she was acting strange. I was anxious that she was pushing herself despite still being unwell, but I could hardly come right out and say that. “It’s not like I’m worried for you, but imagine what it would be like for me if my servant just up and got herself killed—”

“My apologies. I’ll be more careful from here on out.” She listened obediently for a time, but then grew impatient and annoyedly cut me off before trying to storm away.

Before I knew what I was doing, I had grabbed her hand.

“What is with you? You’ve been acting strange ever since you dueled Sister.”

“...It’s nothing.”

“You’re lying. You’re usually all over me, but you’ve been hanging back these past few days.”

The commoner had begun acting strange right after she fought Manaria. Before that, she used to do whatever she could to get my attention. Now, she wouldn’t even meet my eyes.

After I pressed for an answer, she finally relented, saying, “We were battling over you, Miss Claire.”

“What?”

Reluctantly, she told me everything: the taunts, the challenge, the circumstances of their duel. By the end of it all, I was seething.

“...And that is why I no longer have a right to stand by your side,

Miss Claire.”

“What a load of nonsense!” I bellowed after her offhand explanation. “Do you think I’m some prize to be won?! Well, I am most certainly *not!*”

You could certainly find tales of gentlemen fighting over a lady in books and plays. Perhaps such a thing was meant to appeal to a woman’s pride, but I’d always found it strange. How would the lady feel in such situations? What would it be like to have your own feelings ignored and your future decided by the outcome of some duel? Wasn’t that just absurd?

That was why I couldn’t help but feel indignant to find out I’d been put in such a position. Truth be told, I rather lose control of myself in my anger.

“Really? And here I thought you’d be quite happy to have someone as great as Lady Manaria fawning over you,” the commoner said. There was biting sarcasm in her voice that I never thought I’d hear from her.

Further angered, I exclaimed, “You take that back! That is no way for a servant to speak to her master. This is why I hate peasants...”

I was vexed. Vexed to have her, who always treated me so respectfully, treat me like a stranger now. No matter how much she teased me, she never went so far as to insult my dignity—until now.

If I’d been calmer in the moment, I would have realized something was wrong. Her face was so pained. She was suffering. But I failed to notice, and so things took a turn for the worse.

“Fine. I quit.”

“...What did you say?”

“I said I quit. You don’t want a commoner like me around, right?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Quit? *She* wanted to quit being my maid? *But of course*, I thought. *In the end, you’re no different from the rest.*

I was surprised by the ease with which I accepted my despair. Everything from that point felt unreal, as though I were merely a bystander watching things transpire.

“...Do you really mean that?” I asked.

“I do.”

“You wish to quit being my servant?”

“I do.”

I wonder what face she made then. I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I cannot remember.

“I...see.” With difficulty, I steeled myself and prepared to fulfill my final duty as her master.

“...Miss Claire?”

“Your pay will be calculated up to today, so be sure to collect it at a later date.” As a lady of House François, I would act with dignity until the bitter end. A contract was a contract. It was only right that she be paid for each and every last bit of her services. “You’ve given me plenty of cause for complaint, but at the end of the day, you’ve served me well. On behalf of House François, I offer my gratitude.” I wasn’t confident I could smile as I was, but I tried my hardest regardless. I had no clue whether I succeeded. “Thank you for your service, Miss Taylor.”

First my mother left me, then Lene, and now the commoner. It was all too much. But that was okay. I was used to partings by now. I should be. I would not cry before the likes of a commoner.

“Miss Clai—”

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

I hadn’t a clue what I was saying at this point. I was simply speaking out of reflex, using all that had been drilled into me as a lady of House François.

“...Goodbye then.”

I thought I heard the commoner say something, but I was beyond the point of caring already.

“In the end, you’re leaving me too, huh? You liar...”

My tongue let slip some of my deepest and most vulnerable feelings. But I hadn’t the wherewithal to even register that I said anything at all.

“Claire?”

“...”

“Claireeeee?”

“...”

“Yikes. You’ve really got it bad.”

Catherine’s happy-go-lucky voice barely registered with me. We were in our shared dorm room. I didn’t even know when I had returned; the last thing I remembered was dismissing the commoner from my service. Everything afterward was a blur.

It was a different day by this point. I vaguely remembered Catherine’s bewildered face when I returned to the room, but I didn’t remember much else. I hadn’t even changed out of my uniform, but just rolled into a ball under my blanket.

Abandoned. Discarded. Unwanted. Such words had cycled repeatedly in my head. I thought they described me perfectly. I’d tossed and turned, my agonizing thoughts not even allowing me a peaceful sleep.

“You can be awfully delicate when it comes to certain things. I’m guessing something happened with that commoner girl for you to get like this?” Catherine said with her lazy drawl.

My mind picked up the word “commoner” and began to spiral. “*Commoner*”... *I’ll never be able to call you that again, will I?*

“Hmm. I want you to tell me what’s going on, but you’ve completely cocooned yourself. What to do...”

All those dear to me leave me eventually. I can’t take it. It’s all too much. If this is how I’m meant to live, then I’d rather not...

“Oh, what’s this? Commoner? Rae, was it? What brings you here all of a sudden?”

Just as my thoughts took a turn for the dark, Catherine’s words startled me upright. “Commoner?!”

“There you are. Good morning, Claire, although technically it’s still night.”

I looked toward the doorway and saw no commoner, just Catherine sitting in her wheelchair with an impish smile on her face.

“Sorry for tricking you, but I felt this was the only way I could get you to talk to me.”

“...Unfortunately, I have nothing to say.” There was nothing to be said, after all. I was simply undeserving of love. It was only a stroke of

luck that I'd happened to receive any love at all so far—I wasn't worthy enough to hold onto it.

"Yeah, yeah, there you go again. Putting yourself down and drawing weird conclusions. C'mon, pull yourself together. I seriously doubt things are as over as you think. Try telling me what happened. Maybe I can help." Despite it being so evident that I was not myself, Catherine continued to act like she always did.

"...What's the point? You'll only leave me too someday," I grumbled.

She laughed and said, "Well, yeah. I can't stay with you forever. Not with this body of mine."

"Oh..."

"But I'll try my hardest to stay with you as long as possible."

"...I'm sorry."

"It's fine. Here, have a candy." She reached into her candy pot and took out a piece, then handed it to me. I didn't really like the flavor, but the smell of licorice flowers seemed to have a calming effect on me.

"...I dismissed the commoner from my service," I murmured.

I proceeded to explain everything that happened between us. I occasionally got too emotional to speak, but Catherine waited patiently, nodding along.

"...And that's everything."

"I see... Sounds rough. Both for you and the commoner girl."

"Huh? Her too...?"

"Of course. Lady Manaria might have set things in motion, but the root cause of all this was really the way you two interact with one another."

"What do you mean?" I urged her to explain.

"Well... Before I explain that, don't you think you've had it rather easy so far, socially speaking?"

"In what way?"

"Most people can't do things like make friends without taking initiative themselves. That hasn't been the case for you, has it?"

Come to think of it, I *was* often the one being approached by others.

“I mean, take the commoner girl. She’s always the one making these aggressive advances on you, right?”

“She only does that to tease m—”

“Zip it! Now’s not the time, all right?” she said, cutting my complaint short.

“...Please, continue.”

“She might have been a bit extreme about it, but the way she interacted with you was much sounder than the way you do with others. Most people don’t have what it takes to keep interacting with someone who won’t reciprocate their interest.”

“Wait, you think the way she acts is *sound*? ”

“I do.” She moved her wheelchair over to some embroidery goods, then picked out some thread and showed it to me. “Normal thread breaks when you pull on it like this, right?” She pulled both ends of the thread, easily breaking it.

“But bonds between people are the opposite. If both sides don’t pull as hard as they can, their bond breaks. You were supposed to put in just as much effort as the commoner girl did, Claire.”



“...Perhaps. But it’s too late now. Things are finished between me and her.”

“No! Things haven’t even begun between you two!” she exclaimed with uncharacteristic volume, surprising me. She even looked angry for once. “Listen up! You and the commoner just had a temporary fight. Employment contracts can easily be remade.”

“It’s not that simple. I’ll lose face as a noble if I—”

“Is something like that really more important than your bond with her?”

“That’s...well...” Maintaining one’s dignity was important to a noble, but my desire to mend my broken relationship with the commoner was certainly stronger.

“I’m a noble too, if only in name. I understand how important it is to keep up appearances. But I’m sure you’ll be better off prioritizing your connection with that commoner girl more. I get the feeling that if you lose her, you’ll be down for the count for real this time.”

“I am not so—”

“Don’t act tough, Claire. You may pretend otherwise, but it’s clear the commoner has become all the more important to you with Lene’s absence.”

Was that true? Was the commoner really that important to me?

“Catherine, what am I supposed to do...?”

“That’s something you have to figure out yourself. This might sound cold, but I really can’t help you here. If you truly value your bond with that girl, then you need to secure it yourself. You can ask for another’s help only after you’ve done all you can.”

“...I see.”

“Good. Heh, you’ve finally turned that frown upside down, huh? Feel like you’re back on your feet yet?”

“...I’m not sure. But I do understand that sulking in bed won’t get me anywhere.”

“Mm-hmm. Good. Big sis is proud to see the usual headstrong Claire back in action!”

“Pardon, are you supposed to be my big sister now?”

“Ha ha ha!”

I pretended to chide her, but in truth, I was thankful. Her words and never-changing calm, relaxed attitude brought me back from the depths of my own hell.

“Thank you, Catherine.”

“You’re very welcome. This is nothing. After all, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“No, we’re not quite friends,” I said to clarify.

“Wait, whaaat?” She made a playfully exaggerated response.

With a soft smile, I said, “We’re *best* friends.”

“Ooo, there we go. Already putting what you learned into practice, huh? It takes two to maintain a bond.”

“Yes, well, I do learn fast.”

At the end of the day, I still didn’t know what I could do to fix things. But at the very least, I knew I was done being all doom and gloom.

I steadied my trembling hands and knocked on the door.

“It’s open. Come on in.”

“Pardon my intrusion.”

I entered to see a beautiful woman with platinum blonde hair sitting in a chair.

“How do you do, Sister?”

“Fine, thank you. Are you feeling better now?”

“I am.”

Apparently, I had gone to Manaria’s room in tears after letting the commoner go. After I cried myself to exhaustion, she carried me to my room. I was here now to both apologize and thank her for that.

She stood and offered me a chair before sitting back down herself.

“I apologize for the trouble I caused you the other day,” I began. “I let you see a rather disgraceful side of me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I know full well that you’ve always been a crybaby.”

“...That’s mean.”

“Ha ha. Sorry, sorry.” She laughed lightly, then turned serious.
“Rae’s awful. To make you cry like that, I mean.”

“It’s not all her fault. I understand some of the blame is mine, as things stand.”

“Oh?” said Manaria, sounding surprised. “It hasn’t even been a full day and you’ve already calmed down quite a lot. I’m guessing we can thank your roommate?”

“You met Catherine?!” I exclaimed. Catherine typically avoided others.

“I did. Interesting girl, that one. I noticed she was hiding herself, so I used my magic to reveal her... Oh, c’mon. Don’t make that face, Claire. It’s not like I used Dominator on her or anything.”

I must’ve been glaring. I quickly relaxed my expression and said, “Moving on, yes, it is thanks to Catherine that I’ve come around. She’s an irreplaceable, dear friend of mine.”

“How enviable. I wish I had a friend I could count on like that.”

“I’m sure someone like you could make as many such friends as you’d like.”

“No, it’s not so simple. Just like love, friendship isn’t something you can will into being. It has to occur naturally. Anyway, what do you intend to do, then? About Rae, that is.”

“...I don’t know. I haven’t a clue what to do.”

“I can tell. Rae is already making her move, though.”

“Huh? She is?” I asked, surprised.

With a malicious grin, Manaria said, “She came right up and challenged me to another duel. If she wins this time, I’ll have to give up on you.”

“...So I’m being made a prize without my consent for a second time, am I? Has she considered how I feel about all this?”

“Ha ha, well... I’d say from her perspective, this was the only option she had.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you won’t ever speak your true feelings, no matter how long she waits.”

I couldn’t say a word in response. She was right, after all.

Manaria continued, “We’ll be dueling with the Scales of Love, following tradition by presenting offerings to the scale. The heavier offering will be the winner.”

“You accepted her challenge?”

“Yep. Seemed fun.”

“...Would you consider withdrawing?”

“No can do. I’ve got my own reasons to duke this out—not that you need worry about that.”

I hadn’t a clue what her motives were, but she was clearly set on going through with her contest against the commoner.

“You realize I have no reason to comply with the outcome of your competition, right?” I said.

“Of course. But Rae and I are still serious about this.”

“...Do what you want,” I said with a huff. Despite my irritation, I could tell the two of them were not going about this lightly.

“Oh, and one more thing. I intend to play to win. Sorry, Claire.”

“And why should you apologize for that?”

“Because I can see the true feelings that lie in that heart of yours.”

“...I’d rather you didn’t go making assumptions about me.” I didn’t like others acting as if they saw through me—not even my dear Manaria.

“Heh. You might be shocked by what I see in you, you know? One’s own feelings are sometimes less easily perceived by oneself than others.”

Irritated, I said, “Is that so? Then what, pray tell, are the true feelings you see in me?”

“Well, for starters, you can’t help but take an interest in that girl, as vexing as it may be.”

“...Pardon?”

“Oh yes. You don’t want to admit it, but what you feel for her is something known to most as lo—”

“Excuse me?! I would never feel that way toward that commoner!” I exclaimed, cutting her off.

“Commoner? I never said who I was talking about, though?”

“Don’t tease me. Given the context, who else would we be talking about here?”

“Heh, all right, you got me there.” She put both hands up in surrender. *Goodness. The nerve of her!*

“And again, I do not have feelings for her.”

“Is that really true? Because your face tells a completely different story from your words.”

“It does not!”

“Ha ha ha! Got me again. That all being said, I’m pretty sure my intuition is right on the mark.” With an amused grin, she winked.

“...I swear, you’re becoming more and more like that commoner,” I said with a sigh.

“Does that mean you’ll fall in love with me?”

“There you go again with your teas—”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did,” she suddenly said in a lower tone.

“...Sister?”

She stood from her seat and slowly approached me. Overwhelmed, I couldn’t move from my chair.

“I love you. That’s neither a lie nor a joke. If I were to earnestly pursue you, would you reciprocate my feelings?”

“Sister... What’s wrong? Now you’re *really* acting like that commoner.”

“Don’t play daft with me, Claire. You know why I was chased out of the Royal Palace, don’t you?”

I did know. She had been caught fooling around with someone of the same gender. In other words, she was a homosexual, like the commoner.

I asked, “Do you mean to tell me you accepted the commoner’s challenge in hopes of winning my heart like her?”

“That’s half of it, I suppose.”

“Then what’s the other half?”

“Secret. Putting all that aside for now, how about it? Do you think you can reciprocate my feelings?”

She wore the same look of aloof composure she always had, but something about her seemed close to tears. I hesitated for a moment, but eventually I prepared to answer.

But before I could, she said, “No. Wait. It’s fine. I already know your answer. Sorry for asking you something so silly.”

“Sister...”

“Rae put it well herself: This is the norm for *people like us*. Those whose love comes to fruition are few and far between. It’s nobody’s fault —it’s just how things are,” she said with a smile. “But this has nothing to do with my match with Rae. I won’t hold back against her.”

“Even though you have nothing to win?”

“Oh, but I do. At the very least, I’ll get to see her cry.”

“That’s a little twisted, Sister.”

“Do I repulse you?”

“Not at all. I find it quite endearing, actually.”

“Ha ha ha... You’ve sure learned how to banter.”

“I had your example to work with.” I stood up there and bowed to her. “It’s about time I take my leave.”

“Right... Oh, hold on, Claire.”

I stopped and turned around, seeing Manaria there with a smile on her face.

“Just one more thing. Do you love Rae?”

I couldn’t bring myself to say “yes” or “no,” but it appeared my expression was enough of an answer.

“I see. Then I guess it all comes down to Rae,” she murmured.

With that, I left the room behind in earnest.

Interlude: Uncomplicated (Rae Taylor)

“NOTHING AGAIN...”

I checked the loot dropped by the giant tree monster I'd slain, but I didn't find what I was after. I wiped my disappointment away alongside my sweat and began scanning the area for my next target.

I was deep in the forest next to the spot where the Scales of Love were, together with my water slime Ralaire. I was looking for an item called the “Branch of Eternal Love,” the greatest offering one could make to the Scales of Love. According to legend, a Flower of Flora was supposed to be the greatest offering one could make, but that wasn't actually true. In *Revolution*—the game this world was based on—one could find clues about the Branch of Eternal Love, a secret item that trumped the Flower of Flora as an offering. It felt wrong to use my gaming knowledge in my pursuit of love, but my hand had been forced. I would do anything to protect Claire from Manaria.

I would waver no longer. Now was the time for action.

...Or at least that was what I told myself. In reality, obtaining a Branch of Eternal Love was quite the ordeal. They were a super-rare drop from a monster in this forest called a “Conjoined-Branch Tree.” These monsters were disruptive to ecosystems and needed to be regularly thinned out, but as they lived deep in the forests or mountains, few took on the job of hunting them. They were rather stationary too, so they could be left alone with little risk of them spreading. Seeing an opportunity, I'd taken a job from the Academy Knights to eliminate some.

Unfortunately, the monsters were fairly strong. They were functionally immune to magic, which was pretty bad for someone like me who relied entirely on magic. Thankfully, they still had one weakness I could make use of.

“Ready for more, Ralaire?” I looked at the water slime on my shoulder and saw her bounce up and down in affirmation. I gently petted her smooth surface, gave her a biscuit, and continued to walk. She and I had been quarreling for a bit, but I was able to make up with her after

giving her some chocolate.

The weakness of Conjoined-Branch Trees was the slime solution of water slimes. Said slime solution uncovered an area my magic could get through, allowing me to focus my spells on the spot and defeat them. That being said, they were still tough opponents.

“...Here we go.”

After some more walking, I came across a strange-looking cluster of trees. Conjoined-Branch Trees generally didn’t move, waiting instead for their prey to come to them by pretending to be ordinary trees. It was a bit tricky to discern Conjoined-Branch Trees from their regular brethren, but doable with practice.

I wrapped around to the backside of the Conjoined-Branch Tree, carefully silencing my footsteps.

“Now, Ralaire!”

On my signal, Ralaire spat out some slime solution. It coated part of the Conjoined-Branch Tree’s skin and melted it away, causing it to shriek. It then moved to attack. I quickly picked Ralaire back up and slipped her into my pocket. The rest was up to me.

“Icicle Rain!” I cast a spell, causing pillars of ice to rain down. A number of them were swatted away by the Conjoined-Branch Tree, but some managed to strike its revealed weak spot, causing it to shriek again. Some woodland critters fled the area. *Sorry!*

“Stone Cannon!” This time I fired off a drill-shaped boulder. It tore through the branches the monster tried to block with and gouged deep into its body. Still, the damage wasn’t enough.

“I could really use some fire magic right now...”

I could only use water and earth magic, meaning I didn’t have anything particularly effective against Conjoined-Branch Trees, which were of the earth attribute. The fight would end quicker if I used my super- or high-aptitude spells, but missing would cost me too much mana, so I was sticking to whittling it down with low- and medium-aptitude spells. It was quite the nerve-wracking process.

“If only Miss Claire were here...” Claire’s Flame Lance would probably end this in one strike—but, of course, that’d be too easy. She wasn’t here with me now, for I was in the process of trying to win her back at this very moment.

“...Miss Claire.” I thought of her, and of her absence now. This was the longest I’d been away from her since I’d come to this world. I had taken her presence for granted, not fully realizing just how lucky I had been.

“Ugh! What’s moping about it now going to do for me?!” I dodged around the narrow grove, firing ice arrows off in succession. Instead of wallowing in my sadness, I needed to do all I could to get through this—that was what Claire herself would do, at least. She was a woman of action. I may not be able to be quite like her, but maybe I could mimic her in part.

The battle continued for some time, until—finally—the Conjoined-Branch Tree fell on its side and died. Its loot: just a magic stone.

“...Can’t...make it too easy, huh?” I mumbled between labored breaths. Ralaire looked at me worriedly from atop my shoulder. I petted her reassuringly, then wiped my sweat off with a towel and flopped down onto the ground. My skirt was getting dirty, but I was beyond caring.

“How many does this make now...?” I’d given up counting around the hundred mark, but I had to have killed more than two hundred. Of course, I hadn’t reached this number all in one day. I’d been coming to this forest ever since my competition with Manaria was decided, even taking time off class. The Academy was overlooking my absences because they were for Academy Knight work, but I was starting to push it. I would have to come up with another excuse soon.

Time wasn’t my only issue, however. The Branch of Eternal Love’s drop rate still posed a problem.

“A 0.5 percent drop rate is really nothing to scoff at.”

I’m sure there are some people out there who would think hunting two hundred monsters at a 0.5 percent drop rate would total up to a hundred percent chance at seeing a drop, but that is incorrect. If there were a *group* of two hundred monsters with one holding the item, then yes, hunting them all would yield you that drop. But in the case of non-related, individual encounters, *each* monster had an unchanging 0.5 percent drop rate that reset with each encounter. Hunting two hundred of these Conjoined-Branch Trees only gave me a 63 percent chance of seeing a Branch of Eternal Love. I would likely be hunting for a long while yet.

“...Just what am I doing this all for anyway?” I mumbled as I let my arms sprawl back on the leaves. I felt defeated. For a moment, I considered

giving up...but then I remembered. "What am I saying? I'm doing it for love, of course."

I loved Claire. I loved her so much it drove me mad. I'd tried to suppress my feelings after what Dole told me, but it had only made my feelings grow deeper.

"I wonder what excuse I can give Master Dole... Oh well. What will be will be."

As my fatigue deepened, my thoughts grew more basic: I loved Claire, so I wanted to win, and to win, I had to find a Branch of Eternal Love. That was all there was to it, really. What did it matter if we were both girls? What did it matter where our relationship stood? I'd push all those unneeded thoughts to the side, where they belonged. At the end of the day, it was all really rather uncomplicated.

How strange. In my past life as a corporate slave, I would go on jogs every now and then for a change of pace. Right now, I felt like my mind was as clear as it was on those jogs.

"All right, that's enough rest. You ready for some more, Ralaire?" I gave Ralaire another biscuit and began searching for my next target. "Wait for me, Miss Claire!"

All my pessimistic thoughts of Claire not appreciating my efforts or disliking me disappeared as I immersed myself wholly in hunting for the sake of the woman I loved.

Claire's POV

THE DAY OF THE Amour Ceremony finally arrived.

"Wait a second!"

Right when Manaria was moments from kissing my lips, a voice brought her to a halt. All eyes turned to face the source of the voice. I turned as well, then was shocked by what I saw.

It was the commoner.

Her presence wasn't what shocked me, however, but her state. She was completely covered in wounds.

"What took you so long, Rae?" Misha said worriedly.

"Sorry, I got tied up for longer than I expected," the commoner replied, wedging herself between Manaria and me.

With a huff, Manaria said, "So you *didn't* chicken out. I guess I was wrong about you."

"Like hell I'd chicken out. I told you I'd be winning this, didn't I?"

After tauntingly sticking her tongue out at Manaria, the commoner grabbed my hand and pulled me away. I was stunned by her suddenly holding my hand, but I gathered myself and met her gaze directly, a jumble of emotions reflected in my eyes.

"Don't worry, Miss Claire. I won't let this jerk take you away," she declared. Her face was covered in injuries, but she seemed in high spirits.

"But you've already lost. I don't know what you plan to offer the Scales, but I have a Flower of Flora," Manaria said, holding up a glowing flower. She was right. Her offering was already the best one possible. "Even if you happen to have another Flower of Flora, I was here first. I remain the winn—"

"This is my offering." The commoner interrupted Manaria, pulling something unexpected out of her pouch.

"Is that...a branch?" I murmured. The commoner's offering appeared to be just that—an all-too-common tree branch. I felt disappointed, which made me realize I'd been hoping she would somehow surprise us and turn things around.

"Was that the best you could manage?" Manaria taunted.

"No, this was what I've been looking for from the start." The commoner was full of confidence, but everyone around us gave her pitying looks. Of course they would. It was clear her offering didn't measure up to Manaria's. "Don't worry. You'll see once we present our offerings."

The commoner urged Manaria to go first. Once the two began, there would be no going back. If I wanted to stop them, this was the only chance I'd have. I considered it, but the commoner reassured me everything would be okay with a nod.

"Fine. Let's do this, then." Manaria stepped up to the Scales of

Love.

The Scales were ancient but elegant, with a presence that befit a sacred treasure bestowed by the gods.

“I offer what is in my heart to be judged by God.” Manaria theatrically recited a stanza from Poesie Amour, then reverently offered her Flower of Flora to the Scales. The legendary flower glowed even brighter. The Scales tipped greatly in her favor.

“My turn. Here’s my offering.” Without any flair or grandeur, the commoner placed her branch onto the Scales. The Scales didn’t move one bit.

“Figures. Looks like I win after a—” Manaria started, but she was interrupted by a deep rumbling sound.

“An earthquake?!” Everyone dropped low to brace themselves before realizing what was really going on. The earth itself wasn’t shaking at all. It was the Scales of Love that were trembling.

“What is that?” somebody murmured. I looked to see buds had sprouted on the branch. Not just buds—but roots, bursting forth. In a matter of moments, the branch had grown into a giant tree that tilted the Scales completely.

“The Flower of Flora lost...? Just what is this branch...?” Manaria murmured, dumbfounded.

“It’s called the Branch of Eternal Love,” the commoner said. She explained it was an item dropped by a monster living in the nearby forest. It was apparently incredibly difficult to obtain, explaining all the wounds she bore.

“Then the Flower of Flora isn’t the heaviest offering possible?”

“It was the heaviest *known* offering so far, but no, it wasn’t the heaviest there was,” the commoner proudly said. She then turned to look at me. “Miss Claire?”

“...Huh?” I had been left dumbfounded by this unexpected development. Her voice struck sense back into me.

She roughly wiped her injured face, making herself just barely more presentable, before continuing, “Honestly, the outcome of this match doesn’t matter one bit.”

“What...?”

Does she mean to say she doesn't care about me? I worried for a moment, but she continued.

"I cannot give you a romance like you see in stories. As you know well enough already, I can't even express my true feelings without framing it like a joke." She stopped there for a moment before continuing. "But even so, I *do* love you, whether these divine Scales recognize that or not. And even if I were to lose to someone, I would *still* love you and only you. So please..." She dropped to a knee before me and took my hand. "Will you let me return to your side, not as your maid, but as something more?"

The commoner used her own words—not some line from a poem—to express her desire to have her love reciprocated. It was the first time she'd ever done so.

I was immeasurably happy.

"...I can't believe you... You're just so..."

For some reason, tears began to well up in my eyes. I was not sad, however. Far from it, my heart was overflowing with joy.

I tried to respond to her words, so she could return to my side—but before I could...

"Aha ha ha! You got me! You really got me!" Manaria's jovial laughter interrupted us, ruining our moment.

"Lady Manaria, could you please read the room a little?" the commoner chided.

"Nope. I've decided I want you. You're simply the best there is." Manaria abruptly hugged the commoner, causing my eyes to grow wide.

"Wha—Lady Manaria?" the commoner said.

"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."

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

"Ahhh. My bad, Claire. Rae's been my actual target from the start. She's just so fun to tease that I wound up roping you in to get at her." She stuck her tongue out cheekily before laughing some more.

Sister was after...the commoner? Could that be the other half of why she accepted the commoner's challenge, like she mentioned before?

I didn't like what was going on. I didn't quite know *why*—I just

knew that I really, really didn't like it.

"Please get off of me, Lady Manaria," the commoner said.

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

They bantered back and forth as if they were close. I was beginning to fume.

"Well, I refuse!" the commoner said.

"Heh. Playing hard to get just makes you even cuter." Manaria leaned in toward the commoner—toward Rae—to try to kiss her.

That was when I hit the limit of my patience.

"Hey, cut th—"

"No!" I forced myself between the two and pushed them apart, shouting at the top of my lungs. "Rae is mine! You can't have her!"

It took a full second for my mind to belatedly process what I'd said.

Wh-wh-wh-whaaaat?! What on earth am I saying?!

"M-Miss Claire...?" Rae said timidly.

I felt my face go red. "N-no! I didn't mean it *that way*!"

"Miss Claiiiire!" She embraced me.

The hug was stifling, and far too much for the circumstances, but I couldn't deny it made me kind of happy to receive it. I could never express such a feeling, of course, so I resisted it, as I always did. "Let go!"

"No! I love you, Miss Claire!"

"Well, I hate you! Leeet gooo of mee!"

"You said I was yours!"

"Shut up! Forget all of that!"

The two of us squawked at one another, for the first time in days.

"Excuse me, Lady Manaria. I hate to be rude, but can we consider this match decided?"

"...Yes, I suppose."

Misha and Manaria were talking about something as they watched us carrying on, but I was too distracted by both my happiness and embarrassment to notice.

"Leeet gooo of mee!"

“Nooo!”

The two of us were back to our usual ways. The only thing different now, however, was that my chest was filled with a warmth incomparable to before.

“She’s really gone, eh?”

“She’s just like a gust of wind, that Manaria.”

“...She possesses the qualities of a good ruler, I’d like to think.”

After seeing Manaria off, the three princes each made some heartfelt comments. I, too, was reluctant to part with her.

I wondered what she could have possibly wanted to talk to Rae alone about.

“At any rate, congratulations, Miss Claire.”

“Huh? Congratulations for what, Misha?” I responded, puzzled. Looking back on it, I should have turned and walked away right then and there.

Blithely unaware of what was going on, I suddenly found myself surrounded by Rod, Yu, Misha, Pepi, and Loretta. *Huh...? Huh? Huh?!*

“Oh, c’mon now. It’s obvious what’s going on between you two.”

“Yep, yep. You can’t hide anything from us, Claire. Oh, of course, we support you both.”

“...Love can take many different shapes.”

The three princes—even Thane, standing a short distance away—each offered comments. I began to have a bad feeling about what was going on.

“Miss Claiiire! Don’t stop hanging out with us just because you have her now, okay?”

“Let’s continue to have tea parties every now and then!”

“What in the world are you all on about?!?” I exclaimed. I hadn’t a clue why Pepi and Loretta were in tears all of a sudden. My bad feeling had turned into a creeping chill by this point.

“You seriously don’t know?” Rod asked.

In unison, they all said, “You’re dating Rae now, right?”

“*What in the world made you think that?!*” With every fiber of my being, I denied the claim.

“Huh? But...”

“C’mon...”

“Right?”

“...Indeed.”

Misha, Rod, Yu, and even Thane all gave each other looks. It was clear they were greatly enjoying this. I, Claire François, was experiencing what it was like to be the victim of cruel injustice for the first time in my life.

“‘Rae is mine! You can’t have her,’ wasn’t it?”

“Master Rod!” I exclaimed, red in the face. He had repeated, verbatim, some words I said the other day.

“What’s the matter? I thought those were rather lovely words, myself.”

“M-Misha, not you too!”

“Miss Claiiire! Please, don’t forget about us!”

“You have to invite us to the wedding!”

“What are you crying for, Loretta, Pepi?!” I exclaimed. “You didn’t eat those chocolates with liquor in them again, did you?!”

Things were getting increasingly more chaotic.

I insisted, “I only said what I said then in the heat of the moment! I don’t particularly care about Rae or anyth—”

“Hold it. What did you just say?” Misha interrupted me with a keen glint in her eyes.

“Wh-what?”

“Just now, you called her ‘Rae,’ didn’t you?”

“Huh? What are you on about? That’s her name.”

“Uh, Claire? You realize you’ve been calling her ‘commoner’ up till now, right?” Rod said.

“Yeah, I’ve never heard you actually say her name before,” Yu agreed.

“...Nor have I,” Thane added.

“H-huh?” Now that they mentioned it, I realized they were right. At some point in time, I had started actually using Rae’s name. The switch hadn’t been intentional, but it certainly seemed to have a deeper signi...

Wait, no, no, no! It has no deeper significance at all!

“Y-you misunderstand! Until now, um, I’ve been... Oh! I’ve been using her name when it’s just the two of us!”

“Oh? So you’ve *only just* stopped needing to hide things, eh?” Rod said.

“How bold of you, Claire,” Yu said.

“...But there’s nothing wrong with that,” Thane said.

Ah, jeez! I’m getting nowhere with these people!

I said, “At any rate, there’s absolutely nothing going on between Rae and me!”

“Hold it.”

“What is it this time, Misha?!?” In my mind, I thought, *Oh no?! Did I mess up again?!*

“Just now, you placed Rae’s name before your own. Up until now, you’ve always put your own name before ‘the commoner’.”

“Wha—oh, spare me! Must you be so nitpicky?!?” I fumed.

Misha giggled.

“...Oh, you’re enjoying this, are you?” I said.

“I apologize, Miss Claire. But you are just so adorable.”

“Could you cease the teasing already?!” I turned away with a huff.

“Aw, don’t pout,” Rod said. “There’s nothing wrong with it. This is a time for celebration, if anything. Rae’s feelings were reciprocated!”

“Oh, enough out of you all... Wait, are you fine with this, Master Rod?”

“Hm? Why wouldn’t I be?”

“If I do become involved with Rae, wouldn’t that *utterly ruin* your

chances with her?” I fired back somewhat meanly, intending this to be my counterattack.

Rod didn’t seem fazed in the slightest, however. “It doesn’t matter who she loves or dates, ’cause she’s going to wind up by my side in the end regardless.”

“...Ah. Right. I forgot this was the kind of man you were,” I muttered.

“Yeah, that’s Rod for you.”

“...I apologize on behalf of my brother.”

For some reason, Yu and Thane were trying to console me. *Me*, of all people.

“So, how far have you two gone?” Rod asked.

“Huh? What do you mean ‘how far’?”

“C’mom, you don’t need to play dumb with us. First base? Second base? Don’t tell me you’ve gone all the way already.”

“Wha—”

“*Are you stupid?!*” I wanted to ask. But I fought to hold myself back, remembering Rod was royalty. Yes, yes. I’m amazing, I know.

“Of course we haven’t done those things! We haven’t even held hands yet!” I said.

“You’re kidding? Sheesh. Don’t blame me if she gets snatched away from ya,” Rod said.

“That’s rich, coming from the one most likely to do the snatching,” Yu joked.

“...Rod certainly would, wouldn’t he?” Thane commented.

The three princes had chosen a strange time to all be in agreement. If only they always got along this well...

“Hmm... Oh, I know!” Rod suddenly said. “If that’s all too much for you, you should start with a date!”

“A d-d-date?” I repeated back.

“Yeah. Dates are, like, a must if you’re going out.”

“B-but Rae’s a commoner. There’s not exactly much we can talk about or see eye to eye on...”

“Naw, don’t worry about it. Rae will figure that much out. All you need to do is muster up the guts and go for broke.”

“G-go for broke? You’re sure?”

“Totally.” Rod’s sheer confidence made me begin to feel, by extension, like things would indeed pan out.

“Er, Rod, should you be giving such haphazard advice?” Yu chided.

“...I agree with Yu. Unlike us men, ladies tend to be dainty,” Thane said.

“You think so? Rae strikes me as the type to brute force her way through things,” Rod said.

“You overestimate Rae, Master Rod. She’s more normal than you’d expect,” Misha said.

It seemed just about everyone had something to say against Rod.

“Well, whatever. You never know what’ll come of something until you try. Go ask her out on a date, Claire,” Rod said.

“Wait, *I* have to be the one to ask her?!”

“Well, duh. This is between you two, and I doubt she’ll read your mind and ask you first.”

“B-but I could never do something so shameful!”

“Oh, but it’s okay to expect Rae to be, as you put it, shameful? I had no idea this was how a lady of the famous House François might behave.”

“...Hmph!” I should have realized by now that I was being toyed with, but mention of my family name caused blood to rush to my head. “Fine, then! I, Claire François, shall neither run nor hide! I shall successfully invite Rae out on a da...an excursion! Oh ho ho ho!”

It comes as no surprise, I’m sure, that I wound up grumbling to Catherine again that night.

Chapter 5: Tactless Rae and Me

Days before departing to Euclid for our holiday, Rae and I visited the castle town. She had some things she wanted to take care of before our departure and told me I could just wait for her at the dorm, but I insisted on tagging along. Why, you might ask? H-hmph! Just a passing fancy, is all. What Rod and the others said had absolutely nothing to do with this, really. Really, I tell you!

“Where are we going?” I curtly asked, looking toward Rae, who was diligently holding a parasol over me. I’d found it hard to gauge *what* the two of us were ever since the whole ordeal with the Scales of Love, and I’d been speaking to her rather bluntly as a result.

“Just here and there. I need to take care of some minor business before we leave.”

“What kind of business?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. Just, how do I put it...stuff to prevent potential annoyances.”

“How cryptic.” I cocked my head to the side, causing her to giggle. I didn’t know why for the life of me, but just seeing her smile made my heart race.

“Anyways, why the sudden interest? You’ve never accompanied me on a personal errand before,” she asked.

“...No particular reason. I just wanted to get some fresh air,” I said, purposefully trying to sound cold and turning my head away. *Aaaagh! No, this isn’t right!*

“But Miss Claire, I thought you didn’t like the heat or the sun?” She was right. I loathed the sweltering heat and the sun’s strong rays, so I usually told her to deal with her business on her own. Objectively speaking, it was strange for me to be tagging along with her right now.

“Oh, what does it matter?! Let’s just hurry up and do what you came to do!”

“If you say so...”

I stormed ahead, skirting around her question. She gave me a quizzical look for a moment but soon smiled again.

...Phew. It seems I'm in the clear.

“So, where exactly are we going then?” I asked.

“Just right...here.”

The two of us stopped before a building. It looked like a store of some kind, but not a particularly big one. It lacked the high-class appearance of a store meant for nobles, making me think this was a place for commoners to shop.

“‘The Tulle Trading Company’... Do you need to buy something?” I asked.

“No, I just need to talk to the owner a bit.”

“Is that so...? Well, all right. Let’s go inside already. It’s hot out here.”

“That’s why I said you should just wait at the Acad—”

“Inside. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It seemed like she was about to question why I’d tagged along again, so I quickly urged her inside.

“Wel...come?! W-well, if it isn’t Miss Claire. Might I ask what brings you to our humble establishment...?”

The kindly-looking shopkeeper seemed to recognize me and hurriedly came out from the back to greet me.

“It’s not *me* with business here. Go on, Rae. Hurry up and do what you came to do,” I said.

I went to a corner of the store and sat down on a sofa, then examined the interior of the place. As I had guessed from the exterior, this store was meant for commoners. The place did have a sofa to lounge on, but a better establishment would have individual rooms to conduct business in private. This was no place House François would ever frequent, or any other noble, for that matter.

“...What business could she have here?” I murmured. From watching Rae and the store owner talk, I could surmise that they were already somewhat familiar with one another. I hadn’t a clue what

connection a student who had worked as a maid might have with this place, but she seemed pretty serious as she talked business with the man.

“Heh. So you *can* look like that.” I thought she looked kind of cool right now, all stern-faced like that. She had a critical lack of seriousness when she was with me, so this no-nonsense attitude was refreshing. Of course, I’d always found her looks to be rather passable—the problem was her inane behavior, which spoiled it all.

“...They seem to be on good terms.” Rae and the man occasionally dipped into friendly small talk. Watching them made me a little irritated.

“You shouldn’t be so friendly with someone of the opposite sex, Rae...” Their age gap aside, they were still man and woman. There was no telling if the opposite party might misunderstand and come to the wrong conclusion. This wasn’t my jealousy speaking, of course. Perish the thought. I just didn’t want some unwanted moths to start circling around my Rae. I was worried about her, as her employer.

“Honestly... You can be so tactless.” Here I was, pushing myself to tag along with her in this blistering heat. It wouldn’t kill her to, you know...yeah. *B-b-b-but it’s not like I think this is a date or anything! I just want her to attend to me a little better!*

“What kind of date would we even go on, anyway?” I had a plethora of high society experience and a general grasp of how nobles dated one another: Things like visiting art museums, attending concerts, or dining out together were fairly standard. But that was all for nobles. Rae was a commoner. What kind of date would a noble and a commoner go on together?

“Come to think of it, I still have that book I borrowed from Catherine.” I took said book out of my pouch and thought back to last night.

“Your friend was wondering how they should approach their relationship with a commoner?”

“Th-that’s right.”

I went to Catherine for advice, insisting it was advice for my “friend.”

“...Oh, reaaaally,” she said with a grin.

“Wh-what? Is something the matter?”

Catherine was sprawled out on *my* bunk bed, not hers, a book in her hands. “Just to be clear, this is about your ‘friend,’ right?”

“R-right.”

“Could you tell me what this friend of yours and the person they want to date are like?”

I thought for a bit, then answered, “My friend is a somewhat high-ranking noble. They’re strong-willed and have a hard time expressing their feelings. They sometimes say the opposite of what they mean to say.”

“Oho?”

“The commoner is a bit eccentric. They aggressively approach my friend without hesitation, not caring about the fact the friend is a noble. Said friend has been having mixed feelings toward the commoner as of late.”

“Wow. I’m surprised you can see yourself so objectively.”

“This is about my *friend!* My *friend*, okay?!”

“Sure, sure.” She cleared her throat once, then said, “You don’t read novels much, do you?”

“No, I do. Occasionally.”

“But you only read certain genres, I’m guessing. You don’t much care for romance novels, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“Cause romance between nobles and commoners is basically the bread and butter of the romance genre.”

“Really?” It would appear this world was still full of things I didn’t know. “Incidentally, what are you reading there?”

“This? It’s, well… Honestly, I have no idea what genre this falls under… It *is* a novel, though.”

“Let me see that. Now, what do we have here? *Futago Escape?*”

“Hey, Claire! You can’t just snatch things out of people’s hands.”

The novel Catherine was reading depicted a story about two commoner sisters living their daily lives. It was a strange novel, having little in the way of dramatic developments, but the conversations between the laid-back sisters were oddly charming.

“Come on, give it back, Claire! I’m still reading that.”

“How odd. I feel a strange affinity with these sisters.”

“I’m sure you’re just imagining things. Now give it back.”

“I think not. I’ll be borrowing this for a while.”

“No way! I’m still only halfway through it! You tyrant!”

“In exchange, I’ll say we did that field activity together and write the report for you.”

“...That’s the second volume. Take this instead; it’s the first.”

And that was how I obtained this first volume, which I now held.

“Interesting. An at-home date. That might not be such a bad idea...”

If our date was at home, then we wouldn’t have to worry about others getting in the way, and Rae wouldn’t have to worry about putting on airs. This could be it.

Just then, Rae and the store owner seemed to conclude their business. I closed my book and stood up. “All finished?”

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

“No problem. Do come by again.”

“Goodbye.”

The two of us left the shop, and Rae promptly pulled out the parasol. Not bad. She could do well if she tried.

“We still have some time until curfew, don’t we?” I said. “I’m feeling a little peckish...”

“Shall I make you something once we return to the dormitories?”

I’d been trying to indirectly invite her to eat out, but she failed to notice.

“...You can be so dense sometimes.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing,” I said with a sigh. “Yes, yes, let us return. Let us return, why don’t we?!”

Displeased, I stormed ahead, leaving her behind.



“Miss Claire, your skin will burn.”

“It’s fine, I don’t care!”

“Well, I care. What if your beautiful complexion was ruined?” she said, rushing to catch up with me.

I spun around and asked, “...Would you hate me if my skin was ruined?”

“Of course not.” An instant answer. My question must have been abrupt—and quite ridiculous too—but she still answered without hesitation.

“I see. Humph...” I desperately fought to keep myself from smiling.

“Miss Claire, you’re not quite yourself today,” she said, ever the fool.

“And whose fault do you think that is?!”

“Huh?” She returned me a perplexed look. *Goodness*. Even though the truly perplexed one here was *me*!

“Let’s hurry up and return! You’re making me a crème brûlée once we get back!”

“Well... All right.”

For now, I would let her off the hook for a crème brûlée.

“...Goodness. What a waste of an outing together,” I muttered under my breath.

“Did you say something?”

“I said you’re a fool!”

“Erm, Miss Claire? Why are you reading in my room?”

“Oh, be quiet. This is the trend these days.”

“Huh? Is it really, Misha?”

“...Don’t ask me.”

“Oh?”

“What a surprise.”

With our holiday only a few days away, I decided to pay a visit to one of my favorite confectioneries and just so happened to run into Rae right in front of the place. This was quite the coincidence, given that we had decided to go off on our own.

“I didn’t expect to catch you here at a store that caters to commoners,” she said.

“There are some sweets I can only find here. There’s nothing wrong with businesses meant for commoners, anyway—the famous Broumet itself is run by commoners.”

“All that matters is if the sweets taste good, huh?”

“Indeed.”

“I didn’t think you could be such a glutton.”

“Excuse me?!” She might not have been entirely wrong, but hearing such a thing still irked me. “Well, what about you then? What brings you here?”

“Oh, just market resear… I mean, curiosity, yeah. I was just curious what kinds of sweets were in vogue.”

“So you’re just window-shopping, then?”

“I guess so.”

Being a commoner, Rae likely didn’t have the financial leeway to buy luxury goods like sweets. Ralaire was nonchalantly seated on her shoulder, looking inside the confectionery with great interest.

“I see. Well, I suppose I could take it upon myself to buy you something. Go on ahead and choose something you like,” I said.

“Huh? May I really?”

“Of course. Call it noblesse oblige.”

Together, we entered the confectionery. It didn’t quite measure up to a high-end establishment like Broumet, but it was decent enough for a place catering to commoners. The ambience was one of a little-known hole-in-the-wall, which I quite liked.

“…Huh. There sure are an awful lot of folks from the Spiritual Church around.”

“You’ve only just now noticed?” I said. “This place is a favorite of the nuns.”

The Bauer Cathedral, the headquarters of the Spiritual Church, was located relatively close by. Nuns were fairly high in social status, but financially they were little different from commoners. The owner of this store apparently felt a bit sorry for the nuns, so she began giving discounts to members of the church who showed their rosaries—their proof of membership to the Church—at the counter. Many nuns wearing habits could be seen in the adjoining cafe space near the shop, enjoying tea with their sweets.

“Oh really? I didn’t know that,” she said.

“Well, now you do. Have you decided what you want yet?”

“Oh, not yet. There’s quite a lot more to choose from than I expected. Let me think it over.”

“I’ll go ahead and make my purchase first then. Let me know when you’re ready.”

“Okaaay.”

I giggled a little, finding the sight of her with her eyes glued to the display cases a bit funny, and proceeded to make my own purchases. While I was at it, I figured I would buy snacks for Ralaire as well.

“How do you do?” I greeted the proprietress.

“Why, if it isn’t Miss Claire. As always, thank you for your patronage,” she said with a soft smile. She had broad shoulders and looked good in an apron, as was perhaps befitting the owner of a confectionery.

“I’ll have this and that today again.”

“No licorice candy today?”

“No, not today.”

This was where I bought Catherine’s favorite treat, licorice candy. This confectionery was a bit off the beaten path in that they stocked somewhat rarer sweets than most. I’d invited Catherine to come here with me a number of times, but she’s never taken me up on my offer, being stubbornly opposed to riding in carriages for some reason.

“Strawberry daifuku and herb biscuits, right? That’ll be seven hundred gold.”

“I’ll pay with this. Keep the chan—”

“Whaaat?!” Over by the display cases, Rae suddenly exclaimed. Ralaire rolled off her shoulder out of surprise.

“Wh-what’s the matter?” I asked.

“I thought I just heard something that couldn’t possibly be here.”

“And what exactly was that?”

“Strawberry daifuku.”

There she went, acting strange again. I picked up Ralaire as I replied. “What’s so strange about strawberry daifuku?”

“Huh? You mean I heard right? This place has strawberry daifuku?”

“Of course they have it. It’s a popular item among the nuns.”

“Whaaaaat? The sweets situation of this world is wack.” She seemed shocked, staring at the strawberry daifuku and muttering to herself.

“Miss Claire, these strawberry daifuku were actually fairly recently introduced to the Kingdom,” the proprietress explained.

“Oh, is that so?” I replied.

“Yes. They originally came from an island nation to the east. The same birthplace as karashi mustard, I believe.”

Come to think of it, that island nation was said to have many people with dark hair and eyes like Rae. Perhaps her bloodline traced back to there?

“I’ve never once considered that strawberry daifuku might be foreign. They’ve been around ever since I can remember,” I said.

“That would be because of your mother, Lady Melia. She bought them up the moment she heard there was an interesting strawberry confectionery out there.”

“Really...? Mother did that for me?” Hearing my mother mentioned all of a sudden made my chest feel tight.

“By the way, Miss Claire, is that...?”

“Hm?”

The proprietress pointed at Ralaire.

“Oh, don’t worry. This is just Rae’s familiar.”

“Ah, I see... So there *are* monsters out there that can be tamed.”

The water slime was quickly surrounded by women, drawn in by their curiosity and Ralaire's cuteness. Many of them fed sweets to her. I almost smiled at how endearing the sight was, but quickly changed the topic before anyone noticed.

"Has anything of note happened of late?" Typically, I would consider asking a commoner such a question to be a waste of time, but the proprietress and I went way back. I didn't mind making some idle conversation with her.

"Hm, let me think... Not in particular, no. Although some of my regulars have sadly stopped coming."

"Oh no. Do you know why?"

"They were moved to a different branch, apparently, although it's a little odd they didn't tell me themselves. I didn't think they were the kind to not at least say goodbye."

"Ah... Well, I suppose such things happen sometimes."

"I suppose. They were all such sweet girls too. But a third has stopped coming just this month."

"That's sad to hear."

Though I didn't realize it at the time, this was connected to an incident that would occur in the future.

"I've decided, Miss Claire. I'll have some strawberry daifuku too," Rae said.

"Yes, yes. Excuse me, could you add her order to mine?" I asked the proprietress.

"Of course. Would you like them wrapped?"

"Yes please."

While we waited, Rae and I looked around the shop interior. The nuns talking with their friends in the cafe space seemed relaxed, happy to take a break from their usual demure selves. Some of them even appeared to be around our age. This was likely one of the rare moments of relaxation they could afford with their finances.

"Thank you for waiting, Miss Claire. Here's your order."

"Thank you. Come on, Ralaire, let's be off."

After capturing the hearts of the nuns, Ralaire had been fed many

snacks and appeared to be in a state of bliss. She reluctantly left their hands and hopped into mine.

“I’ll come again sometime,” I said.

“You’ll always be welcome here.”

Together, we left the place behind.

“I can’t believe someone put strawberry daifuku out on the market before me...” Rae muttered to herself.

“Oh? Do you come from the east after all?”

“Huh? Oh, no, um... Kinda, but not really?”

“Again with the cryptic answers...” But then again, it wasn’t unusual for her to be so incomprehensible. With some exasperation, I returned Ralaire to her shoulder. “Do you have any plans after this?”

“Nope. Want me to hold your things?”

“No, thank you. These strawberry daifuku break easily, so we should probably head straight back to the dormitories.”

“Aww. And here I thought we could go on a date.”

“A d-d-d-d-date?!” That word greatly flustered me. Was this a chance to make up for that failed date from that other day? “W-well, I suppose I could deign to—”

“But if it’s for the strawberry daifuku’s sake, I understand. Let’s hurry home.”

“...I can’t believe you.”

“Hm? Miss Claire?”

“Just. How. Dense. Can. You. Be?!”

“Huh?! What did I do?!”

In the end, we returned to the dormitories without doing anything else that day. I would have to make up for our failed date some other day. *Sniff.*

Interlude: **Loretta (Kind Of) Runs Away from Home (Pepi Barlier)**

“PEPI, PEPI!”

“What is it, Father? And must you shout?”

Now that the holidays had begun, I was back in my family home, taking a violin lesson in my room, when I heard my father shouting for me. Right as I responded, he burst through the door.

My father is Patrice Barlier. He works as a finance official and is part of House François's political faction. People call him a talented klutz and a smart coward—not very complimentary things, mind you—but he always laughs off such comments. I respect him greatly.

“Pepi, oh Pepi, something terrible has happened!”

“What’s the matter, Father? Please calm down and explain.”

“How am I supposed to calm down when things are so wrong?!”

“Here, have some water.”

The part about him being a coward was, much as it saddened me to admit it, true. As his daughter, I really didn’t like to see him acting so pathetic.

“Ahh... Thank you, Pepi.”

“You are very welcome. Now, what is the matter?”

“Right, so... Loretta has run away from home.”

“...Huh?” I said, nonplussed. *Loretta ran away...?* “Please, explain.”

“Of course. It appears Loretta didn’t return home for the holidays, so Earl Kugret contacted the Academy to check if things were okay.”

“And?”

“Well, they checked her room and found a note on her desk that said ‘*Don’t look for me.*’”

“...Um, okay?”

“Pepi! This is serious! What if something happened to Loretta?!”

“Father, please calm down.”

“Again, how am I supposed to be calm?!”

My father was in a terrible panic. The members of House Kugret and House Barlier were close friends, and my father treated Loretta as though she were his daughter too. It made sense that he’d be worried for her.

To calm him, I said, “Listen. Loretta is a noble, and unlike commoners, we nobles are not free to go wherever we please. Her options are limited.”

“Go on...”

“Even if she sold all she had on her, she’d probably only have enough to live off of for a few days. What’s more, as a noble she is used to having a servant attend to her, so she probably wouldn’t enjoy a life on the run much.”

“I see, I see...”

“She isn’t the shrewd type either. In fact, I bet she’ll show up—”

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Master, my lady, I beg your pardon,” our butler said.

“Sebastian? We’re in the middle of something right now. Can it wait?” my father said.

“I’m afraid it cannot—”

“She’s here, isn’t she?” I cut in.

“Yes indeed, my lady,” Sebastian said with a troubled look.

“Huh? You don’t mean...” My father turned to me.

“I told you, didn’t I? Her options were limited.”

Loretta had come to us.

“I’m thinking of tailing Miss Claire.”

Reasoning it would be easier for someone close to Loretta’s age to hear her out, we showed her to my room. My father wanted to contact House Kugret immediately, but I convinced him to wait. I figured I could at least learn what in the world had kept her from going home first.

“You want to tail Miss Claire? Why?” I asked.

“Because there’s something suspicious about that Rae!” One glance at Loretta’s stern face told me she was beyond convincing.

“So? That’s nothing new. That girl’s been a weirdo from the very start.”

“Yes, she has, but that’s not what I’m getting at here. Have you noticed how Miss Claire’s been acting differently around her?”

“Ah...” I had a rough idea what Loretta was getting at. The commoner known as Rae had been making advances on Claire for quite a while now, much to the latter’s irritation. But recently, things had begun to change. Claire now looked at Rae with something other than annoyance in her gaze. In fact, the looks Claire now gave Rae were similar to the ones Loretta gave Claire...

“That Rae has tricked Miss Claire somehow! I need to protect her before there can be any further misunderstandings!” she said with a pained look of resolution.

“S-sure...” I said with a sigh.

It was a somewhat open secret that Loretta liked Claire. Most people who were close to her could tell. I was sure even Rae knew. It was only Claire herself who hadn’t caught on, despite how obvious Loretta made it.

Oh, Miss Claire. You’re such a heartbreaker and you don’t even know it.

“So what’s your plan then? What’ll you do about money?” I asked.

“I have some jewelry I’ve been holding onto that I can liquidate, so money won’t be an issue. Finding my way around Euclid once I get there might be a problem, since I’m a bit geographically challenged...”

“So your plan is to wing it.”

“You don’t have to put it like that...” She made a pouty face. *Oh boy...*

“There’s more going on here than what you’re telling me.”

“Huh?”

“Part of why you want to do all this is because you don’t want to go home, am I right?”

“...You see right through me.”

“Of course I do. Just how long do you think I’ve known you?”

The two of us grinned wryly at one another.

“All right, I’ll admit it. I don’t want to go home right now,” she said. “I have my plate full with just Miss Claire and my music as is.”

Loretta was expected to become Bauer’s first female soldier. If she returned home right now, her holidays would only be filled with training every day.

“I know this is selfish of me, but both Miss Claire and my music are really important to me.”

“I know. And I don’t think you’re selfish at all. You’re just doing the best you can.”

“...Thank you.” She smiled bashfully.

“All right. I’ll go talk to your father and convince him somehow,” I said.

“Really?! Thank you, Pepi!”

“In exchange...”

“Yeah?”

“You have to take me with you.”

“You’re coming too?!” She looked at me like a mother who had just found her missing child. I couldn’t help but be soft on her when she made such faces.

“It’s too dangerous for you to go alone, and there’s something in Euclid I want to look into myself.”

“Thank you. Honestly, I was worried about going alone.”

“It’s fine. For a friend...this is nothing.” Saying that made my heart ache, for some reason...

“If things are decided, let’s go ahead and contact Earl Kugret!”

“Whoa!”

My father came bursting through the door. Honestly, he could be such a worrywart.

“Father, you know it’s rude to eavesdrop, right?”

“Now’s not the time for manners! Loretta, I’m sure you’ll be fine in Euclid as you’ll have Pepi with you, but you should really let your father

know where you're going. He's been worried sick about you."

"...I'm sorry," Loretta said.

I said, "I'll explain everything to the Earl myself later, so go ahead and return to your room, Father."

"All right. But if you're going all the way to Euclid, make sure you prepare accordingly."

"Of course."

"Very good." With a satisfied nod, my father left my room.

"I see your father hasn't changed," Loretta said.

"I know, right? He can be such a handful."

"I like that about him, though. He's different from my hard-headed old man."

"That's no way to talk about your father. Earl Kugret is a wonderful person."

"...My bad." She awkwardly scratched her dark hair.

Afterward, I contacted Earl Kugret and told him that House Barlier would be looking after Loretta for a while. I also told him that I would be with her, so he needn't worry there. The Earl sounded greatly concerned about his only daughter running away, but seemed to accept her being in my hands.

"Shall we, Pepi?"

"Indeed, Loretta."

Let us be off to Euclid.

Claire's POV

IN NO TIME AT ALL, the time of our departure was upon us. We set off for the François holiday home as a group of four—my father, me, Misha, and Rae—traveling in a carriage pulled by three horses. My father

was reluctant to let Misha and Rae ride along, but I persuaded him to allow it, as we were all going to the same place. Rae and I sat with our backs to the coachman, and Misha and my father sat on the other side facing us. My father—both out of love and out of his pride as a noble—wanted me to sit next to him, but I got my way in the end.

“And then I said, ‘Are you a fool? The kingdom would fall apart without the nobility to prop it up,’” my father said, proudly recounting some event or other. He spoke with eloquence befitting a statesman, but... he had already told the same story a number of times now.

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

“Hmm? Have you? Well then, let me tell you a different one. It was right after Claire was born...”

He began another story—that he had also told only minutes ago. Rae and Misha smiled wryly, aware he was repeating himself but unable to say a thing. The difference in their status was too great for them to speak. As his daughter, I could technically stop him, but I was still a noble lady. It would be improper of me to interrupt him too many times.

Most of my father’s stories were about his own achievements. He was the Minister of Finance, meaning he basically held the purse strings to the entire treasury. The other ministries were by no means beneath him, but being able to control the flow of money gave him much influence. No piece of legislation or policy could get off the ground without his approval. That, in turn, made him see every item that *did* make it through as his own accomplishment—which wasn’t untrue, I suppose.

“Claire, you are still young—and a woman—so you might not understand that ideals alone are not enough in politics,” my father said, suddenly pulling me into a conversation.

“I see...” I said noncommittally. I was a little irritated by his comment about me not understanding something because I was a woman. Certainly, it was a fact that men dominated the political stage, but women had their own perspectives to contribute. If women ever gained the right to participate in politics, I was sure many talented female politicians would rise up.

That all being said, I couldn’t very well voice such an opinion here. I looked to Rae for help.

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

“Oh, she was just an angel! The most adorable being in existence!”

Rae skillfully changed the topic. It was honestly incredible how she was able to handle my father, a worldly-wise politician, with such ease.

Misha said to Rae, “I’m surprised you’d be bold enough to speak directly to Master Dole like that.”

“What’s so surprising about it? He’ll be my father-in-law one day, you know.”

“How can you joke about something like that right in front of him?”

Misha looked weary, exasperated by Rae’s audacity. Misha was a former noble, so she couldn’t help but feel under pressure when she was in my father’s presence. Just sitting next to him must put her on edge. The idea of exchanging words with him was likely unthinkable.

Dole said, “I permit this commoner to speak to me only because Claire does the same. Otherwise, we would never even be in the same carriage.”

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

“Mmm.” My father seemed satisfied by Rae’s humble comment. Such words were proper for her as a commoner, but I found myself not so amused for some reason. My father said, “I’ve noticed you’ve become quite close with this commoner, Claire. What a turn of events, after you started off hating her so much.”

“...I wouldn’t say we’re close.”

Not yet, at least. I’d been wanting to close the gap between us some more, but it’d been tough. I hadn’t made a lick of noteworthy progress in our relationship since the whole Scales of Love thing.

“Is that so? Well, be careful with whom you open up to. For a noble, your heart is much too gentle.” He addressed me in the condescending tone one might take with a child. I understood he spoke from a place of concern, however, so I bit my lip and nodded. “We wouldn’t want history to repeat itself, would we? I imagine being burned by that Rousseau traitor was enough.”

Even from him, hearing Lene mentioned in such a way was too much. I exclaimed, “Father!”

He ignored me and continued. “To think the whore would sell her

own country out to the Empire, after all those years we graciously employed her. His Majesty was much too lenient. She should have received the death penalty, at the very least.” I could tell from the look on his face that he meant what he said.

I fought to swallow back all the words about to burst forth. Technically, nothing my father said was incorrect. No matter what their circumstances might have been, what Lene and her brother did was horrible, easily worthy of the death penalty. But even so, Lene still remained someone irreplaceably dear to me.

I managed to endure my father’s comments. Just barely. Or at least I thought so until he continued to speak.

“She was having relations with her own brother too. Just the very thought of someone so revolting being at your side makes me—”

“That’s enough!” Fed up with all his hateful words, I finally snapped.

He looked at me with surprise. Even Rae seemed bewildered.

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

“Silence. I will not overlook such comments about Lene anymore, not even from you.” Seeing him continue to insult Lene, I rebuked him, unable to contain my anger.

Overwhelmed, he momentarily held his tongue.

I continued, “It is true what Lene did was wrong. But she had her own struggles, her own burdens...”

Only Lene herself knew the pain of falling in love with her own brother. Not even I, someone close to her, could imagine it. What right did anyone have to judge her if none could understand her hardship?

“Lene has been punished already. Please, spare her further censure. I still consider her dear to me.”

Lene betrayed me. She chose her brother Lambert over me. But even so, I still considered her a precious servant...no, more than that. A sister, perhaps.

“Claire, that is not the way a noble thinks.” My father’s voice was icy. “We nobles are born to rule. Compassion is but a tool for us to control people. We do not wallow in sentimentality.”

“I am not wallow—”

“Then why defend a servant who has betrayed you? Goodness, Claire. What would you have done if another noble had heard all you’ve said?”

“B-but...” My voice trailed off. This was getting nowhere. It was like we were talking past one another. My argument was emotional, but his was grounded in the logic of the noble world, and logic and emotion did not see eye to eye. It didn’t help that I knew which of the two I was actually meant to follow, as a noble.

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

I didn’t answer.

“Your response?”

I couldn’t.

“Claire.”

“...Yes, Father.” Quietly, I relented. Frustration ate me up inside, but I couldn’t forgo a response...for I was a noble. It was precisely because I was a noble that I’d been allowed to live the life I’d had so far. To ignore the expectations that came with those privileges would be irresponsible of me.

The one in the right here was my father. The one in the wrong was me. Understanding this, I weakly hung my head.

Just then, I felt Rae grab my hand from an angle my father couldn’t see. I glanced over at her, barely holding back a single tear. She squeezed my hand gently, and I squeezed hers back hard.

We may not have been able to use words, but something was unmistakably conveyed between us regardless.

Interlude: Background Check on Rae Taylor (Pepi Barlier)

“SO THIS IS EUCLID,” I said. “It’s a bit small, but it looks nice.”

After reaching Euclid by carriage, we stretched our stiff limbs and took a look around.

“It’s no wonder House François has a villa here. This place has all you’d ever need, and the fish tastes amazing too.”

“Oh right, you’ve been here a few times already, huh, Loretta?”

“Yeah, together on holidays with Miss Claire.”

“Oh... I see.” I ignored the strange pain in my heart and smiled.
“Well, we’re here. Now what?”

“Huh? You’re asking me?”

“...Don’t tell me you don’t have anything planned?”

“W-well, I figured I could leave everything to you the moment you agreed to come along, so...I got nothing,” she said sheepishly.

I couldn’t help but laugh at how meek she became. I didn’t hate being relied on. If anything, it made me all the more motivated. “All right. Just to be clear, we’re on this trip to look into that Rae Taylor girl, right?”

“Right. To better protect Miss Claire from her wickedness.”

“Then let’s gather information on her from the locals.” Euclid wasn’t only the location of House François’s villa—it was also Rae’s hometown. We should be able to find out what kind of person she was by talking to the locals here.

“Oooh, information gathering... Sounds fun.”

“We’re not here to have fun, Loretta. Take this seriously.”

“I will, I will.”

“You better. Let’s head over to an inn first to change.”

“Huh? Why do we need to change?” Loretta sounded like she wanted to get to questioning locals right away.

“Just look at us. We look like nobles on holiday. Do you think we’ll get proper answers asking around like this?”

“Oh, right. I guess not,” she said, understanding.

“Follow me. It’s not a noble-exclusive place, but I managed to arrange a room at a fairly decent inn for us.”

“Thanks, Pepi. I knew I could count on you!”

We changed into commoner clothing at the inn and immediately got to questioning the locals.

“Rae? Oh, the Taylor girl. Yeah, I know her pretty well, I’d say.” We managed to find a middle-aged man who seemed willing to answer our questions.

“What kind of person is she?” I asked.

“Hmm, well... She’s mysterious, I suppose.”

“Mysterious? How so?”

“Her mind always seems elsewhere. She spends most of her time in a daze of sorts. Her parents were pretty worried about her at first.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Really? That Rae?” Loretta said, similarly confused.

That description didn’t line up with what we knew of her at all, but we chalked it up to a difference in perspectives, thanked the man, and moved on. The next person we questioned was a vegetable-selling woman.

“Do I know Rae? Oh course, she came by to purchase from us all the time. She’s a bright girl, that one.”

“Wait, what?”

“Bright?”

Once again, Loretta and I were in disbelief.

“She wasn’t particularly good at studying, if I recall, but she was a quick thinker for sure. She was even called a child prodigy, if you can believe it. Why, she was a far cry from my own daft son.”

“She was called a child prodigy...?” I said, unbelieving.

“That she was. She always had her head in the clouds, that one, but I remember the school teacher used to rely on her as a human abacus.”

“No way...”

We went on to question a number of people. All of them described a Rae who was nothing like the one we knew.

“Pepi...”

“Yeah...”

“I’ve had a feeling, but now it’s certain: Rae is no ordinary person.”

“She’s even deceived all the people of her hometown.”

I didn’t know why Rae had hidden her true self from the people of her home, but there had to be some reason. But what could have transformed her from a child prodigy with her head in the clouds to a Claire-obsessed pervert?

“Ah! Pepi, hide!”

“Wh-whoa, Loretta!” I almost stumbled over from having been abruptly pulled to the side. I fell onto Loretta’s chest, causing my heart to race a mile a minute. *Wh-wh-what’s going on?!*

“Look, it’s Miss Claire and the commoner.”

I said nothing in reply, my mind elsewhere.

“Pepi?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, mm-hmm.” Though bewildered by my chest’s sudden thumping, I managed to refocus and saw Rae leading Claire by the hand into a building.

“That woman! What does she intend to do to Miss Claire?!”

“Calm down, Loretta! Let’s first find out what exactly that place is.”

“R-right. But she’s in for it if it’s some sort of place of debauchery!”

I managed to keep Loretta from charging forth, and together we peered at the shop from afar.

“It looks like a tailor shop, one for commoners,” I said.

“...So it’s Rae Taylor’s home?”

“Probably.” Taylor was a common family name for tailors.

“Should we go in?”

“No way—we’d bump into Miss Claire if we did. How are we supposed to explain why we’re here?”

“Ack. Right.”

“Let’s just keep watching a little longer.”

The two of us waited outside, watching the Taylor home. No matter how much time passed, however, Claire and Rae never came out.

“That’s weird...” I said.

“Yeah...”

“They wouldn’t spend the night there, would they?”

“No way. Miss Claire would never settle for staying at a dingy place like this.”

“You’d think...”

The Taylor home looked adequate as commoner housing went, but it was still a far cry from the luxury a highborn noble like Claire would be used to.

“I can’t wait any longer. I’m heading in.”

“Wha—hey, Loretta!”

Ignoring my attempts to stop her, Loretta entered the home.

“Welcome! Oh my, my, my. What cute girls we have here.” A young woman in an apron greeted us. She had voluminous hair that was black like Rae’s, but she didn’t resemble the commoner girl very much. She was probably Rae’s sister, given that this was the Taylor home. Perhaps the difference in their appearance was because they were only half-sisters or something. “Are you looking for clothes?”

“Oh, no, we’re, um...looking for someone.”

“Is that so? Who might that be, then?”

“Um...” Loretta hemmed and hawed. To think she would actually barge in without a plan...

“Excuse me,” I said. “We were actually wondering if we could ask about your younger sister.”

“My younger sister...?” the woman mused. “Oh, do you mean Rae?”

“Yes, her.”

“Oh, are you Rae’s friends? Nice to meet you. I’m her mother.”

“Whaaaaat?!?” Loretta and I exclaimed. The woman had to be past her

mid-thirties to be Rae's mother, but she looked like she was still in her teens.

"Y-you look very young," I said.

She giggled. "I get told that a lot. Let me call Rae over for you."

"N-no, no need!" I stammered. "We're not here to meet her. We're actually staff from the Academy, you see."

"Pepi?" Loretta gave me a look. I pinched the back of her hand and continued.

"We were wondering if we could ask a few questions about her. Would that be all right?"

"Oh, my. I understand—please, come on back."

Rae's mother—Mel Taylor, her name turned out to be—led us further into the shop to what I assumed was the lounge, although it was a bit too shabby to really be that. We sat on some tattered chairs near a small table.

"So what questions did you have?"

I asked, "We were wondering what kind of child your daughter was when she was young."

"Oh, let me think..." Mel seemed to ponder for a bit, then said, "She was a very bright child, I'd say. She could read and do math even without being taught, though she never showed much interest in schoolwork..."

"Is that so?"

"She was often asked to write letters on behalf of others who couldn't write, and whenever she heard a family had bought a new book, she would visit and ask to read it."

"So she liked to read, huh? Was that how she learned to cook?" Rae was known to cook things that even fascinated nobles, so it made sense to ask.

"No, I believe she picked up cooking normally. Cooking is something all commoners must learn, after all."

"O-oh, I see," I replied. I found it hard to see the connection between the food Rae made and normal commoner cooking, but I let it go.

"She can be rather mysterious, but she is a good girl," Mel continued. "She buys expensive medicine in the Royal Capital and sends it

to the people of Euclid every now and then.”

“O-oh.”

“I had no idea...”

Loretta and I exchanged looks, deep in thought. Mel saw this, smiled, and continued. “...As a child, Rae seemed hardly there at times, as though half her heart was off in another world. My husband and I really worried about her. We thought she might grow bored of this world and wander off to her other one.”

The person Mel described was nothing like the Rae we knew. Just who was Rae really?

“But it seems the entirety of her heart has come to settle in our world. She’s found someone worth making that choice for.” Mel smiled broadly, the tenderness in her expression leaving no doubt that she was Rae’s mother. The ‘someone’ she mentioned likely referred to Claire. “Of course, I’m glad she’s found herself wonderful friends like yourselves as well.”

“...You knew all along?”

“But of course. You two are a little too young to be staff at the Academy. It helped that a girl who carried herself similarly was just here.” This, too, likely referred to Claire. “How is Rae getting along at school? She tends to be rather meek. I can only hope she isn’t picked on.”

“Ah... Um... Well, she’s made a name for herself, that’s for sure... She seems to be enjoying herself, though.” There was no need to mention that Loretta and I had tried to bully her before. Also, *that* Rae, meek? Unthinkable.

“I see. I’m sure she can be a handful sometimes, but I’d be very happy if you’d continue being her friends.” Mel deeply bowed her head.

“...Let’s go, Pepi.”

“...Right. Thank you for your hospitality, Ms. Taylor.”

“It was no trouble at all.”

Mel saw us off at the door as Loretta and I left their home.

“Let’s go back to the inn,” Loretta said.

“Yeah... Hey, wait. Where’s your scarf?”

“Where’s yours?”

“I guess we dropped them somewhere.”

“...Oh well. Let’s go.”

“Right.”

Later that night at the inn, Loretta and I discussed our discoveries.

“We still don’t really have a grasp on her, do we?” Loretta said.

“No, we don’t...”

Rae Taylor had somehow hidden her true self not only from the people of her hometown, but from her very mother as well. Whatever was going on was more serious than I’d initially thought.

“But from what we’ve heard...it doesn’t seem like Rae is a bad person,” Loretta admitted.

“Yeah...”

It was hard to imagine someone who bought medicine to send to their hometown would approach Claire with ill intentions. What’s more, while Rae was described as mysterious by many people, there wasn’t a single rumor about her that was actually bad.

“Still, it’s not normal to walk around with a monster on you,” Loretta said.

“Huh? Oh, right. It’s easy to forget, but Ralaire’s a monster, isn’t she? I can only see her as our cute little mascot at this point.”

“Just the other day, she hopped onto me because I was holding some cookies.”

Aww, how sweet, I thought. Animals had always liked Loretta.

“She began jumping around all joyfully when I gave her one,” Loretta said.

“Maybe I should start bringing cookies around with me... Wait, no, we’re getting off topic.”

Ralaire was harmless; Claire herself had told us that.

“Right, we were talking about Rae,” Loretta said. “Ugh, I just don’t get it anymore. If she’s not a bad person...meaning she’s a *good* person... then I don’t think I can hate her anymore.”

“Loretta...”

It'd be convenient for Loretta if Rae had been a bad person, but the odds of that were looking slim. Now she couldn't justifiably take her frustrations out on her.

I said, "But maybe you don't need to hate her? Just challenge her head-on as your rival in love."

"But...I don't think I can win against Rae..." Perhaps because she was getting tired, Loretta's voice trailed off. Her response was more timid than usual as well.

"What're you saying? Miss Claire would be lucky to have you. Even I'm proud to call you my... Loretta?"

"...Zzz..."

"...Good night."

I got up, adjusted her blanket a little, then got back under the covers myself.

"Come to think of it...this is the first time we've stayed the night together, just the two of us."

No servant present; only the two of us together on this small bed. I could look at her face anytime I wanted just by glancing to the side. She had more brawn than brains and tended to leap before looking, but her face looked adorable—no, utterly cherubic—like this, asleep. I even adored the freckles she was so self-conscious about.

The moment I thought that, my heart began to race.

"...Huh? Wait..."

What's going on? Why's my heart beating so fast? All we're doing is sharing the bed together...

"...No way. Do I...?"

Was Loretta something special to me...?

"No way, no way, no way! That can't be!"

Loretta is my best friend, and that's it! But maybe the fact I'm making excuses like this means that's not exactly the case...?

"Oh no... What do I do?" I spent the rest of the night agonizing over that very question.

Claire's POV

“Now then, in celebration of Miss Claire visiting our home...
Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“...Cheers.”

“Thank you so very much.”

With Mel leading the toast, we raised our cups full of fruit-infused water and began dinner. The various dishes on the table were all made by Mel herself and consisted of freshly baked bread, herb-roasted chicken, vegetable soup with meatballs, and fruits that had been chilled in the river. It was a slightly meager spread by my standards, but for a commoner, it must've been a feast.

“Please, eat as much as you like, Miss Claire,” Mel said with a bright smile.

“Th-thank you...” I replied, hesitant to eat.

“...No pressure. If you don’t like something, you needn’t force yourself.” Rae’s father—Van Taylor—seemed to see right through me. Van was a large man who didn’t smile much, but I got the impression he was the frank but sincere type.

“Oh no, I would love to.” A bit flustered that my hesitancy had been noticed, I quickly began to eat. I extended my fork toward the herb-roasted chicken, thinking meat was my safest bet. I sliced a piece off the shared plate it was on and put it on my own plate. It seemed to smell pleasant enough. I took a bite.

...Ick.

It wasn’t disgusting, but it certainly wasn’t pleasant. The meat still tasted gamey underneath the strong flavor of the herbs. I suspected that much time had passed since the meat was first culled. I was used to fresh chicken that had been culled the same morning, so the difference was quite stark to me. I could also tell that only a sparse amount of salt had been used as well. I knew sugar was quite a pricey commodity, but to think even

salt was precious for commoners...

Of course, I wasn't so rude as to voice any of these thoughts. I smiled and said, "...It's delicious."

Mel returned a happy smile. "Please, you must try the soup as well. I splurged and made a consommé today!"

"Gladly." I tried the meatball soup. As guilty as it made me feel to come to such a conclusion, I did not enjoy it either. She called it a consommé, but that was a stretch. The ingredients were poor-quality, and the soup wasn't clear as a proper consommé should be. If a Broumet chef served this and claimed it to be a consommé, they'd certainly be fired that very day.

Even so, I forced a smile and said it was delicious. I went on to try some of all the dishes—which was a daunting task, if I was being honest. I'd had no idea food could taste so different from what I was used to.

Ralaire came over and nestled up against my hand, perhaps having noticed my difficulties.

"Oh my. Do you want some food, Ralaire?" I asked.

"My, my, my. Would you like some of mine, Ralaire?" Mel held out some meat, but Ralaire turned sharply away.

"Ah... It looks like Ralaire wants to eat what Miss Claire is eating, Mom. I'm sorry, Miss Claire, but would you mind feeding her?"

"I don't mind. Ralaire is a dear friend of mine, after all." I spoke calmly despite actually being ecstatic at the thought. I was able to feed Ralaire some of the bits that were harder for me to stomach. *Nicely done, Ralaire!*

"Oh my, my, my. You've hardly touched your plate." Mel said.

In the end, I hadn't managed to eat all that much. The taste had proved a bit too much to bear. But I didn't want to hurt Mel's feelings, as I was sure she'd put all her heart into the food.

"Perhaps it's not to your taste after all?" she asked.

"Not at all, Mom. Miss Claire always eats small portions. Miss Claire, how about you try the fruit as well? It's freshly picked and tastes really good." Rae stepped in, suggesting I try the fruit. Come to think of it, fruit was a relatively safe option that wouldn't taste too different from what I usually ate.

“Thank you, Rae. I think I will.” Feeling as though I had just been saved, I took an orange and ate a slice. It was a bit lacking in sweetness, but it was plenty edible, nonetheless. I ate some more fruit, managing to satiate my empty stomach and get through the dinner.

We had tea after the meal—albeit weak tea—and told Mel and Van about life at the Academy. They listened with great interest, Rae somehow remembering even the most trifling of details.

“Miss Claire was so frightened then!”

“I-I was not!”

“Oh my, my, my. Miss Claire is afraid of ghosts?” Mel said, giving me a pitying look as Rae recounted the time she and I went into a haunted house at our school festival. Van just listened silently. “In that case, you should probably stay away from the beach.”

“Why is that?” I asked. I had prepared a new swimsuit after hearing there was a nearby beach in Euclid, so it would be a shame not to go.

“...There’s been undead spotted along the coast lately,” Van answered.

“It’s really become a problem for the fishermen,” Mel added.

The two explained that undead had been haunting the coast for about a week now. There weren’t too many of them, but they still posed quite the threat to ordinary people with no combat skills. The neighborhood watch was keeping them at bay for the time being, but things were gradually getting out of hand.

“In that case, we’ll eliminate them,” I declared, feeling a sense of duty as a noble.

“Oh my, my, my. But it’ll be dangerous...and besides, you’re afraid of ghosts, Miss Claire,” Mel said.

“Undead fall under the category of monsters. They are nothing like ghosts,” I said. Ghosts were unexplained phenomena, and undead were monsters. The two were nothing alike. “We can go to the coast first thing tomorrow. Right, Rae?” I’d missed a chance to leave a good impression on Rae’s parents during the meal, so I was trying to make up for that now. Not that I wanted to be in their good graces for any particular reason or anything...

“Fine by me. Let’s go wearing our swimsuits while we’re at it. We can start your swimming le—”

“Shhh! Shhh!” I hurriedly shushed her.

“Oh my, my, my. Miss Claire, do you have trouble swimming?”
Mel asked.

“N-no, of course not. I am able to swim; I simply wish to improve.
That’s all.”

“Why, that’s wonderful. Rae grew up here by the water, so she
should be able to give you some pointers. Rae, make sure you teach her
well.”

“Okay.”

My excuse seemed to work—Mel didn’t doubt my ability at all.
Honestly, it was somewhat hard to believe she was Rae’s mother, given
how naïve she was.

“...It’s getting late. Miss Claire, you should rest,” Van said, looking
at the wall clock.

“My, my. Time flies when you’re having fun,” Mel said.

“Indeed. I suppose I’ll have a bath and head to bed, then,” I said.

“Ah... I’m sorry, Miss Claire. We don’t have a bath here,” Rae said.

I was speechless, aghast at the thought of having to go without a
bath for the day. Truly, the lives of commoners and nobles were beyond
comparison.

“O-oh... I see. I understand.”

“I brought soap, so I’ll wipe you down in the bedroom.”

“Okay... Thank you, Rae.”

On a slightly awkward note, our dinner came to an end.

“...I’ve lived a truly blessed life up until now, haven’t I?” I
murmured to myself as Rae wiped my body down.

“You didn’t like the food after all, I take it?” she asked.

“I appreciate your mother’s efforts, but...I didn’t think it would be
so different.”

To commoners, what we’d had tonight was normal—no, luxurious,
even. It boggled the mind.

“It’s not just the food either. To think your home doesn’t even have

a bath..."

Euclid was cooler than most places, but it was still summer, so I couldn't help but sweat a little. Not being able to wash said sweat off in a nice bath was harrowing.

"Yeaah, the lives of commoners are different, huh?" Rae said wryly.

"...Indeed. I knew that. At least, I thought I did..." While I did understand that our lives were different, I hadn't actually considered what that meant. "Rae, do you remember the Commoner Movement from a while back?"

"I do."

"I had mocked the commoners making demands back then, but..."

"But?"

"...Perhaps it's not so strange that they'd resent nobles when our standards of living are so different."

The commoners attending the Royal Academy came in direct contact with nobles, thereby realizing the differences between them. I understood why they would want to partake in the Commoner Movement now.

After continuing to wipe me down in silence, Rae placed the wet towel back in the bucket and began dressing me in my pajamas, saying, "Miss Claire, you're a powerful noble, aren't you?"

"I am, I suppose."

"Then don't you have the ability to change how things are?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" At first, I didn't understand what she was getting at.

"This world could be made easier for commoners to live in. If anyone can do it, it's you, Miss Claire."

"But... I..."

Such a thing was easier said than done. Certainly, I hailed from an influential family. I had far more at my disposal than commoners and ordinary nobles. But the disparity between commoners and nobles that I had witnessed today was stupendous. Bridging it would be no simple task. Just the very thought of trying to ford that river made me tremble.

As she fastened the buttons of my pajamas, Rae said, “It wouldn’t be easy, of course. 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’s your wish, then I will do everything in my power to help you.” She smiled radiantly, as though she truly believed, from the depths of her heart, that I could be capable of such a feat.

How strange. For some reason, listening to her made me think that I really *could* be capable of it. I felt the clouds over my heart clear away. Still, I was too embarrassed to thank her properly, so I said, “You really are a cheeky thing...”

“Comes with being your maid.”

“Hmph.” I pretended to take offense, unable to be honest.

“We should get to sleep now. We have the beach waiting for us tomorrow.”

“...All right.”

She turned off the lights, then got on the floor to sleep. But I was having none of that.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“This bed is pretty big, isn’t it?” I said, knowing full well that was not true. The bed was tiny, even when compared to the bunk bed in my dormitory room.

“Is it...?”

“It is! So...”

“So...?”

“So, you know... Ugh!” *How can you not understand?!* “You can sleep here with me.”

“There won’t be much room, though?”

“It’s fine!” I grabbed her arm and shoved her onto the bed, then laid down next to her myself. “Good night!”

“...Good night, Miss Claire.”

Goodness... Just how dense can she get?

“Okay, Miss Claire. First put your face in the water.”

“You better not let go! You hear me?!” Submerged up to my shoulders, I pathetically pleaded to Rae. She nodded back insincerely, urging me to hurry up and dip my face.

Rae and I were at a beach close to her house. The sand was pure white, and the water was a wondrous emerald green—but I was in no position to admire the beach’s beauty right now. Rae was giving me a swimming lesson, on account of the fact that I swam about as well as a rock. My swimming skills were so poor, in fact, that I couldn’t even put my face under the water. Rae gave me a lukewarm, pitying gaze as she encouraged me to take the plunge.

After a few deep breaths, I worked up the courage and put my face just under the surface of the water. My eyes were closed, of course. *Ick... The water tastes so salty and clings to my skin. A lake would’ve been so much better!*

“Blah!” The thought of not being able to breathe air terrified me. I soon raised my head back up, having at least succeeded in my goal of putting my face underwater. “How was that?! I did it! I put my face in the water!”

“Yes, you did. Now let’s try it for ten seconds next.”

“What?! You’re going to make me attempt something so challenging this soon?!”

“There’s...nothing remotely challenging about this.” She grinned wryly. I had a feeling she was thinking something rude. *Grrrr...*

Incidentally, we were dressed in our bathing suits, since we were at the beach—even if we were only in the shallows. I wore a bright red bikini with a white cloth pareo wrap. I’d heard it was the latest summer fashion among the nobility, so I’d obtained one as soon as I could. Rae wore a black one-piece swimsuit with two white stripes on either side. It was a simple design, definitely something a commoner would wear, but it looked oddly lovely on her. The nape of her neck—made visible with her hair tied up—and her spotless, glistening thighs made my heart race.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Rae said, “Ten seconds. Ready?”

“Hmgh... Fine. I, Claire François, have mastered countless skills

before and I shall do so again,” I declared before putting my face under the water. Being unable to breathe and being surrounded by darkness both scared me. Even so, I kept my head under for as long as I could. “Blah! How many seconds was that?!”

“Five.”

“Ergh... This is difficult. I imagine most people in the world are unable to accomplish this feat.”

“Uh, no? I’m sure just about everyone can do this much.”

What? Absurd. Did the rest of humanity descend from fish?

“I wish to take a break,” I said.

“Already?! All you’ve done is put your face in the water twice!”

“And that is plenty. If I am already able to put my face in the water for five seconds, then I’ll be able to swim soon enough.”

“What?! That logic does *not* track.”

Despite Rae’s protests, I had my way. Taking a break from the swimming lessons, I got curious about where Ralaire was and began looking around for her, finally spotting her a short distance off the shoreline.

“Is it just me or is Ralaire a little bigger than usual?”

“Well, she *is* a water slime. She probably absorbed some of the ocean’s water.”

How strange, I thought to myself—right when Ralaire began to jettison water out of her mouth.

“I-Isn’t she moving a bit fast?!” I exclaimed.

“Wow, she’s like a water jet.”

“And what’s that?”

“Err...nothing. More importantly, are you okay being beaten by Ralaire when it comes to swimming skills?”

“I am most certainly not, but do you think I can compete with that?!”

After some more talking, Mel came along. “Rae! Miss Claire! I brought you lunch!” She waved at us, holding a basket in her other hand. She wore a swimsuit as well, which was perfectly normal but made Rae

cringe for some reason.

“Perfect timing. We were just taking a break,” I said as I wiped myself down with a towel Mel handed me. Ralaire got out of the ocean and shook off her excess water.

“Oh, I see. How many meters are you able to swim now? Knowing how talented you are, I’m sure you’re able to swim a hundred meters with ease,” Mel said. I could tell her question was genuine from the utter purity of her smile.

“O-oh, well... Yes, I can swim just about that much,” I lied, earning a cold look from Rae. *Don’t you dare tell her!*

“Heh heh, I thought so. Oh, here are your lunches. I made sandwiches.” Mel removed the cloth covering the basket to reveal a flask and some sandwiches. Ah...

“...Thank you very much,” I said, but my expression was stiff. I felt bad knowing she went through the effort to make food for me that I might not eat.

“It’ll be okay, Claire,” Rae whispered to me.

I gave her a questioning look.

“Today’s sandwiches have some things I taught her how to make, like mayonnaise and mustard.”

“Really?! Well done.” To think I’d be able to have mayonnaise while staying at a commoner’s place. My Rae truly was a resourceful girl.

“Please, try one,” Mel urged. I did just that, still a little wary.

“It’s delicious!” I said.

“Oh my, my, my. That’s a relief to hear.”

The rich flavor of mayonnaise paired well with the spicy notes of mustard. I had no trouble eating this.

“This mayonnaise thing really is delicious, though,” Mel said. “You mentioned it was popular in the capital, Rae?”

“Yup. It was first introduced by a restaurant called Broumet. Nobles just can’t get enough of it.”

“And you’re familiar with such a high-grade condiment? You must be taking Rae to some fancy places, Miss Claire,” Mel said.

“That she does!” Rae said.

“...I do?”

How odd. I was fairly sure Rae already knew about mayonnaise even before I introduced it to her. I pondered the mystery as I fed Ralaire a sandwich. Maybe we were spoiling Ralaire’s taste buds a little...?

“By the way, Miss Claire,” Mel began, “You look lovely. Is that swimsuit the current fashion in the capital?”

“That it is. This cloth bit wrapped around my waist is called a pareo. I had it tailored just for me.”

“Oh my... How wonderful.”

“Mom, settle down. We don’t need your usual bad habits scaring Claire again.”

I snapped to attention and backed away from Mel. She had a bad habit of spontaneously stripping people of their clothes. I was only wearing this swimsuit, so being stripped here would be a whole incident.

“My, I would never be so crude. You can be such a bully, Rae. Speaking of swimsuits, though, yours is rather...how to put it...” She sighed.

“Mom...” Rae protested.

“I’m of the same mind over Rae’s swimsuit,” I said. “But I can’t help but also wonder why Ms. Taylor is so well-endowed, but Rae is, well...”

“Don’t say it. Please, I beg you,” Rae said.

Despite what I said, I couldn’t actually look at Rae in her swimsuit without my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. My harsh comments were really to hide my embarrassment.

“I’m still growing,” Rae said. “They’ll get bigger.”

“Oh my. Good luck,” Mel said.

“Hey! Don’t give me that pitying look!”

It was then that a great change occurred.

“Oh?”

Clouds blotted out the sun, and a chill filled the air. Before we knew it, we were surrounded by a fog that reeked of magic. Ralaire trembled fearfully.

“Rae, look!” I exclaimed. Beyond the fog, a tattered ship sailed in from the sea.

“Is that...a ghost ship...?” Mel murmured in surprise. We were wondering the exact same thing.

Interlude: First Battle (Loretta Kugret)

“HAAAAAAP!” After cutting down a skeletal undead, I scanned the area for my next target. Undead monsters from the ghost ship were appearing en masse on Euclid’s beach.

“Loretta, behind you!” a shrill voice called.

I spun around and sliced the zombie that had snuck up on me in half.

“Don’t let your guard down, Loretta.”

“My bad. Thanks for the help, Pepi.”

Pepi used her wind magic to boost my strength. This way, I could fight some more.

The appearance of the ghost ship brought with it a magical fog that surrounded Euclid. Pepi and I had gone to the beach, figuring we might as well enjoy ourselves since we were in town, only to suddenly encounter the undead on our stroll. We thought they were just a wild pack of undead at first, but no matter how many we defeated, more showed up.

That was around the time adventurers and townsfolk appeared, bearing arms. They told us that Euclid was under attack by a ghost ship. Dole had taken command of the situation, preventing any panic, but the endlessly spawning monsters made our defeat only a matter of time. Claire and some others were heading off to attack the ghost ship itself, the source of our problem, while everyone else was to hold the undead at bay here on the coast.

And so, Pepi and I joined up with the adventurers and cleared away the various skeletal, zombie, and bat monsters that appeared.

“Whew, you ladies aren’t half bad.”

“Not bad at all! You two would be around B rank if you became adventurers, I’d say.”

“...Thanks,” I said, a bit hesitant.

“Thank you very much,” Pepi said.

As a noble, it hurt my pride to work with these people. Adventurers

were known to be a lowly, misfit bunch, even among commoners. Plus, they may have been armed, but they were still commoners, which meant it was my duty as a noble to protect them. Fighting *alongside* them was disgraceful.

That being said, the undead were numerous. Pepi and I couldn't handle them all alone. What's more...

"Group A, group B, circle around to the east! We'll pincer them with the western groups!"

"I'm firing off area magic! Get down!"

"Now's our chance! Don't let up!"

It was hard to admit it, but the adventurers were experienced fighters. Their tactics were cruder than those I'd seen from my family or the military, but they were effective, nonetheless.

"Hey, there's something sending the undead scattering over there."

"I hear that's a familiar of one of the nobles storming the ghost ship."

"Wow! It's as big as a boulder in the water!"

"This is my first time seeing a familiar, but they sure look handy."

The adventurers even had the leeway to make small talk as they fought.

...These commoners aren't particularly strong. The nobles I've fought alongside so far weren't particularly weak. It's me. I'm the weak one.

I'd taken part in a number of Undead Hunts up until now. I'd fought both as a daughter of House Kugret and as someone expected to one day be the Kingdom's first female soldier. But now that I was fighting in a battle where none of my background mattered, I was presented with a harsh truth: I had been coddled all this time, protected by others.

Damn it... Damn it!

Whenever I fought together with my family or the military, I took command as an officer, relying on the strength of others. But as I saw now, fighting on the frontlines was completely different. Before, I'd treated combat as a numbers game. Now, I could see each and every one of these people had their own lives—families, things they wanted to protect, and places they wanted to return to.

The fact that I had never realized something so obvious weighed on me, dulling my blade and my body.

“Hey lady, look out!”

I hadn’t even realized I had broken away from the group and charged forward. I was surrounded by an undead horde in an instant.

“Shoot...!”

“Air Cutter!”

Before I could even swing, blades of wind cleared open a path for me. I ran along the weak footing of the sand and returned to the group.

“Thank you, Pepi.”

“Quit spacing out or you’ll get hurt!” she scolded. She had a lot less fighting ability than me, not having trained as much, but she was adapting to the battle far better. I was the only one out of place here.

“Hey, freckle girl. You’re a noble, right?” a more senior, bearded adventurer asked.

“I am,” I answered. “What of it?”

“You should fall back to the rear.”

“What?! Are you mocking me?!”

“No, no. It’s all about giving the right people the right job. From the look of things, you’re more of the type to take command, right? Adventurers like us are good at acting alone, but group battles like this aren’t our forte. We need someone to give us orders.”

“...And you think that someone should be me?”

“Well, we don’t have anyone among us with experience fighting big fights like this. Do you?”

“...I do.” I had commanded a five-hundred-man unit for last year’s Undead Hunt. There couldn’t be more than a hundred people here—more specifically, around twenty adventurers and eighty commoners who’d found weapons.

“Then we’ll leave it to you,” the adventurer said. “Feel free to order us around as you see fit.”

“...All right.”

“It’s settled, then. Hey, girl over there. Go along with the freckle girl

as her guard, all right?”

“Will do,” Pepi said.

“Good. All right, you bastards! We’re not letting any of these monsters take a single step into the town!”

“Yeah!” the adventurers yelled.

Pepi and I were led by an adventurer to a slightly elevated rocky tract located toward the rear. From here, we could see most of the beach.

“We have a telepathy channel set up. Can you connect?”

“I can.”

“All right. We’ll be counting on ya.” The adventurer who’d led us here slapped my back, making me cough a little.

I calmly began to observe the chaotic state of the beach.

“Loretta...”

“It’s okay, Pepi. I got this.”

The hesitation and uncertainty in me was gone. I had returned to being a commander—a soldier who shed neither blood nor tears. I could grasp the battlefield as numbers once more.

Be pragmatic.

Be calm.

Emotions do not win a battle.

I took a deep breath, then let my voice reverberate across the battlefield. “Left wing, advance ten meters! Those in the center, pull back twenty meters! We’ll take them out by surrounding them!”

Eventually the ghost ship vanished, leaving the remaining undead horde to gradually be dealt with. The outcome was clear. We had won.

“You did it, Loretta! You won us the battle! Loretta...?”

I pushed Pepi aside and ran through the opening in the rocky tract toward the ocean, then vomited out the contents of my stomach.

“Loretta...” Pepi followed and gently rubbed my back. She didn’t say a word further. She understood what was wrong.

Non-soldiers died...under my command...

Soldiers were people who willingly chose to fight. They were ready to follow orders, even if it meant death. But the people under my command today were different. Some adventurers might have been willing to risk their lives, but certainly not all of them. The non-adventurer commoners, at the very least, were all victims here. And because of my orders, some of them died. That fact was too much for me to bear.

“...Hey, freckle girl. Not handling things too well, huh?” The bearded adventurer who’d told me to take command appeared.

“...How many?” I asked.

“What’s that?”

“How many people died?”

“...What good would knowing that do you?” he questioned back.

“Just let me indulge my ego,” I said. “I want to know how well I did as a commander.”

“Loretta...” Pepi said.

“Is that so? Even if knowing will haunt you for the rest of your life?”

“That is a cross all who take command must bear.”

Those who died were gone for good. It would be presumptuous of me to say I’d take responsibility for their deaths when they were already gone. This was just me...stroking my ego, and nothing more.

“Eleven died. It’s an incredible number, considering we stopped all those undead.”

“...Eleven...”

That was eleven people with families waiting for them, homes to return to, lives to live. I’d taken all that from them.

“So there’s nobles like you around, eh?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I just figured all you nobles only ever saw us commoners as pawns on a chessboard.”

“...There are certainly people who think that way.” But not me.

“I’m sure those who died today would find some peace knowing they died fightin’ under somebody like you,” the adventurer said.

“...I doubt it.”

“Well, I don’t. Commanders who can empathize with us are rare, and commanders who can empathize but be cold-blooded when needed are even rarer.” The adventurer reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small flask. “Liquor,” he said. “For those who departed.” He undid the lid and turned it upside down, pouring it into the sea.

“...Wait here for me one second.”

“Pepi?”

Pepi ran off, only to return with her violin in hand a few minutes later.

“Pepi, the ocean breeze will damage it.”

“It’s fine. I’ll only be a bit,” she said, then began to play.



“A requiem, eh? That’s probably a bit too high-brow for their tastes,” the adventurer said. Despite his words, though, he was smiling. “Hey, freckle girl, what’s your name?”

“Loretta. Loretta Kugret.”

“Hoh, what a surprise. You’re a lady of the Kugret house, huh? No wonder you took command so well.”

“You needn’t flatter me.”

“I mean it, though. I’ll remember you, kid, and your first true battle.”

This was not the first time I’d taken command, but I knew what he meant to say... *Yeah. This'll be my “first” battle.*

This was the battle when I learned what it meant to fight, what it meant to take command, and...what it meant to lead people to their deaths. *I'll never, never forget this day.*

The bodies of the undead faded away, leaving countless magic stones scattered along the coast. Meanwhile, Pepi’s requiem continued on and on with no end.

Claire’s POV

THE ONE STANDING in our way after we infiltrated the ghost ship was Louie, Rae’s childhood friend. It was likely the Empire that had instigated him. He had turned himself into an undead while still alive, then been pierced by numerous silver blades due to Rae’s quick thinking.

I didn’t know who might have tricked him, but I believed him to be a fool to betray the ones he held dear. At least, I *had* believed that.

“Thank you. Ah... I wonder if they’ll forgive me for not paying them back...”

His last words made my mind go terribly clear.

“Are we really doing this, Miss Claire?”

“Of course. If not us, then who?”

I dragged a reluctant Rae along with me to Louie’s home. His sickly mother—the reason he’d masterminded this whole ghost ship incident—should be there, bedridden. I believed it our duty to tell her of his last moments.

What Louie did was wrong. Even if he were only dancing in the palm of the Empire’s hand, his actions had caused many deaths. But given his circumstances, perhaps he had no other choice.

I understood the feeling of wanting one’s mother to live. Back when my mother died in an accident, I would have happily sold my soul to the Empire to bring her back, if such a choice had been available.

“Somebody else will tell her before long. I hear she still hasn’t fully recovered yet. Wouldn’t it be better to wait?” Rae said.

“If anyone is to tell her, it must be us. Only those who were actually there can tell her how he thought of his friends and his mother in his last moments.”

Rae had a pained look, for some reason. “...Miss Claire, you’re really a noble, aren’t you?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“No, never mind...”

It wouldn’t be until much later that I would understand what she meant to say.

Louie’s home was on the outskirts of Euclid. It was a small house, even by commoner standards, with wear and tear visible on the building. The garden was overrun as well, perhaps because there was no one to tend to it.

As I observed the state of the place, I knocked on the door. We were told to come on in, so Rae and I did just that.

“Why, Rae, it’s been a while.”

Louie’s mother, Ophelia, greeted us with a gentle smile. Like Rae had said, the woman hadn’t fully recovered yet. Her skin was pale, and her arms and legs were terribly thin.

Incidentally, we’d left Ralaire behind to avoid frightening Ophelia. We entrusted her to Mel, who had gone to the adventurers’ guild to help a

friend with something. Ralaire was apparently quite popular among the adventurers after the defensive battle the other day, so she was taking part in their merrymaking.

“I apologize for not getting up,” Ophelia said. “I’m not feeling terribly well. It’s nothing serious, but...”

She broke into a coughing fit. I rushed over and rubbed her back, trying to ease her pain. “Please, don’t worry yourself. You should rest.”

“My, who is this young lady? Is she your friend, Rae?”

“Oh no, this is—”

“I am, ma’am. My name is Claire. I’m Louie’s friend too,” I lied. Revealing I was a noble here would put a wall between us, and I wanted her to be at ease. I tried to smile as gently as I could.

“Oh, Louie too?” Ophelia’s face lit up. “I haven’t seen him since the last time he brought me my medication. How is he doing?”

I froze for a moment. From those few words alone, I could tell just how much she loved her son. Even as she lay here sick in bed, she thought of him.

But I had to tell her. She needed to know how her strong, kind son died sticking to his convictions.

“Louie has...passed away,” I said, not mincing any words.

“What...? No... That can’t be true.” She seemed to think I was joking at first, smiling wryly and denying my words. But my expression told her I meant what I said.

A silence followed, one that seemed to last both an eternity and only a moment. Either way, it was too short a span of time for a mother to accept her son’s death.

“Why... How did he die?” Her voice was faint, barely audible.

“Louie...” I hesitated. I had thought I should at least tell her—his mother—the truth, but seeing her state made me think better of it. “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. Rae had been dead set against it, but I insisted we go with this. The only other person who knew what really happened was Misha. My father seemed to notice something was up when I gave him my report, but didn’t press for

details.

“Louie was very brave. If it weren’t for him, this town would have suffered great loss,” I said, taking Ophelia’s hand. It was thin and weak, trembling slightly. I prayed she could take pride in the way her son had died. “Louie is this town’s hero.”

She was speechless for some time, lost in thought, expression unreadable. Eventually, she found her voice again. “I...see. Every little thing made him cry when he was little. I never thought he would grow up to be such a fine man...”

A smile crept onto her face. I thought, perhaps, she had found peace with Louie’s death. But I was mistaken.

“Still...I’d rather he’d have stayed a crybaby...if it meant he would come back to me.”

Stifling her cries, she wept.

“I had no idea death was such a different affair for commoners,” I murmured.

A few days had passed. We were on our way back from Louie’s funeral.

“What parts would you say are different?” Rae softly asked. She seemed to sense I was in low spirits.

“When a noble falls in battle, they are given a grand memorial service. But Louie was buried in the small garden of his home, and only given a crude grave marker and a small bouquet of flowers. It’s all so...meager.”

It was enough to make me wonder if death meant something completely different for commoners than it did for nobles.

“Louie is actually rather lucky. Most commoners don’t even get their own grave. Commoners who are worse off and those who die unknown on the streets are buried in shared graves.”

It was difficult for me to conceive of the reality Rae spoke of. Such a thing couldn’t be called a burial. It was more like disposal.

“I believe being able to honor someone’s death is a right only afforded to nobles. I won’t say there aren’t commoners who do the same, but for most, death can only be a sad, wretched thing.”

“...Rae?” I realized Rae wasn’t speaking to me, so much as she was speaking for herself to hear. “Rae, is something the matter?”

“...No. I was just fantasizing about all the ways I’ll toy with you once we—”

“Don’t lie to me. I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re serious and when you’re not.”

“...I’m sorry.” She took a deep breath and slowly said, “I never really paid Louie any mind. Not when he tried to make moves on me, not when he fought me, and not even when I killed him.”

“I see. What’s the problem, then?”

“...This was the first time I’ve ever killed anyone.”

“Oh, I see...”

“I don’t think Louie can be forgiven for what he’s done, but the one who ended his life and made Ophelia cry was undoubtedly me.”

This was the first time in a while I’d seen Rae look so fragile. The last time had been when she clashed heads with Manaria, I believe.

“Rae...”

“Louie smiled in his last moments, even though he was filled with regret. He had his mother, his friends, his future waiting for him, but I killed him!”

“Rae...” Unable to stand by any longer, I embraced her. I felt her tremble in my arms. “Rae, listen closely.”

“...Okay.”

“You are not solely responsible for Louie’s death. Misha and I also played a part. So quit trying to shoulder all the burden yourself.”

“But—”

“All we did was give him the *stiletto*.”

“The *stiletto*...?”

The *stiletto*, also known as the mercy strike (the coup de grâce), was a sword used to kill enemies near death to end their suffering.

“By taking cantarella, Louie was guaranteed to lose his humanity sooner or later. In his last moments, however, he was able to think of his mother and friends. That’s proof he was able to die while still human.

What we did was an act of mercy.”

I didn’t wish to glorify killing, but I did not see our actions as senseless murder.

“...You really think so?”

“I do. But if you still can’t find it in you to forgive yourself, then remember him. Remember who he was, how he was fond of you, loved his mother, and cared for his friends. Remember him for the rest of your life.”

She looked at me, not saying a word.

I continued, “And remember the fact you took his life as well. If you can do that, then I’ll shoulder half that sin for you. We’ll atone together. Until the day we die.”

“Miss Claire...”

Rae didn’t cry. But even in the absence of tears, I could see she deeply lamented Louie’s death. I held her tight, realizing then that she had a vulnerable side too.

On this day, our one sin became shared between the two of us.

Interlude: The Means and the Conviction (Pepi Barlier)

“ALL RIGHT, let's stop there. Go ahead and take a ten-minute break, Lady Pepi.”

“Paah, haah!” Exhaustion assailed me at once. I had created and held a vibration-controlling magic field for several dozen minutes now, gradually expanding it and only releasing it on Misha's command. My body, despite not having moved much at all, was covered in beads of sweat like a waterfall.

“Here.”

“Thank you...” Still panting, I took the towel Misha offered and wiped my sweat. Not even caring how it might soil my skirt, I sat down on the ground.

We were in the courtyard of the Jur home. House Jur had fallen from grace; their courtyard was big, but contained no flower beds. They lacked the funds to hire a caretaker for such things.

Misha was training me in magic here.

“You're able to spread your wind magic out wider than before,” she commented.

“Yes, and I owe it all to you. Thank you.”

“Not at all. You're helping my family out greatly just by asking me to be your tutor.”

Indeed, I had asked Misha to be my magic tutor. I had medium aptitude in wind magic and mainly fought using wind blades, rather orthodox magic, but I no longer believed that alone to be enough.

I never want to see Loretta make such a face again.

The battle we'd both been part of on the beach had been a big shock for Loretta, but also for me. I'd learned firsthand how much stronger Loretta was than me. I lacked her ability to command troops, but I still wanted to be with her. Resolving not to be a burden, I set about improving my magic.

She cried... The fact that Loretta's own command wasn't enough to keep people from dying weighed heavily on her heart. If I had been stronger, perhaps I could have prevented her from ever having to make such a face. Perhaps the battle would have been a breeze if Misha had been there instead of me.

That was how amazing Misha's Siren was. I saw it once more when I asked her to teach me, and I was awed all over again. Its range was of particular note—the spell traveled through the air, so it could extend as far as one's magic capacity allowed. If Misha had been the one standing on that beach, she'd probably have slain dozens of undead.

I don't think I can ever measure up to Misha...but I can at least get stronger than I am now.

"All right, I'm rested," I said. "What's next?"

"Let's see... Your range has grown quite a bit. Let's work on precision next."

"All right."

"I'll prepare some targets. Use your wind blades to only hit the ones I call out."

"Got it."

Along the other side of the courtyard, Misha lined up targets similar to ones we used in Academy magic classes. The distance was about fifty meters, a far but doable, distance for my present self.

"One."

"Ei!"

"Four."

"Haa!"

"Nine."

"Yaah!"

"Two."

"Taah!"

As Misha instructed, I struck the targets with blades made of wind.

"Moving on: Two and eight."

"Yaah!"

“Four and ten.”

“Traaah!”

“Three and five.”

“Uryah!”

The orders gradually became more difficult, but I did my best to keep up. When she started calling out three targets at a time, however, I was almost always unable to do as she said.

“Looks like precision is your current bottleneck.”

“Looks...like it...” I said through heavy breaths.

I’d been fairly successful at increasing my maximum range, but precision was proving more of a roadblock. For reference, Misha showed me what she was capable of. Hitting three targets was nothing to her—she could hit as many as ten, randomly called out, with pinpoint accuracy.

“Whoa... You’re incredible.”

“Well, I *did* get into the Academy on a scholarship. This much is expected of me.”

I’d thought I understood how amazing her magic was, but this was really something. The gap between us made me feel a little dejected. “Is there any way to train my precision?”

“Let me think... I suppose there *is* a way, but it’s not exactly simple.”

“Really? Teach me!” I urged. She seemed a bit hesitant, however. “Is there a problem?”

“Not quite a problem, *per se*, but a question of conviction and values.”

“Just tell me what it is, for starters. I’ll decide whether to go through with it or not after hearing about it.”

“...All right. Why not try using an instrument?”

I gave her a quizzical look.

“You’re skilled with the violin, correct? I heard you received an invitation to play at the Autumn Concert after an event you did before the holidays.”

“I did, yes.”

Just as Loretta had received an invitation after her Foundation Day Festival performance, I had also received an invitation to the Autumn Concert. Loretta and I both jumped with joy when my invite arrived.

“You must be able to play the violin with the utmost precision, like an extension of your body.”

“Perhaps, but what’s that got to do with magic?”

“There exist magic tools in the form of instruments.”

“...Ah.” *In other words...* “You’re suggesting that I use an instrument as a weapon?”

“I am.”

It made sense. Controlling magic was difficult precisely because the process necessary to envision magic was abstract and vague. I could expect to improve greatly if I had something physical to work with. What’s more, I could operate a violin more finely than my own arms and legs. Who knew how useful it might be if used for magic?

“The question,” Misha said, “is whether you yourself would be okay with such a thing.”

“...Right.”

The violin was special to me. Utilizing sound in magic was acceptable, but I greatly disliked the idea of playing the violin as a means of combat. I was sure many wouldn’t bat an eye at the idea, but I truly believed it antithetical to what the violin stood for.

I did not say this without basis. Music revealed character. If I used the violin as an instrument of war, it could very well affect my ability to perform. It was said, if only anecdotally, that the famous inventor of telepathy wind magic used to be a celebrated singer but lost their singing voice after using it for magic.

Misha said, “Personally, I do not recommend this path. The arts and warfare are best kept separate.”

“...Yeah. I think the same way.”

“Then let me think of ano—”

“But could you teach me how to do it, anyway? Just in case.”

“...Very well.”

Regardless of whether I’d ever actually use it, there was no harm in

at least knowing the technique. Misha told me the location of an instrument magic tool workshop and taught me the trick to controlling magic with instruments.

“Thank you, Misha.”

“Hopefully I was of some help.”

“You were. I feel unmistakably stronger than before.”

Even the smallest step brought me joy. At the very least, today was a huge leap forward from that day when I’d been tormented by my own incompetence.

With a wry grin, Misha said, “You really like Lady Loretta, huh, Miss Pepi?”

“...What’s wrong with that?” I said a bit bashfully. I had told her my reasons for seeking her aid when I came to her, so she could know I was sincere.

“Nothing at all. If anything, I’m envious of you.”

“What about you, then, Misha? Do you ever wish to become stronger for Master Yu’s sake?”

She didn’t say a word, just smiling wryly. I may have opened up to her, but she had no obligation to do the same, as vexing as that might be.

“All right, keep your secrets. Let’s continue practicing.”

“Right.”

I began to practice widening the range of my magic again, eyes shut in concentration.

“...You and Rae are both so enviable.”

I thought I heard her murmur something, but surely it was just my imagination.

Claire’s POV

“**C**LAAAIIRE, fetch me a piece.”

“Yes, yes.”

Catherine sprawled herself out on my bed like she always did, asking me to fetch her a piece of her favorite candy. I was a bit distracted, having been deep in thought, but I concealed it and did as she asked, taking a piece of licorice out of the nearly empty candy jar.

She thanked me and returned to reading her novel. I went back to my desk and was about to get lost in my thoughts again when she made another request.

“Claaaiire, fetch me the third volume of *Futago Escape*.”

“Yes, yes, I’m on it.”

“...Claaaiire, give me a shoulder rub.”

“All right, but only this once.”

“...Hmm.”

I moved to my bed and began to massage her dainty shoulders, thinking back on what had happened in Euclid as I did so.

“Sit down on the floor, Claire.”

“Huh?”

“What happened? Tell me.”

“Wh-what’s with you all of a sudden?”

She sat herself up, meeting my eyes with a serious look. That was when I realized exactly what I had been doing.

“The Claire I know would never indulge me this much. Something happened to you, didn’t it?”

“N-no, nothing in particular.”

“Reaaaaally?”

“W-well...”

She seemed to see right through me. Seeing it was futile to try to hide it any longer, I confessed. “...I learned what poverty was like firsthand.”

She looked surprised for a moment, then urged me to continue. “... Go on.”

“Up until recently, I’ve known what poverty was and meant, of course...”

“Right.”

“But I never *truly* understood what it was like. I’ve been...willfully ignorant up until now.”

I told Catherine about what happened in Euclid: the trip to my villa, the shocks I experienced at Rae’s home, the undead incident, the battle in the ghost ship, and how I let a truth remain in darkness. Of course, I asked her to keep this all a secret.

“I walked the town with Rae after the incident and saw so many things I hadn’t been able to see before.”

There were orphans gathered in institutions, elderly farmhands forcing their tired bodies to toil on, an ex-adventurer who’d lost a hand sitting on the ground and gazing into the distance. Not a soul tried to help them, and yet they were all striving to survive, in their own way.

“Back when the Commoner Movement was ongoing, I saw a group of children begging for alms on the street. The only thought I had to spare for them then was how filthy they looked...”

“Do you regret that?”

“I do. How could I have been so arrogant? I understand now that I knew nothing of the world.”

I had thought it was their own fault they wound up that way. That their own indolence was what landed them in poverty. But that wasn’t how the world worked. That wasn’t how the world worked at all...

“Rae explained much to me. I know now that none are poor because they wish it, and that poverty is something that can befall anyone.”

How was it the fault of the orphan that they didn’t have any parents? How was the farmhand to avoid aging, which came for us all? Who could rebuke the adventurer for becoming injured and losing his livelihood?

All I’d ever done was look at those poor, blameless people...and leave them to rot.

“I’m so ashamed of myself...”

“Claire...” Catherine held my hand. Her warmth calmed me slightly.

“I can’t let myself wallow in self-pity forever,” I said. “I need to

make amends for my mistakes.”

“How?”

“I’ll eradicate poverty from the Kingdom.”

“...I get the feeling that’s going to be very hard to do.”

“But it must be done, for I am the daughter of Dole François and Melia François.”

My mother had once told me something that Lene reminded me of when we parted: *“Listen, Claire. A noble must not surrender to reality and abandon their ideals. If you are to call yourself a François, you must stand by your ideals and make them reality.”*

Now that I knew just how deep poverty ran, I understood eradicating it would be no easy task. But for me to avert my gaze from the issue simply because it was daunting would cast shame on the François name.

I was a noble, and as a noble, the livelihood of commoners was my responsibility. It was my noble duty to ensure they were able to lead good lives, and to forget that would make me no different than parasites like Clément Achard, who merely tyrannize and exploit the weak.

“Claire...you’ve grown.”

“...Huh?” I looked to see Catherine giving me a soft gaze, the kind a mother might turn on a child who’d learned how to do something new.
“What’s that look for...?”

“Oh, I’m just thinking about how far you’ve come.”

What? Was I a disaster earlier?

“There aren’t many nobles who are capable of seeing the world in such a way. You’ve done well, Claire, even if that Rae girl helped you a bit.”

“Y-you think so?”

“I do. But if you put it another way, that also means you don’t have many like-minded nobles to be your allies.”

She was right. I could now see why those partaking in the Commoner Movement wanted to call nobles corrupt.

“I see... That is quite the problem.”

“Are you throwing in the towel already?”

“Unthinkable. If anything, I’m more fired up than before.”

“That’s my Claire!” Abruptly, she pulled me into a hug.

“Wha—Catherine? Cut it out.”

“No way!” she laughed. “I’m so happy my little Claire’s grown wise!”

“I’ve always been wise!”

“I know, I know. But now you’re more enlightened than ever!”

“I don’t need your empty flattery!”

“I mean it, though!” Finally, she let me go and broadly smiled. “You can do it, Claire. I know you can. I’ll be cheering for you.”

“Hmph. Of course I can do it. Just who do you think I am?”

“Now, *this* part of you I’d be okay never seeing change.”

“And what part is that supposed to be?!”

“Yep, that part right there.”

“What?!”

We continued to squawk back and forth. It made me think—I must’ve frustrated Catherine on countless occasions until now. She was once a commoner. This grand epiphany I’d finally had about poverty must’ve been very obvious to her all this time. My immaturity and arrogance had been on full display to her.

Even so, she didn’t give up on me. Hence, it was only right that I not let her down.

“Hey, Catherine?”

“Yeah?”

“Watch me.”

“Heh, you bet.”

I had much I needed to do. First, I needed to grasp the current situation. I began planning my course of action for tomorrow, returning a smile to Catherine as I did so.

Chapter 6: Sly Rae and Me

THE NEXT DAY, I was in my room reading through all the books and newspaper articles on the Bauer government system that I could get my hands on. Now that I'd made up my mind to get involved, I was diving into the subject head first, holding nothing back.

Rae told me visiting a church might prove to be a good reference as one of the Spiritual Church's objectives was to decrease the wealth disparity, so I asked her to arrange a visit. After she left, I read through a peculiar newspaper article.

“Human trafficking...?”

The article, which had been published while I was off on holiday in Euclid, detailed how some nobles were secretly engaging in human trafficking. My father told me it had caused a temporary stir in noble circles, but things died down just as quickly. Apparently, the reporter had gone missing, and the newspaper published no further reports on the subject.

“...So there was a cover-up.”

Human trafficking was a serious crime. Slavery existed in the Kingdom long ago, but it was strictly outlawed now. If there was really human trafficking going on, like the article claimed, then the guilty nobles would undoubtedly be stripped of all titles and assets. Said guilty parties probably put pressure on the newspaper to drop the issue. As for the missing reporter...well, that was perhaps best left unsaid.

Reading the article carefully, I could guess at least one noble who might be involved. Most nobles wouldn't be able to figure out this much, but I was the daughter of the Minister of Finance, who controlled the flow of coin. The flow of coin was the flow of people, as well as information and influence. Utilizing my knowledge, the contents of the article, as well as the investigative capabilities of the people serving House François, I was able to paint a rough picture of the situation.

“Clément Achard...are you behind this?”

If all my information was correct, the ringleader of the human trafficking ring was Clément. I grimaced, recalling my encounter with him

at his residence. He was a monster of a man, the personification of a noble supremacist. And now he'd sunk as low as human trafficking.

"Does he think his status will let him get off easy? You bring shame on the Achard name..." House Achard used to stand equal to House François at the rank of duke. It was in Clément's generation, however, that the house fell to the rank of marquess. The reason why was simple: King l'Ausseil wanted to distance Clément from power.

As I was now, I could understand King l'Ausseil's aims. He saw the corruption plaguing the nobility system and was striving to remove it. Unlike House François, House Achard had many shady dealings going on in the background. Whenever they were close to being caught, they'd scapegoat an underling to escape blame. However, this made their faction's influence wane, causing them to be demoted from duke to marquess. King l'Ausseil's move to weaken House Achard's faction was one of the reasons he was hailed as wise.

"There are many disreputable rumors around Master Clément, but... would he really go this far?"

Personally, I did not like Clément. I did not think he deserved to be a noble. But regardless, a noble he was. Surely he had the dignity to not stoop this low?

"Regardless of his involvement...I am appalled at how deep the corruption among the nobility runs."

The problem wasn't just House Achard. None of this reached my ears in my lectures at the Academy, but apparently, many experts and critics had highlighted numerous flaws in the way nobility currently functioned in the Kingdom. Non-Academy-related books and newspapers were my only source of information, and I learned from them that despite King l'Ausseil's best efforts, it appeared that the Academy still remained the playground of nobles, its classes still conservative-leaning in scope.

"I didn't think things would be this bad..."

Having grown up observing my father, the ideal noble, I had believed all nobles were as virtuous and dutiful as him. In reality, however, aristocrats like him were few and far between.

I recalled the words I heard uttered by a student involved in the Commoner Movement: "*You royals and nobles are all just parasites living off our tax money!*" Even now, that statement made me fume with indignation. But when I really thought about it, I had to begrudgingly

admit he wasn't altogether wrong.

"...How could things have come to this?" An academic claimed the nobility system had propagated for far too long, and that a system with no checks and balances was doomed to rot. Nobles may spend their time vying for power with other nobles, but there had been no political force to oppose the *nobility system itself*. As a result, the ideals it stood for had been forgotten, or so the academic posited... Incidentally, this academic was exiled from scholarly society immediately after publishing this claim. This was back in the previous king's time, when the influence of the nobility was stronger.

"...Are those close to me safe?" There were no negative rumors surrounding House Barlier and House Kugret—Pepi and Loretta's families, respectively. But House Barlier had recently been making moves to strengthen ties with House Achard, and House Kugret went as far as to engage Loretta to Kristoff. I didn't *think* Baron Barlier or Earl Kugret would be involved in anything shady, but it wasn't impossible, especially with the power imbalance between them and Clément. *Perhaps I should warn Pepi and Loretta to be careful.*

"...There's no way Father is involved in anything, right?" I knew it was highly insolent of me to doubt my esteemed father, but the more I learned about the poverty of the commoners and the corrupt nature of the nobility, the more I began to question what I'd previously taken for granted.

The horrific possibility continued to nag at me when...

"Guess who!"

"Eek!"

I heard a carefree voice just as my vision went dark.

"Rae?! What are you doing? Quit playing around!"

"But you weren't responding when I called out to you. You had this downer look on your face too. Made me all sad."

"Huh? O-oh, is that so? I apologize." If I had accidentally ignored her, then the fault was with me. I meekly acknowledged my fault.

"...Is something wrong, Miss Claire? It's not like you to apologize."

"Wait, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, y'know, normally you'd just be like 'oh, you were there?'

and turn away with a huff.”

“...Do you really think I’m so abrasive?” The fact I couldn’t outright deny that I might say something like that did vex me a little, however. “I’ve just been thinking a bit, that’s all.”

“About what?”

“Nothing important. What do you care?”

“Booo. C’mon, Miss Claire. Share your worries with me, won’t you? Just as happiness is worth double when shared, burdens are halved when shouldered with another.”

Those words struck a chord with me. “...That’s quite a good saying.”

“Thanks. A close friend of mine taught it to me.”

“It looks like I owe that friend of yours a thank you then. The truth is...”

I began to open up to her, revealing everything I’d been bottling up—from my suspicions of Clément to my doubts regarding my own father.

“You think there’s a chance Master Dole is corrupt?” she asked.

“I do not think he, of all people, could be corrupt—but then again, I did not suspect any noble could be corrupt not too long ago.”

She pondered for a brief moment, mumbling to herself. “Hmm... What do I say here? He isn’t *not* corrupt, but that’s just his cover, so...”

“What are you mumbling to yourself?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing. But, uh, yeah, I think Master Dole’s fine.”

“Based on what?”

“Hmm... Based on you, I’d say.”

“Me?” I gave her a quizzical look, urging her to elaborate.

“I do not think Master Dole could raise you to be so honest and straightforward if he were an ill-natured man. If he did do something questionable, it would be because he had good reason to.”

“...You think highly of my father, I see.”

“Well, yeah, we are partners in—*ahem*, I mean, he’s *your* father, after all.” For a moment, it sounded like she was about to say something else.

“...You’re right. My father isn’t the type of man to commit injustice out of self-interest.”

“Incidentally, I serve you a hundred percent out of self-interest.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Now be quiet.”

“Bah, so cold! But I love that part of you too!”

Rae reverted to her usual buffoonery...but it was thanks to her that I’d been able to shed my doubts. Frustrating as it was to admit, she made a very good confidant.

“This newspaper article is a bit strange, though,” she said.

“Strange? How so?”

“If they’ve done this much research, then the reporters and the newspaper should know the culprit is Clément, right? It’s weird that they wouldn’t just mention him by name.”

“Oh...” Now that she mentioned it, that was strange. “Perhaps they lacked concrete evidence?”

“They wouldn’t publish the article at all if they lacked concrete evidence. With how much influence the nobility wields, publishing an article like this without damning proof would just be asking to be squashed.”

“...You’re right.” The disappearance of the reporter lent weight to her claim, “Why do you think it *was* published like this?”

“Hmm. I can’t say, based on the information available to us. But it *does* feel like it was intentional. Not that I know what they’d have to gain from doing things this way.”

“Indeed...”

“I don’t see any point in thinking about it right now, though. Let’s start with something more concrete.”

“That’s an idea. The Church?”

“Yeah, I was able to book a visit. We can go tomorrow.”

“Well done.”

I could only do what I could. It was better to take action than torture myself with unanswerable questions.

I murmured, “...Perhaps I’m taking after you.”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Rae donned a dumb expression. Looking at it brought me peace... not that I would ever admit such a thing to her.

Rae and I stepped through the exquisite stone gate, carved in the style of the old Bauer dynasty. Lamps and candlesticks brightly lit the interior of the building. The white walls resembled the ones in the various clinics around Bauer, except these felt like history.

We were in the Bauer Cathedral. The Spiritual Church had many branches across the world, but this was the head temple. There were other religions, but most of them were offshoots of the Spiritual Faith, meaning completely independent faiths were rare.

As the head temple of the dominant religion, the Cathedral was appropriately magnificent. Naturally, it didn’t compare to Bauer’s Royal Palace, but it was bigger than my own home. The size of the place, despite frugality being a virtue of the Faith, spoke to the vastness of their influence.

But enough talking about the sights. We were here for something different.

“Well, we’re here, but who should we talk to?” I mused.

“Oh, maybe someone at the front desk would be willing to answer our questions?” Rae said. Apparently, that was what she’d been told when she made an appointment. But that wouldn’t do at all.

“That only gets you what the Church wants you to hear. I want the truth.”

I waltzed right past the front desk and proceeded further in. Rae hurriedly followed after me.

“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,” she said.

“I don’t need documents. I can talk to people. Oh, excuse me, you there.” Passing the entrance to what was probably a chapel, I approached a nun in prayer.

“Y-yes?” She started like a frightened squirrel, trembling slightly. She was a pretty girl, wearing a black wimple that all but hid her silver hair and red eyes.

“I have some questions about the Church. Do you have some time?”

“O-oh, um, I’m busy with my prayers right now, so...”

“That’s all right. I can wait.” I sat down next to the nun, killing time by looking around the chapel. Rae sat down next to me with a look of exasperation directed my way. *What’s with her?*

“U-um...?”

“What? Out with it.”

“Eek! I-I’m sorry!”

The nun seemed about to say something, so I urged her to speak, but she instead recoiled back and apologized.

“Why are you apologizing? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“...O-oh, I’m sorry.”

“There, you did it again. At any rate, hurry up and finish your prayers. We’ll be waiting right here.”

“O-okay...”

The nun glanced at Rae, who solemnly shook her head. *Seriously, what’s going on?*

The nun resumed praying, clearly conscious of our presence at first but slowly managing to focus on her devotions. The small, frightened creature faded, replaced by a nun wholly absorbed in prayer, even radiating a sense of holiness.



Now, that was fine and all, but Rae, oh, that Rae...

“What are you gawking at?” I said. The nun was certainly adorable—but how *dare* Rae stare at her when *I* was right here?

“I wasn’t gawk—oh! Are you being jelly, Miss Claire?!”

“What are you on about?! I am not jelly! Wait, what does that even mean?!” I rebuked Rae as she began talking nonsense again.

“Be quiet in the chapel, mollusks,” the girl scolded. I could hardly believe my ears.

“Um...?” Rae looked bewildered.

“Oh! I-I’m so sorry! I sometimes say things I shouldn’t... S-stupid, stupid Lilly...”

The girl, who was apparently named Lilly, hurriedly explained herself. That had been quite the outburst, though...

And had I heard the name Lilly before...?

“Lilly?” I said. “I believe I’ve heard that name before... In any case, are you done praying now?”

“Y-yes. I apologize for making you wait.” She straightened her posture.

“I wish to inquire about how the Church operates. Just the rough gist will do.”

“H-how the Church...operates? It might be better if you speak to the public relations manager. The front desk should be able to lead you to them...”

“I don’t want to hear about the Church’s official facade, I want to know the real Church, blemishes and all.”

“I-I see...?” Lilly looked bewildered. She didn’t seem to understand what I was getting at.

“Miss Claire desires to address the issue of poverty among commoners,” Rae said.

“P-poverty...?”

“Yes. We were hoping the Church might have the means to help us with our efforts.”

“O-oh, I see. The Church might, yes. I-I would like to help you there

if possible, um..." Lilly seemed to accept Rae's simple explanation, but then turned and looked at her hard. "H-have I seen you before?"

"I was actually just thinking that I'd seen you before, Lilly."

I endured watching them talk back and forth, ignoring me, but I had hit my boiling point. The words just slipped right out of my mouth. "...Not the most original pickup line, now, is that?"

"W-wait, no! I h-had no intention of picking anyone up!"

"Me neither. I only have eyes for you, Miss Claire. Wait, are you being jelly? You're jelly this time for sure, right?"

"I am not jelly! I don't even know what language that word is supposed to be from, but cut it out!"

"I said be quiet in the chapel, you senile eggplants!"

Rae and I fell stone silent.

"Oh, no, no, no... I'm so s-sorry..." Her outbursts were so bizarre that it was hard to believe they were accidental, but she sounded genuinely contrite.

"Is something the matter, Miss Lilly?" A well-dressed elderly man who was passing by approached us.

"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... And it's not every day that the daughter of the Minister of Finance wants to talk to me."

Upon hearing that, I belatedly realized who this girl was. She had the same hair color and eye color as Chancellor Salas, wore a habit that was embroidered differently from the other nuns' attire, and was named Lilly. She was...

"I-I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. I am Lilly Lilium, daughter of Bauer Kingdom chancellor Salas Lilium and a cardinal of the Spiritual Church."

Interlude: The End of My Lonely Battle (Lilly Lilium)

WHILE WE DISCUSSED the Church's plans to alleviate poverty and its position as an economic entity, Rae left her seat to go take a break. I chatted with Claire while we waited, but we ran out of tea and no refill was coming, so I went to go check on the ones in charge of serving us.

“Miss Lilly is meeting with the daughter of the Minister of Finance now?”

“I know... It’s disgusting.”

I found the nuns tasked with serving us, but hid myself upon catching a snippet of their conversation.

“It must be true that Miss Lilly is a homosexual then.”

“How immoral...and while engaged to Prince Yu too.”

It was just as I expected. I was often gossiped about behind my back like this. Many were envious of me, as it was unprecedented for someone as young as me to be made a cardinal. Most of the time, people gossiped about my sexuality.

For some reason, I’d only ever liked other girls. I knew it was unnatural, but I couldn’t help it. I had once confessed to an older girl I knew, unable to conceal my feelings any longer, but that...did not go well. Ever since then, I’d lived on the edge of a precipice, treated like a heretic by others.

“She’s only a 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.”

Not everything the women said was correct, but at least some of it hit the mark. It would likely have been impossible for me to become a cardinal if it weren’t for my father, and it was true my idea of love differed from the values of the Church. The two were justified in taking issue with me. Or at least, so I thought...

“Isn’t that a little unfair?” Rae stepped in and interrupted their gossiping.

“Um, can we help you...?”

“You’re Miss Claire’s maid, aren’t you? What business do you have with us?”

The two nuns looked at Rae with some confusion. There wasn’t a trace of guilt on their faces.

“Is same-sex love really such a terrible thing?” Rae bluntly asked.

“Umm...” One of the nuns grew evasive.

“At the very least, I don’t think it’s natural.” The other nun responded with the prevailing opinion.

The one who had been evasive signaled for the other to stop, but it appeared she was dead set on maintaining her stance. This wasn’t a surprise—nuns did wield some status in society. More than a commoner serving a noble, anyway. Some nuns were even noblewomen whose families had been ruined after political defeats. They had no reason to fear a common maid.

“How so?” Rae asked.

“Think about it. Same-sex couples cannot produce children. Their relationships bear no fruit.”

I could never come up with a rebuttal to this argument. Heterosexual couples could contribute to society by leaving behind descendants, but homosexual couples could not do the same. That was why people claimed same-sex love was indulgent, as it served no greater purpose.

But to that, Rae said, “If birthing children is a condition for love to be natural, then heterosexual couples who are unable to conceive must not have a natural relationship 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.”

Rae’s counterarguments were things that had never even occurred to me before. I’d never stopped to consider my own stance on what made love real. She also made a good point that making reproduction the chief criterion of validity discounted some heterosexual couples who couldn’t

reproduce.

The way she questioned the very idea of “normal” was eye-opening too. Rebuttals could be made to what she’d just said, of course, but it was also hard to deny the fact that disease was to some degree natural, as everyone became sick at some point in their lives. But was it natural to undo that sickness through the means of man—that is to say, *unnatural* means? It was a gray area. If you went even further and claimed such unnaturalness was objectionable, you might come off as saying the medical services the Church itself offered were wrong.

The nun didn’t seem to have expected Rae to debate her like this. She grew red in the face and started to trip on her own words. “Such sophistry...”

“Please, tell me specifically which part of what I said was sophism. Otherwise, I’ll take your entire claim 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!”

This was yet another argument I never had a rebuttal for. No matter what fancy arguments we presented, it remained a fact that homosexuals were in the minority. As heterosexuals were in the majority, did it not make sense for the rules we followed to be theirs to define?

“I’ll accept that there are fewer homosexuals than heterosexuals. But what does that prove? What is wrong with a number being smaller?”

“It proves it’s not *normal*!”

“All right, so a higher number means something is ‘normal’? But you still haven’t explained why the ‘abnormal’ smaller number ought to be bad.”

“Well...that’s because...”

“Do you think happening to belong to a majority means you have the right to attack someone in a minority?”

“Argh...”

Rae presented yet another effective counterargument, claiming numbers were not a justification for discrimination. I listened to her logical breakdown, my heart feeling lighter than ever.

“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?”

“What’s wrong is that’s simply discrimination in its purest form. Doesn’t the Church teach all are equal under the Spirit God? Your values conflict with your own teachings.”

Rae’s counterargument clearly flustered the nun. The more devout the follower, the more hesitant they were to stray from doctrine. Equality under the Spirit God was one of the core tenets of the Church. To flout it was unthinkable for the pious nun.

Rae could probably have forced the woman even further into a corner if she wanted to. But she didn’t.

“I’m not trying to outdebate you or embarrass you. I just want you to be freed from your bias against homosexuality.”

There was silence from the nun.

“I won’t even ask you to understand,” Rae said. “But can’t you at least respect us?”

“...Are you a homosexual too?”

“I am.”

Rae showed she was willing to compromise. Rather than trying to win the argument, she asked for respect. If she had continued to argue, neither side relenting, the nun would have clung to her resentment. But Rae chose a different path.

The hostility left the nun, who now seemed willing to meet Rae halfway. She wasn’t a bad person. Her belief was simply the prevailing thought of the world.

With a grimace, she said, “I...I cannot acknowledge anything yet. But I believe I understand what you mean to say. I will think about it. When... If I devise a rebuttal, then perhaps we might debate again.”

“That’s enough. Thank you very much.”

The two nuns left. I’d been unable to do anything but stand there in blank amazement throughout their entire exchange.

Rae turned, then went wide-eyed upon noticing me. “Wh-what’s wrong, Miss Lilly?”

I hadn't even realized I had been crying. This was the first time I'd met someone who understood my suffering and accepted what I was.

I am a woman of faith. To me, faith was absolute. But I had lived my whole life having the absolute nature of my faith deny who I was.

Until now. Finally, someone had come to bring an end to my lonely battle.

"...ank you..."

"What?"

"Thank you...very much..."

Before I knew it, I had dived into her chest. Flustered, she wrapped her arms around me. Her body, taller than my own, seemed to envelop me in a sense of security.

"I've always thought my own feelings were a sin... But you... you..."

My voice was too feeble to string words together. I'd been longing to hear the words Rae had just said for so long. Her exchange with those nuns had changed *everything* for me. I wanted to tell her that, but I couldn't form the words through my tears.

"Nobody has ever accepted who I am before... It's amazing, the way you're able to unashamedly say what you think..."

I barely managed to say that much before looking up at her, my face still stained with tears. She looked bewildered and yet still dashing.

I was certain this had to be destiny.

"I-I think I might be in love with you, Rae."

The moment I said that, I heard the sound of something dropping close by—but I was too far gone to care.

There was only one thought left in my mind: No matter what happened, I would never let Rae go.

Interlude: Conspiracy (Pepi Barlier)

WITH MY HOLIDAY nearing its end, I invited Carol Achard over for a violin lesson. Mid-lesson, someone rang the bell to the manor.

“Who could that be?”

“Oh, that must be Kristoff. He mentioned he wanted to talk to Master Patrice.”

“To my father? About what?”

With the sound of the bell having interrupted us, Carol suggested we might as well take a short break. I wiped my sweat off and sprayed some perfume on myself, then went out of my room and down the stairs. “... Looks like she was right.”

As Carol had said, Kristoff was here. Kristoff was the oldest son of House Achard, a marquess family, as well as Loretta’s fiancé. In that sense, he was my rival in love, but beyond that we had nothing in common.

House Barlier belonged to House François’s political faction, which had a poor relationship with House Achard. I was able to call Carol over for lessons because we had a connection going way back, but it was strange to see Kristoff here.

“Father... He may be a high-ranking noble, but you needn’t bow *that* much...”

My father welcomed Kristoff, bowing so deep you’d think he was about to kiss his feet. It wasn’t a pleasant thing to witness. Of course, I was sure he wasn’t doing it because he *wanted* to. This was just his way of surviving the harsh world that was high society. Still, it hurt to watch.

“...I think I’ll just slip back to my room.” Thinking the violin would clear the bad taste in my mouth, I turned on my heel. Before I could fully leave, however, I overheard something that made me stop in my tracks.

“Oh, and I do ask that you keep this matter a secret from Master Dole,” my father said.

As I explained earlier, House Barlier was part of House François's faction. Obviously, House Barlier was below House François in terms of hierarchy within that faction, but we were indebted enough to them to owe them our loyalty and more. What could my father want to hide from Dole, the head of House François?

My father took Kristoff and led him to a parlor in the back. As parlors were often used by nobles to conduct secret discussions, eavesdropping was impossible...*normally*.

"I'm sorry, Father. But I can't help but be worried," I whispered under my breath. I entered the book storage neighboring the parlor and locked the door behind me, then put my hand on the wall facing the parlor. Focusing, I poured my magic into the wall. It seeped through and filled the air on the other side.

Soon after, I could hear what they were saying.

I first heard my father. His voice was desperate, lacking his usual cheerfulness. "*I can't do this anymore. Master Dole is sure to notice.*"

I was using a wind spell I learned after undergoing Misha's special training. It allowed me to detect the vibrations in the air to pick up sound in a wide area. I couldn't use this on a magically protected room, but a conventionally soundproofed room like this was easy to bypass.

"Hmph... What are you suggesting? Surely you don't mean to back out? Not after coming this far." In contrast to my father, Kristoff was calm. Too calm, in fact. His voice was chilling. What was going on between them?

"I don't want to lose money any more than you do! But the human trafficking is being done in my territory! If we're caught, it'll be my house that is ruined!"

I couldn't believe my ears. Human trafficking? And it was being done in our very own territory?

"Master Patrice, please calm down. Nothing's come to light yet. We'll be safe for the time being."

"Hardly! Surely you've heard the rumors yourself: They say His Majesty l'Ausseil himself is going to have us nobles audited!"

"That's just a rumor."

"But what if it's not?! You understand that it won't be just our heads, but the heads of House Achard as well, surely?!"

My hand trembled against the wall as I listened in. What in the world was I hearing? Was our family secretly in peril?

“Even if an audit does occur, it’ll be a while before they trace things back to us,” Kristoff said. “The ones handling the dirty work are the Spiritual Church, anyway.”

Even the Spiritual Church was involved?! I didn’t worship the Spiritual Church to the extent those in my parent’s generation did, but it was still shocking to hear they played a part in something this wicked. I might have stumbled into something more sinister than I’d ever imagined...

“What has Master Clément to say about the issue?”

“Nothing, as always. Father never gives his comment, being all too happy to sit back and observe. The best others can do is try to ascertain his wishes, knowing he can cut them off whenever he wants.”

“...And I’m but another of his expendable pawns, I suppose.”

“As am I.”

I began to panic, not knowing what to do. This was too much for me alone. I needed to tell someone.

But who?

The first person that came to mind was Claire. I knew I could trust her. But if I told her, then wouldn’t it be a matter of time before Dole found out? And if Dole did find out, would he protect the Barliers? Would he protect my father? From the sound of things, my father was guilty of betraying him. No matter how magnanimous Dole might be, it was hard to imagine he’d have mercy. It was a well-known fact that Dole hardly ever spared those who made an enemy of him.

“...Is there anyone else?” I wondered out loud.

Loretta’s face rose to mind. She was a close friend. I could trust her not to disregard what I had to say... Or could I? The fact Kristoff was Loretta’s fiancé could pose a problem. It was obvious Kristoff wasn’t the one she held in her heart, but that was of little importance here—an engagement was a promise between houses. Loretta might be willing to help me, but House Kugret might not be so willing. At worst, I might cause her problems for nothing.

“Listen carefully, Master Patrice. All we need to do now is wait for the right moment. And the right moment is sure to come.”

“...Can I trust you?”

“I don’t think you have a choice. For what it’s worth, my life is just as much on the line as yours.”

Not a trace of indecision was present in Kristoff’s voice during any of this. His usual kind face now seemed so haunting in my memory.

I heard the neighboring room’s door open. Their discussion was over, it appeared. I held my breath as they passed by the book storage I was in, unable to stop my hands from trembling.

“What do I do...?”

My thoughts were a jumbled mess, and my breathing was wild. I was in no state to continue my violin lessons. I snuck back to my room, taking care the two didn’t notice me, and saw Carol tending to my violin.

“Should we resume? Oh dear. You look quite pale—are you all right?”

“I apologize, but would it be possible to cancel our lesson here?”

“Feeling under the weather, are we? It’s not a problem at all. Let me call a servant over for you.”

“Thank you.”

Seeing I was clearly unwell, she allowed me to cancel the lesson, then even went as far as to make sure I was looked after. Her concern seemed sincere...but perhaps that was just wishful thinking on my part. Carol belonged to House Achard, and if House Achard was doing something sinister with House Barlier behind the scenes, then she could very well be complicit.

I couldn’t help but be paranoid after suddenly learning of the awful thing my family was a part of.

Somebody...please...help me!

My plea only echoed vainly in my heart.

Claire’s POV

THE STORY OF RAE'S first love was quite astounding. Rae fell in love with a girl named Kosaki but couldn't accept herself for being a homosexual, met a girl named Shiko and learned to accept herself for who she was, confessed her love to Kosaki, then was outed and persecuted by Misaki. To top it all off, she'd actually been manipulated into getting rejected by Shiko, who had feelings for Rae the whole time. Afterward, Rae skipped school for a time. Her parents tried their hardest to understand and support her as a queer person, and eventually she got back on her feet.

It was hard to believe she could have such a troubled past, given how aloof and fearless she always behaved. She laughed it off, saying first love had a tendency to not pan out, but I felt like this went far beyond "not panning out."

"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 said.

"I-I'll help, Miss Claire." Lilly voiced agreement.

That Misaki girl was obviously just awful, but Kosaki and Shiko were equally guilty for tattling and manipulating.

"There's no need for that," Rae 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?" I parroted back, confused.

"Yeah, we went hunting stuff like tsuchinoko."

"And that is...?"

"Oh, sorry. Forget it." More nonsense—not that that was anything new. "Anyway, there was a lot going on in all our lives back then. So it's not really anyone's fault."

"Really? To me, it sounds like this all started with that Misaki person. Surely she's to blame?" Kosaki and Shiko were guilty of exacerbating things, but there was no denying it had all begun with Misaki.

"Well, it's more complicated than that."

"Wh-why is that?" Lilly asked.

Rae's answer surprised me. "Besides her problems at home, Misaki actually liked Shiko. But she couldn't accept that about herself."

“R-really?”

“Yes. The reason she chased me out of the group was because she thought I would steal Shiko from her.”

“Wh-whoa... So it was a love triangle?” Lilly moaned.

Love triangles featured often in romance novels and plays. It would seem they occasionally happened in real life too. Go figure.

“Not quite. It was a love *square*.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Kosaki liked Misaki.”

“H-how complicated...” Lilly groaned.

Rae borrowed a pen and paper to draw it out:

Misaki → Shiko

↑ ↓

Kosaki ← Rei

“What an absolute mess,” I said.

“A-agreed,” Lilly said.

“Well, we were all very young...”

“You’re still only in your mid-teens, though?” I said.

“Ah... How young we were...”

“Are! Not ‘were’! Use present tense!”

What was with her, looking all nostalgic and all?

“Anyways, the four of us eventually all made up,” Rae said. “It was a real riot when we found out what Kosaki was actually like, though. We had her pegged as our little angel, but she was actually pretty devilish.”

“I had a feeling,” I said. “She sounds like the kind of girl who thinks her cute face can let her get away with anything.”

“You’ve nailed it, Miss Claire.”

Girls like Kosaki were a dime a dozen. Well...girls with her kind of looks were, anyway. But quiet, reserved girls who flashed bashful smiles,

were easy to dote on, and only ever wanted everyone to get along? They were few and far between. Some girls pretended to have that kind of personality to make others underestimate them, but the genuine article was vanishingly rare. The pretenders sought to make their targets dance to their tunes, then have them do all kinds of things for them. Falling prey to such deception was something of a regular hazing ritual for young noblemen who came to the capital from the countryside.

“In the end, Kosaki and Misaki got together,” Rae said. “Oh, and it was Ko × Mi, not Mi × Ko.”

“What nonsense are you on about now?”

“Nonsense?! This isn’t nonsense, this is critical information! The dynamic of a ship changes everything!”

“Wh-what are you suddenly angry for?!”

I didn’t understand why for the life of me, but the order of the names seemed important to Rae. I was flat-out mystified, but she seemed so worked up that I’d rather just let it go.

“Anyways, that’s the story of my first love,” she said. “Told you it’d be boring.”

“It wasn’t boring at all,” I said.

“Y-yeah. It was very informative,” Lilly added.

“Really?”

It was no wonder she came off as strange when she had such a past behind her. I felt I could forgive some of her eccentricity now that I knew the cause of it. “You’ve had a rough time of it,” I said.

“No, not really. It’s become something I can laugh about now. So, how about it, Miss Lilly? Disillusioned with me yet?”

“N-not at all. If anything, I like you even more now.”

“Perfect—wait, what?”

Honestly, what was Rae thinking? Her story was so heartrending that it was hard not to admire her after hearing it.

“Er, well, my point was that first love rarely works out—especially for queer people. So try to take rejection in stride,” Rae said. “Just look at me: I take getting shot down by Miss Claire so well, it’s become a joy of its own.”

“How shameless!” I exclaimed. I took back everything I’d just thought about forgiving her eccentricities. I’d rather she become less silly, thank you very much.

“Miss Claire, your first love was Lady Manaria, right?”

“N-no! Th-that was...different! Sister is just so incredible that I misunderstood.”

“Sure, sure. You have me now anyway, right?”

“...Don’t get too carried away or I’ll fire you,” I rebuked.

“Apologies,” she meekly said. “Wait, how’d we even get to this topic anyway?”

“Right... We came here to talk about solving the poverty issue...” And got completely sidetracked.

“I-It’s okay to go off on a tangent sometimes,” Lilly said comfortingly. “B-but to go back to what you were saying, Rae, our ideals don’t always line up with reality.”

“What do you mean?”

“Th-the Church has many ideals that we would like to see made reality, but politics get in the way.”

My father had said something similar earlier. Until recently, I’d believed reality trumped ideals at every turn as well. But I’d since remembered my mother’s words. *Do not use reality to escape your ideals.*

Right now, I was teetering between the two lines of thought—so there was merit in listening closely to Lilly’s words.

“E-even if something should work in theory, if it can’t be implemented in reality through political means, then it’ll never go anywhere...and often, it never does.” Lilly seemed to speak with wisdom beyond her years. I wondered what she might already have experienced, despite her youth. “I’ve already given up hope of politics getting anything done. The Church has erected a wall between itself and the political world, anyway.”

“That’s awfully honest,” Rae said.

“But even so, we shouldn’t give up on our ideals!” I raised my voice upon hearing the defeat in Lilly’s own. “If we don’t do anything...the people will only continue to suffer.”

Ideals alone can’t sway reality. But that didn’t mean one could use

reality as an escape from their ideals. What, then, could we do?

“Let’s chase those ideals then,” Rae said. “Let’s work to make them a reality.”

“Rae...”

“You’re not alone. I may not be much help, but I’m here for you.”

“Thank you.”

The two of us had a good thing going on when Lilly exclaimed, “Oh, get a room, you pustules!”

We looked at Lilly.

“...I-I didn’t say that on purpose! Really!”

“Ah... It’s all right, we believe you,” Rae said.

What a bewildering tic to have, real or not.

“At any rate, thank you for all your hospitality today, Cardinal Lilly. Please let us know if there’s anything we can do in return,” I said.

“I-It’s been my pleasure to help you learn about the Church! I couldn’t possibly ask for anything in return.”

“We can’t have that. Tell us, are there any problems you have going on right now?” Rae asked nonchalantly.

“P-problems?”

“Yeah. You’ve really helped us out. We want to pay the favor back.”

“Aw... Y-you’re so sweet...”

“Watch it...” I warned, seeing Lilly get a little too happy. Even I had limits to my patience.

“W-well, um... There is this curse I’m researching called the Crosswise Curse...”

“Oh, that’s the one that affects gender, right?” Rae said.

I’d heard of the curse as well. It made one’s gender appear to be the opposite of what it actually was, if I recalled correctly.

Rae said, “Wouldn’t the Church’s Tears of the Moon cancel out or at least dampen its effects?”

“Y-you know about the Tears of the Moon?!” Lilly gasped. “But

that's one of the Church's greatest secrets!"

"Oops." Rae covered her mouth with her hand, like she'd made a gaffe. I wasn't surprised, as I was also used to this sort of behavior from her. That said, I did intend to eventually make her tell me where she got all this secret knowledge.

"Wh-where did you learn about the Tears of the Moon?!" Lilly pressed.

"Er, umm... Master Yu told me."

"Th-that can't be. If Master Yu knew of a way to remove her Crosswise Curse, she'd have long—ah!" This time it was Lilly's turn to seal up her mouth with her hand.

Wait, what? "...Cardinal Lilly, what did you just say?"

"Oh, no, no, no..."

"Is Master Yu affected by the Crosswise Curse?" Rae pressed for an answer.

Lilly let out a sigh of defeat. "I-I'll 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."

The two of us nodded.

With resignation, Lilly began to speak. "Th-the truth is..."

To summarize it simply, it turned out Yu was a girl.

I sat in silence, thinking. With a yawn, Catherine said, "What's up? Did you get into a fight with Rae or something?"

A few days had passed since I found out Yu's secret, and the issue had plagued me the entire time, so it was no surprise that Catherine eventually sensed something was wrong with me. It was nighttime, so we talked in darkness with the lights out, as we usually did. She was sucking

on some of her favorite licorice candy today too.

“No, we’re not fighting,” I replied.

“Reaaaally? You don’t have to hide it from me.”

“We’re really not.”

“Well, then what’s bothering you?”

“It’s just something to do with Master Yu’s body. Don’t worry about it.”

“Master Yu’s body? Ah... So you found out?”

“Huh? Wait, you don’t mean...?”

“Yep. House Achard knows her secret and is keeping quiet, just like House Jur,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You’re kidding.” Catherine was in the same position as Misha, then.

“Hundred percent serious. The only difference is that House Achard went out of their way to dig up the secret as leverage against Master Yu’s faction.”

“That does sound like something Master Clément would do.”

It was almost as if Clément had schemes laid everywhere he could. Scheming was par for the course where the nobility was concerned, but people didn’t usually try to put their fingers in every single pie—stretching yourself too thin made it easy to have the rug pulled out from under you. Then again, maybe the standard logic didn’t apply to Clément. Nobody had ever succeeded in pulling the rug out from under him, after all.

“I suppose I can talk to you without hiding anything, then,” I said. “A lot has happened these past few days...”

“What, like a rival in love appearing?”

“Catherine!” I rebuked her.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be serious,” she said with a giggle. There wasn’t a trace of ill will in her teasing. She was just having fun, albeit at my expense. I couldn’t see her from my lower bunk bed, but I was sure she had a wide grin on her face right about now.

I told her all about Lilly...even the part about Lilly falling in love with Rae. Looking back on it, I probably didn’t have to go into *that much* detail, but I was a bit too worked up to realize in the moment. She’s since

teased me about it every moment she could. Ugh.

“You know, if you keep hesitating, Rae might just get swept away by another girl right under your nose.”

“Such a thing would never happen...Rae’s nothing more than my maid, anyway. What do I care what she does?”

“Oh c’mon, quit being so shy,” she groaned. “From what I’ve heard, this Lilly girl seems pretty straightforward about her feelings. She might have a serious advantage over you.”

“Hmph. I doubt that.”

“Really? Have you even managed to tell Rae you like her yet?”

“Wh-what?! Absurd! Wh-who would like that commoner?!?” I could feel my face reddening. Catherine didn’t ease off me, however.

“Rae’s made her feelings clear for you countless times so far, but you only ever brush her off. It wouldn’t be a surprise if her love ran dry at this rate, you know?”

“Urk...” She had a point. If I were in Rae’s shoes, I’d have given up trying to win over someone so cold a long time ago. “...But I just don’t know what to do.”

“What do you mean? It’s easy. Just tell her you like her.”

“I could never! That’s just...embarrassing!”

“Ah, right... You were raised to be the quintessential noblewoman, weren’t you?”

Indeed I was. From a young age, I’d been taught that noblemen were always the ones to make their love known. For a noblewoman to do the same was vulgar. That was why I found it shameful to express feelings of affection.

“But Rae’s a girl, you know? Don’t female friends tell each other they like one another all the time?” Catherine said.

“This is different. Rae isn’t a female friend. She’s something more sp—” I got that far when I realized Catherine was hanging upside down from her bed looking at me.



With a fat grin on her face, she said, “Go on. She’s what now?”

“Catherine!” I threw my pillow at her, causing her to retreat back up.

“Whoa! Close one. Aha ha ha, I was only kidding,” she said. “I’m glad, though. You’ve finally realized your own feelings.”

“Yes, yes, this topic is *over*. We’re talking about Master Yu now.”

“Ah, Master Yu. Poor thing.”

I recalled Lilly’s explanation. Yu had been born female, but afflicted by the Crosswise Curse by Queen Riche. She wanted Yu to have a right to the throne, which was perhaps noble of a mother, but to hurt her child in the process was awful of her.

“So, there’s a way to heal Master Yu?” Catherine asked.

“There is. We can uncurse her by using a certain ritual item kept with the Church.”

“I see... But it’s not so simple as heading over and using it, I’ll bet.”

“No, no, it is not.”

We may have had a way to heal her, but doing so would affect more than just Yu herself. If the fact one of the three princes had actually been female this whole time came to light, the royal court would be livid. It would be a scandal unlike any other, especially since she was made male to cheat her way into the line of succession.

There was also the fact that Yu was fifteen years old, an age when she had to think about marriage. Odds were high that the royal court was already searching for a suitable woman among foreign royalty. There was no way they’d just be okay with her coming out and saying she was a woman now, of all times.

“But if things continue as is, no one will be happy. Except Queen Riche, that is,” Catherine said.

“Yeah...”

Yu couldn’t live as her real gender was. Her future spouse would likely keep her secret, but they would have unknowingly entered into a same-sex relationship, which would put a lot of strain on their marriage. The only one who benefitted from this arrangement at all was Riche, who got her way and got her “son” in line for the throne.

“What’d Rae have to say?” Catherine asked.

“She said we need to hear what Master Yu wants before doing anything.”

Rae seemed to have her own opinions on the matter, but she still wanted to place Yu’s wishes first. Nothing was going to be done without hearing from her.

“So that’s why you requested an audience with Master Yu?” Catherine asked.

“I’m surprised you heard about that. Yes, that’s right. I’m a bit hesitant to go, though...” Yu’s problem was tied to an unbecoming side of the royal family, so there was real danger in diving into it. I didn’t want anything bad to happen to Rae, so it was a bit hard to get enthusiastic about this visit.

“Are you worried about Rae?”

“Of course I am. Why shouldn’t I be? She’s my maid.”

“Here we go again...”

“Oh, be quiet.” I was indeed worried about Rae (and not just because she was my maid), but it was still a bit too difficult for me to say it outright. “I’m sleeping. I have a visit to the Palace tomorrow.”

“All right. Good luck, Claire.”

The two of us went to sleep then. Before I drifted off completely, however, I heard Catherine’s sadness-tinged voice.

“Maybe it’s time... You have that Rae girl by your side now...”

I would not remember it come morning, however.

“You want to know what *I* want?” Yu replied.

On the morning of the day school would resume, Rae and I went to the Royal Palace to see Yu. Applying for an audience with a prince came with a series of procedures, followed by a lengthy approval process. It really put into perspective how peculiar it was that we could just meet the princes normally at the Academy. We received a referral from Lilly, however, and because she mentioned we had a potential solution to Yu’s

condition—that is to say, a way to make her male transformation perfect—our application was approved in no time at all. Officially, I was the one receiving the audience, and Rae was tagging along as an acting health professional of sorts.

Rae wanted to know whether Yu even wanted her problem solved at all. Rae had been able to learn some things by talking to Misha, but it was always better to hear something from the source rather than second-hand.

“This is not a matter of *want*, Master Yu.”

We had requested an audience with Yu alone so she could speak freely, but we were not granted that, perhaps because the issue affected the royal family as a whole. With us now to keep an eye on us was Salas, the chancellor.

He looked toward us and said, “It pains me to say this, but Master Yu must remain a prince. The matter has long since surpassed the question of what he wants himself.”

“We understand, Master Salas. Rae and I grasp the complexity of the issue present,” I said politely. The slightest action of royalty could have rippling consequences on the country. I felt bad for Rae, but as a noble, I had to sympathize with what Salas said. “However,” I continued, “if we don’t know how Yu himself feels on the matter, how are we to support him emotionally if and when he manages to fully become male?”

Salas was a capable nobleman, enough so to become chancellor. He would listen as long as what one had to say was logical and coherent.

“I see. So you want to know his true feelings not for the sake of determining which gender he should be, but whether further support is needed once he is properly made male?” Salas asked for confirmation.

“That is correct.”

He put his hand to his chin, thinking. He looked quite striking in that pose. His silver hair and red eyes, the same features Lilly had, paired well with his handsome face and had earned him many admirers among nobles and commoners alike. If someone like me—who was accustomed to beauty—found him objectively eye-catching, then commoner women would probably be absolutely smitten by him. It was a good thing Rae had no interest in men... *What am I feeling relieved for? Goodness.*

“I do see some merit to be had here, Master Yu,” Salas said, giving his permission.

“I’ll speak frankly then,” Yu said. “If it were possible...I would like to return to being a woman.”

“Master Yu...” Salas warned. His face creased with concern.

“There’s no need to worry yourself, Salas. Since there’s nothing that can be done about it, I’ll stay a man like you want. But I can’t change how I feel inside,” Yu said apologetically. “Once a month, when the moon becomes full, I’m able to return back to my true self. I’ve been able to narrowly maintain a balance between my body and soul thanks to that, but if I were to forever be stuck as a man, I’m not so sure I’d be able to hold myself together.” Her perfect, princely demeanor didn’t falter for a moment, but I had no doubt what she said was how she genuinely felt.

“What do you suggest he do then, you two?” Salas asked us.

“Does Rae have permission to speak?” I asked.

“She may. I am not a stickler for status, so long as one shows merit.”

“Thank you very much. If you please, Rae.”

“Thank you. The way I see it, Master Yu has two options.”

“Go on.” Salas leaned in, hopeful.

“The first is to continue with things the way they’ve been.”

“...But what would that achieve?”

“It would satisfy the royal court’s wish that Master Yu remain a prince, while also allowing her to be herself once a month.”

“And the second option?” prompted Salas, a bit disheartened.

“The second option is to have Master Yu embrace life as a girl.”

“...Have you not listened to a word I’ve said? That is not an—”

“Officially, we would have Master Yu disinherited.”

“...What is this nonsense you are suggesting?” Salas spluttered.

Rae remained firm. “It’s Master Yu’s obligation to play the part of heir that complicates things. If she were freed of that obligation, it wouldn’t matter what gender she was.”

“Are you suggesting the palace embarrass itself by revealing Master Yu’s secret?”

“Not at all. After she’s disinherited, the palace can announce she’s

become ill and has to stay at a convent for care. She would live there with a number of attendants serving her. She wouldn't be free to move about as she pleases, but her gender wouldn't matter this way."

"Do you have any idea what you're saying?" Salas said sharply. Rae was clearly speaking out of line as a commoner, but even now she showed no sign of backing down.

Yu spoke up. "If we went through with that, would I spend the rest of my life confined to a convent?"

"Kind of, at least in the beginning. If you grow your hair out and put on some make-up, you'll be able to go out passing as a high-ranked nun, I'm sure. Thankfully, your face is pretty feminine as it is already."

Yu grinned wryly. While it wasn't perfect, it seemed she liked the sound of things better than what she had now.

"...Rae, was it? What of all that talk of permanently making Master Yu a man?" Salas asked.

"As far as I know, such a thing isn't possible," Rae answered.

"...I allowed your audience with Master Yu because you claimed to have a solution for his condition, but this has only proven to be a waste of time." Salas sagged his shoulders.

Rae didn't relent. "Master Salas, do you not consider Master Yu being able to live as her true gender a good thing?"

"I do not. It is the will of the royal court that he remain a man."

"Even though there are two other heirs?"

A bit sternly, Salas said, "Listen carefully, *Rae Taylor*. You may think disinheriting a member of the royal family is a trivial thing, but it is not. Disinheritance is a punishment reserved solely for the heaviest of crimes. We could not impose such a thing on Master Yu."

"I'd say what you're imposing on her already is far worse though," Rae said. This was around the time I realized she was not entirely herself. I had never seen her fight so hard for someone else's sake before.

"...You've overstepped your bounds. Claire is one thing, but a commoner like you has no right to criticize the court."

"Master Yu has done no wrong; why must she suffer for Queen Riche's actions?"

"This audience is over. Leave."

“Master Salas!”

“...I appreciate it, Rae. But some things just can’t be changed,” Yu said with a weak smile. She seemed like she could disappear at any moment. After putting up with this farce for over a dozen years, she had given in. I saw nothing left we could do here.

“Rae, we’re leaving. Master Yu, Master Salas, thank you very much for your time.”

“You’d do well to assume this is the last time we meet to discuss this matter,” Salas said.

“...Duly noted,” I replied.

Rae seemed like she still had things she wanted to say, but I pulled her out of the room by force. It was raining when we stepped outside. We waited by the gate for our horse carriage to come.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I can’t believe you, Rae...”

“What? Don’t tell me you’re fine with this outcome!” she said angrily. Gradually, the rain gained intensity.

“I am not. But as Master Yu said, some things just can’t be changed.”

“How can you say that? Weren’t you the one who said you didn’t want to use reality to escape your ideals? Was that all just for show?”

“...When did you grow so high and mighty that you could talk like that to me?”

“Status has nothing to do with this! If we can’t even save one person, then saving all commoners is just a pipe dream!”

“Rae!” I said sharply. She gasped, seeming to return to her senses.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Whatever has gotten into you? This isn’t like you at all.”

“Misaki was the same as Master Yu...” she said hesitantly. “She... or, well, he...was forced to live as the wrong gender.”

I was shocked. I recalled that Misaki was one of the people mentioned in the story of Rae’s first love.

“And just like Master Yu, no one around Misaki understood him and he was forced to live a lie... Until one day, he killed himself.”

I gasped. Rae kept her head cast down, so I could not see her expression. But I was sure she was crying.

She continued. “He didn’t die just because no one listened to what he wanted. He died because he couldn’t bear the fact that what he wanted bothered those around him so much.”

“That’s...terrible.” As someone who was born a woman and had never questioned my own gender, I could not even hope to imagine Misaki’s pain. I didn’t even know where I would start. But Rae was different, I’m sure. She must have tried in her own way to understand Misaki, to support him—only for him to still slip away. Misaki’s pain was great, I’m sure. But I couldn’t help but grieve the pain Rae must have felt even more.

“There was no easy fix for Misaki,” she said. “There was no Crosswise Curse we could simply cure. But with Master Yu, it’s different. We can actually help Master Yu, so why—”

“That’s enough. Come here.” I brought Rae into my arms. Her cheeks were wet, surely because of the rain...

“I still remember how Kosaki cried at his funeral, clinging to his casket.”

“I see.”

“But this world is so cruel... Misaki’s parents blamed Misaki himself for dying. They called him weak, said he was wrong to feel how he did.”

“I see.”

“I don’t want to ever let such a thing happen again. Once they’re gone, it’s too late.”

“I know.”

She seemed so weak, like a baby weeping. Hoping to soothe her somewhat, I continued to warm her cold body with my own.

At some point, the rain had reached an intensity where it drowned out our voices. The two of us held one another until the carriage came.

The rain did not stop that day.

Interlude: Failed Assassination (Salas Lilium)

“WHEW. I'M EXHAUSTED!” After Claire and Rae left the room, Yu did a big stretch in his chair.

“Master Yu, such behavior is slovenly,” I chided. It was just the two of us in the audience room, but that did not mean he could be lax, even if he preferred to keep himself approachable to others in his day-to-day life.

“Don’t worry. I get it, Salas.”

“Do you? Sometimes you make me wonder.”

“You don’t want me getting any ideas, right?” Yu smiled broadly as I failed to find words to respond with. “I’ll admit, I did get my hopes up when they said they could do something about my body.”

“Master Yu...”

“But even if there was something that could be done...the royal court would never allow it.” He rested his chin against his hand, leaning on the arm of the chair. With a distant look in his eyes, he said, “I have been raised as this kingdom’s third prince and have an obligation to remain it. I cannot half-heartedly betray those who have supported me so far.”

“Your understanding is appreciated.”

“But you know...” His tone turned dreamy then. “It was nice to fantasize what it’d be like to live as a woman, as impossible as I know it is.”

“...Fantasize and nothing more, I presume?”

“Of course. While it would be nice, I cannot so easily cast off the duties that bind me as prince.”

“...I see.” Intuitively, I could tell: Yu was wavering. The suggestion that Rae Taylor woman had made was unrealistic. Given the status quo of the palace, it was something that could never be done. But that was precisely why it was so alluring. The impossibility of it all made the temptation all the sweeter to Yu. No matter how much he claimed not to be charmed by it, I knew the temptation would continue to haunt him.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time.

“Master Yu, I pray you do not let your wild fantasies trap you.”

“Don’t worry, Salas. I know better. You can leave now. I’ll leave to rest soon myself.”

“...As you wish.”

I bowed and made to leave. As I glanced over my shoulder to take one last look at Yu, I saw the look of a maiden lost amid a dream.

In the dead of night that same day, I was not in my room in the palace, but at a ruined manor outside of the capital.

“...It’s me. Let me in.”

I heard the sound of the door immediately unlocking. I’d likely been noticed the moment I approached the manor.

“What a treat. It’s not often you come by yourself.”

Receiving me was a man wearing a black mask. He was Alter, my *masterpiece*. He seemed to melt right into the darkness of the lightless room. While it was too dark to see, the spacious room should have been a disorderly, cluttered mess with a number of beds lined up.

“Something urgent has come up. I need you to send an assassin.”

“So suddenly? All right, who do you need dead?”

“The third prince—Yu Bauer.”

“...What?” he spluttered. “You’re kidding me, right? Weren’t you going to back that kid for the throne? I thought you had to jump through a whole lot of hoops to ensnare that poor Riche woman too.”

“Things have changed; I’m starting over from square one. Yu is useless to me now. Supporting him any longer will only backfire on me.”

Yu had been a valuable pawn in the past, but his worth was questionable now. I still had Thane in the wings, anyway, though I did almost lose him due to Alter’s rash actions.

“Is that right? Something happen?” Alter asked.

“Nothing that you need to be aware of.”

“Huh. Well, if you say so.” He shrugged with disinterest. “When do you need him dead?”

“As soon as possible.”

“We could do it tomorrow, then. Maybe. Depends on his schedule.”

“His schedule won’t be a problem. Tomorrow, he is slated to make a wellness visit to an orphanage.”

“Heh. How convenient.” He picked up on what I was implying right away. “Somebody procured from the Church would be perfect then, eh? Out of those that’re ready...maybe this one will do?” He flung off the sheet of a nearby bed. On it slept a nun. “Stocked this one just the other day. It’s a real challenge getting anything done lately, y’know? The royal family’s starting to get wise.”

“Enough boasting. Is she prepared?”

“Course. It’s me we’re talking about. All that’s left is for you to input your commands.”

“Very good.” I neared the sleeping nun and touched her cheek. Her eyes faintly flickered open. I met her gaze as I cast my hypnosis magic. “My sweet, sweet daughter. Can you hear my voice?”

“I...can hear you...”

“I need something of you. Can you help me?”

“Yes...Father...”

I told her the objective and the means with which she would make the kill. Rather than make my instructions too precise, however, I left some room for her to make her own decisions. Such was the greatest secret to utilizing humans: letting them exercise their own will to an extent.

“And that’s everything. Do you understand?” I asked.

“Yes...Father...”

“Then repeat it back to me.”

“Firstly, I need to...” The nun correctly recounted the plan back to me. This should be enough.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Alter.”

“Sure thing. Have yourself a good night now.”

Without responding to his insincere tone, I left the manor behind.

There was uproar in the palace in the afternoon of the next day.

“What about Yu?! Is Yu safe?!”

“Calm down, Queen Riche. It’s all right. The Prince is unharmed.”

“Do not tell me to calm down! Somebody tried to assassinate my boy!”

The assassination had been a failure. I didn’t know where the information leaked from, but somebody anonymously made a report, causing Yu’s guard to become stronger than usual.

I was infuriated. The key to a successful assassination was to make the first attempt work. Afterward, the target would be too vigilant. It would take time for their guard to slacken again.

“Salas...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

L’Ausseil called out to me. Just what could he possibly want now of all times?

“Do you have any ideas as to who might have ordered such a thing?”

“I am ashamed to say I do not.”

“Perhaps someone from the Spiritual Church?”

“I am told the offender has been missing for many days. The Church is likely not involved.”

“Hmm...” He sunk into thought.

“We must demolish the convent that allowed this crime to happen and denounce the Church! No, not even that is enough!”

“Calm yourself, Riche.”

“Your Majesty, how can you be so calm now?! Somebody has tried to have your son killed!”

“And that is precisely why I must remain calm. I have to think why someone would want Yu killed, as well as what I must do from here on.”

“No, now is not the time to dally! We must—” Riche continued to have a fit for some time; it took great effort to pacify her. In the end, she began to feel anemic and had to be escorted back to her room by a maid.

“Salas...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Do you think there will be a second attempt?”

The man didn’t have the slightest suspicion the one who ordered the assassination was me. I stifled a smile and humbly said, “I would fear the worst and be extra vigilant for the time being. We should increase the number of assigned guards, not just for Master Yu, but for Master Rod and Master Thane as well.”

“Indeed.”

“We should issue a gag order on this incident as well. It’d be unwise to let it become a scandal.”

“That’s reasonable. I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“As you wish. I shall get to it at once.”

I left to instruct the guards. The fool of a king didn’t even suspect a thing. Indeed, the one truly fit to reign was me alone.

“...But just what could push you to such drastic action, Salas...?”

L’Ausseil muttered something as I left, but his words did not reach my ears.

Interlude: Suspicion (Misha Jur)

NOT LONG AFTER I returned to the capital, the unthinkable happened. Rae and Claire finding out about Yu's secret was surprise enough, yes, but that was entirely eclipsed by the attempt on Yu's life. Information on the incident was suppressed so the royal family could save face, but I was able to learn of what happened through my family. Even now, House Jur was qualified to know and keep Yu's secrets, as I had explained to Rae just recently.

The incident took place when Yu was making a wellness visit to a convent. A former nun who happened to be visiting the same convent that day had abruptly attacked Yu while wielding a dagger coated in poison—cantarella. It wasn't the new variant of cantarella that Louie used, but the old variant that had been used against Thane. The Empire was suspected of involvement because of the poison, but the nun claimed to remember nothing pertaining to the incident, so the truth remained unclear.

Some testimonies from those present were of note. One person claimed the nun showed signs of being under mental manipulation. Another claimed that the nun had been a quiet girl in the past but was oddly cheerful that day, almost like she was another person. Yet another claimed the nun had attacked Yu with physical prowess previously unthinkable of herself. All these testimonies were reliable, coming from nuns and soldiers assigned to the case. I couldn't help but think of a certain someone after hearing them, however.

Ever since the morning of our first day at the Academy, my close friend, Rae Taylor, had seemingly become a different person. She used to be a quiet girl prone to zoning out, a quick thinker but not a great student, and her knowledge of etiquette had only been commoner-level. She was top seat among the transfer students only because of her incredible magic power; her academics and etiquette were nothing to write home about. But she was now academically among the top five of our year, and her etiquette was far too good for a commoner. Her personality had done a complete 180 as well—the way she constantly tried to make moves on Claire was unthinkable of the old Rae.

“...Could whatever happened to the nun have happened to Rae as well?” I murmured to myself. I didn’t think it was likely, but I couldn’t fully deny the possibility. It was all much too similar for me to just write off as a coincidence. Rae was somebody relatively close to Yu. Her lack of interest in Yu as a prince seemed genuine, but it could all be an attempt at reverse psychology to make Yu more interested in her.

“But if Rae were an assassin, she’d have had many chances to attack Master Yu by now...” All students in the Academy had their backgrounds vetted, so security around Yu was lighter on school grounds. If Rae wanted to attack him—no, *her*, she’d have been able to do it long before this attempt with the nun.

“...Why’d that nun attack now of all times, anyway?” Perhaps whoever was targeting Yu had a change of circumstances and needed her dead now. Maybe that meant Rae had only now become a threat to her.

“Maybe I should report her to the military...” That was the best thing I could do to protect Yu. Even if my doubts proved misplaced, Rae would only be locked up until she was cleared of suspicion. Things would end with her hating me, sure, but that was a comparatively good result.

Rae returned to our dorm room then. “I’m back.”

She seemed a little tired. Judging from her maid clothes, she must have come from Claire’s. The day had ended before I knew it.

“...Welcome back.”

“Me, sleep.”

“C’mon, Rae. At least change your clothes first.”

“Too tired.” Just like that, she collapsed onto her bed and fell asleep.

“Just how lax can you be...?” I sighed. She was so carefree, and blithely unaware of my suspicion of her. I felt my desire to report her to the military ebb away as I watched her childlike face. It wouldn’t hurt to wait and see a little longer, probably. “I want to trust you...but there are some things I still need to set things straight.”

I got up and opened the closet, then forced her to get out of bed and change clothes.

An opportunity to dispel my suspicions came surprisingly quickly.

“Hey, Misha?”

“Yeah?”

Nighttime in our dorm room. I was writing at my desk when Rae called out to me.

“Do you have any interest in becoming a nun?”

“...What?” Bewildered, I turned to look at her. She was just lying on her bed, looking over at me. “Where did that come from?”

“Do you?”

“Of course not.”

“I see...”

I hadn’t a clue what she was getting at, and I didn’t know how to interact with her right now with all my suspicion of her. For the time being, I decided I would just pretend I’d heard nothing.

“But would you become one if it meant you could be with Master Yu?” she asked.

“...What do you mean?”

“Ooh, did that catch your attention?”

I had returned to writing, but that didn’t last long. The mere mention of Yu’s name drew my attention completely back to Rae.

“Rae, what are you planning?”

“Just the happiness of my best friend.”

“Don’t kid around with me.”

“I’m not kidding, though.” With a hefty grunt, she got out of bed as if she were an old man. “I might be able to do something about Yu’s body.”

“How?”

“Didn’t I already tell you before?”

Rae had already told me how she and Claire knew Yu’s secret and could heal her body with a relic from the Church. But that wasn’t what I was asking. “No, I mean how are you going to convince the court?”

“Shock and awe.”

“What?” I doubted my ears. “...Are you scheming something again?”

“What do you mean ‘again’? Don’t make it sound like I’m always up to no good.” So she said, but the words ‘shock and awe’ didn’t inspire confidence. “Anyways, I was thinking...”

Rae filled me in on her scheme. She wanted to use the ceremonial dance to reveal the fact that Yu was a woman, making it widespread, indisputable knowledge to the whole kingdom.

“...That idea is insane,” I said.

“But it’s the only one we’ve got.”

“You realize you *will* be executed if they discover your involvement, right?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

I put my hand to my temple, feeling a headache. Two contradicting feelings fought in my mind: my desire to trust Rae, and my suspicion of her.

“Why are you willing to go so far?”

“I told you already. For my best friend.”

“That’s a half-truth at best, I bet.”

“I really mean it!”

“No, you don’t. I doubt you even see me as a friend at all.”

She frowned at this. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you’re not the Rae Taylor I know.” I dived in headfirst and confronted her. I was ready for the worst. If she killed me here, then so be it.

She became visibly flustered. Was I right after all?

“Wh-what are you talking about, Misha?”

“You haven’t been yourself for a while now. Since the very day we began classes, I imagine.”

“Uhh...” I could see it on her face: I’d hit the nail right on the head.

“You’ve always been strange, I’ll admit, but you were still within the bounds of an ordinary commoner girl. But from that day forward you’ve clearly become a different person entirely.” I stepped closer. “At

first, I blamed the stresses of our new environment for your changes in personality. 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?"

"I know it's ridiculous, but it's the only explanation." I thought I sounded insane, but I also felt like I was on the verge of uncovering the truth. "So, who are you? What happened to my best friend, Rae Taylor?"

Rae made a pained look and said, "I am Rae Taylor."

"...Is that your answer? Then I regret to inform you that I won't be going along with your plan. I won't help you endanger Yu."

She let out a big sigh and made a face like she'd given up. "All right. You got me. But I don't think you'll believe what I have to say."

"That's for me to decide."

"...I guess it is. All right, I'll talk. It might sound like a whole lot of nonsense to you, but it's the truth."

What she had to say was shocking. She claimed to have memories of herself in a different world, and that this world was the setting of a game in her world. She said she'd been reincarnated into the heroine of that game and was fighting to save Claire. It was all preposterous, but I heard her out for the time being.

"This world is the setting of a...*vee-dee-oh* game?"

"Do you believe me?"

"...Honestly, it's a bit hard to. You said the world you come from is more advanced than ours, right?" I began to question her, trying to poke holes in her story as best as I could. Her explanations were sometimes too difficult for me to completely follow, but I found very little contradiction throughout, regardless. Her story was self-consistent. "So...what? You are Rae Taylor, but you're not?"

"I guess so. I have my memories of being Rae Taylor, but I've mixed with my other self. That's why I seem like a completely different person to you."

I thought for a while, clamping my mouth shut. Could I believe her? *Should* I believe her? I didn't know. But there was one thing she mentioned that I couldn't overlook. "You said there would be a revolution?"

“I did.”

“And when it occurs, the royal family will be no more?”

“Yes.”

“...All right. In that case, I have my answer.” I sat up straight and faced her directly. “I will help you. I will believe what you’ve said.”

The moment I said that, she collapsed onto the bed.

“Rae?”

“Oh, thank goodness...”

“Were you that nervous?”

“How could I not be? You could have very well thought I’d lost my mind.”

“I suppose that’s true. But what you’ve told me lines up with a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

“Your test results. You never were very good at studying.”

“Ugh. I can’t believe my prior dumbness bailed me out.”

“That’s not all though. There’s the fact that you counteracted that Nur Empire poison.”

“Oh, right. Cantarella. Yeah, being able to heal that was quite the lucky break.” The composition of cantarella was supposed to be a mystery, but Rae had somehow managed to heal Thane from it despite that. “I’m glad you believe me though. But wait... Since when did you learn to be so open-minded?”

“Don’t make it sound like I’m always inflexible or something. And your story isn’t as unbelievable as you might think, at least, to the people of this world.”

“What do you mean?”

“You come from a world of science, so something like crossing worlds seems impossible as it’s unscientific. But your logic doesn’t apply here. This world has magic, the most unscientific thing there is.”

“Ah... You’re right.”

“Besides, you’re not exactly unique. Tales of the lost children of the Spirit have been passed down for ages.”

“Now that you mention it...”

According to an old legend, lost children of the Spirit were people who appeared out of nowhere, always bearing special powers.

“You’re one yourself, aren’t you?” I said.

“That I am!” Her special power was likely her abnormal magic aptitude.

“At any rate, this secret of yours explains a lot of things I’ve been wondering about. Thank you for opening up, Rae.”

“No problem. I’m more than glad to finally get this weight off my chest. You really had my heart racing for a moment there, though.”

“Did I? It must’ve been even harder to tell your parents, then.”

“Huh?”

“...What do you mean ‘huh’? You’ve told them, right?”

“Nope,” she said nonchalantly.

I put my hand to my temple in disbelief. “This is precisely the sort of thing you ought to tell your parents right away.”

“R-really?”

“Yes. They didn’t say anything when you were visiting?”

“Um... No, nothing in particular.”

“...Come to think of it, your parents always have been rather hands-off.” I sighed, then warned Rae she’d better tell her folks everything one of these days. “It’s getting late. You have practice for the ceremonial dance tomorrow, right? Do you have enough time to rest?”

“Oh, yeah, no problem. I’ll use magic to get some good sleep.”

“Go ahead; I’ll wake you in the morning. Good night.”

“Good night.”

I extinguished the lamp light and laid down in bed. My suspicion of Rae had, for the most part, been cleared away. She wasn’t a threat to Yu but was really helping her. *I’m sorry for doubting you, Rae...*

I wondered if she still saw me as her best friend now that she had changed so much. I hoped she did. Before long, drowsiness took hold and drifted me off to sleep.

Claire's POV

RAE'S PLAN WENT OFF without a hitch. Yu revealed her gender and renounced her seat in the line of succession during the ceremonial dance, thus making it public knowledge. Some people of the royal court tried to amend things by claiming Yu had been made a woman by the Crosswise Curse and was merely temporarily confused, but that was unlikely to work. It had been clear to all that Yu was herself then, what with how resolutely she spoke. There were too many witnesses for the truth to be buried too. Perhaps Rae had chosen the ceremonial dance precisely for that reason? Who knows how far she thought ahead.

Still, problems remained. Yu and the rest of us all had our stories straight, but it was still up in the air whether Rae would be punished or not. Her actions were clearly against the wishes of the palace—particularly those of Riche's. It was quite plausible that someone would try to harm Rae while she was imprisoned.

“...Which is why I need your influence to free her as soon as possible.” I was currently with my father in his study at the François manor. He puffed his pipe while listening to me. “Queen Riche is a frightening individual. Many a noble has fallen from grace after opposing Lady Yu. It is unlikely she would simply stand back and do nothing here. Rae is in danger.”

Yu had renounced her claim to the throne as the third in line, the last of all three princes. By no means had she been likely to inherit the throne. Despite that, it was a well-known fact that Riche was obsessed with having her child be monarch one day. She was even the main political opponent of the most influential prince, Rod. While she never dirtied her own hands directly, she did make all kinds of efforts to whittle down his influence where she could. It would be unthinkable for her not to take vengeance on Rae.

At any rate, I was worried for Rae so much that it hurt. My father, on the other hand...

“Your fears are unfounded,” he said, exhaling a puff of smoke.

“That Rae is sharp. She can fend for herself.”

“Surely you aren’t serious?!”

“What do you think might happen to her, then?”

“Well... What if she’s secretly killed behind closed doors?”

Riche was this kingdom’s queen. Surely she could order a few people discreetly killed.

“Rae is a maid of House François. Not even Queen Riche can carelessly lay a hand on her knowing she’ll incur our wrath.”

“Perhaps so, but maybe she won’t think anyone will care much about a maid or two going missing.” As sad as it was to say, commoner servants were not particularly prized by high society.

“You worry yourself too much, Claire.”

“But Father!”

“Rae will be fine. Now leave me be.”

“Father...”

He clearly had no intention of listening any further.

“Very well. I shall take my leave.”

I left the study, unable to hide how dejected I was.

“I’m worried about Rae.”

“Oh, Miss Claire...”

I joined Pepi and Loretta for a tea party alone, having not felt like hiring a temporary maid in Rae’s absence. The two gave me worried looks. Ralaire, entrusted to me by her master, felt somehow worried for me as well.

“You are very kind, Miss Claire, to care about a servant so much.”

“...Yes, well, Rae is an exemplary maid. She would not be easy to replace,” I replied. Of course, in truth, I no longer thought of Rae as just a mere maid anymore. She was something more to me now, something irreplaceable. But I could not be so forthright as to say so and insisted I was just worried for Rae as her master.

“Be strong, Miss Claire. This is *that* commoner we’re talking about here. It would take a great deal to make her falter.”

“I’d hope so,” I replied. That was when I noticed it was just me and Loretta talking. Pepi seemed off in her own world, distracted with a gloomy look on her face. “Pepi, is something the matter?”

“Oh... No, it’s nothing. I’m sorry for blanking out.”

“That’s nothing to apologize for. If something’s the matter, though, please do tell us. We’re friends, after all.” I was worried about Rae right now, but I wasn’t so selfish as to ignore the plight of my friends.

“Well...the thing is...” Pepi began to say something, but quickly slunk into silence.

“Pepi?”

“...No, I’ve changed my mind. You have a lot on your plate as is already. Perhaps another time, if you’re so willing.”

“All right. Feel free to tell me whenever you feel the time is right.”

“Thank you.” She smiled weakly. I now knew she was bearing a great secret concerning her family, but I already had my hands full with my own worries then and couldn’t help her.

“Yeaah, that is worrying.”

“Right?”

Later that night in my dorm room, Catherine and I had tea, talking rather early in the night for once. She was sucking on one of her usual candies again. I was pretty sure candy and tea didn’t go together, but oh well.

“That being said, you can’t do anything reckless,” she said. “That’d only put Rae in a worse position.”

“...I get that, but I’m just so worried. I can’t stop imagining the worst happening to her.”

Unlike when we talked before, I didn’t have it in me now to hide my feelings for Rae. Catherine made no move to tease me, however.

“I won’t tell you not to worry, but I don’t see anything you can do but wait things out. From what I’ve heard, though, it doesn’t seem like His Majesty l’Ausseil wants to make any waves out of this incident, so I doubt anything bad will happen.”

“...I sure hope so.” Feeling glum, I took a sip of my black tea. It

was a high-grade tea procured by House Achard, but I couldn't appreciate its flavor at all as I was.

"Hm... Let me guess, you're thinking of what happened to your mother, Lady Melia?"

"...You're too sharp in all the wrong ways."

"Aha ha ha, my bad."

As she guessed, I was being affected by my past trauma with my mother. I was afraid of Rae being killed before I could tell her how I felt about her, just like how my mother passed away before I had a chance to properly reconcile with her.

"But yeah, I suppose it would be tough for you to just sit back and wait for things to play out, then."

"Indeed. I'm well aware I'm overthinking things, but I cannot help but worry."

"I see, I see." She crossed her arms in thought, remaining silent for a few moments. "Hmm, but I still think you shouldn't openly do anything."

"Why?"

"Because you're part of Master Rod's faction," she said. I expressed confusion, prompting her to continue. "If Queen Riche found out Rae was important to you, she would have all the more reason to harm her."

"...Oh. I see what you're saying." Riche was a part of Yu's faction, and House François was the head of Rod's faction. The odds Yu would inherit the throne were slim now, but there was a good chance Riche still hadn't given up on it. She would be more than happy to harm Rae if it meant it would affect me, a lady of House François. That was why Catherine said I shouldn't be reckless.

"But Queen Riche wants to avoid making an enemy out of my father, doesn't she?" I said.

"She does, I'm sure. That's why she's only targeting Rae through official channels, denouncing her and such, to not get on Lady Yu or Master Dole's bad side. But if she knew just how important she was to you and Master Dole, that might change. She could do something more drastic, like have her assassinated for instance."

"Assassinated?!"

"Yep. That's why it's safer to just let Riche think Rae's some

annoying commoner, and nothing more. I think that's why Master Dole's not openly doing anything either."

Really...? Had my father thought that far ahead? "But if that's the case, then why wouldn't he just tell me?"

"Well, given how close you are to Rae, it would be strange if you were too calm. It's much more natural if you're panicking a bit."

"I see... Wait, what are you talking about?! Rae and I aren't close at all!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say," she said, unbelieving.

"...This is all rather frustrating."

"I'll bet. You've never been all that great at sitting still. Not that that's necessarily a bad thing or anything. It means you're a woman of action!"

Just as our conversation reached a stopping point, a knock came at the door.

"Pardon my intrusion. I see you two are still awake?"

"Aha ha. Sorry about that, Emma."

It was Emma, Catherine's maid.

"Please rest now. Staying up late is not good for your body."

"Whaaat? Surely a bit more wouldn't hurt?"

"I disagree." Emma extinguished the flame of our room's candlestick.

"What are you doing? That is no way to treat your master, Emma," I rebuked.

"It is precisely because she is my master that I do this. Taking care of her health is one of my duties."

"...That is still no way to—"

"Hey, hey." Catherine cut in as things got tense between Emma and me. With a carefree smile, she said, "Emma may seem strict, but she can do a lot of good for me, Claire."

"My lady, please..." Emma urged Catherine not to continue, but Catherine paid her no mind.

"You remember that wheelchair you got me, right?"

“Of course,” I said.

“Emma helped pass that off as a gift from Lambert back when he was still around.”

“...And whyever would she do that?” I said, a bit indignantly. Emma seemed indifferent.

“No, no, you misunderstand,” Catherine quickly explained. “My father would have definitely taken it away if we told him that it came from you, so Emma begged Lambert to say it was a trial product he was working on.”

“Oh, I see. That’s what you meant.”

Clément certainly wouldn’t take kindly to hearing Catherine had been gifted something from a political opponent. Emma’s actions were quite justified in that regard.

“Why didn’t you say just that then, rather than let yourself be misunderstood?” I asked Emma.

“I saw no need to.”

“See? She may not always seem like it, but she’s a good person,” Catherine said with a smile. I had always had an issue with their relationship, but it seemed I had been misunderstanding things. They trusted one another in their own way.

In the end, our tea party came to an end there.

Since my father and everyone else I talked to recommended I not do anything rash, I begrudgingly decided I would abide. Thankfully, I had Catherine’s logical explanation to ease my worries over my decision.

“Rae...please be safe...” From the bottom of my heart, I wished for nothing more.

“At long last...”

I descended the stairs leading to the royal palace’s underground dungeon. I had been granted a visitation with Rae, who was imprisoned while under investigation for her involvement in Yu’s whole fiasco.

The stairs leading down to the dungeon were poorly lit, the torches

spaced several meters apart. I was worried I might trip with how dark things were. Slowly, I made my way down together with a guide. As unshakable as Rae might be, surely being locked up in a place like this had done a number on her?

“We’ve arrived, Lady Claire.”

“Thank you. I request you let us meet alone.”

“Of course. And, um...”

“Yes?”

“Please give my regards to Master Dole. As requested, none have laid a hand against her.” The guard saluted and stepped away.

...Hmph. So my father did ensure her safety after all.

Rae noticed me right away as I neared her cell. She seemed to be in better spirits than I had imagined she would be. I hid my relief and said, “You look better than I expected.”

“If I seem well, it’s because you’re here with me now,” she said happily.

To think *that* was the first thing she had to say to me after a week apart. She never changed. Rae was Rae to the bitter end. Despite it only being a short seven days, it felt like we had been pulled apart much longer.

“How has prison life been?” I asked.

“Not too shabby.”

Apparently, the investigation hasn’t been too intense. Despite being confined, she hadn’t been tortured or anything, just questioned lightly. This was likely due to Yu and everyone else involved keeping their stories straight. Yu claimed she had ordered everything herself, and Lilly and I backed her claim up. Rod and Thane did the same too, apparently. I didn’t know why, but King l’Ausseil was on our side, causing the majority of the palace to side with us as well. I figured it’d only be a matter of time before Rae was released.

“Oh. My food was poisoned, though.”

“*What?!*” I exclaimed in disbelief.

She explained that it was likely someone in Queen Riche’s faction trying to get revenge. Queen Riche took the biggest loss out of everybody with this incident, what with her hopes of Yu ever inheriting the throne being crushed. It made sense to think someone in her faction would try to

get revenge one way or another. That much didn't surprise me, but the fact they'd go as far as to try to poison Rae was a shock. Thankfully, Rae was cautious enough to inspect and even cast antidote magic on all her food. My father had negotiated things so she could bring a wand with her. Ever brilliant, he was.

"Well, I'm relieved you're all right."

"I have Misaki to thank, really."

I hadn't a clue what she meant. Misaki, as I recalled, was that haughty ingrate mentioned in the story of Rae's first love—though I suppose they all did reconcile afterward, enough for Misaki to confide his gender dysphoria problems to Rae. But I thought Misaki had ended his own life?

"Misaki? What do you mean?" I asked.

"He showed up in my dreams."

Apparently, the night she had been put in the dungeon, Rae saw Misaki standing by her bedside.

"You never change, always too eager to get wrapped up in another's mess," he had said in his usual snide way. *"But you did good. I can rest easy now knowing somebody out there who knows what it's like is all right."* He flashed an awkward smile. *"Now don't be an idiot. Make sure you check your food."*

Before Rae could even respond, he disappeared.

"So things like that can really happen, then," I mused.

"Eh. It was probably just my mind manifesting my unconscious desires." So she said, but she was clearly happy.

"Putting that aside... You could have died. I *told* you this was dangerous business."

"Yes, yes you did," she admitted.

The one most opposed to Rae's scheme was none other than myself. I was reluctantly persuaded after she told me what happened to Misaki, but that didn't mean I *approved* of the plan. She could have made an enemy of the royal court, for crying out loud. As someone who knew just how fierce high society could be, I could not help but stand against her.

"I haven't a clue what's going on from here," she said. "Any developments?"

“Things are going almost exactly as you anticipated.”

I filled Rae in on the events that followed the ceremonial dance. Firstly, Yu was sent to a convent. As I’ve mentioned, the royal court was publicly going with a different story, claiming Yu was staying at the convent for medical care. That said, it was clear the situation had spiraled out of the royal court’s hands; it wouldn’t be long, I imagined, before Yu had the freedom to do as she pleased.

“Yu wanted me to pass a message along to you,” I said. “She says, ‘Thank you. I will be sure to return the favor one day.’”

“I see. How are people reacting to the news of her change?”

“There’s a bit of stir, as we expected. Those in the know assumed her change was temporary, caused by the full moon.”

Those who knew Yu’s circumstances had assumed she appeared as she did at the ceremonial dance because of the light of the full moon, but that was actually not the case. We had actually cured her of the Crosswise Curse with the Tears of the Moon. To receive permission to use the Tears of the Moon, the approval of two people at cardinal ranking or higher was required; thankfully Lilly and Yu met that requirement. Lilly had been investigated for her role in all this, but she was able to just say she couldn’t refuse a request from Yu—just like Rae planned.

“Miss Lilly possesses a fair amount of status anyway, so the palace cannot easily punish her.”

“What’s Misha up to?”

“She’s negotiating with her parents.”

Misha wished to leave the Academy and join Yu in a convent, but her family was resisting. Misha was an extremely gifted student, and House Jur expected great things from her. For her to throw all that away to join a convent must have seemed like a waste to the family. Her mother supported her, however, reminding everyone that House Jur had other gifted heirs. Of course, Yu telling the family herself that she wanted Misha by her side swayed them strongly as well.

“Since it was her parents’ fault that her childhood was so rough, it seems they feel obligated to give in a little,” I said.

“I see.”

From what I could tell, Misha has always had feelings for Yu. Perhaps her wish would be granted in time.

“And how have you been, Miss Claire?”

“Perfectly fine. Except, of course, for the embarrassment of having my maid arrested.” So I said, but the past week had actually been unbearable for me. I was beside myself with worry, wondering if something terrible was happening to Rae. I couldn’t express such a thing directly, but Rae had become someone dear to me, more so than I ever imagined possible. I was relieved beyond belief that a repeat of what happened to my mother hadn’t occurred.

“Is that it? You haven’t been lonely or felt any yearning while we were apart?”

“Well, don’t you think highly of yourself?” I hid how surprised I was that she’d actually guessed correctly and huffed. She grinned as though she saw right through me. Honestly, her personality was just the worst.

“Did Master Dole say anything?”

“Nothing.” I cocked my head to the side. “I thought for sure he would fire you, but that hasn’t come up at all... Exactly what dirt do you have on my father?”

“It’s not like that. Master Dole is just a kind man.”

I didn’t believe her one bit. There was definitely something going on between her and my father. Neither would tell me anything, however, so I felt a little left out. Surely it was only a matter of time before they talked to me, though?

We continued to talk for some time until the jailer appeared.
“Apologies, Miss Claire, but Rae is to be questioned again.”

“What more questioning can even be done?” I said. “Is it not clear already that she was only acting on Lady Yu’s orders?”

I implicitly demanded Rae be released already but received an unexpected response.

“Well... This time His Majesty King l’Ausseil wishes to do the questioning.”

“His Majesty does?”

But why? Was King l’Ausseil not on our side?

“At any rate, I ask that you leave for today,” the jailor said.

“Very well. I shall come again.”

Reluctantly, I left the dungeon behind.

Back in my dorm room that night, I talked with Catherine.

“Queen Riche has declared war with her actions, and I do believe I shall accept.”

“Oh, c’mon, Claire. Poisoning Rae’s food was just a warning, at best. There’s no way she wouldn’t know she brought a wand with her.”

“Even if that were true, she still has no right to be doing such a thing! Not to *my* Rae!”

“Wh-whoa, okay, let’s calm down now.”

My fit of rage did not last long. Neither could I have expected what would come next—that Rae would be expelled from the Royal Academy and be made an officer of the King’s own Secret Service.

Afterword

THIS HAS BEEN Volume 2 of *She's so Cheeky for a Commoner*. I'm Inori, the author. This book is a spin-off of *I'm in Love with the Villainess*, retelling the story from the perspective of Claire. This spin-off is full of spoilers, so I highly recommend you read the main series first.

This volume compiles the contents of chapter four to chapter six of the web novel, spanning the Scales of Love Arc to the Church Arc. Some new characters appear in this volume: Manaria, Rae's powerful rival; Lilly, one of the most popular characters after Rae and Claire; and many more. The volume also featured Claire and a few other characters reacting to these new characters. We also had more scenes with our spin-off original character Catherine and dived deeper into the characters of Loretta and Pepi. I sincerely hope it made for a pleasant read.

The next volume of *She's so Cheeky for a Commoner* will probably be the last. I hope to bring to everyone the final confrontation with Clément Achard, Catherine's secret past, the outcome of Loretta's and Pepi's crushes, as well as Rae and Claire as they challenge a revolution head-on. Look forward to it!

Many things happened leading up to the release of this volume. *She's so Cheeky for a Commoner* became slated for English and Korean translations, and the manga adaptation of *I'm in Love with the Villainess* received 9th in the "Tsutaya Comic Award 2022," as well as 8th in the "Next Manga Award," both superb results. The series has gained more popularity than ever before, both overseas and domestically. Of course, I have nobody to thank but my readers for this.

And so I thank you, reader, from the bottom of my heart. There will be announcements concerning the series coming in the following months, so please keep an eye out.

I'd like to end with some acknowledgments.

To Nakamura of GL Bunko: Thank you once again for all your help. I am forever grateful you allowed me to continue this series. I hope I can return the favor through book sales.

To Hanagata: Thank you for providing such wonderful illustrations of Catherine, Loretta, and Pepi. Catherine, in particular, turned out simply

adorable. I also believe Loretta and Pepi have managed to escape their meager existences as Entourage Member A and Entourage Member B thanks to your illustrations. Thank you for all you do.

To my partner, Aki: We did it; Volume 2! I'm sorry for making you worry. Let's go celebrate with nonalcoholic cocktails again this weekend.

And lastly, to all who purchased this book: You have my deepest gratitude. Thank you so very much.

If a third volume comes out, let us meet again then. This has been Inori.

PixivFanbox: <https://inori-0.fanbox.cc/>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/Inori_ILTV

—INORI, SEPTEMBER 24TH, 2022



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter