



I'm in LOVE with the VILLAINESS

Written by
INORI

NOVEL
4

Illustrated by
HANAGATA

I'M IN LOVE WITH THE VILLAINESS

– Watashi no Oshi wa Akuyaku Reijou –

- VOLUME 4 -

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[SEVEN SEAS]





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Rae Taylor



Lana Lahna



Eve Nuhn



Philine Nur



Empress Dorothea Nuhn

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE BALL

“I DON’T WANNA go to school!”

It was a morning a few days after the assassination attempt on the pope. My twin daughters had just woken up, only for one of them to say the most unexpected thing—unexpected from May, at least.

“What’s the matter, May?” Claire asked. “Did somebody say something mean to you at school?”

“No, they’re being mean to Aleah! And I don’t wanna go somewhere where everybody’s being mean to Aleah!” May puffed out her cheeks in defiance.

“Aleah, is this true?” Claire asked.

“It’s not. But...” Aleah hesitated.

“It *is* true!” May cut in. “Everybody only talks to me and ignores Aleah! I *hate* them!”

Recognizing this would need some time, Claire and I had the two take the day off school. We postponed breakfast and sat them down at the table with Claire, while I prepared black tea for Claire and me and warm milk for the girls.

“Could you tell me in detail what’s been going on?” Claire asked as soon as I sat down.

Sounding like a little ball of anger, May mumbled, “It started when I learned to use magic after memorizing the, uh... *Borrid Method*?”

“That’s wonderful, May! Congratulations,” Claire said.

“Congratulations, May,” I echoed.

“No! It’s not a good thing!” May yelled. “Ever since they found out I can use four kinds

of magic, the teachers only pay attention to me! Even when Aleah and all the other kids are trying their best!"

She stopped momentarily and took a sip of milk to calm down.

The meritocratic beliefs of the Nur Empire extended all the way down to its elementary school, thanks to which even exchange students like the twins were accepted without prejudice. But the system had its downsides: tremendously gifted students like May were welcomed, even celebrated, but average students found their efforts unrewarded.

That being said, we hadn't expected May to be the one complaining about the system being unfair. Aleah was more precocious than her sister in many regards, so Claire and I had figured she'd be the one to see the injustice first.

"And now the teachers want me to go to a different class than Aleah, but I don't wanna!" May grumbled.

With that, the pieces of the puzzle all snapped together. May wasn't rebelling against the bias inherent in the empire's meritocratic beliefs—she was simply angry at a system that didn't treasure her beloved sister. A system that wanted to separate them.

Claire and I locked eyes for a thoughtful moment. She was the first to speak.

"May, I understand what you mean to say. We'll talk to the school about Aleah's treatment. But insisting you stay in the same class as Aleah is just being willful. You—"

"Let me, Miss Claire." As bad as I felt, I had to cut Claire short. "May, we're very happy that you told us your honest feelings. And we're very happy you thought about your sister's feelings too."

"Really?" May asked.

"Mm-hmm. This problem is a bit difficult, but your mothers want to take the time to think it through with you two. Is that okay?" I asked.

"Yeah." She nodded.

I stood up, walked over to the two, and hugged them. Unlike usual, they hugged me back without any fuss. This matter must have been weighing heavily on them.

"So what do you two want to do?" I asked, looking them in the eyes.

May answered, "I don't wanna go to school anymore."

While Aleah answered, "I... want us to go to school."

Their opinions were divided.

"But Aleah! Don't you care if we can't be together?!" May exclaimed.

"I do! But I don't want to be the reason you can't go to school..." Aleah said.

May was as true to her desires as ever, but Aleah was more mature. She had to have her qualms about the favoritism her sister was shown, but regardless, she cared deeply for May.

"Do you not like me anymore...?"

"That's not it! I don't want to be apart from you either..."

"Then why?!"

"You have the same talent as Sister Manaria. It'd be wrong for you to waste it."

"I don't care about that! I wanna be with you!"

"All right, that's enough!" I put a stop to things, as they were both getting too worked up. "Let's get this straight. May, you don't want to be apart from Aleah?"

"Yeah."

"And Aleah, you want May to learn more about how to use her magic?"

"Yes."

"Hm... Okay. Let me discuss this with your mother."

I parted from the two and returned to my seat at Claire's side. Her expression was stiff, which worried me.

"Miss Claire?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh... Wh-what is it?"

"I was thinking we could discuss our daughters' situation?"

"R-right, yes, let's. Of course..."

Her response was a bit strange, but she seemed up for it. This was definitely a problem I couldn't deal with alone, so knowing she was with me right now was reassuring. At least, I hoped she was with me. Her head did seem to have been in the clouds just then. Oh dear.

"They certainly know some big words for their age..." Claire said.

"Isn't that because they love to ask questions and listen to us talk?"

"Perhaps, but even then..."

"The two of them *were* clever enough to survive in the slums, Miss Claire. Besides, there's nothing wrong with them being a little more knowledgeable than other children their age."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Claire said. I could tell something else was bothering her, but for now, she seemed ready to move back to the topic at hand. "Couldn't they put Aleah in the same class as May?"

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea. Knowing the empire, they probably want to put May in the hardest class at the elementary school, and I think that'd be a bit too difficult for Aleah."

"I see... May, will you be moved out of all your classes?" Claire asked.

"No, just magic class."

"Then can't you bear being away from Aleah for just that one class?"

“No! I wanna be with Aleah,” May grumbled.

“May, you treasure your sister, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you love her?”

“Yeah!”

“I thought so. You don’t want to make her sad, right?”

“Never!”

“But forcing her to take magic class with you might make her sad. Are you still okay with that?”

“Huh?! Really, Aleah?”

“I can’t do anything in your class, May. I can’t use magic,” Aleah answered.

“Oh...”

“I don’t want to be apart from you either, but there’s this swordplay class I can take while you’re in magic. I was asked to join it at the same time you were asked to join yours.”

“And that’s what you want to do?”

“Yes, because I don’t want to fall behind you. But I’m happy you said you wanted to be with me. Thank you.”

May grew silent, clearly conflicted. She didn’t want to be apart from Aleah, but she also didn’t want to make Aleah sad. But if Aleah herself wanted things to be this way...

“Just for magic class?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yes. I’ll be with you the rest of the time, like always.”

“Mm-hmm... Okay, but only for magic class!”

“Hee hee. All right, all right.” Aleah smiled and patted May’s head. May still looked sulky, but we finally had a solution. I could breathe easy.

“Okay, so May will do her best to take magic classes alone, while Aleah learns swordplay. The rest of your time, you’ll be together, just like you’ve been so far. All good?” I asked.

May nodded. “Yeah.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“May, thank you for being so understanding. And Aleah, thank you for being so considerate toward your sister,” I said.

“Of course! I would do anything for my sister,” Aleah proudly declared.

“Ah, me too!” May quickly perked up upon hearing Aleah’s words.

And so, May’s truancy came to an end, at least for the time being.

“Miss Claire and I will be going to school now, so you two be on your best behavior at home, okay? Aleah, can you take care of lunch? Just warming what I left out is fine.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Shall we be off, Miss Claire?”

“Yes... let’s.”

“Have a nice day!” our two daughters said as we left.

We exited the Bauer student dorm and made our way through the main street toward the Imperial Academy. Foot traffic was high, as always, so we had to weave through a crowd of mixed nationalities to proceed.

Since the twins were taking the day off, we didn’t need to drop them off at

elementary school. This left us more time to appreciate our surroundings, even after our long morning discussion.

"We haven't been able to walk to school this leisurely in a while, have we?" I asked.

"Indeed..."

"Miss Claire?" I could tell something had been weighing on her mind for a while now.
"Is something wrong? Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"Why do you always assume something is wrong?" she huffed. "Well... I suppose you're right on the mark this time." She smiled wryly and let out a deep sigh. "I just... lost some confidence, is all."

"Confidence? In my love for you? Please, give me a chance to reaffirm my love tonight!"

"Rae, I'm being serious here. Now's not the time for jokes," she said soberly.

"Ah. Forgive me."

"Yes, well, I've known you long enough to realize that you're just trying to cheer me up. But right now, I want you to listen seriously," Claire said. "Earlier today, when May said she didn't want to go to school, I tried to use logic to convince her otherwise. But you moved to comfort them instead."

Oh. So that's what was bothering her.

"I don't think what I said was wrong, but I didn't consider their feelings. I was... forcing my solution on them." She frowned. "You, on the other hand, asked how they felt and what they wanted to do. I think you handled it correctly—no, I think you handled it better. I feel a bit pathetic, realizing how rigid my thinking was."

She sighed deeply for a second time. This wouldn't do at all.

"Can you wait here for a bit, Miss Claire?" I asked.

"Huh? Um, Rae?"

I left a bewildered Claire behind and waltzed over to a nearby fruit stand. "Excuse

me, young lady, some strawberries, please.”

“Young lady? Dearie, I’m already a mother with a daughter your age.”

“No way! You don’t look a day over twenty!”

“Oh, my! Well said, dear. Here, I’ll give you a discount; they’re out of season anyway.”

“Thank you very much!” I paid for the paper bag of strawberries and returned to Claire. I held a strawberry out to her. “Here.”

“There you go, snacking again,” said Claire. “And we were just in the middle of a conversation.”

“I know, I just thought it’d perk you up a bit.”

“Goodness, what am I to do with you?” She sighed but took the strawberry I offered regardless.

I bit into one myself, my mouth filling with the sour-sweet taste. The fruit seller had said they were out of season, but I had a hard time believing that, considering how fresh they tasted.

“Delicious,” Claire murmured.

“Indeed. You can tell a skilled farmer grew them. Growing food’s a bit similar to child rearing,” I said.

“Hm? In what way?” Claire took another strawberry from my hand.

“They both require experience.”

“Huh?! You’ve raised a child before?!” she exclaimed. Of course, she meant in my past life.

“No, no, no. I meant my own experience being raised as a child, not my experience raising one. Do you remember how I told you about my first love?”

“Of course,” she answered. “How could I forget such a messy, overcomplicated love square?”

In my past life, I'd fallen in love with a girl named Kosaki and been burned. It had left me depressed for a while, and it still affected me to this day.

"Just like May, I didn't want to go to school for some time after that. At least, not until my mother comforted me—like I just did with May and Aleah. That experience stuck with me, so I was able to draw upon it."

"But I—"

"I'm sure you listened to everything your parents said as a child, Miss Claire," I interrupted. I've said this before, but Claire truly had been an obedient little angel before she became a villainess. Perhaps excessively so.

"Um, so?" she asked.

"Being nobles, both you and your mother were probably brought up to follow and act in accordance with society's rules and morals."

"That... may be true."

"That being the case, the response you gave May earlier was what you believed to be correct. While you might think it a mistake now, I see nothing wrong with imparting the same beliefs Madam Melia taught you when raising your own children."

Claire grew silent, a wistful look in her eyes. She was likely recalling the bygone days she'd spent with her mother—whose name was Melia, in case you forgot.

"Even in my past life," I said, "people had conflicting ideas about how to raise children. Should they be raised to prioritize social norms and expectations, or should they be encouraged to live in accordance with their individual wants and needs? Your upbringing was more aligned with the former, whereas mine was more like the latter. Both have their pros and cons."

I bit into another strawberry before continuing. "Your method—convincing May it was her responsibility to attend school—might have worked perfectly. And while it succeeded this time, there was a chance my method might have ended in them both refusing to go to school. Neither approach was a guaranteed success."

"But in the end, yours was right," she said.

“We’re both drawing on our lived experiences. You have your experience with your mother from when you didn’t want to learn ballroom dancing, and I have mine from the time I didn’t want to go to school. I interrupted you this time because I thought my experience was closer to May’s situation, but it was really just pure luck that things turned out the way they did.”

It also didn’t hurt that our girls were really smart for their age and therefore able to talk through their problems.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that your method of child rearing isn’t wrong. The right technique just depends on the situation.”

“That’s not just lip service?” Claire asked haltingly.

“I mean it. One hundred percent.”

“Thank you, Rae.” Claire reached into the bag and pulled out the last strawberry. “As a reward, you can have the last one.”

“Please feed it to me.” I opened my mouth.

“Hee hee. Oh, you idiot.” Despite her harsh words, she fed me the strawberry.

Mmm... It was at least fifty percent sweeter than the ones before.



"I'm sure I'll make a blunder with the children one of these days," I said. "I'll be counting on you then."

"Hee hee. All right, Rae. Let's give it our best."

"Yes!"

With that, a burden fell from Claire's shoulders, restoring her to her usual spirited self. We both loved May and Aleah dearly, and that sometimes led us to worry. But I believed that as long as we could speak our minds to each other, we could overcome every obstacle.

I truly believed that Claire felt the same way.

The bell chimed, informing us it was time for our lunch break.

"Class is dismissed." With those few words, the teacher promptly left the classroom. Unfriendly as always, though they impressively always finished their lesson on time.

Then the ground began to shake.

"It's an earthquake!" somebody yelled as panic filled the room. I grabbed Claire to shield her with my body, and a minute later, the tremors came to a halt.

"Quite a long one this time," said Claire.

"Indeed," I said. "Haven't they been rather frequent of late?"

This had come up in conversation with Rod some time before we left the Bauer Kingdom. Earthquakes had grown increasingly common, which worried many people in Nur, having heard what the eruption of Mt. Sassal did to Bauer. They honestly didn't seem so remarkable to a Japanese person like me.

"Claire, Rae, are you two okay?" a worried voice called.

"Oh, Lady Philine," I said.

"Thank you for your concern, but we're all right," Claire replied.

"Thank goodness... Shall we have lunch together, then?"

Normally, we ate lunch in the classroom alongside Lana and Frieda, but this day was different.

"I'm sorry, but we didn't prepare any lunch today," Claire answered.

Because of our discussion with May and Aleah that morning, I hadn't had time to make lunch—or rather, I'd been halfway through making lunch, but it had wound up becoming May and Aleah's breakfast instead. Claire and I were famished, since we'd left without eating breakfast. Yet for some reason, Claire didn't look particularly thrilled that our long-awaited lunchtime was here.

"Oh. So you'll be eating in the cafeteria, then..." Philine smiled wryly.

"Yes..."

The reason for Claire's reluctance? Simple: The food in the cafeteria was less than great.

"Would it be all right if I sat with you two?" Philine asked.

"Of course. The facilities themselves are fine, thankfully," Claire answered.

"Indeed. They do serve the Nur Empire's formal cuisine, after all. It would be quite the problem if they weren't up to snuff."

I listened to them chat as we walked to the cafeteria. They always got along well. I wasn't jealous or anything. Not *one* bit. Why would I be, when *I* was Claire's wife?
Yeah!

We reached the cafeteria after a few minutes of walking.

"Empty as usual," Claire commented.

"This place just isn't popular," Philine added.

Despite my griping, the cafeteria itself was clean and spacious. Its size was comparable to college cafeterias from my past life, but the building was made of wood rather than metal and concrete, lending it a cozy ambience. The tables and

chairs were well made too.

The food was the only problem.

“Excuse me, what is today’s lunch?” Claire asked.

“Mutton and vegetable soup, sausage, sauerkraut, and bread,” the cafeteria lady replied, cold and concise—she was a well-built woman who seemed like the no-nonsense sort.

That was essentially the same as the last time we ate here. The cafeteria didn’t have menus—instead, the spread depended on the day of the week, and everyone got the same thing.

“Two of those, please,” Claire said.

“Right,” an unmotivated voice replied from within the kitchen. I stood behind Claire, waiting for our food.

“I’ll go find us a table,” Philine said.

“I doubt we’ll have any trouble finding a place, given how empty it is.”

“Yes, but the food being what it is, I’d like us to at least have a nice place to sit.”

“I see. Good idea.”

With her lunch in hand, Philine left to find a table. I followed her with my eyes, watching her choose a sunlit table by the window with a nice view.

“Here’s your food. Carry it yourself now.” The cafeteria lady handed us two trays with food inelegantly plopped onto them. It hadn’t even been five minutes. I suspected they simply heated up some premade food, which was fine—restaurants precooked some of their food too. In fact, I didn’t think any restaurant in existence made everything on the spot from scratch. No, the problem was—

“Ngh...”

“Miss Claire, staring at it won’t make it any better. Let’s go.”

“Right...”

At my nudging, we walked to the table Philine had secured.

“Shall we?” I put my hands together. “Bon appétit.”

“Bon appétit.”

“Guten appetit.”

The two put their hands together too. Moments like this really drove home that the world this game was set in had been developed by a Japanese company. If this really had been medieval Europe, they would have more likely offered a prayer before a meal.

Such were the thoughts running through my mind as I started with the bread, tearing off a piece and eating it. It was hard. Low-quality wheat mixed with barley was my guess. High-quality wheat by itself would have yielded a better texture. The yeast must have gone bad too, and it lacked butter. It wasn’t inedible, but it certainly wasn’t good. And that was just the beginning.

I tried the soup next. It smelled as though it had been salted too sparingly and spiced far too heavily. The meat wasn’t tender lamb but gamey mutton. While I generally enjoyed well-seasoned food, this soup was overpowering, as though they’d tried to drown the gamey taste with spice. The vegetables were cooked to a mush. It just wasn’t especially good.

The sauerkraut was sauerkraut, nothing more. There wasn’t much to critique about what was literally just fermented cabbage.

The one saving grace was the sausage. It was edible. Enjoyable, even. But as the main protein of the meal was mutton, the sausage was small—nothing but a side dish. I wished they’d used it for the soup instead.

In conclusion, the empire’s cuisine was pretty disappointing. This was already a well-known fact in this world, much like the infamy of English cuisine in my old world. But unlike English cuisine, this world’s cuisine was very much real and very much in front of me. To give you some perspective, I could see Claire—who *never* complained about the food she was given—struggling to finish her lunch. Yeah, it was that bad.

Of course, there were a few reasons for this. One lay in the food culture of the empire. The upper-class citizens of the empire traditionally ate simple rather than extravagant meals, which led to public establishments following suit—similar to how the English gentry's love of simple foods had influenced their country's cuisine.

Another reason was the empire's social system. Many people left their family homes early in life to work as live-in apprentices, leaving them little time to learn proper home cooking. Poor cooking skills meant poor cuisine, further feeding into the vicious cycle of a mediocre food culture.

The low social status of chefs and pâtissiers likely contributed too. With the empire having been at war for such a long time, the most respected profession was that of a soldier. Chefs, pâtissiers, and other non-combat related occupations were the victims of implicit prejudice—despite both military cooks and army rations being an integral part of warfare.

Just to be clear, everything I've described so far only applied to the Nur Empire's *formally recognized* traditional cuisine. We'd already seen just how many foreign ingredients we could buy in the central market, and the empire was brimming with exchange students and immigrants from other countries. Naturally, this meant many citizens preferred foreign cuisine over their own, so the people of the empire actually ate quite well. It was only the imperial family and the nobility who obstinately refused to change.

You could see this reflected in Philine's lunch, no better than our own. No wonder she'd been so taken with the chocolate and rakugan we offered her. As an imperial princess, she had likely never before had an opportunity to taste such sweetness.

"Rae, your displeasure is showing on your face," Claire warned.

"I'm sorry, but this food is far worse than I even imagined. It should be blasphemy to use ingredients this way," I fumed.

"I-I'm sorry..."

"It's nothing you need to apologize for, Lady Philine," Claire said. "It's the empire's culture, nothing more."

"But it's beginning to pose a diplomatic problem... Many foreign dignitaries complain about it when they visit," Philine said.

Of course they complained. If I were served this, I'd think the empire was trying to poison me.

"Aye, even we don't wanna serve this stuff," a voice suddenly said.

I looked up to see the cafeteria lady approach. It seemed she'd heard us.

"I'm sorry, we didn't mean to—" Claire began.

"It's fine; we know. The food here is terrible. But that don't mean we like it." She gave us each a small plate of butter. "For yer bread. Of course, yer free to use it differently if ya'd like." She smiled meaningfully.

"Um, what does she mean?" Philine asked.

"She's saying we can do something like this." I took half of my butter and dropped it into the soup, which would make it taste fuller—incomparably better than before.

"My, this is so much better," Claire said.

"Why not cook it like this from the start?" I asked.

"They got angry the last time we tried to change things. The empire once had many delicious foods, y'know. Zwiebelkuchen, spargelsuppe, eierschecke... All forgotten," she muttered as she made her way back to the kitchen.

I recognized the things she'd listed as German regional cuisine from my world.

"Can't you do something about this?" I asked Philine.

"I want to, but my mother doesn't see it as a problem..."

Right. I really didn't think I'd ever see eye to eye with Dorothea.

Regardless, wasting food was wrong. The three of us took our time, finishing up our far-from-satisfying meals.

"That was... nice?" I said.

"Don't phrase it as a question," Claire shot back.

"A ball, huh?"

In class the next morning, the teacher told us the Imperial Academy was hosting a ball, and a lavish one at that, as it would double as Philine's society debut. That much was fine. In fact, I thought it was wonderful news. The problem: my participation was mandatory.

"You seem displeased, Rae," Claire said. We were in the classroom, eating lunch with Philine, Lana, and Frieda.

"I am displeased, Miss Claire. You know better than anyone how bad I am at dancing!"

"My, how unexpected," Philine said. "I thought you were the type to do everything perfectly."

"Dance is easy! Just let your fiery hot passion take control of your body!" Frieda said.

"We're talking about ballroom dancing," I retorted. Sure, there was room for self-expression in ballroom dance, but that kind of flourish was better left to the experts.

"Isn't this a good opportunity to learn?" Claire asked. "We can practice like we did for the ceremonial dance."

"Oh no, do I have to wear that training harness again?"

"Is that a problem?"

I enjoyed having Claire fuss over me, but that training harness seriously wore me out. In fact, simply recalling all that practice made me tired.

We'd brought lunch from home today, having learned our lesson with the cafeteria. White rice, seasoned fried chicken, rolled omelet with scallions, and green pepper namul. All simple dishes, but I was confident in their taste.

I'd noticed Philine had her eyes on Claire's lunch for a while now.

"Miss Claire, how is today's lunch?" I inquired nonchalantly.

Claire smiled. "Delicious. Thank you for making lunch every day, Rae."

That smile alone could have fed me for days.

I needed to eat too, so I got started on the fried chicken. We had no problem affording food, since Bauer provided us with financial aid as part of the exchange program—hence why this fried chicken wasn't breast meat but *thigh* meat. I'd rubbed it with cooking sherry and salt, let it marinate in my very own special sauce, and then coated it in potato starch before frying it in a small amount of oil, resulting in fried chicken that exploded with the aroma of my special sauce when you bit into it. We were eating it cold, so the meat wasn't particularly juicy, but it was still delicious.

I tried the rolled omelet next. I don't think I need to explain my process in much detail—I just mixed diced scallions with egg and fried it, as you usually would. I supposed I had added some mayonnaise and sugar to bring out the omelet's natural flavor. I didn't care much for sweet omelets myself, so it was just a pinch of the latter. Claire liked this dish a lot, so I often included it in our lunches.

The namul was the last thing I ate. Back in modern-day Japan, this dish would have been the easiest to make, but in this world, it was the hardest. In Japan, I would have simply finely chopped green peppers and mixed them with salt, sesame oil, and chicken bone broth powder; microwaved the result; and then sprinkled sesame seeds on top. But in this world, I was missing the most critical component: *the microwave*.

Okay, I'm kidding. I was also missing chicken bone broth powder.

Consommé powder, chicken bone broth powder, dashi soup stock, MSG—these flavor enhancers were the culmination of my world's culinary science, but I hadn't truly understood their impact until I came to this world. I'd thought I might make my own substitute—until I realized it would take *ages*. I would have to cook various different meats, fish, bones, and vegetables for a long, long time while also skimming off any scum that formed. Consommés and dashi-based soups did already exist in this world, but they were all closely guarded restaurant secrets.

In the end, I settled on making a faux consommé powder. I took carrots, onions, celery, ordinary mushrooms, and shiitake mushrooms, and I sliced them all ultra-thin. I then dried everything under the sun, dry-roasted the onions with a frying pan,

and ground up the results with a mortar and pestle. The absence of meat meant it lacked richness, but it was far better than having to make broth from scratch every time. I was thinking I might be able to mass-produce it and sell it through Broumet. Then again, if it really took off, I worried I might earn the ire of restaurant chefs the world over.

But I digress.

The takeaway here was that this namul was made with my faux consommé powder and tasted pretty good. People who disliked green pepper could enjoy it to a degree, and people who didn't mind green pepper could eat it endlessly. In fact, the Japanese recipe I based it on was called "Endless Green Peppers" because—you guessed it—it made people want to eat green pepper ad nauseam. That's a recipe I'll have to skip over for now, however. Just know that I made it for Claire and Aleah, being the green-pepper-haters they are.

I looked at Claire's lunch and confirmed the namul was being eaten. Mission successful. *Woo-hoo!*

"Miss Claire, feed me please, aaah." I opened my mouth wide.

"Didn't I do this just yesterday?"

"What's that matter? C'mon, aaah."

"A-aw, I wish that were—I mean, h-how shameless..." Philine muttered.

"Oh! I want to feed Rae too!" Frieda exclaimed. "Lana, you too! Let's feed Rae!"

"Huh? Me?" Lana said after a delay. She seemed somewhat distracted.

"Oh, goodness! Why is everyone making such a fuss about this?!" Claire complained as she picked up a piece of fried chicken, presumably for me.

"Wait, Claire!" Philine said. "Why don't you practice feeding me before Rae?"

"Lady Philine?!" Claire gasped.

"Hey, you're just trying to take advantage of the situation to get Claire to feed you!" I complained.

"If you don't, I'll feed Rae first! I mean it, I'll really do it!" Philine declared.

"What kind of threat is that?!" I exclaimed.

Needless to say, it was a lively lunch.

"Whew... Returning to our previous topic, do you like to dance, Lady Philine?" Claire inquired as she cut her rolled omelet.

"Truthfully, not very... Well, I don't mind dancing itself, as I've taken lessons from a young age, but I don't care much for dancing with men," Philine answered dejectedly. She was slightly afraid of men, as a result of her sheltered upbringing. She was a princess, after all.

"What about you, Claire?"

"I enjoy dancing. It's a form of expression for me. I believe those who have trouble speaking their mind can communicate their feelings through dance. I've even heard of cases where dance brought people together."

While she was but a common citizen now, she'd been one of the belles of high society in the past. She had likely danced with many men since her youth—which made me realize something important: I had yet to dance with Claire.

We'd practiced together for the ceremonial dance but hadn't actually danced together for the ceremony itself. Well, no... I supposed we had danced together during practice, but there was a fundamental difference in what *together* meant in ballroom dancing. We had yet to dance hand in hand, bodies close to one another.

"Miss Claire, can you teach me how to ballroom dance?" I asked.

"Oh, but of course. But why the sudden change of heart?"

"I just thought it'd be nice to dance with you."

"Rae, you realize ballroom dancing is typically done by a man and a woman, right?" Claire reminded me. Normally, she would have been right. Normally.

"*Oh?* Is that a rule in the Bauer Kingdom? I don't think anyone will question it here," Frieda said.

“Really?” Claire asked.

“Yes,” Philine answered. “Same-sex marriage has been recognized in the empire for a long time.”

“See? Nothing wrong with it. So will you be my partner for the ball, Miss Claire?” I asked.

“Hee hee, all right. In exchange, you have to wear a dress, okay?”

“Whaaat?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me. You realize I still haven’t seen you wear a dress once, right? You even wore a pantsuit for our audience with the late King l’Ausseil.”

I didn’t like skirts much. I wore the Royal Academy uniform because I had to, but I preferred no skirts at all if I could. For a ballroom dance, I would have to wear that... whatchamacallit? An evening gown? Bleh.

“Oh, don’t make that face. I want to see you dolled up for once. Can you wear an evening gown for me? Please?”

“Ugh. I’ll think about it, but only because *you* asked.”

“Hee hee. I’m looking forward to it.”

That was when a voice suddenly called for me. “Rae Taylor, a moment please.”

Wondering who it could be, I looked toward the entrance of the classroom to see a familiar face beckoning me.

“Oh, it’s Hilda. What could she want?” Philine asked.

Indeed, it was Hildegard Eichrodt, an extremely talented official of the Imperial government and someone with whom we’d worked closely during the pope’s visit. Notably, she was also a love interest in *Revo-Lily*. Her monocle glinted in the light, as it always did.

“I’ll be right back.”

Most of my lunch was gone at that point anyway, so I left Claire behind and went over.

“Yes?” I asked Hilda.

“Sorry to call on you so suddenly. I have a request,” she replied.

Mmm... I have a bad feeling about this.

“Would you please assist with the refreshments for the ball?”

“The refreshments for the ball?”

“Yes.” Hilda adjusted her monocle before continuing. “As you likely already know, our empire’s cuisine is not held in particularly high esteem. I was hoping you could help us improve it.”

Her countenance and tone remained sharp, but her body language communicated sincerity. Of course, I knew it was all an act. But it was an impressive act, nonetheless.

“But why me? Why not somebody from the empire?”

The cafeteria lady, for instance, certainly seemed concerned about the empire’s culinary situation. Besides, wouldn’t this have been better off left to a professional in the food industry?

“There are a few reasons, but... we should sit down first. Could you follow me to the parlor?”

I followed Hilda to the room the academy used to entertain guests. Nothing extravagant, but it was comfortable and furnished well enough.

“I’ve come to request your assistance for three reasons,” she resumed. “The first is that I desire insight into your extensive culinary knowledge.”

“Er, I’m really nothing special, you know?” I liked cooking but didn’t really consider myself an expert. I was nowhere near the level of professional chefs, even in this

medieval European-esque world.

"You're far too modest. You're the brains behind Broumet, are you not?" Hilda's expression loosened into a smile. She'd done her research.

"I've shared a recipe or two with them, yes, but my cooking skills are nowhere near as good as those who make a living off it."

"We can leave the actual cooking to the professionals. What I want from you is your creativity."

"Uh-huh..." She was still giving me far too much credit. I wasn't particularly creative; I just had knowledge from my old world.

"The second reason is your social skills. In the span of a few months, you've managed to forge meaningful connections within the empire, even with Lady Philine herself."

"No... that's all thanks to Claire," I said. I wasn't introverted or anything, but I certainly wasn't the type to actively expand my circle of friends. Claire, on the other hand, could definitely have been considered a socialite. Almost all of our connections in the empire were her doing.

"You two are practically one and the same. Having your support naturally means we'll have hers, will we not?" she said.

"No. I am me, and Miss Claire is Miss Claire." It might not have sounded convincing coming from me, with how I followed Claire around, but individuals were ultimately just that—individuals. To me, Claire was irreplaceable, and hopefully I was the same to her. For an outsider to reduce us to a package deal was incredibly uncalled for.

"Forgive me. I'll extend my hopes to her directly later, then. The final and most crucial reason why I chose you is that Her Majesty Dorothea has taken an interest in you."

"Oh, now I get it." In an instant, I grasped the bigger picture.

"I'm glad you understand. Yes, the greatest obstacle in our food troubles is Her Majesty herself—more specifically, the fact that she doesn't recognize the problem exists at all." Hilda put a hand to her forehead and shook her head, frustrated.

The reason the empire's formal cuisine had remained so poor for so long was because its highest authority—the Empress—saw no reason to fix it. Knowing her personality, convincing her otherwise would be a challenge. Hence why the task was being thrust onto me, someone Dorothea had taken a peculiar interest in.

How crafty, I thought. But what could possibly make a government official like Hilda go this far?

"Can you help me?" Hilda asked with her classic soft smile. I knew the smile was an act, but it was still enchantingly beautiful.

I said nothing, but I thought it over for a moment. I could easily refuse. This was the empire's problem. There was no reason for me to help, but...

"I'll do it," I said.

"How... unexpected. I didn't think you were the type to do things out of the kindness of your heart, like for instance Claire might. I'm grateful, but may I ask why you've accepted?"

She certainly didn't mince her words, but she was right. I had a feeling she and I were similar, personality-wise.

"I figured it wouldn't hurt to make the empire owe me one," I said.

"To make us indebted, then."

"Yes."

The imperial government hadn't yet made any attempts on Claire's life, and I wanted it to stay that way. Plus, there was another thing I needed to prepare for.

"Let me guess... the demons?" Hilda said.

"Has no one ever told you that it's creepy to predict someone's thoughts that way?" It was rude to say, but it was true.

With the empire so close to demon territory, the threat of demons was high. The Three Great Archdemons we'd met were powerful, and they had named and targeted Claire specifically. Lilly had said we weren't likely to run into them at all, yet we'd

already been attacked by all three since we'd come to the empire. It would have been foolish not to prepare countermeasures.

"Heh heh, you're everything I hoped you were," Hilda said.

"I don't think I've done anything worth getting your hopes up for."

"That's not true. Everybody had their eyes on Claire, the hero of the revolution, but I'm more impressed by you, Rae Taylor."

"Is that right? Thank you very much."

This was likely another one of Hilda's acts. Even if she did mean what she said, it was likely in the sense that she thought I'd be useful for furthering her own career.

"May I ask you something?" I said.

"Of course."

"Don't you think you're dreaming a little big?"

For a brief instant, Hilda's facade slipped away. But it was back as quick as it went.

"Whatever do you mean?" she said, playing dumb. How crafty.

"Oh, nothing. Just making sure someone knows not to try anything."

"Is that so. I haven't a clue what you're trying to imply, but you continue to intrigue me even more, Rae Taylor."

"Is that so. What an honor. Ha ha ha."

"Heh heh heh..."

Two vixens trying to outfox each other... Jeez. All this probing each other for information was tiring me out. Wasn't there a saying for this? Something like "if opposites attract, likes repel"?

"Anyway, just let me know if you need anything. We'll spare no effort, now that you're helping," Hilda said.

“Really? Then there’s something I’d like to request right now.”

“Yes?” She seemed a little more on guard than before.

“Two things: let me borrow the Academy’s cafeteria workers—and grant me an audience with Her Majesty Dorothea.”

“Welcome, Rae.” Dorothea, whom I hadn’t seen since the conference with the pope, seemed to be in a rather good mood as she greeted me.

I had been invited to the Imperial Castle’s audience chamber. Dorothea sat atop her throne clad in her usual armor with two swords by her side. Her sharp, composed gaze homed in on me, matched by a faintly amused smirk.

“What brings you here today? Have you finally decided to pledge your services to me?”

“No. I’m here to discuss improving the empire’s food situation, Your Majesty.” I rejected her invitation for what felt like the umpteenth time, getting straight to the point.

She made no effort to hide her displeasure as she grimaced. “How dull. Don’t bother—food’s only purpose is to nourish soldiers.”

“I see. Well, let’s put that aside for now. Here, take a look at this.” I took something resembling a biscuit from my bag.

“Hm? What is this?”

“It’s a ration packed with nutrients that combatants need. Please, try it.” Provisions—in other words, military rations—was food that soldiers ate.

“Hmm. I see...”

“Your Majesty, you mustn’t,” said the man beside her. “Please, let the poison taster try it first.”

“Silence, old man. Rae is not one to use such underhanded tricks.”

"That's not the issue! Your own safety is at risk!" The elderly man, who I assumed to be Dorothea's manservant, shouted until he was blue in the face. He was right; the Empress had no business eating unknown foodstuffs so carelessly.

"How about I eat half first?" I offered.

"Humph. Please do. I'm sorry about the old man."

I ate half the biscuit. I tasted sweetness—not just from sugar but from dry fruits as well—alongside the richness of butter.

I'd asked the cafeteria ladies to help make this special biscuit for me. It was similar to the empire's official military rations, but it had more sugar and butter, as well as the dried fruits. Not only did it taste better, but it also had more calories and was nutrient-dense.

"Humph. It's good," she said.

"Here's the recipe, and here's an estimation for ingredients and labor cost."

"Quite cheap. But even if it tastes good, it isn't better than what we already have," she said disapprovingly.

It seemed she didn't get it yet.

"I wonder about that," I said. "Compared to your current field provisions, this is three times more nutritious at the same weight. And as you've said yourself, the flavor is noticeably better."

"Hmm... So it would incur no extra transport costs while improving morale. Humph. Not bad."

"This is but one example. We can make different types as well."

"Very well. Rae Taylor, I'll leave production to you. Use any personnel as you see fit."

Huh? No way, I thought. If I did the labor for you, I'd get pulled into the empire for real.

"You can't put a foreigner in charge of your own military," I said.

“The Nur Empire welcomes all individuals of talent, regardless of origin.”

“How do you know I won’t make something highly addictive or unhealthy?”

“You wouldn’t say that if you were planning to.”

“I might just be employing reverse psychology.”

I’d just learned something new: Dorothea had no sense of caution regarding those she took an interest in—likely as a result of her excessive confidence. She probably considered herself a perfect judge of character, or she believed she could solve problems with violence after the fact if she were somehow mistaken. Her sloppiness surprised me. Though I supposed if it had worked for her thus far, I couldn’t really call it sloppy.

“Humph... Then what do you propose instead?” she asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t implement the change right away, for sure. I’d test its safety over a year, then officially adopt and mass-produce it.”

“Too slow. Your exchange program will have ended by then.”

“Indeed. Let Lady Philine handle it. I can train her.”

“Philine? You think she can handle this?”

“Philine is more talented than you think.”

“Humph... Let’s do that, then.”

Whew, dodged that bullet. But the real deal began now.

“Your Majesty,” I said, “eating is more than the process of acquiring adequate nutrition.”

“What’s this about?” she asked.

“Are you aware of the general consensus on the empire’s formal cuisine?”

“I am not, and neither do I care.”

“I thought they were trying to poison me.”

“Hmm...?”

“A certain diplomat spoke those words after eating the empire’s food.”

Dorothea grimaced. “Go on.”

“The only country with such awful formal cuisine, bad enough to be considered blasphemy against food itself, is the empire. It’s so bad that it’s costing the empire diplomatic opportunities.”

“Is it truly that awful?”

“Yes. Definitely, yes,” I asserted.

Dorothea groaned. “Then what do you suggest?”

“Culinary reform. Luckily, the empire has a wealth of ingredients at its disposal, thanks to its various vassal states. We should definitely make use of them.”

“Hmm...” Dorothea seemed deep in thought.

Just one more push would do it.

“I recall Your Majesty was a devotee of rationality?”

“Naturally.”

“Then shouldn’t you amend any irrationality within the empire?”

“What is this irrationality you speak of?”

“Your chefs are forced to intentionally make unpalatable food. Their skills are deteriorating.”

“Is that really a problem?” she asked.

“Yes! People eat every day. If the empire’s chefs were given the opportunity to really flaunt their skills, you could develop a far more impressive food culture.”

“Culture, hmm? I don’t quite understand that field...”

Dorothea’s obsession with rationality had become a problem. Under the lens of rationality, culture was often seen as wasteful and indulgent. As a book I read long ago had put it, *If all that was excess were trimmed, there would be nothing left to call culture.*

“That’s all right,” I said. “We don’t need to go into detail about the benefits of improving your food culture. Just understand that improving the empire’s formal cuisine will at least yield results in the diplomatic field.”

“Humph. Very logical.”

“With that all said and done, could I have your official approval?”

“Hmm?” Dorothea’s face made clear her confusion. “Is my approval somehow necessary?”

“Huh? Er, didn’t Your Majesty prohibit extravagant meals?”

“I myself do not care for extravagant meals, but I’ve never once spoken out against other’s eating habits.”

“Ohhh, I see what’s going on.” The people around Dorothea had probably come to their own conclusions about what she wanted—well intentioned, but ultimately completely missing the mark. “Your Majesty’s influence is far greater than you realize. Please be a little more careful about what you say and do.”

“Humph. It would seem that is the case. Your advice is appreciated.”

“Great. Also, could you make an official announcement stating people are free to modify food as they see fit?”

“Is that necessary?”

“It is. Otherwise, the people will be wary of defying what they thought was your decree.”

“How complicated.”

Don't talk like you're not somewhat at fault... I thought. "I was also asked to lead the efforts in these first culinary reforms. Do you object to that?"

"None. Do what you must."

"Even if it means you'll owe me one?"

"Why not?"

Nice, that's a verbal promise.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll return and get to work right away."

"Good. I like fast workers like you... Heh, I want you even more now."

"Haven't I told you I belong to Miss Claire?"

"Why don't you both become citizens of my empire? You can even get married here, if you'd like."

"Mmm..." To be honest, the offer was tempting... but I wouldn't be swayed. "We don't need anything official. Knowing our love is mutual is enough."

"Humph, that's too bad. We are done here, then. You may leave."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

After my audience with Dorothea, I returned straight home to the Bauer student dorm.

Now, let's get this cooking boom going!

"Scram! I don't need nobody tellin' me what to do!"

The day after my audience with Dorothea, I paid a visit to the Ministry of Culinary Affairs, which oversaw the Nur Empire's food situation. Of course, I had come to

improve the empire's formal cuisine like I discussed with Dorothea—but the moment I stated my business, I was met by the head chef's shouts.

The head chef wore a white chef uniform and a chef's hat, but he looked quite young despite his high position. His facial hair made him seem older, but he couldn't have been past his thirties—maybe even his twenties. While most chefs tended to be on the plumper side, his body was toned, much like an athlete's. Judging by how brazenly he addressed us, he was definitely the head honcho here.

"Why, I never! How rude!" Claire, who had come along, was furious—being the stickler for decorum that she was.

"Oh, sure, I'm the rude one here!" The head chef didn't seem to like the idea of being bossed around by a stranger, likely due to his professional pride.

"Now, now, no need for that. You too, Miss Claire," I tried to soothe them both. Picking a fight wouldn't get us anywhere.

"I can make tasty, brand spankin' new dishes well enough without yer meddlin'! I've just been holdin' back on Her Majesty Dorothea's account!" the head chef spat.

According to him, all the miserable fare he'd churned out thus far was due to his not being allowed to shine—and that was probably true. He held office in a ministry of the Nur Empire, one of the most powerful nations, so he was probably an elite in the culinary world—perhaps even the best chef in the empire, considering its meritocratic practices. Even if the empire itself didn't respect chefs as a profession, his skill was still most certain.

But skill wasn't enough.

"I'm sure you're right," I said, "but just making new, delicious dishes won't be enough, so—"

"Zip it! Whatever yer plannin', you can leave me right out of it! I ain't puttin' up with outsiders lookin' over my shoulder an' orderin' me around!"

He was leaving us no room for negotiation. Now what?

"Is something the matter?" someone called. Presumably having overheard us, Hilda entered the room, a puzzled look on her face.

"Oh, Miss Hilda," the head chef said. "Nothin' the matter, Miss, just a couple brats talkin' smack."

"Is that so? Could you explain what happened in detail?"

I quickly briefed her. Once I finished, she nodded in understanding. "I think it will be best if you ascertain each other's skills. Why not have a cook-off?"

"A cook-off?"

"Yes, seeing as bickering back and forth here won't accomplish anything. If the ministry chefs win, that will be proof of their skills, and the culinary reforms will continue according to their wishes. But if Rae wins, you chefs will have to recognize her skill and accept her advice. Will both parties agree to this?"

What in the world? What kind of development is this? I thought, greatly taken aback.

"Wouldn't have it any other way!" the head chef declared. "We've been workin' this kitchen for generations, all the way since the late Emperor's time, and we ain't about to give it up to some nobody!"

"Then you have no problem doing what the winner says if you lose?" Claire asked.

"Sure, but there ain't a snowball's chance in hell of that happenin'!"

I personally didn't feel the slightest bit inclined to participate, but Claire and the head chef were at each other's throats. My choice was made for me.

"All right. I'll do it," I said.

"Wonderful. And you, chef?" Hilda asked.

"You betcha. I'll show ya the cooking spirit of an imperial chef!"

And thus I found myself forced into a cook-off.

"Which is why I've gathered you all here. Please help me!" I lowered my head to everyone present.

Gathered in the Bauer student dorm's kitchen were seven people: Lene, Misha, Frieda, Eve, Joel, Aleah, and me—everybody who could cook. Claire wanted to participate as well, but I'd asked her to refrain on account of her disastrous skills in the kitchen. She had a good palate, though, so I intended to ask for her help with taste testing later.

"I don't mind, but have you decided on what kind of dish you want to cook yet?" Lene asked.

It had been a while since we could properly talk like this. We'd both been busy since coming to the empire.

"Well, we'll be competing with a three-course meal: an appetizer, an entrée featuring meat, and a dessert," I said. "So we can work from there."

"That's quite a bit..." Misha said with a frown.

I couldn't argue with that.

"How long do we have?" Frieda asked.

"One week," I answered. Far too short a time to invent a three-course meal's worth of new dishes.

"And why am I here?" asked Eve, her words dripping with displeasure. She still hated me for some unknown reason.

"Sorry, Eve, but I need all the help I can get right now," I answered.

"So you'd be fine with anyone then?" she seethed.

The misunderstandings just kept piling up.

"Isn't seven people too many?" Joel asked. It was a good question—too many cooks spoil the broth, after all.

"I'll be overseeing everything while you six work in pairs on a single dish."

"Huh? I'm making something too?" Aleah asked with surprise.

"Yes," I answered. "I'll help some, of course, but I think you're a good enough cook already." I meant it. Aleah might not have been able to use magic, but she was an astoundingly fast learner in every other regard.

"Okay, Mother... I'll try my best," Aleah said, nervous but happy.

"Does anyone have preferences as to which part of the meal they'd like to make?" I asked.

"I'd like the dessert, if possible." Joel was the first to answer. I found it a little surprising he'd picked dessert, considering his usual brusqueness. "Confectionery is more up my alley than the rest."

"Oh, I see. I'll leave it to you, then," I said.

"You can count on me."

That was one person down for dessert.

"Why don't I work on the entrée? It sounds like the most trouble," Lene said.

"That would be great."

Lene offering to work on the entrée was a big help. Being the highlight of the meal, it was better to leave it to the most experienced member. Lene had years of serving the François house under her belt and was one of the key figures at Frater, a trading company at the forefront of the culinary industry. We had no one more experienced than her.

"Can you work on the entrée too, Aleah?" I asked. "There's a lot you can learn from Lene."

"Yes, Mother."

"Let me help with the appetizer. I'm somewhat familiar with formal dining, so I think I can manage it."

"Thank you, Misha. I'll leave it to you."

That left two people to assign.

"Hmm... Are only the appetizer and the dessert left? Do you have a preference, Mademoiselle Eve?" Frieda asked.

"No."

"*Ooh la la*, very shy girl! Your bluntness is so very cute. Why don't I do dessert, then?"

"Then I'll be on the appetizer with Misha," Eve confirmed.

"Please and thank you," I said.

It was settled: Misha and Eve on the appetizer, Lene and Aleah on the entrée, Joel and Frieda on dessert, and me overseeing everything.

"Are we allowed to do as we see fit for our dish?" Lene said, always asking the right questions.

"For the most part. There's just one thing I want everyone to uphold," I said, before explaining my one key condition.

"I see... That's very much like you, Rae," Lene commented.

"Always thinking ahead," Misha said.

"How shrewd," Eve muttered.

"*Non, non*, Mademoiselle Eve. Not shrewd. Say it's nice!" Frieda said.

"Mmm... That *is* important," Joel agreed.

"Okay, Mother!" Aleah said.

It seemed everyone was in agreement.

"All right, let's win this cook-off!" I declared.

Thus began our preparations.

“Ladies and gents, it’s time for the long-awaited First Imperial Formal Cuisine Cook-Off! I’m Lana Lahna, here to bring you play-by-play commentary. I’m joined today by Marthe Borel, the Imperial Academy’s cafeteria lady, here to provide a running analysis!”

“This whole ordeal’s taken an unexpected turn, but it’s a pleasure to be here nonetheless.”

Lana’s and Marthe’s voices echoed far across the venue, amplified by wind magic. We were at a temporary event venue set up in Ruhm’s central market. In the middle of the venue was a kitchen, which was surrounded on all sides by spectators.

“It’s become quite the event,” Claire said incredulously.

I agreed. “I had no idea it’d become something like this.”

A truly breathtaking number of spectators had gathered. The citizens were apparently tremendously invested in this event.

Initially, the cook-off was to be a quiet affair, but it seemed Hilda had pulled some strings and turned it into a large-scale event. Her reasoning was that it would help bring the citizens around to the idea of changing the empire’s cuisine, but I was sure it didn’t hurt that an achievement like this would look good on her record. *That sly fox...*

Three judges sat in front of the kitchen. One was Philine, which wasn’t strange at all, given that she was an imperial princess and this event would decide the empire’s formally recognized national cuisine. She was visibly nervous in her seat.

The second judge was Dorothea’s elderly manservant, whose name I had learned was Josef. He seemed used to making public appearances and, in fact, looked somewhat bored.

The final judge was, shockingly, Empress Dorothea Nur herself.

It’s an honor, but are you sure you don’t have better things to do, Your Majesty?

From the moment she took her seat, Philine restlessly sneaked glances at her mother. Dorothea, on the other hand, didn’t seem to even notice Philine. This mother and daughter were clearly distant, in multiple meanings of the word. I supposed that,

seeing as Philine had chosen Claire's route, their relationship hadn't had the chance to improve.

"Heh. Well, ya didn't chicken out, I'll give ya that," sneered the head chef, wearing his white uniform. Alongside him were who I presumed to be his sous chefs, standing imposingly with their arms crossed and glaring our way.

"Whyever would we?" Claire asked. "Our victory today is guaranteed."

"Ha! Don't get yer hopes up, lady!"

"I could say the same to you!"

In mere moments, Claire and the head chef were at each other's throats.

"Oh, and would you look at that? We haven't even started and this kitchen's already getting heated! Looks like we're gonna have quite the match on our hands today, don't ya think, Marthe?"

"Perhaps, but I personally dislike all the bickering. A real chef fights with nothing but their food."

"I couldn't agree more! Oh, would you look at that? It's about time for this cook-off to get cookin'! This event is sponsored by Frater Trading. Frater Trading: We're there for you."

Hwuh?!

Hearing Lana announce something I would never in a million years have expected to hear, I looked over at Lene, who stuck her tongue out at me sheepishly as though to say "Whoops!"

A businesswoman's acumen wasn't to be underestimated.

"Now for the opening address! Your Majesty Dorothea, if you would?" Lana asked.

"Very well." Dorothea stood and walked to the front.

In an instant, a hush fell over the crowd. The respect her citizens felt for her was palpable.

"Today, you bear witness to an event that will change the cuisine of our empire forever. Never again shall our food be called poison."

Dorothea kept her opening address short and sweet—very true to her nature—but the crowd went wild, nonetheless. Her popularity astounded me.

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty Dorothea! Now then, time for the rules! The contestants are to prepare an appetizer, an entrée featuring meat, and a dessert for a best-of-three match. The first side to score two points wins the cook-off!" Lana explained.

We'd put some serious effort into planning our dishes, but we were up against professionals who cooked for a living. Victory would be hard won. Then again, seeing how much attention this event had already focused on the empire's cuisine, it wouldn't have been a stretch to say we'd already accomplished our goal.

"Our first bout is appetizers," Lana said. "Ready, set... cook!"

The deep reverb of a drum signaled the chefs to leap to action.

"Misha, Eve, anything I can do to help?" I asked.

The two shook their heads and gave curt responses.

"Just watch us, Rae," Misha said.

"Please sit down," Eve added.

I knew they were both the cold, blunt sort, but being shot down like that still hurt. Then again, some people considered being given the cold shoulder by a beautiful woman a reward in itself.

"Sister Misha, Miss Eve, try your best!" May cheered from the stands by the Bauer side of the kitchen, helping in her own way. She could cook, but nowhere near as well as her sister. Her voice seemed to reach them, as Misha waved at the stands and Eve turned and nodded.

"What's this? The imperial chefs seem to be preparing mushrooms!" Lana said.

"Those are shimeji, hen of the wood, king trumpet, and oyster mushrooms. I'm

impressed they could procure them at this time in spring," Marthe elaborated.

"Oh, so they're, like, rare ingredients? On the other hand, I only see some plain old onions and bacon from the Bauer team."

"Onions are most delicious at this time of year. A fine choice of ingredient."

Lana and Marthe's live commentary echoed throughout the venue. They might have been an impromptu pair, but their teamwork was perfect.

"Eve, is the dough ready?"

"Yes, it just needs to be baked. The oven is preheated."

"Thank you. I'll take things from here."

"Please do."

Misha and Eve's teamwork was perfect as well, perhaps due to their similar personalities. Their cooking proceeded smoothly.

"We're finished," Misha announced.

"As are we!" the head chef said. It seemed neither side had faced any complications.

"Both teams have finished! Let's see what our judges think, starting with the imperial team's appetizer!"

Prompted by Lana, the head chef set the dishes before the judge. Their dish was—

"Four-mushroom roast wi' a lemon marinade!" the head chef announced. It had been bothering me for a while now, but what was up with his thick Tokyo accent?

"Why, I've never heard such a crude imperial dialect," Claire remarked.

"Imperial what now?!" I exclaimed. The revelation shocked me, having up until then assumed everything about the empire was based on Germany, given their naming schemes. Then again, their food situation was more like the United Kingdom's... I supposed the empire was just a jumbled mess of my own world's cultures.

But more on that later. Back to the head chef's appetizer.

"I took four kinds a' mushroom and roasted 'em up nicely, takin' care to not let 'em burn, then marinated 'em in a lemon sauce. All the mushrooms are a rare, off-season variety. Fragrant and tasty, it's the perfect dish to start off a meal," he explained.

Marinated mushrooms, huh? That did sound pretty good. Even back in my world, marinated mushrooms had often been served as appetizers in Italian cuisine.

"Now, time for the judging! Judges, please eat your dish!"

Following Lana's prompting, the judges took a bite of the dish. Their eyes shot open wide with surprise.

"It's... delicious. The mushroom flavor just fills my mouth..." Philine said.

"The marinade is wonderful too. The refreshing taste of lemon elevates the dish even further," Josef said.

"I don't understand such minute details, but this is good," Dorothea agreed.

The appetizer had been favorably received.

"Up next, the Bauer team's appetizer!" Lana announced.

Misha and Eve set their dishes before the judge.

The Bauer team's appetizer was—

"Seasonal onion and bacon pie," Misha said.

Eve followed up with an explanation. "We slow-fried a large quantity of fresh onions together with bacon to draw out the gentle sweet and savory flavors of the ingredients, then baked it into a pie. Please help yourselves."

Appearance-wise, the dish looked more like a quiche than a pie. Quiche was, of course, just as delicious when fresh from the oven.

The three judges moved their forks to the dish.

"Oh, this is delicious as well. It has a very nostalgic flavor," Philine said.

"You can taste the sweetness of the onion. What a wonderful seasonal flavor," Josef said.

"Mm-hmm. This one is good as well," Dorothea said.

It seemed our appetizer had made a favorable impression too.

The judges soon finished off both dishes, and it was time for the results.

"Now, which appetizer tasted the best? Get ready for the reveal in three... two... one!" A needlessly dramatic drumroll played out. The moment it stopped, the judges each raised a placard for the dish they'd liked most.

"Two votes for the Nur Empire! One vote for Bauer! Incredible!" Lana exclaimed.

"Yeah, saw that coming," Marthe commented offhandedly.

"Let's ask why our judges voted the way they did!" Lana said.

"Umm... They were both delicious, but I chose the head chef's appetizer because it felt more original," said Philine.

"I liked the seasonal flavor of the Bauer team's dish more," said Josef.

"The marinated mushrooms tasted better. That is all," said Dorothea.

The end result wasn't as favorable as I'd hoped.

"I'm sorry, Rae," Misha apologized.

"Sorry," Eve apologized as well.

"It's all right. We still have two rounds left," I said.

This cook-off was just getting started!

"And the first match goes to the Nur Empire!" Lana said, eliciting a wild cheer in the crowd for the imperial team. The majority of the spectators were citizens of the empire, making us exchange students unmistakably the away team. "Coming up next, we have the entrées! Any thoughts on the upcoming entrée bout, Marthe?"

"The entrée is the highlight of a three-course meal. It's important enough that you could argue this round should be worth twice as many points."

"Insightful! But that'd cause some problems, competition-wise!"

"A shame."

It would have been nice to have this round worth double the points, but things are never that easy. Regardless, we couldn't afford to lose.

"Lene, Aleah, give it your all."

"Leave it to us, Rae."

"I'll do my best, Mother!"

The two reassured me and entered the kitchen.

"Sister Lene, Aleah, go get them!" May cheered passionately from the stands, watching her dear sister with excited eyes.

"Why don't you two give up and save face while you can?" the head chef taunted. His gaze was fierce, but Lene and Aleah wouldn't back down. They were used to Claire's far fiercer gaze.

"Laugh while you still can," Lene said.

"We won't lose," Aleah declared.

They stood strong...

Which means there's no need to boo, May, my dear. That's inappropriate.

"It's now time to cook your entrées! Ready, set... cook!"

As soon as Lana finished, both teams set about their work.

"Well, would you look at that? The Bauer team has quite the cute chef with them!"
Lana said.

"According to our data, Aleah is only six years old, but she's already a talented cook."

"Really? Well, let's see what she's got!"

I might have been the one to add her to the team, but I still had some concerns about how she'd perform under pressure. But as far as I could see, she was doing just fine. Lene played the role of lead chef while Aleah did an excellent job of supporting her. As my daughter's cooking teacher, I was proud.

"Hey, you!" the head chef suddenly called.

"Me?" Aleah asked.

"Yeah, you! I thought it weird yer entire team was just a bunch of brats, but then ya bring out an actual child?! Ya all tryna mock me or somethin'?" he yelled.

Grr, you're the one heckling!

"I may be young, but I'm a proper cook who's been entrusted with the kitchen at home plenty of times. Don't you think you're setting yourself up for embarrassment by mocking me?" Aleah replied.

"Damn brat..." The head chef trembled with rage and shame.

Yeah! You tell him, Aleah!

"Let's take a look at what our competitors are doing! First off, the imperial team is... Oh? They seem to be preparing a long skewer!" Lana said.

"Ah, I see what the head chef's tryin' to make."

"Ohhh, I think I know what you mean!"

"Yeah. It's been all the rage in the streets lately."

I watched as the head chef took thin cuts of beef and beef tallow and skewered them, alternating between each. A giant kiln-like structure was being prepared for him. I had a sense of what he was making.

“And what about the Bauer team?” Lana asked.

“My, looks like they’re usin’ beef and asparagus. I can guess what they’re making too.”

“Wow, that’s a pro for ya! You haven’t been in the business for thirty years for nothing!”

“You flatter me.”

“Things are getting heated! Once again, this event is sponsored by Frater Trading. Frater Trading: We’re there for you.”

That sponsorship stuff was seriously spoiling the mood. Although, I supposed it wasn’t spoiling Lene’s, who was currently all smiles.

“Aleah, how’s the meat?”

“It’s ready! Please check it!”

“Looks good. The soup is done too. Let’s put them together and let it simmer.”

“Yes, Sister Lene!”

Aleah was working hard under Lene’s guidance. Claire and I watched worriedly from our seats.

“Both teams have finished their entrées!” Lana said. “Let’s see what our judges think! Starting with the imperial team’s dish, we have... Wow, what’s this?”

The imperial chefs brought over a huge chunk of meat that had been cooking in the kiln. The smell of spices wafted heavily through the air, eliciting a rumble from a stomach next to me.

“Miss Claire?” I asked tentatively.

“Y-you’re hearing things. There’s no way I’d react to the enemy’s cooking,” she said.

“You sure? That dish is genuinely delicious.”

“You’ve eaten it before...?”

“Yes.” In my past life, that was.

“Traitor.”

“I’ll make it for us at home some time. A smaller version that’s easier on our budget, of course.”

Now, back to the main show.

“What we got here’s called doner kebab!” the head chef said. “I’ve been dyin’ to make it myself for a while now, seein’ how popular it’s been in the capital. You can eat it with veggies between some bread, but this time, I’m servin’ it up as is—just meat and spice!”

His line chefs held the huge chunk of meat as the head chef carved away at it with a long knife. Dishes like these weren’t just a feast for the taste buds but a feast for the eyes as well.

“Now, judges, please try your dish!” Lana announced, and the judges did just that.

“It’s delicious. I’ve been wanting to try this ever since I heard about it a while back. A bit spicy,” Philine said.

“The beef tallow seems to be the critical component. I can’t get enough of the juices,” Josef said.

“Mm-hmm, it’s good,” Dorothea said.

Once again, a favorable impression. Despite his obnoxiousness, the head chef was indeed a formidable chef.

“And now for the Bauer team’s entrée!” Lana announced.

“Our dish is veal and white asparagus soup,” Lene said as Aleah laid out the dishes. “We roasted the tender veal to bring out its flavor and combined it with the Nur Empire’s traditional white asparagus soup. We hope you enjoy its simple taste.”

Pieces of veal shimmered in the white soup, and the aroma of rich butter mixed with that of seasonal white asparagus. It wasn't as flashy as the doner kebab, but it did have a certain elegance—one that made you want to correct your posture in your chair.

"Now, to the tasting!"

The judges brought the soup to their lips.

"This is... delicious! It tastes nostalgic, like the pie, but also somewhat original..." Philine said.

"Ah, the taste of spring... White asparagus certainly is a must in this season," Josef said.

"This is good but too little. Can I have more?" Dorothea asked.

The dish was raking in the praise. That was Lene for you. She wasn't just canny—she also had the skill you'd expect from the proprietress of an up-and-coming trading company.

"It's time for the results! A loss here is a nail in the coffin for the Bauer team! Will they hang in there?" Lana said.

Another drum roll. The judges raised their placards, revealing—

"One vote for the Nur Empire! Two votes for Bauer! The Bauer team takes the round! Woo-hoo!"

"An unexpected result," Marthe commented.

All right! We're tied now!

"Let's see why everyone voted the way they did, starting with Philine!"

"The kebab was delicious, but I think the soup had a more elegant feel that matched the theme of formal dining."

"Oho, I see! And Josef?"

"I enjoyed the seasonal taste and elegance of the soup, but the deciding factor was the fattiness of the kebab, which was a bit too much for an older gentleman like myself."

"Uh-huh, I see, I see! How about Your Majesty?"

"The kebab was simple and tasty. That's how I enjoy my food."

Close call—if Josef hadn't been an older man, we might not have won.

"Thank you very much! Looks like we're tied now. Things sure are getting interesting, aren't they, Marthe?"

"Yes, the Bauer team is doin' better than I expected. That little girl—Aleah, I believe her name was? She did pretty well earlier. We can expect good things from her in the future."

"Glowing reviews from a thirty-year veteran in the field! You're going places, kiddo!"

"Th-thank you very much!" Aleah replied nervously. Things hadn't been going great at school for her, what with May being shown favoritism and all. With any luck, this would give her some much-needed confidence.

"Humph. Ya guys got lucky, but don't count on it a second time!" the head chef said.

"The next round is the last, huh? Please don't go too hard on us," I said.

"Dumbass, what's the fun in holdin' back? No good citizen of the empire holds back in a fight!"

The empire sure doesn't hold back with their warmongering either. Sheesh.

"It's now time for the last match: desserts! Don't change the channel yet—you won't wanna miss this one!" Lana said. Of course, by "channel," she was referring to the wind magic channel being used for the live coverage. It had nothing to do with my world's modern-day television.

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Again? Really?

"It's about time for the grand finale! The score's currently one-to-one with the imperial team taking the appetizer round and the Bauer team taking the entrée round! All that's left is room for dessert!"

"The dessert is the finishing touch on a three-course meal. The adage 'all's well that ends well' couldn't be truer here. Let's hope they finish strong."

"You got that right! Once again, this commentary is brought to you by me, Lana Lahna, with expert analysis by Marthe Borel. Let's give it our best 'til the end, Marthe!"

"Yes, let's."

We'd managed to tie. All that remained was the dessert round. Our chances of winning were now fifty-fifty—perhaps less, considering we were up against pros.

"Ya ready to end this?" The head chef glared daggers at me, but as I had previously mentioned, Claire's gaze was far fiercer.

"Are you?" I glared back. Of course, the one actually doing the cooking would be Joel and Frieda.

"Good luck, you two," I said.

"We got this."

"Pas de problème, on s'en occupe! Leave it to us!"

The two responded reassuringly. The ever-composed Joel and Frieda the unstoppable bulldozer—if they were nervous, they sure didn't show it.

"It's time for the final round of the cook-off! Ready, set... cook!" Lana said, beginning the final round.

"Joel, Frieda, try your best!" May cheered from the stands with the last of her energy.

Joel returned with a slight nod while Frieda sent her a wink.

"Let's start off by checking in on the imperial team, like before!" Lana said.

"Interesting—it looks like they're cracking eggs and separating the yolks from the whites!"

Marthe elaborated. "I see someone grindin' almonds too. Even I don't have a clue what they're making. It looks like we're seein' some new innovation to match the times."

"Embracing new things is very much in the spirit of Nur! Will the head chef show us that same spirit as a chef of the Nur Empire, right here, right now?!"

From what I could see, the head chef was separating the yolks from the whites to whisk the latter into a meringue with an eggbeater. This, combined with the almond flour—in other words, the ground almond—gave me a pretty good idea of what he was working on. Another strange instance of Japanese influence making an appearance in this world...

"Now, then, why don't we take a gander over at what the Bauer team is doing? Oh, what's this? They seem to be using eggs just like the imperial team!"

"It looks like that boy is making a custard while the girl is working on cookie dough."

"Do you have any idea what they could be making, Marthe?"

"I believe so. There's a runnin' theme across their dishes, after all."

"Really? What is it?"

"Oh, you'll see soon enough. That head chef might get the carpet pulled out from under him yet."

That was the cafeteria lady for you. Her thirty years in the culinary business weren't just for show—she realized what was going on. We just had to pray the judges realized it too.

"Frieda, is the dough done?"

"*Oui!* Should I put it in?"

"Go for it."

“Roger that!”

I'd had some doubts about whether the mismatched duo could work well together, but it seemed they did just that without a problem. Joel gave the orders while Frieda provided support, although their personalities might have made one think it would be the other way.

“We’re approaching the end of the end here! Let’s watch as our contestants put on the finishing touches!” Lana announced.

“Bake’s done!”

“Plate’s ready, head chef!”

“Frieda, cream and mint!”

“*Oui!*”

Finally, both teams finished their desserts.

“To the judges, starting with the imperial team!” Frieda said.

“What we’ve got here’s our own take on a dessert known as dacquoise, from the fallen western country of Reims,” the head chef explained.

My prediction was right on the money. Dacquoise was a baked sweet that used almond-flavored meringue and originally stemmed from French cuisine. Around the time I was originally born in my old world, a certain Japanese individual had introduced dacquoise to Japan in the same shape as Japanese monaka sweets. Those same monaka-shaped dacquoise had gone on to be sold in modern-day France. Their outsides were crunchy and their insides soft, giving them an interesting mouthfeel. I liked them a lot, myself.

“And what about the Bauer team?!” Lana said.

“We’ve made an everyday, run-of-the-mill sweet. If I had to name it... it’d be an egg cake with chocolate cream, I guess,” Joel said.

The two of them had made a triple-layered baked sweet with cookie dough on the bottom, cream cheese dough embedded with dried fruit in the middle, and butter

and custard dough on top. Each layer was a different color, making for an aesthetically pleasing effect.

"For the last round, please try both dishes at the same time! Feel free to start with whichever you like!" Frieda said.

The three judges tried the two types of cakes.

"Oh, I see..." Philine remarked.

"Hm, how clever..." Josef said thoughtfully.

Dorothea said nothing.

From the look on their faces, I could tell... our intent had made it through.

"All right, it's time to crown our winner! Judges, get ready to raise your placards for the dessert you think was best! Let's find out who the goddess of victory will smile upon in three... two... one!"

A third drum roll. The result...?

"Zero votes for the Nur Empire! Three votes for Bauer! It's the Bauer team's victory! Yahoo!"

"I figured as much. Congratulations, Bauer team," Marthe said.

We won. It had been a gamble, but the risk had paid off. We'd gotten our point across.

"We did it, Rae." Claire put her hand on my shoulder. I looked around to see everyone else wearing looks of triumph and relief. It might have been a close match, but it had been a good one, nonetheless.

However—

"What in the blue blazes?! That's impossible!"

There was still a sore loser left.

"How could my new recipe lose to some old-fashioned egg cake?! I ain't tryin' ta be a bum here, but I'm gonna lose sleep if I don't get a real reason why!" The head chef slumped down in his chair, adamantly refusing to acknowledge our victory.

"Your behavior is unsightly, Chef," said Dorothea. "The match is over. You lost."

"I mean no disrespect to Your Majesty, but when it comes to food, I'm the expert here, and I just know there's no way my cookin' could lose! I won't accept this outcome until I hear a satisfactory explanation!" It was a testament to the head chef's pride in his work that he dared address the much-respected Dorothea this caustically. No ordinary person would dare talk back to her.

"Humph. You really don't understand why you lost?"

"Not one bit!"

"Care to explain then, Rae Taylor?"

"Umm..." I hesitated. Would an explanation from *me* really convince him? Still doubtful, I was about to reluctantly begin when—

"Pathetic... It's 'cause yer like this that you'll never be as good as yer father!" A voice rebuked the head chef.

"M-Mama..."

It was Marthe, the cafeteria lady and the expert analyst for the event.

"Ya went and got yerself a nice lofty position as head chef, only to make an arse of yerself now?"

"Sh-shut it! I ain't buyin' these results! It don't make sense that my cookin' lost, and ya know it don't!"

"No, I get why ya lost. What ya cooked wasn't the Nur Empire's food. Ain't that right, judges?"

The judges all nodded at Marthe's words.

"What...? What do you mean?!"

"Think back to the dishes the Bauer team presented," Dorothea said. "Onion and bacon pie, white asparagus soup, egg cake... They have been improved upon, but they are all traditional dishes of our proud empire."

"Ah..."

Dorothea's words finally made him understand.

This was the condition I'd given everyone at the start—to make new dishes based on the empire's existing ones.

"Your cooking was delicious," Dorothea continued. "But that was all. On the other hand, the Bauer team's were all reimagined dishes that I could still proudly call the empire's. The pie was zwiebelkuchen. The soup was spargelsuppe. The cake, eierschecke. Do you understand why you lost now?"

You could find delicious food anywhere, especially in the Nur Empire, where ingredients from annexed countries were abundant and citizens came from all over the world. What could the empire, where culinary fads came and went with the breeze, present to the world that they could call *uniquely* their own? Surely not another country's food.

Finally finding my words, I said, "Every country struggles to find food they can proudly present as their own. Your culinary skills are by no means inferior. To be able to make what you did today after living and working in the empire's stagnant culinary world for so long is amazing. However—"

"What's expected of us imperial chefs right now is cooking that we can show the world with our heads held high." Marthe finished what I wanted to say.

"I... see... I get it now." The head chef hung his head.

I meant it when I said his skills were good. We'd need him if we wanted to shake up the empire's culinary world from here on out, so I hoped this ordeal didn't break his spirit.

"Heh heh..."

"Um?" I looked at him.

"Heh heh... Aha ha ha ha! Ya got me good. I lost for real!" He started laughing madly before bounding to his feet like a rabbit. "Ah, jeez. No two ways about it. I lost. I thought the never-changin' cuisine was the lamest crap ever, but the real lame one was me. Ya got me good."

He smiled as though the debacle of moments ago no longer concerned him in the least. What was up with this guy?

"All right, I admit my loss. Yer all quite impressive, but I'm different now. I won't lose next time, ya hear?"

I'd thought he was just some obstinate jerk, but he was actually a pretty nice guy. He accepted his defeat and even acknowledged our skill.

"There won't be a next time. Cooking is your battle, not ours. Leave us out of it," I said.

"Quittin' while yer ahead? Can't have that."

"Instead of another cook-off, how about you help us change the empire's cuisine? I ask again, will you help us?"

"That was the deal, wasn't it? A man never goes back on his word." He extended his right hand—his knife-wielding hand. I wasn't so dimwitted as to miss the significance of his action. I shook his hand firmly.

"I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Right back at ya!"

And so, amidst the applause of the spectators, our cook-off came to a close.

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"Oh, give it a rest already."

"And there ya have it. This girl will be trainin' you lot startin' today."

We were in the Nur Empire's Ministry of Culinary Affairs' cookhouse—a wide, immaculately clean space with multiple large kitchens and what appeared to be a cold room in the back.

Standing in front of the chefs was a little girl.

I cheered her on from the sidelines. *You got this, Aleah!*

As agreed upon, we were now helping the imperial chefs improve the empire's cuisine. What was unexpected, however, was the fact that Aleah would be spearheading our efforts, as the other members of the cook-off were too busy with other responsibilities. She was about to begin a lesson for the younger chefs.

"Head Chef, is this for real?" a young chef asked.

"Is what for real?"

"Are we seriously being taught by a little girl just because you lost some cook-off?"

"Ya got a problem with that?!" barked the head chef.

The young chef clammed up for a moment, but he shortly continued. "I mean... We may be young, but we're still proud chefs of the empire. So yes, I do have a problem with it."

"Did ya not watch the cook-off?"

"No, I did. But from what I could tell, you didn't really lose in terms of cooking skill but in terms of theme, right?" The young chef was right in a sense. If it was just a contest of better cooking, they might have won instead.

"Well, yeah..." the head chef admitted.

"What do we have to learn from them, then? When it comes to the empire's cuisine, we know far more than these outsiders."

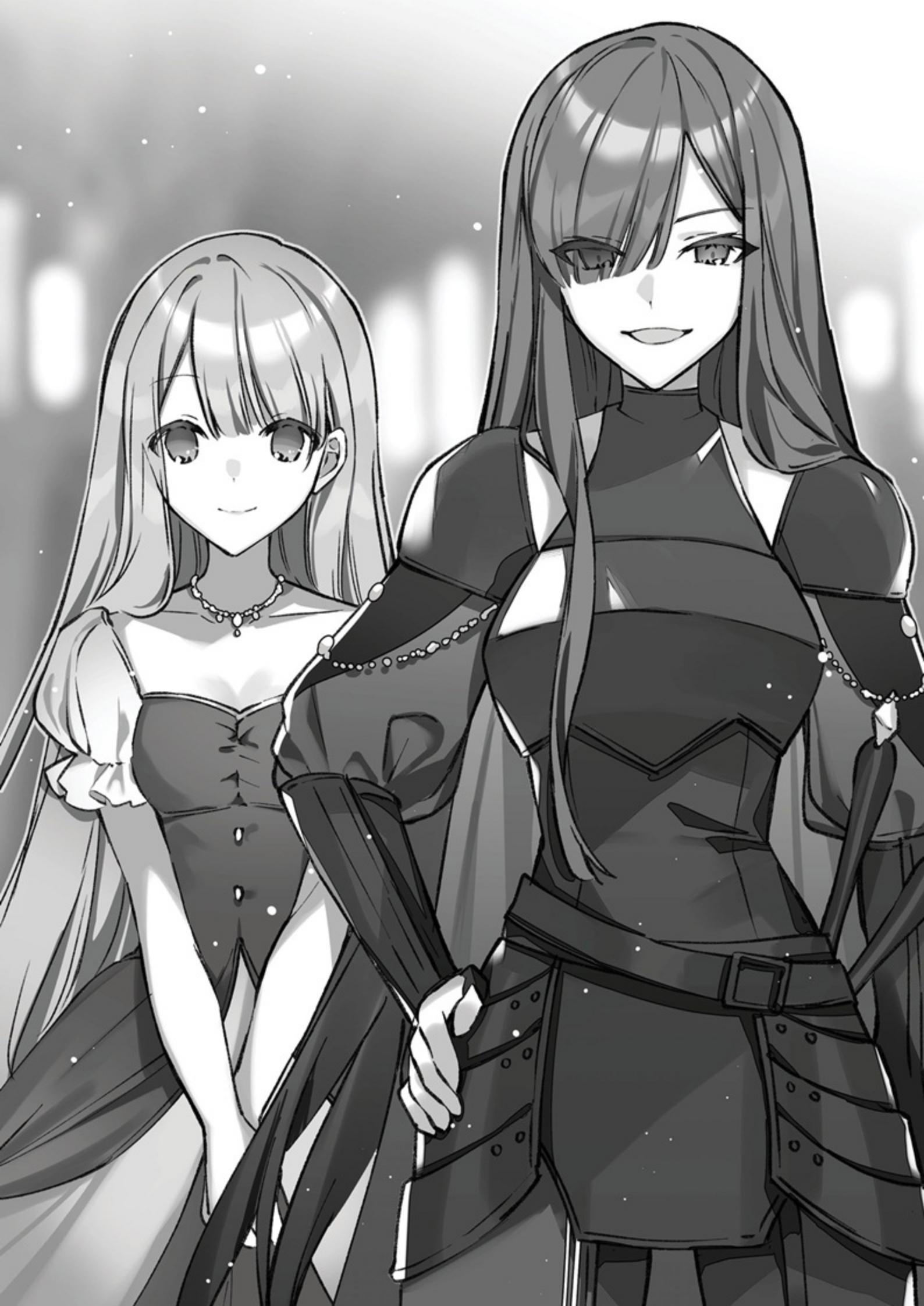
"That is wrong," a voice suddenly said from the entrance.

"Y-Your Majesty?! And Lady Philine."

With the appearance of the Empress and the imperial princess, the chefs all dropped to a knee and bowed, starting with the head chef.

“As you were. I care not for formalities,” Dorothea said.

“Has everyone been well?” Philine asked.



"You insist you have nothing to learn from this young girl, but that is wrong," Dorothea stated with solemnity. "The head chef and the other experienced chefs will handle improving the empire's formal cuisine. You greener chefs will instead focus on introducing new dishes to the empire. Aleah here is Rae Taylor's student and is well versed in a variety of new dishes."

The young chefs looked at Aleah again, who was standing as imposingly as she could with her arms crossed, chin raised, and a smug look on her face.

"But surely Miss Rae would be a better teacher?" a chef asked.

"Rae is busy with other matters... Or do you mean to say you are dissatisfied with my decision?"

"N-no, not at all!"

I understood why the chefs might object to being taught by a child, but everyone else from Bauer was simply too occupied.

"I realize you have your pride," Dorothea continued, "but you must swallow that pride for the sake of the empire's future. Philine and I shall join you as well."

"Your Majesty?!"

Dorothea ignored the shocked chefs and walked over to Aleah. Philine followed behind, a bit flustered.

"Aleah. Your performance at the cook-off was exceptional. I look forward to your lesson."

"As do I," Philine said.

The two bowed their heads to the girl only half their height, further confounding the chefs.

"Understood," Aleah said. "But your dress is unacceptable."

"Hm? Is there a problem?"

"Yes. In what world do people cook while wearing armor?"

"I see. I shall take it off then." Dorothea touched the imperial crest on her pitch-black armor, causing it to disappear. Her armor was a magical tool. She might not have been able to use magic herself, but there was a workaround—and that's an explanation for another time.

"Wha—Your Majesty?!" a chef exclaimed.

With the armor gone, what lay underneath was bared—leaving Dorothea in her undergarments. She didn't seem to care herself, but a lot of the chefs were male, and they certainly did. Her true age aside, her physical appearance was somewhere around that of a beautiful woman in her late twenties or early thirties. To a one, the men immediately turned away.

How gentlemanly, I thought.

"Your Majesty, that is unbecoming of a lady. Please put this on at once," Aleah said.

"I doubt my body is anything to look at, but I suppose you are right." Dorothea put on the chef uniform Philine had brought with her, allowing us to finally continue. "As I said, Philine and I shall learn to cook with you all. I once considered cooking a useless pursuit, but the cook-off has me thinking otherwise. Good food is good."

The chefs cheered. Understandably so, as the main reason they had been unable to cook freely until now had just said she'd gained an interest in their craft.

"I personally chose Aleah as my instructor. I will brook no objections. Learn what you can from her," Dorothea said with a tone of finality.

The chefs still seemed a little reluctant, but they accepted Aleah's position.

"I shall now begin my cooking lesson. But first, one thing." Aleah cleared her throat, then sternly stated, "You must call me Ms. Aleah from now on. And when you address me, you must start and end with Ms. Aleah."

Oh dear. I buried my face in my hands. This was definitely my fault—and Lene's.

You might recall that when Lene was at the Royal Academy, she taught us something called the Way of the Maid in preparation for the cross-dressing café, during which some ominous switch was flipped within herself. It seemed Aleah had flipped a similar switch just now.

Before we'd come that day, Lene and I had crammed as many new recipes from Frater and Broumet as we could into Aleah's head. At that time, however, Lene had completely reverted to the strict "Ms. Lene." My guess was that Aleah now believed this was the standard approach to teaching.

"Is such a thing necessary?" Dorothea asked.

"At the start and end, Your Majesty."

"Ms. Aleah, is such a thing necessary, Ms. Aleah?"

"It is in order to uphold mutual respect between teacher and student."

"Ms. Aleah, I see, Ms. Aleah." Dorothea seemed to find it amusing and played along.

Everyone else wore looks of protest, but how could they object when the Empress herself obeyed?

"I shall now begin my cooking class. What do you say?"

"Ms. Aleah, yes, Ms. Aleah."

"I can't hear you!"

"Ms. Aleah, yes, Ms. Aleah!"

"Good. Let's start with the most basic of basics: how to cook rice."

And with that, the young chefs of the empire began their lesson with Aleah.

"Do you sincerely believe you can make fondant au chocolat like that? Measuring your ingredients perfectly is of utmost importance in confectionery work! Measure that chocolate like your life depends on it!"

"Ms. Aleah, yes, Ms. Aleah!"

"You mustn't cut bread with an ordinary knife! Cut it with a bread knife after warming it over a flame!"

"Ms. Aleah, yes, Ms. Aleah!"

“Use more fresh cream for the crème brûlée! Are you trying to make pudding?!”

“Ms. Aleah, yes, Ms. Aleah!”

Aleah’s lesson involved a lot of shouting, but it progressed smoothly. Dorothea and Philine both tried their best to follow along. Dorothea seemed to be enjoying herself—Philine, not so much. She occasionally glanced at me as though to complain.

Oh dear...

The lessons went on for a few days. By the last one, the light had faded from everyone’s eyes as they droned, “Ms. Aleah... yes... Ms. Aleah...”

I decided to pretend I wasn’t seeing any of it.

Dorothea seemed unaffected. “Hmm... Perhaps Aleah has brainwashing magic that exceeds mine?” she mused.

My ears just so happened to fail me as well.

“One, two, three. One, two, three—ow!”

“I’m so sorry, Miss Claire!” I hurriedly apologized, having stepped on Claire’s foot. How many times did that make? I felt terrible.

“It’s fine, Rae. You’ll get the hang of it soon enough,” she said with a bright smile.

She just might be an angel.

We were in the Imperial Academy’s dance hall. A spacious room with sakura wood flooring and mirrors lining each of the four walls, it was typically reserved for dance classes. Presently, it was open for students to practice in after school, in preparation for the ball.

Little-known fact—what we referred to as “*sakura* wood” was often actually birch, not cherry, like the name would suggest. It was a smooth, firm wood, well suited to be flooring for a dance hall.

Lana, Eve, and Philine were also with us. Philine watched with envious eyes as Claire taught me, making me want to exclaim, *Don't you know how to dance? You've been an imperial princess all your life!*

"Perhaps I should just be a wallflower at the ball," I said, thoroughly demoralized. Even Claire's instruction couldn't salvage my horrendous dance skills.

"What are you saying? Do you intend for me to dance alone?" she replied.

"Well, no..." I *did* want to dance with her, but at this rate, I would just be stomping Claire's feet flat.

"Why not dance with me instead, Claire?!" Philine's hand shot up as though to say 'Pick me, pick me!'

"I wouldn't mind dancing with you *after* Rae," said Claire.

"No fair..."

"Forgive me, Philine, but Rae is my significant other, you see." Claire accompanied these words with a dazzling smile. That confirmed it—she *was* an angel, no doubt about it.

"Hey, Rae? How do I make Claire fall for me?" Philine asked.

"I feel like that's not something you should ask Miss Claire's lover," I answered. What made her think I would answer such a question?

"Why not? Who better to ask than somebody who has already succeeded in winning Claire's heart?"

"I can't tell if you're being logical or just plain stupid..."

Philine should have been a lot smarter than this, but it seemed whenever Claire got involved, she became something of a ditz.

"Is it breasts?" she asked.

"Just who do you think Miss Claire is? A perverted old man?"

"There isn't a soul in this world who hates a beautiful bosom, male or female. Oh, I see. It can't be breasts... mm-hmm, nope."

"Where were you looking just now?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Oh, so we're doing this, then?" If it was a fight she wanted, it was a fight she would get!

Kidding, of course.

"Haven't you two been getting along rather well without me lately?" Claire said, a bit glassy-eyed.

"My, are you perhaps jelly, Miss Claire?" I asked.

"I am indeed," she replied.

"Huh? You're just up and admitting it?"

"I see no reason to hide my jealousy when I love you so."

Gah, so precious.

"Are you doing this to me intentionally?" Philine asked mournfully.

"Ah! Forgive me, Lady Philine," Claire said.

"It's all right. It must've taken Rae a while to earn your love to such an extent. I just need to take my time and do the same," Philine said.

"Um, no. Like I've said, I'm not looking for a second partner"

"I'm. Not. Listening!" Philine covered her ears and shook her head. She'd definitely been ditzier than usual of late.

"I think your dancing's, like, loads better than when you first started, Ms. Rae! I'm sure you'll learn to dance before Ms. Claire's feet are squashed totally flat!" Lana joked.

When I looked over toward her, I saw Eve practicing dance steps alone—without Lana.

“Are you not going to practice?” I asked.

“Hm? Me? I’m... not good at this kinda stuff.” Lana’s expression clouded slightly, but she still smiled. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but she continued before I could. “I may not be dancing, but I at least get to see Ms. Rae in a dress!”

“Oh, so you’re not dancing at the ball?”

“No plans to. Oh, but maaaybe if you were to teach me, I might?”

“Sorry, but I’ve got my hands full trying to learn myself.”

“Aha! No kiddin’!” Lana seemed to be her usual self. So what was with that brief change in her expression just then? “Eve’s fine practicing on her own. Even a know-nothin’ like me can tell she’s good.”

“Thanks,” Eve said shortly before continuing to silently practice. True enough, her steps were fluid. She had experience.

“You’re quite good, Eve,” I said.

“Humph.”

She still seemed to hate me. I really would have preferred to be on her good side than her bad, but there hadn’t yet been a chance to clear up the misunderstanding between us.

“Hey, Eve—”

“Focus, Rae. From the top again,” Claire said.

“Oh, yes.”

Another opportunity to clear up our misunderstanding, gone with the wind. Alas.

“You’ve been practicing the first movement for a while now, but didn’t you two take dance lessons at all in Bauer?” Philine asked. “I figured Claire would be experienced,

as she's a noble."

"I do have a wealth of experience with dancing, but the dances of the Nur Empire are slightly different from Bauer's," Claire explained.

"Specifically, there are different roles for same-sex pairs," I elaborated.

"Ah, I see."

As I've mentioned previously, the empire recognized same-sex marriage. Naturally, this meant they had dancing roles for same-sex pairs that differed from the traditional mixed-sex ones. What Claire and I were practicing right now was the one for two women. Since Bauer didn't have such dances, we were both learning everything from scratch.

"That said, there's quite a gap between you two," Philine observed. "Claire is already accustomed to it, but Rae looks like she's dancing for the first time."

"Miss Claire has far better motor control and more training than me," I said.

"I'm really nothing special, but dancing is certainly not a strong point of yours, Rae," Claire said.

I've mentioned this before—around the time we practiced for the ceremonial dance—but this body was unbelievably awful at dancing. Even more so than my previous life's body! That was simply how the protagonist of the original *Revolution* was written. My body was otherwise superb though, so I had no complaints.

"I see... But I'm a little envious of Rae getting to take lessons with such a lovely partner," Philine said.

"Oh, but I'm sure you had a splendid teacher as well," Claire said.

"Yes, but they were very strict. Your teaching has far more love."

"You hear that, Miss Claire?" I asked.

"Yes. I teach with plenty of love, but I also remember to crack the whip sometimes."

Claire with a whip—could there be a better combination? Just putting it out there.

But I'm *not* a masochist.

Probably.

"Still, I'm happy to hear there's an official same-sex dance," Claire said.

"A lot of foreigners say the same thing," Philine said.

"If this were Bauer, we'd be met with strange looks," I said. I'd had a terrible impression of the empire during the revolution in Bauer, but now that I'd actually seen it for myself, I realized it wasn't all that bad. I'd have to accept Dorothea's offer, but if we lived in the empire, I could even marry Claire.

"Miss Claire, do you want to marry me?" I asked.

"Pfft! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying all of a sudden?! Ah, I beg your pardon." Claire made her first mistake, treading on my foot.

Granted, my proposal had been a bit sudden.

"Sorry, I was just thinking that if we became citizens of the empire, we could get married," I said.

"Are you the type to care about such formalities?" she asked.

"Well, no. I guess not."

"Then we can just stay as we are. No matter what the law might say, we're partners. As long as we both agree on that and those close to us acknowledge it, I have no problem."

"Neither do I." Thank goodness. We both felt the same way.

"Besides..." she said.

"Hm?"

"We promised May and Aleah we would return to that house, didn't we?"

She was right. Both we and the kids had promised the house we would "be back

soon." We couldn't be getting too comfortable in the empire.

"Thank you, Miss Claire."

"You're very welcome, Rae. Now, let's continue."

We resumed our dance practice. I even felt as though I had improved somewhat.

"To borrow your words, Rae... Get a room, you normies..."

I pretended not to hear Philine's grumblings.

"Uh, which way was it again?"

"Right, Rae. After turning right here, it should be soon to the left."

"Aha ha, I didn't know Ms. Rae was so directionally challenged!"

"What am I doing here?"

Claire, Lana, Eve and I were on our way to pick out dresses for the ball. As always, the imperial capital was flooded with people moving hither and thither, with shops on all sides brimming with clientele.

"I'm not directionally challenged; I just haven't had time to look around and get my bearings," I said.

"But didn't Philine draw us a map?" Claire asked. "We just need to go past this and we're there."

"Look, I never claimed to be directionally *gifted*." Wasn't *directionally challenged* a bit harsh though?

"Aha, you wouldn't think it, but I'm actually pretty good with directions," Lana said. "Never been lost in my life, not even as a kid!"

"Impressive," Claire said.

"How are you with directions, Eve?" I asked.

"Fine," she replied, cold as ever. She was always the impassive sort, but my presence seemed to make her even crabbiest than usual. She normally never even consented to walk with me, but our circumstances had forced her hand.

The cost of our dresses would be covered by Bauer, as attending the ball was considered one of our responsibilities as exchange students. While the others had already bought their formal wear for the ball, the four of us hadn't, having been too busy with the cook-off. As a result, the treasurer of the exchange student group had pestered us to go shopping, bringing us to the present moment.

"A dress, huh?" I said sadly.

"Why do you sound so depressed about it?" asked Claire. "We're shopping for dresses. Surely that's a joyous thing?"

"Yeah, yeah! And, while there's a limit, it's on somebody else's dime! It doesn't get better than this!" Lana crowed.

"You're awful," Eve said.

"Huh?!" Lana protested.

It wasn't that I didn't get where they were coming from. Even I liked buying clothes, especially when I wasn't paying for them. The problem was that I had to buy a *dress*.

"I went with it at the time because you agreed to dance with me, but I really don't like wearing skirts that much," I said.

"You've mentioned that before, but I just don't understand why," said Claire. "Aren't women who don't wear skirts a minority?"

With this world's values so closely resembling that of medieval Europe's, the standard lower garment for women was a skirt. Some artisans and farmers wore trousers, but in general, skirts were the norm.

"Skirts are so breezy..." I complained.

"Well, aren't trousers too tight?" Claire asked. Perhaps it came down to preference.

“Could this perhaps... have something to do with your sexual orientation?”

“Huh? Uh, I really doubt that.”

“Really? But don’t men detest wearing skirts?”

“Er, perhaps, but I’m a woman.” Oh, I saw what was going on. “Miss Claire, are you wondering if I consider myself a man?”

“Not at all. I just figured someone who loved women would like the sorts of things that men do.”

“No, no, no, that’s completely wrong. Sexual orientation and gender identity are entirely different things, although you might not be familiar with those terms.”

“What’s gender identity?” Lana inquired.

I didn’t know what Eve was thinking, as she was expressionless, but Claire wore a puzzled look.

“Gender identity is what gender you consider yourself to be, male or female. For most people, it’s a straightforward thing; but for some, their gender identity differs from their body’s sex.”

“Uh-huh... So, like, someone could have a man’s body but identify as a woman, or the other way around?” Lana asked.

“Exactly.” That had been the case for my friend Misaki. In my world, it was called gender dysphoria.

“That sounds... hard to live with,” she said.

“Yeah. It’s probably unimaginably painful.” Enough to make people turn to suicide, as Misaki had. “Anyway,” I continued, “my own gender identity is female, so it’s not like I want to become a man or anything.”

“I see,” Claire said.

“I will admit some of my preferences are a bit boyish, but doesn’t that go for everyone?” I asked.

"Oh, yeaah! I know what you mean 'cause, like, I totally hate sweet things, but my friend thinks that's weird!" Lana agreed, head bobbing up and down.

I wasn't opposed to the traditional male-female gender binary system. In fact, I believed it was a well-established model that explained the undeniable biological differences between people. But I also believed society had advanced to a stage where the two traditional classifications were no longer sufficient.

Contrary to what the gender binary dictated, I believed everyone had some degree of *both* masculinity and femininity within them. I also knew there were people who identified as a gender that wasn't male *or* female, or who couldn't connect well to any gender at all. For such people, the enforcement of the gender binary was simply cruel.

"Does any of that really matter?" Eve asked.

"Well, for most people, probably not," I said. "But I'd be happy if you remembered it anyway."

Eve frowned. "All right."

Hm? Had Eve just *agreed* with me? Could it be? Was she warming up to me?

"Huh? Hey, ain't that Joel?" Lana pointed out a tall person. There weren't many people with blue hair in this world, so it likely was Joel.

"Joel!" I called out, but he didn't seem to hear us, turning at the next street corner instead.

"Wait... Isn't that the way to the red-light district, according to Philine's map?" Claire asked. Even in Ruhm, the Imperial Capital of an influential superpower—no, *precisely* because it was Ruhm, I should say—there existed shops that dealt in sexual favors. "He's usually so straitlaced, but I suppose he is a man."

"Huh... He didn't seem to care at all when I changed in front of him though," Lana said.

"Pervert," Eve said.

I took a neutral stance on sex work, but that didn't mean I could just ignore the

dangers of such places. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wha—Rae?” Claire said.

I left the three behind and ran after Joel, but...

“He’s... gone?”

I’d chased after him pretty quickly, but once I rounded the corner, Joel was nowhere in sight. I looked in all directions but couldn’t catch a single glimpse of his characteristic blue hair.

A voice came from behind me. “What were you thinking? What if you got lost by yourself?”

“Eve...”

“You understand how dangerous it is for a woman to walk around here alone, right?”

“I’m sorry.”

But if Joel was visiting the red-light district, I wanted to at least make sure he was going with proper knowledge in hand.

“Let’s go back. It’s not a good idea to linger here too long,” she said.

“Yeah... It kind of feels like you’re the teacher now, huh?”

“Well, I am a good deal older than you.”

“Wait, what?! ”

“What’s with that reaction? You can learn at any age, you know?”

“Yeah... I guess you just look so young.”

“Don’t flatter me.” Eve turned away with a huff.

I’d absolutely thought she was younger than me. Just how old was she, then?

I was worried about Joel, but I couldn't loiter in that kind of place, especially not with Eve. Her age aside, she looked like a beautiful young girl and that wasn't the sort of person who ought to just walk around that kind of neighborhood. I didn't want to cause her any more trouble either, not after I'd made her go through the trouble of chasing after me.

"Let's go back," she said.

"Right..." I felt a tinge of reluctance, but I left with her.

Looking back on it now, at that moment, I was completely wrong about Joel. But it wasn't until later I found out how.

Despite getting sidetracked, we managed to make it to the dress shop. It was a normal shop, catering to regular citizens—not some kind of exclusive boutique meant for the imperial family, as one might hope from a recommendation from the imperial princess. Still, Philine had clearly recommended it for good reasons. The storefront alone was stylish, a carefully balanced mix of opulence and charm.

"Shall we enter?" Claire asked.

Lana, Eve, and I were—quite frankly—too daunted to do anything. Only Claire stepped forward and pushed open the door like it was nothing. That was a villainess for you. Even something like this wouldn't faze her.

"You're amazing, Miss Claire," I said.

"Sorry?"

The way she didn't even know why I was complimenting her was just so darling.
Mwah.

We entered the shop and were promptly greeted by an employee. "Welcome. Are you here to buy a dress?"

"My name is Claire François. Lady Philine referred us."

"Indeed, Miss François. Right this way, if you will."

The moment Claire mentioned Philine's name, the employee smiled brightly and led us farther into the shop. All manner and color of beautiful dresses were on display. Just looking at them gave me a pleasant, uplifting feeling—or at least, it would have if I actually liked dresses.

"May we attend to you?" the employee asked.

"Please," Claire said.

I'd thought we'd just pick out whatever dresses we liked and be on our way, but it seemed it wouldn't be that simple, as an absurd amount of employees had appeared, all smiling from ear to ear.

"You needn't be so overly courteous with us, you know?" Claire said.

"Oh, but we must. Miss François is a very important person who accomplished something grand with naught but the help of other women. There's also Lady Philine's word to consider."

They seemed to hold Claire in high esteem.

"So you know about us? Then you must also know we were enemies of the empire," Claire said.

"Certainly, we haven't forgotten that. But as fellow women, we still respect you, Miss François. Please allow us to attend to you."

"If you insist..." Claire said, a little ill at ease. Being treated as the hero of the Bauer Revolution always made her slightly uncomfortable.

Each of us wound up with two employees attending to us, helping with dress selection and changing.

"I understand you are here to pick a dress for the ball?" an employee asked.

"Yes," Claire answered.

"Might I inquire if you've picked a dress before?"

"I have, many times. And you three?" Claire asked.

“It’s my first,” I said.

“Saaame,” Lana said.

“Me too...” Eve said.

The difference between former nobility and former commoners was great.

“That being the case, why don’t we have Miss François pick her own dress while we assist the others with their selections?” the employee offered.

“Splendid. Are you three all right with that?” Claire asked.

“Yes, please do,” I said to the employee.

“Pretty please!”

“Please do.”

For the time being, the three of us split from Claire.

“For starters, please feel free to select any dresses that catch your eye. We can examine them in greater detail afterward.” At the employee’s urging, Lana, Eve, and I began choosing dresses. It didn’t take me very long.

“How about this?”

I’d chosen a black A-line dress. An A-line dress was a dress with the shape of an “A”; in other words, a dress that flared out toward the bottom. This one had a rounded boat neck for the neckline, well suited to my small bosom. Boat necks had also been a favorite of Audrey Hepburn—not that I was trying to compare myself to her beauty.

It also had french sleeves—made from plentiful amounts of lace—that just slightly covered the shoulders. Normally, evening gowns weren’t supposed to have sleeves attached, but a french sleeve didn’t really count. It was perfect for someone like me, who wanted to limit the amount of skin I showed.

“My, you seem quite accustomed to selecting clothes, Miss Taylor. If you don’t mind me asking, does your last name come from what I think it does?” the employee asked.

"If you mean the fact that my family are tailors who run a clothing store, then yes," I answered.

"I thought so. I think you chose a wonderful dress."

I let out a sigh of relief upon hearing a professional affirm my selection. The protagonist's mind had some attire-related knowledge, but this was my first time actually making use of it. I was glad this had ended without me embarrassing myself.

"I want this one!" Lana said. She had chosen a white empire-waist dress. An empire silhouette cinched under the bust and continued straight down after. It featured a high waistline, so it was well suited to women with smaller builds. Its neckline was also rounded, which lent a gentle, feminine impression.

"Seeing as you're so well endowed, Miss Lahna, why not try one with a sweetheart neckline?" an employee suggested.

A sweetheart neckline had no shoulder straps, exposing everything from the neck down to where the cleavage began. The neckline formed the shape of a heart, hence the name. Only people with ample chests could do it justice.

"Oooh, cute! I'll go with this one then!"

"Splendid choice."

And with that, Lana had chosen her dress without issue.

"Perhaps... this one?" Eve picked a black sheath dress. A sheath was a slender silhouette that emphasized the natural lines of the body. Eve was fairly short, so a dress like this, which made her seem taller, was a good pick. The neckline was the same as mine, a boat neck—because she had no breasts either.

"The color overlaps with Miss Taylor's. Why don't we change it to this light-blue one?" an employee suggested.

"Pretty..."

"It's the product of a young, up-and-coming designer. I'm glad you like it."

With this, Eve was also finished.

"All done?" asked Claire, arriving with a dress in hand.

"Please try on your selections, ladies," an employee said.

We changed in the fitting rooms. Dresses were seriously a pain to put on. Even back in my old world, when I'd been Rei Ohashi, I'd felt the same way whenever I had to put one on for a friend's wedding.

"My..."

"What is it, Miss Claire?"

Being the most accustomed to wearing dresses, Claire was the first to exit the fitting room. She had chosen an eye-catching, crimson mermaid dress. A mermaid silhouette hugged the body from the shoulders to the knees, then flared out widely—an elegant design that emphasized her femininity and exuded grace. The voluminous dress accentuated her hips and legs, making her look absolutely captivating as she walked. It had an asymmetric, one-shoulder neckline—a stylish choice.

But that's enough prattling about the little details. All you need to understand was that Claire in an evening gown was so dazzling that she was hard to gaze upon directly.

"You look wonderful in that dress, Rae."

"Oh, please. It just sounds sarcastic when you look that beautiful."

"I mean it. I didn't think I liked black, but after seeing you, I've changed my mind. You look most elegant."

Oh, gosh. Could she see me blush?

"Yours appears to be a bit tight around the chest, Miss François," an employee said.
"Allow us to adjust it slightly and send it to your residence at a later date."

"Please do," Claire replied.

"Your dress appears to be a bit loose, Miss Taylor. Allow us to tighten it slightly and send it at a later date."

"Please do," I replied.

Loose, huh? Heh, it'll take more than that to get under my skin.

"Ms. Rae, Ms. Claire, how do I look?"

"Putting this on was exhausting..."

Lana and Eve also exited their fitting rooms. Out of the four of us, Lana was showing the most skin. She also had the biggest breasts and, therefore, the most raw sex appeal.

Eve, like me, didn't have the most curvaceous of bodies. I couldn't help but sympathize, seeing her lined up next to Lana.

"Your dresses fit well. Feel free to take them home as is," the employee said.

"Okay!"

"Okay."

And with that, we were finished. We all changed back, paid for our dresses, and then left the shop.

"I'm glad we came today," Claire said.

"Me too. Seeing Miss Claire in an evening gown almost made me ascend," I said.

"Almost made you what now?" Lana asked.

"Just ignore her," Eve said.

Weren't these two students of mine starting to treat me less and less like a teacher? Well, whatever. I was just happy I'd gotten to see something divine.

"I'm looking forward to the ball," I said.

"Took you a while to come around." Claire grinned wryly.

I wouldn't mind some even more vigorous dance practice if it meant I could dance

with her in that dress.

I would later receive my wish, undergoing intense training under her tutelage, only to wake with sore muscles the next day—but that was a story for another time.

It was finally the day of the ball, which was being held not at the academy but at one of the many dance halls the empire had built—a spacious and extravagant building that rivaled even the finest of Bauer's structures. Most buildings in the empire were lifeless, purely practical, but I guess even they could be lavish when it was called for. Such were the thoughts running through my mind as I eyed the chandelier dangling from the ceiling.

Being a ball, it was currently late in the evening. The sun had long since set, so magical lamps lit the ballroom in its stead. Young boys and girls in formal dress engaged in chatter as they waited for the ball to officially begin.

"Whoa!" Unaccustomed to high heels, I nearly fell. My feet were *definitely* going to have blisters later. Feminine clothes and I had been bitter enemies my whole life—and in both of them.

"Are you all right?"

The one who grabbed my arm to stop my fall was none other than Claire. Her long hair was done up, her evening gown was tailored, and her makeup was perfect, making her the very personification of beauty itself. She was too radiant to gaze at straight on. But I stared at her anyway.

"C-cease your staring. It's embarrassing," she said.

"Is there some part of you that mustn't be seen?" I asked teasingly.

"There is *not*, but it's still embarrassing!" Her entire face flushed as she turned away with a huff. She was simply the cutest.

"Ms. Rae, you look so cute! Whoa, Ms. Claire, were you always that beautiful?!"

"How shameless."

Lana and Eve had done their hair differently than usual. Lana's long hair, usually in just a headband, was in an updo, though the headband was still present. Perhaps that was just her thing? Eve, on the other hand, had her usual braids wrapped into a bun, which was covered with a chignon cap, giving her a slightly foreign feel.

Long story short: Many cute girls, me happy.

"You guys came. Took you a while." Joel was already there as well, dressed in a tailcoat with his hair combed back—a standard formal men's look.

"Good evening, Joel. You look very dapper in that tailcoat," Claire said.

"Thank you, Claire," he replied.

"Hey, Joel. We actually saw you out in the city the other day," I said. "What were you doing in the red-li—"

"Rae!" Claire stopped me for some reason. "Surely you don't mean to lecture him here? Now's not the time."

"But those kinds of places can be dangerous. Somebody needs to let him know," I said.

"Even so, you shouldn't shame him in front of a crowd. Do it another day when it's just the two of you."

"Oh. I suppose you're right."

It was culturally acceptable to publicly reprimand someone in modern-day Japan, but that did invite its own set of problems. It might be considered efficient, as it served to warn others from making the same mistake, but it was questionable whether that benefit outweighed the negatives of the shame it brought the target. This world might have been more culturally Japanese than European, but personally, I agreed with Claire's opinion. I decided to put off lecturing Joel.

That said, I will mention now that there was a discrepancy in what I meant when I called those places dangerous and what Claire *thought* I meant. This came to light only later. She thought I was referring to the illicit nature of the red-light district, when I was actually speaking of venereal diseases. The way her face turned bright red like a tomato when she realized her mistake was wonderful.

Now, back to the story.

"It seems we're starting," Claire said as the lamps began to dim.

"Everyone, thank you for attending today." Near the front of the dance hall was Philine, illuminated by a spotlight. Wind magic amplified her voice. "This ball marks my debut into society. It is an honor."

She curtsied with elegance befitting an imperial princess. She wore a cream-colored gown with an abundance of drapes. It was surely the work of a talented artisan, a true masterpiece of a dress—and yet somehow, the dress didn't outshine Philine herself. I'd had her pegged as a girl worthy of pity, but that night, I only saw the finest of princesses.

"But that's enough from me. Please enjoy yourselves tonight." Philine finished her opening speech and received generous applause. When the applause died down, triple-meter ballroom music began to play.

"It's time," Claire said. The ball had begun.

"May I have this dance, Miss Claire?" I asked.

Many people, male and female, desired a dance with her. I couldn't even begin to count how many had glanced her way since our arrival. Thankfully, I was her lover, which put me at the front of the line.

"Hee hee, of course. I've been wanting to dance with you all dressed up for the longest time now." She placed her dainty porcelain hand over the one I extended. "Will you show me what you learned?"

"It would be my pleasure." I put some strength into my arm and pulled her forward. Her small frame quickly assumed position.

I was nervous, fearful I might tread on this angel's toes. But to my surprise, I perfectly carried out the dance steps she had drilled into me.

"Hee hee, you're wonderful, Rae," she said.

"You're teasing me."

"No, I mean it. You're really wonderful. This is the happiest I've felt since coming to the empire." Claire smiled as beautifully as a blooming flower. Oh, no—that smile, at this distance, left me reeling. "Rae, do you realize you're blushing?"

"And who's to blame for that, Claire?"

"Hee hee, oh, you... Hm?" She stepped on my foot. "F-forgive me! B-but it's because you so suddenly—"

"It's okay, Claire," I hushed. "Ready? One, two, three..."

"R-R-R-R-Rae?!"

Don't look at me like that. I want to stand equal to my beautiful partner, if just for today. I put strength into my hand on her waist.



"This is unfair..." she said.

"You know how I am," I replied.

"Indeed, I do. You're always unfair. And yet I love even that part of you, Rae."

Aw, jeez. There she went, saying adorable things again. If we hadn't been surrounded by people, and if we hadn't been at a ball, I would have pushed her down and made a mess of those lips right then and there. My love for Claire was just that overflowing.

"This is nice, isn't it, Rae?"

"Indeed, it is, Claire."

I wholeheartedly wished that moment would last for eternity.

For I still didn't know just what "eternity" entailed.

After dancing with Claire, I decided to take a breather and went to the end of the dance hall to check out the food. The culinary reform appeared to be a success, as the spread on display looked absolutely delicious. Slightly reimagined regional Nur dishes were featured alongside new dishes from vassal states. They were all lined up on the table, plate touching plate.

"This is delicious!"

"It's nothing like before!"

The voices of those trying the food reached my ears, bringing a smile to my lips. But citizens of the empire weren't the only delighted parties.

"Whoa, how many different kinds of sausage do they have, anyway?"

"This pretzel thing's pretty good!"

"I feel bad that I ever looked down on the empire's cuisine... I'm still going to eat though!"

Even students from the Bauer Kingdom partook, experiencing some culture shock as they did.

One mustn't turn up their nose at other cuisines because they assume their own culture's food is superior. Food is an ever-evolving thing.

Having completed my main objective of dancing with Claire, I continued on to my secondary objective: eating. Starting with the sausages, I rapidly began filling my plate with a little of this and a little of that, when—

“Oh, there you are, Rae.” Hilda appeared. She wore an evening gown as well, a long blue dress. It looked so good on her that I couldn’t help being intimidated.

“Is something the matter, Miss Hilda?” I asked.

“Not at all, I just wanted to give you my thanks.” Her usual soft smile crossed her face. “Thanks to you, the empire’s cuisine has greatly improved. We even made it in time for the princess’s debut. I can’t thank you enough.”

“No, I hardly did anything.”

“Modesty isn’t always a virtue, Rae. You’ve done well. Be proud of it.”

“Right...” I wasn’t being modest; I really didn’t think I’d done much.

“Hilda, you came!” a voice called out.

“Good evening, Princess,” Hilda said.

Philine approached. I’d seen her dancing with a number of people earlier, so she was presumably taking a short break.

“Have you eaten yet?” Hilda asked. “The food is wonderful.”

“Thank you, but I’ll hold off until I’ve finished my engagements. Ah, Rae, where might I find Claire? I want to ask her to dance.”

“Miss Claire should still be out there. Perhaps you passed her?”

“I see... She would be popular, wouldn’t she?”

“Indeed. As her partner, I’m both proud and jealous of that fact.”

“Yeah...” Philine looked a bit downcast when I said the word “partner”

I'm not giving her up even if you make that face, you know.

“How about a dance with me, then?” Hilda offered.

“Oh, sure,” Philine answered.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Princess. I was asking Rae.”

“Huh?” Philine’s face paled.

Hilda gave no indication that she noticed. “How about it, Rae?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t intend to dance with anyone other than Miss Claire.”

“I see. A pity.”

“Plotting something?” I asked.

“You can tell?”

“All too easily.”

As Hilda and I crossed swords again, Philine stammered, “I-I’m going to go back out and dance...”

I watched her go before I turned to Hilda. “Was that intentional just now?”

“You could tell?”

“Is that wise? Won’t this hurt your career?”

“The princess’s stock has dropped of late. I believe you will prove far more useful to me.” Hilda wasn’t even bothering to hide it anymore.

“You realize I’m not a citizen of the empire, right?”

"Even so, you are close to Her Majesty. Perhaps even more so than the princess."

"You're overestimating me."

"Am I? Her Majesty doesn't so much as notice the princess anymore, but she has eyes on you. You and Claire François." Hilda smiled curiously—not the usual soft one but an expression that hinted at her genuine scheming self.

"You've done something awful, Miss Hilda."

"Have I?"

"Yes, to Lady Philine. Of all the people working with the imperial family, she likes you the most."

"Oh, really? And how might you know that?"

"Why wouldn't I? Even an ordinary student at the Imperial Academy can see it." I was referring to my classmate Anna, who was the font of all our reports on Philine's affection levels. Anna really was as ordinary as they came.

"Heh heh, you're good. I see leading questions won't get me any information."

"I don't care what you think of me," I said. "We're talking about Philine right now. She might be a strong girl, but everybody has a limit. Being betrayed by someone she trusts will be too much for her."

"You sure know where you stand on the issue." Hilda snickered.

I believed Philine to be a touch unstable at the moment. The person she liked, Claire, was already with me—someone who, not to gloat, had a long list of achievements that only began with a revolution. To make matters worse, Dorothea—her own mother—favored me. And now Hilda did too? There was no way she didn't have an inferiority complex where I was concerned.

"Why don't you work together with me?" Hilda asked. "You want to change this country, don't you?"

"I don't think this is the place for such a conversation," I said before walking away.

The empire wasn't a threat to us at present, but it was entirely possible that that wouldn't remain true in the future. I didn't want to take any chances.

Ugh... What a pain.

I wasn't quite sure if this had helped or hindered the plan Claire and I had hatched to manipulate the empire, but my gut told me it was a problem. We'd initially intended to use Philine to change the empire's aggressive foreign policy, but the wedge between Philine and I kept getting larger. Perhaps we should change our plans.

After walking for a bit, I came across Lana.

"Is something the matter, Ms. Rae?" she asked. As she had said a while ago, she wasn't interested in dancing, filling her plate with food instead.

"Oh, nothing. Where's Eve?" I asked.

"Dancing with Joel. You wouldn't think it of her, but she's the type to get swept up by a crowd." Lana laughed happily.

Her easygoing nature was just what I needed after my exhausting encounter with Hilda.

"Do you not dance much, Lana?" I asked.

"Nope. I suck at dancing," she said with a smile.

"Didn't you have dance classes back at the Royal Academy?"

"Yeah, but I wasn't really suited to it."

"I see... You're like me, then."

"I'd have liked to dance with you if I knew how to. Oh, why don't we dance under the bedsheets tonight? That's more up my alley." Lana shimmied at me teasingly.

"Don't spout such drivel!"

"Ow!"

Claire had taken a brief break from the dancing and appeared just in time to give Lana a quick chop to the shoulders.

"Did you meet Philine, Miss Claire?" I asked.

"I did. She asked me to dance, but I was a little tired, so I declined."

"Oh dear..." Bad luck.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Well..." I proceeded to explain what had just transpired with Hilda.

"I see..."

"Why not dance with her now?" I suggested. Even if Philine disliked me, our plan had a chance as long as she still liked Claire.

"That would have the opposite effect, I'm afraid. She would think I had some ulterior motive if I asked her to dance after turning her down."

"I see..."

In the end, the ball ended without any events of further note. Save for one thing, anyway. The guest of honor, Philine herself, announced she would be leaving early.

"Welcome. You may approach."

Dorothea had summoned me to her audience chamber—alongside Aleah, strangely enough. We hadn't brought any of Aleah's formal wear with us to the empire, so we had to put in an emergency rush order at the same shop where I'd bought my dress. She looked absolutely positively adorable.

Claire had come with us but was currently waiting in the antechamber, as she hadn't been personally summoned.

Dorothea leaned back deeply on her throne, Josef as ever by her side.

"I hear the culinary reforms bode well. Well done, Rae," she said.

"Yeah, well, the imperial chefs already had the skills. I just gave them the chance to use them," I replied.

I honestly didn't think I deserved the credit. All I'd done was persuade Dorothea, participate in a cook-off, and send Aleah to train the young chefs—as well as a variety of insignificant things not worth mentioning.

"I shall grant you a reward," Dorothea said. "Name it."

"All right. I've already asked this of Hilda, but I reiterate my request that the Bauer exchange students receive special protection from the demons."

"Mmm... Very well. Did you have anything specific in mind?"

"That's for you to think about. The details would fall to your national security, would they not?"

"That is true. Very well, I shall think on it."

"Is that all for today, Your Majesty?" I wanted to go home and flirt with Claire—my every second was valuable.

"Not yet. I shall grant Aleah a reward as well. What will it be?"

"Huh?" Aleah froze up.

"The chefs you trained have unanimously praised your work," Dorothea explained. "You have restored their pride."

"They did?" Aleah muttered.

Dorothea regaled us with their words. It seemed the young chefs who had originally resisted the idea of learning from a young child had gradually changed their minds.

"Now that I think about it, the lot of us were probably stuck in the status quo."

Despite being in the Ministry of Culinary Affairs, where the Nur Empire's very best chefs gathered, chefs lacked social status on the whole. They took pride in their

skills, but no one gave their craft its due.

"But Ms. Aleah told us that wasn't how things ought to be."

At some point during her lessons, Aleah had told them something that banished their fears once and for all: *Good food is magic. The work you do as chefs is amazing.*

In Nur, many chefs had come to the profession after they failed the cut to join the military. Like Aleah, many of them had low or no magic aptitude. Thus, hearing her say that they had magic in their own right had struck a chord.

"Ms. Aleah gave us back our pride. So if you must reward someone, please reward her."

"All the chefs wished for you to be rewarded thus," said Dorothea. "Accept it."

"Y-yes!" Aleah cried enthusiastically, looking delighted.

I was so proud of her. That night we'd cried together, after she discovered her lack of magic aptitude, felt like forever ago.

"Good. What will it be?" Dorothea asked.

"I can ask for anything?"

"You must."

"Then... then make me as amazing as my quad-caster sister."

I gasped at this request. Even if Aleah refused to voice it, I had always suspected she had an inferiority complex with regard to May.

"Mmm, I see..." Dorothea nodded. "That will be difficult."

"Is it impossible?" Aleah asked.

"The empress of Nur never goes back on her word. I'll train you myself."

"Huh?!" I blurted out, unable to believe my ears. The empress of Nur was going to train my daughter? As in, the *Sword God* herself would take Aleah as a disciple?

“Your Majesty?!” Josef exclaimed. “It is unheard of for the ruler of Nur to offer guidance to a citizen of another country!”

His complaint was valid. Another fact to consider was that Bauer, where Aleah was from, had been at war with Nur not too long ago.

“Well, you’ve heard of it now,” Dorothea responded.

“Spare me the sophistry and think of your position!”

“Old man, do you really think the one you’re risking your life to admonish is so contemptible as to go back on her word?”

“Must you really train the enemy, Your Majesty?!”

“If you’re so worried about enemies, you can protect me yourself.”

Josef was at a loss for words. To protect Dorothea—again, the *Sword God*—one would have to be stronger than a demon.

“We’ll start tomorrow... no, right now,” said Dorothea. “Come, Aleah.”

“Yes!” Aleah said.

“Your Majesty!” wailed Josef.

“Huh... No, wait, hold on a minute, Your Majesty,” I said.

“What? You too?” she snorted.

“Aleah is only six!”

I knew Aleah had talent—I’d seen her train with Rod. But this was enemy territory, and Dorothea wasn’t exactly a person I could trust.

“I’ll have someone cast strengthening magic on her and arrange for a healer,” Dorothea said dismissively.

“Even so—”

“What kind of mother denies her own daughter’s wishes?”

I don’t want to hear that from someone who won’t even look Philine in the eye! That was what I wanted to say, but I narrowly stopped myself.

“She may be young, but your daughter is already a blade drawn from its sheath,” Dorothea said.

I was still worried... but this *had* been Aleah’s own request, and if she were to go down the path of the sword, then she could have no better teacher than Dorothea. Still, I hesitated.

“Mother Rae, please.”

“Aleah...”

“I want to become strong. Like Mother Claire and Mother Rae.” Aleah’s eyes burned with conviction.

I finally made up my mind. “All right. Please teach her,” I said to Dorothea.

“Leave her to me. Oh, right. Philine wanted to see you. Go to her.”

“I will. Try your best, Aleah.”

“Yes, Mother!”

With that, Aleah left together with Dorothea.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused you, Josef,” I said.

“If you’re sorry, you should have stopped Her Majesty,” he grumbled.

“I couldn’t possibly pass up the opportunity to have the Sword God train my daughter.”

“It could be a trap, you know?”

“That’s unlikely, considering her personality.”

"Indeed, indeed." Josef sighed as he rubbed his eyes.

"May I ask the way to Lady Philine's room?"

"I'll send someone to guide you. You are dismissed."

"Thank you very much." With that, I left the audience chamber behind.

"We just can't seem to get enough of each other lately, can we?"

"Oh, just terrific." I grimaced when I discovered that Hilda was the person Josef had sent to guide me—which surely no one could fault me for.

"It seems your stock in the empire has risen yet again," she said with great interest. She'd clearly already heard about Dorothea training Aleah.

"I think you mean Aleah's has. This is all her achievement."

"She's your foster daughter, is she not? It's just as much your achievement."

I supposed there was some truth to that.

"Oops, I better leave it at that," Hilda said. "There's no merit in getting on your bad side any more than I already am."

"Sure..." I didn't hate Hilda or anything, but I certainly didn't like her either. If anything, I supposed I found her difficult to deal with because she was so similar to me.

"The princess's room, correct? Right this way." Hilda led the way. "I heard through the grapevine that you can predict the future. Is that true, Rae Taylor?"

"Of course not."

Hilda had probably heard rumors from undercover spies in Bauer around the time of the revolution, but I wasn't about to confirm anything.

"Then what was that you said to me earlier about me 'dreaming a little big,' I

wonder?"

Crap. I had said that, hadn't I? I'd just been trying to keep her in check, but maybe it had backfired.

"Just some good insight," I answered.

"Truthfully? I'm impressed. But that insight, or whatever it may be, appears to be a bit flawed."

Huh? What does she mean by that?

"We're here," Hilda said, standing before what had to be Philine's room. "I shall take my leave then."

"Thank you very much." I watched her go before knocking on Philine's door.

"Yes...?" a voice said from inside.

"It's Rae. I heard you wanted to talk with me?"

"Please enter."

"Pardon me." I opened the door and stepped inside. It had been unlocked. A bit careless, no?

The room was dark for some reason. The lamps were all off, preventing me from seeing very far.

"Lady Philine?"

"Back here, Rae."

I moved toward her voice. *I have a bad feeling about this...*

"Rae..." Philine was standing in her bedroom, before her bed, facing away from me.

"Why are the lamps off?" I asked.

"I didn't want you to see."

“Huh?”

“I’m surely making... an awful face right now.” Without a pause, she lunged at me.

“Lady... Philine?!”

She pinned me to the ground, her hands locked around my neck.

“Please... die... Rae Taylor.”

My mind raced to find a way out of my predicament. Luckily, I had instinctively managed to wedge some of my fingers under Philine’s, so I wasn’t suffocating just yet. That didn’t change the fact I was pinned down, nor the fact that I wasn’t particularly versed in any martial arts.

If I’d known this would happen, I’d have asked Claire to teach me more than the basics of self-defense!

It would have been a simple matter to just send Philine flying with my magic, but that would most definitely injure her. Even if I was the true victim here, this was the empire, and moreover, we were within the Imperial Castle. The truth of the incident would no doubt be covered up, and then—

“It’s... all your fault...? You took everything from me...!” Philine whispered deliriously as she tightened her grip. Her bloodshot eyes told me she wasn’t herself. There was something else at play here—but figuring that out would have to come after I was safe.

Now, then, what to do?

Philine panted heavily, her face contorted into an expression I won’t describe for fear of besmirching her reputation. It was safe to assume she was under the influence of some magic or drug.

“I held it in... as you took Claire... Hilda... even Mother from me!”

“Lady... Philine...”

She wasn't herself at that moment, but the malice in her voice was all too real. As I mentioned when I spoke with Hilda at the ball, Philine's resentment toward me had been building for a while now. Even while under the influence of some other power, she couldn't have attacked me so fiercely if she bore no real hatred for me.

"Give them back...! Give them back...!" Philine's breathing grew further ragged, her hands clenching tighter around my neck.

It hurt. It felt like my fingers would break.

"Give them... back...!" Abruptly, Philine's face contorted in anguish, her trembling lips opening and closing like a fish gasping for air. "What... did you do...?!"

I hadn't done a thing. This was simply a natural physiological response within her body.

Philine was a delicate and introverted girl. Attempting something like murder caused her an extreme amount of stress, hence why her breathing ran so ragged. That breathing in turn lowered the amount of carbon dioxide in her blood, which forced her to breathe even faster, again lowering the amount of carbon dioxide in her blood—looping ad nauseam.

Chronic hyperventilation syndrome—more commonly known as simply hyperventilation.

"Why... How..." Philine's grip gradually loosened before she passed out entirely.

Whew... I don't know if it was her chronic bad luck or plain bad planning on her part, but either way, I'm saved.

I caught my breath as I racked my brain. *Should I call for someone? What would I even say? The imperial princess tried to choke me? No, nobody would believe that.*

Seeing no other choice, I carried Philine to her bed and began first aid treatment. I cast detoxifying magic on her, just in case she had indeed been drugged, and I stroked her chest to try and calm her down. Her hyperventilation would resolve itself if she could breathe deeply, so a brief period of unconsciousness would enable her to recover.

In no time at all, she began to rouse.

"Hello, Lady Philine," I said.

"I... what?"

"You went a bit cuckoo on me. That's supposed to be Frieda's thing, you know?"

"Ah!" Philine's eyes burst open, and she made some distance between us. "I-I..."

"It's okay, Lady Philine. You weren't yourself."

"But I—I...!"

"It's okay." I approached slowly, like one would a frightened animal, and hugged her soft body.

Philine was tense at first, but then she gradually eased into me. "I... I hate you, Rae... I hate Miss Claire and Hilda and Mother, I hate everyone..."

"I know."

The floodgates finally burst, and she sobbed in my arms.

Uhhh, what am I supposed to do now?

"But the one I really hate—"

She was about to say something, but just then—

"Princess Philine?!"

"Rae?!"

The door to the room swung open and two people stepped in—Hilda and Claire. I imagined Claire had come looking for me after I'd been gone for some time. As for Hilda, she and I would need to have a chat later. A nice and thorough chat.

The two of them stared at us. More specifically, at my neck.

"Lady Philine... y-you couldn't have," Claire muttered.

Philine had tried to strangle me with everything she had, so to no surprise, her fingers had left marks on my neck. Now how was I getting us out of this one?

“Oh, but she did, Miss Claire,” I said.

“No... But why?”

“Why, because I asked her to practice strangulation play with me!” I chirped.

“Huh?!” Philine looked like a pigeon nailed by a BB gun.

More people were gathering, having heard the commotion.

“Yes, I asked Lady Philine to choke me, but she couldn’t bear it and broke down crying halfway through,” I said.

“What?!” Philine exclaimed.

“Just go with it for now,” I whispered in her ear.

“But why would you request such a thing, Rae?!” Claire demanded.

“I wanted to practice before doing it with you, of course! It’d be rude of me to pass out midway through our session!”

“Miss Claire has such a fetish?!” the crowd whispered furiously.

“I do *not*!” she insisted. “And you, Lady Philine!”

“Ah, y-yes?!” Philine straightened her back at Claire’s sharp tone.

“You mustn’t accept such requests! There’s a limit to how kind one can be!”

Philine sniffed heartily. “Uunh... waaaah!”

“You’ve even made her cry, Rae! Get down on the floor and get on your knees!” Claire barked.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Who said you could sit down?!”

“You did, just—”

“On your knees without sitting down!”

“How?!”

Our strange comedy act was interrupted by Josef. “Rae Taylor, I ask that you not practice your peculiar fetishes with our princess,” he said after heaving a deep sigh. “All right, everyone, disperse. And not a peep of this to anyone, all right?”

He clapped his hands, signaling the onlookers to shuffle out of the room. At length, he left himself, but not before stopping to quietly whisper, “And now you owe me one, Rae Taylor.”

Oh. He totally knew.

“Was that convincing enough?” Claire asked as soon as it was just her, Philine, and I left in the room. Amazing. She’d realized I was acting and played along.

“Yes, that was perfect. Thank you very much,” I said.

“Why did you cover for me?” Philine asked. “I tried to strangle you...”

“Well, it wouldn’t be my first time being strangled,” I said.

“Huh? So you two really do that kind of thing?” she asked.

“We do *not!*” Claire said.

“Sadly, it wasn’t with Miss Claire.” I was referring to that time with Sandrine, in case you were wondering.

“If you covered for me out of pity... I’d rather you didn’t,” Philine said self-derisively.

Goodness, this girl... I sighed. “Don’t say that. I care about you. If you weren’t around, well... that’d be a problem for me.”

“I don’t understand.” Philine looked at me dubiously. “We aren’t close. If anything,

we're rivals, fighting over Claire."

"That doesn't mean I don't care about you. I've been watching you for a while now. In a sense, I met Miss Claire because of you." I was thinking back to playing *Revo-Lily*, the game in which I'd first met Claire—not as Rae Taylor, but while playing in the role of Philine. "If things had been just a bit different, I might have been in your shoes. Besides..."

"Yeah?"

"The villainess may have won my heart, but the princess has won my respect. Well, I also respect Miss Claire, but you get the idea."

Philine was shy and timid—in other words, just an ordinary girl. But if given time to grow, she could be strong enough to overthrow the Nur Empire. I genuinely liked her.

"I really believe we can be good friends," I said. A relationship like the one I had with Claire was likely impossible, but one closer to that of friendly rivals definitely wasn't out of the question.

"Even after what I did to you?" Philine asked.

"That was nothing. At least, not between kindred spirits."

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon, you really don't know? We're both devotees of Miss Claire!"

"Ah! You're right!"

Philine and I shared a firm handshake.

"Unbelievable... Must you two end things on a joke?" Claire seemed greatly perplexed by the outcome.

CHAPTER 13

TO CHANGE THE EMPIRE

“I THINK THE NUR EMPIRE is heading toward ruin as it is.”

It was currently lunch break, a few days after Philine and I had come to an accord. The classroom was unusually empty, with only Claire, Philine, me, and a small handful of other students present. The three of us were chatting over lunch when Philine said those words seemingly out of the blue.

“What do you mean?” Claire asked as she shot a glance my way. Her meaning was clear: *This could be our chance.*

“The empire has taken aggressive action against many countries, not just the Bauer Kingdom,” said Philine. “We’ll be surrounded by enemies on all sides at this rate.”

As I expected, Philine had been concerned about the state of her country this whole time. For now, she was a princess in name only, lacking in both authority and ability, but she still cared for her country’s well-being.

“Certainly, the empire has made a great number of enemies,” said Claire. “They’ve managed so far thanks to the strength of

their military and their focus on domestic industries, but that’s a poor reason to assume they’ll manage as well in the future.”

“Exactly. I’m especially worried about what would happen if the current ruler changed.” Philine hesitated. “If... if something were to happen to Mother, I fear the empire would lose its foundation. I wish to do something before that happens.”

“What do you think should be done, then?” Claire asked, wisely judging that Philine had broached this topic in hopes of seeking advice.

Put on the spot, Philine thought for a moment. “We have to shift the empire’s current foreign policy from one of aggression to one focused on reconciliation.”

Yes, yes, yes! I thought. If Philine hadn't at least been aware of the problem, we would have gotten nowhere. This was a big step forward.

"I see..." said Claire. "But such change would be difficult to achieve with the empire in its current state. There are a number of problems that need to be fixed first."

"That's true," Philine agreed.

"What problems do you see?" Claire asked.

Philine thought for a moment once again. "I think the biggest issue is the fact that Mother doesn't see a problem with her current policies. But in another light, that also means we can change the empire's policies if only we change my mother's mind."

"Oh, indeed. For better or worse, Her Majesty has great influence over this country," said Claire. "It would be no exaggeration to say all your foreign policy is dependent on her."

"But I really don't get the feeling she'll change her mind so easily," I added.

This was the stubborn Dorothea we were dealing with, after all. She seemed to have put a lot of thought into her current policies, based on what little I had gathered from my audiences with her.

"We'll need evidence to support our case, but with the empire as well-off as it is now, finding any might be difficult. It'd be nice to at least have more people who shared my cause, though..." Philine didn't have many allies to turn to, as evidenced by the fact she'd brought her woes to a couple of foreigners. "Still, it's not like I have nobody on my side. Mother's manservant seems to agree with me."

Oh, that worldly wise elderly manservant... I think his name was Josef?

"But as her manservant, he can't openly oppose my mother. He does what he can to persuade her against her... stronger impulses at every possible opportunity, but that's the limit."

I remembered the elderly manservant becoming a reliable ally to Philine in *Revo-Lily*, but I doubted the two were as close at the present moment. He wasn't an enemy, but he wasn't entirely on our side yet.

"There's also a certain group that, well... I don't know if I'd call them allies, but they seem to respect me..." Philine said.

"Really? That's great. What group is this?" I asked.

"Well, it's... the army."

"The *army*!?" I exclaimed. Hold the phone—did that mean Philine was already talking with their higher-ups?

"Oh, sorry! By army, I meant a small group of noncommissioned officers and soldiers."

"Ohh..." I nodded. "That surprised me."

"For what reason do they respect you?" Claire asked.

With some embarrassment, Philine explained. "As part of my imperial duties, I once had to observe the armed forces at work. I saw a group of noncommissioned officers being overworked by their drill instructor. They told me it was normal for the army, but I just couldn't bear it, so I stepped in..."

Harsh training was par for the course for the military, no matter what country you were in. Luckily, Philine's intervention had turned out to be the right course of action. The drill instructor was found to be overworking his soldiers far beyond conventional limits and was later punished by military law. Since then, a portion of the noncommissioned officers and soldiers had held Philine in high esteem, or so she explained.

"Wow, I didn't know you could be so well liked," I said.

"Why do you have to sound so surprised?! I'm well aware of how unpopular I am. You don't need to rub it in..." Philine protested, but her words went straight through one ear and out the other as my mind raced to think of ways to best utilize this information. "Still, it might not matter, seeing as Mother's influence is strongest with the army. If they were commissioned officers, it might be a different story..."

Philine smiled feebly as she said this, but I disagreed. I saw potential in this nugget of information, which I tucked carefully away in a corner of my mind.

"What about Hilda?" asked Claire. "Isn't she closely involved with the empire's Department of Magic Technology?"

"Yes, she is," Philine answered. "Hilda's network is something of a marvel. The empire's growth owes much to magic, giving that department influence, second only to Mother herself, and Hilda much political sway. But..."

"But?" Claire urged Philine to continue.

"It seems she's grown tired of me." Philine smiled faintly. She was likely thinking back to what had happened at the ball. "Hilda only has eyes for Rae right now. If anyone were to ask for her help, it should be—"

"That's not right, Lady Philine," I interrupted. She looked back at me with surprise. "Hilda's not the type to become infatuated with someone. She simply aligns herself with whomever she thinks will benefit her the most."

"You sure know her well," she said.

"Now's not the time to be jelly."

"Jell... I'm sorry?" Philine asked, confused.

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, mucking about and hoping Hilda will come back around to you will achieve nothing. You're going to have to show her you have value, and you're going to have to do it yourself."

Hilda really wasn't all that complex. She gravitated to those who seemed useful and nothing more. If Philine wanted to gain her support, she needed to prove her worth.

"We also need to make allies with the rebel forces inside the empire," Claire said.

"Wh-what?!" Philine's eyes widened with surprise. "Th-the *rebel* forces?"

"Did you think there weren't any?" Claire asked. "There are quite a few religious states under the empire's rule, no? Even if they've been conquered by force, it doesn't mean they've given up spiritually."

Dorothea allowed the citizens of her empire freedom of religion and freedom to proselytize. While this sounded good on paper, her real intent was to keep the

various sects in check by pitting them against each other to squabble among themselves for influence.

But she had underestimated the power of faith.

"I've caught wind of rumors," said Claire. "They tell of rebel forces secretly gathering under a certain person's lead."

"I had no idea... Do you think they'll help me if I meet with them?" Philine asked.

"Before that, I need to know if you're ready, Lady Philine."

"If I'm... ready?"

Claire nodded. "Seeking Hilda's aid is one thing, as you both serve the empire. To discuss allying with the rebel forces is a completely different matter. You would, without a doubt, be opposing the empire... as well as Her Majesty Dorothea."

"I..." Philine paused. Resolve wavered in her eyes. She wanted to fix the empire, but did she have what it took?

"If you really wish to change the empire, you must eventually confront Her Majesty. Can you do it?" Claire asked.

Philine was silent for a few moments. Slowly, and with great effort, she found her words. "A long time ago, Mother brought me to a certain place."

"Huh? What are you—"

"Miss Claire," I hushed. "Please, continue, Philine."

"I was so happy to have Mother spending time with me that I didn't even think to care where we were going. I... I didn't know, then..."

Her gaze fell downward as she spoke. This was an important memory—the moment when she had begun to harbor doubts about the empire.

"She took me to see an execution."

That memory was a deep wound carved into her mind.

"The man was being executed for plotting against the empire. I was too young to understand quite what he was saying, but he spoke out against the empire until the bitter end."

And then he was decapitated, right before her eyes. To this day, she couldn't forget that scene, dyed deeply red.

"I clung to Mother out of fear. But all I received from her were those cold, frightening words."

"All who defy me meet this end. Does that scare you?"

"I couldn't answer her. I was terrified, completely and utterly terrified. But not of what I saw befall that man. I was terrified of Mother."

From that moment onward, Philine could no longer gauge where she stood with regard to Dorothea.

"Mother is a charismatic person. But part of that charisma comes from fear. It's the same for the empire. If you oppose the empire, you die. That's why so many countries fear us. But that can't last."

Philine raised her head and looked us confidently in the eyes.

"Somebody needs to stop Mother. And I want to be that somebody" She spoke with conviction, her eyes no longer betraying doubt. "Claire, Rae. Will you help me stop her?"

"Of course," Claire said, nodding deeply. "And Rae will too, right?"

"Yes. I'll do everything I can to help," I said.

"Thank you both."

"We're finally making progress, Rae."

"That we are, Miss Claire."

We talked as we climbed into bed together for the night.

"I'll try my best. For May and Aleah's sake too," she said.

"Yes, I will as well."

There had been some complications along the way, but we could now finally start what we'd come here to do.

It was time to begin our plan to change the empire.

"Hilda, do you have a moment?"

"Oh, Princess Philine. Forgive me, I'm a little preoccupied right now. Allow me to come by later."

"O-oh, okay..."

"I'm truly sorry. Until next time."

Philine watched sadly as Hilda paced away.

It being Sunday, school was out. We were in a corridor of the Imperial Castle. In order to establish contact with Hilda, Philine had granted Claire and me permission to enter the palace grounds. Claire had suggested we go talk to Hilda as a group, but Philine insisted she do it alone. It was good to see her taking initiative, as she would need to be the driving force behind shifting the Nur Empire's foreign policy toward reconciliation, but things just weren't panning out.

"She gave me the cold shoulder," Philine sniffed.

"You need to be more forceful, Lady Philine," Claire said. "You're the imperial princess, and Hilda is but a mere official. Be more assertive."

"Assertive..." she mumbled back.

"That's right, Lady Philine," I said. "Learn from Miss Claire's example. She could suck up at least an hour of someone's time, easy—even if they had important business to

attend to."

"I'd never!" Claire exclaimed.

Hmm... really now?

While she had mellowed out a lot, back in the original *Revolution*, she had often sought out Thane and taken him hostage with conversation in the corridors of the Academy, despite his clear lack of interest. Of course, that always ended with her blowing a gasket once the protagonist walked by and stole his attention.

Hours passed. It was now around noon and time for another pass at Hilda.

"Hilda, I have something to discuss with you," Philine said.

"May we do this later? I'm actually on my way to report something urgent to Her Majesty."

"Oh... I see. I understand, later is fine."

"Once again, I'm truly sorry."

And so, Hilda managed to brush Philine off yet again.

"Th-this is hard..." Philine said.

"Don't give up," Claire said. "If you stumble here, at the very first step, you can say goodbye to your chances of ever convincing Her Majesty."

"You're right. Oh, you're absolutely right..." Philine said dispiritedly.

Aw, jeez... I patted her shoulder. "Why not practice with Miss Claire a bit?"

"Huh?" Philine said.

"Me?" Claire asked.

"We'll act it out. Lady Philine will try to keep Miss Claire here, while Miss Claire will do what she can to leave. Sound good?" I asked.

"L-Let's try it!" Philine said.

"Why does it feel like I'm being cast as the antagonist here?" Claire sighed. "Oh, no matter. Let's give it a go."

Actors, take your places. And... action!

"My, Lady Philine. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Claire. Are you free for a moment?"

"I'm so very sorry, but I'm feeling a little under the weather right now. Is later all right?"

"O-oh, of course..."

"Cut, cut!" I yelled. That was terrible! "You *know* she's feigning illness, so *why* in the world are you backing down?"

"But if she were actually sick, what else could I do?" Philine asked.

"At least ask questions to make sure she's really sick—not faking it—before giving up."

"Yes, only relent once there's no room for doubt," Claire added.

"This is harder than I thought... Could you show me an example, Rae?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I have a bad feeling about this," Claire muttered.

Role change: Rae swapping in for Philine. Take two. And... action!

"My, Rae. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Miss Claire. You're abso-tremendous-lutely stunning today, as you are every day. Oh, how I adore you!"

"Th-thank you very much. I'll be on my way, then."

"No, no, no, let's talk some more! The night is still young, is it not, my fair lady?"

"What in heaven's name are you saying, Rae?!... I mean, forgive me, but I feel a little under the weather, so—"

"That won't do!"

"Eek!"

I abruptly swept Claire into my arms.

"I'll nurse you back to health, so please converse with me in return," I whispered lovingly into her ear, my face inches from hers.

"Stop! I said stop!" Claire exclaimed.

Darn. And things were just getting good.

"Have you forgotten the point of this practice?!" she exclaimed.

"Hm? It's to stop someone from leaving and make them listen to you. I'm pretty certain I'm doing this right," I said.

"There's no way anybody could replicate what you just did!"

"Huh? Really?"

"In the first place, you'd get in trouble doing that to anybody else! You were *clearly* coming on to me!"

"Oh, I get it. We're supposed to make Hilda come on to us?"

"Yes—wait, no!" Claire's shoulders heaved as she gasped for air.

Yup, wifey was cute today as well.

"Well, there you have it. Easy enough, right?" I said to Philine.

"It sure looked like you two were just flirting to me," she said.

Whoopsie.

"The wrong people were in the wrong roles. Let's have Lady Philine play Hilda, while I play Lady Philine," Claire said.

"Oh, that sounds like a good idea," Philine agreed.

"Let's give it a go," I said.

Enh, another casting change. Take three.

"Oh, good afternoon, Claire."

"Good afternoon, Lady Philine. Are you free to talk right now?"

"I'm sorry, Claire. I have a previous engagement to uphold. Is another time all right?"

"I don't mind waiting for you to finish."

"U-umm... I probably won't finish within the day. Perhaps another day would be best?"

"I understand. What day works best for you?"

"Ugh... I-I surrender..."

Claire cleverly guided the conversation, eventually forcing a promise to meet. As a former belle of high society, something of this level was but child's play to her.

"That was amazing, Claire," said Philine. "Like magic."

"That was nothing. Just remember to make your voice heard without being rude."

"I see, I see."

"If the other side still tries to avoid you while you've maintained civility, you can then reprimand them for their rudeness. I cornered you just now because you realized it would be rude to deny me any further."

"I see. Thank you, I think I can use this."

Claire was openly antagonistic toward the protagonist in the original *Revolution*, but when among her noble peers, she pursued her goals through indirect means such as these. Her family and others close to her never saw her villainess side, so you might say the protagonist got special treatment—special in the sense of Claire's starting prejudice against commoners, that is.

"Let's have you try it yourself," Claire said. "Rae, this time you will take the role of Hilda."

"All right."

"Are you ready, Lady Philine?"

"Y-yes!"

Aaand take four.

"Oh, Rae. Is now a good time?"

"It is not."

"Huh?"

"Pardon me." Taking advantage of her hesitation, I walked away.

"What are you doing, Rae?!" Claire exclaimed. "Hilda would never be so rude!"

"Well, we don't know that for sure. We'd best be prepared for anything."

"We need Lady Philine to have some confidence first! Just look at what you've done to her!"

I looked over at Philine to see her on the verge of tears.

"Don't you think she looks kinda cute when she's about to cry?" I asked.

"I do *not*! Take this seriously!" Claire scolded.

In the end, we practiced until the sun went down. I don't know how much our practice actually ended up helping, but—

"Very well. I shall meet you in your room tomorrow afternoon, then."

Philine somehow succeeded in getting Hilda to promise to meet her.

There was a knock at the door, causing Philine to shoot a nervous look my way. Claire and I nodded, prompting her to nod back before calling the visitor in.

"Pardon the intrusion... Oh?" Hilda raised an eyebrow upon noticing Claire and me. "I came because Princess Philine requested we talk, but I wasn't aware you two would be present."

"This conversation will concern us as well," said Claire. "I trust our presence won't be an issue?"

"Of course not. I am quite busy, however, and would prefer to keep this brief if possible," Hilda said, polite but assertive.

The old Philine would have been overwhelmed by those words, allowing the reins of the conversation to be snatched from her. But now?

"I understand. Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to come here. I'll strive to keep this brief, but please do take a seat." Philine calmly urged Hilda to sit down.

Hilda looked slightly startled, likely realizing this wouldn't be as cut-and-dried as she first thought. I'd always believed Philine had it in her to put her foot down. She'd just needed some practice was all.

With resignation, Hilda sighed and sat in the chair. The smile she always plastered on when in front of Philine was gone, replaced by a cold, indifferent visage. “So? What is it?”

“What do you think of the current state of the Nur Empire?” Philine asked without pause. She was past getting hung up on changes in other people’s facial expressions.

“That’s quite an abstract question,” Hilda said. “The empire is a wonderful state, perhaps the greatest in the world.”

“I agree. But are things really sustainable as they are? Don’t you think the empire is making too many enemies?” Philine didn’t let Hilda’s cookie-cutter answer stop her, pressing forward.

Hilda’s face remained as expressionless as a Noh mask. “Certainly, the empire has many enemies. But the empire also has the strength needed to bring those enemies under its rule.”

“Does it really?” Philine challenged. “What about the three-nation alliance between Sousse, the Alpes, and Bauer? While we managed to maneuver against it this time, if their alliance had come to fruition, the empire would be in danger, would it not?”

“Hypotheticals will get us nowhere. All that matters is that the alliance *didn’t* come to fruition, and the empire is prospering,” Hilda said, dismissing Philine’s hindsight-based proposal.

“If the hypotheticals were groundless, perhaps. But the potential threat posed to the empire is very much real. I agree that the empire is prospering right now, but don’t you think it’s also walking on thin ice?” Philine didn’t give an inch, asserting the validity of her supposition.

“I see. Certainly, there is an element of danger to the current state of affairs, but such is always the case with diplomacy. There is simply no perfect way forward. All we can do is weigh the risks of the options available to us and choose as carefully as we can.” Hilda refuted the argument, seeming to imply Philine’s concerns were idealistic armchair theorizing.

“As insignificant as I am, I’m still a member of the imperial family. I know well enough how complex diplomacy can be. But is the empire’s current foreign policy truly the wisest? Are we really choosing the best options?” Philine pushed forward

even further, hinting at an alternative.

"What do you mean to say?" Hilda asked.

"I believe it's time the empire put an end to its aggressive approach to foreign policy and adopted a more reconciliation-focused tack."

Philine threw the first punch. Now, how would Hilda counter?

"Did these people of Bauer put you up to this?" Hilda glared our way.

"No, I've always felt this way," said Philine. "I arrived at this conclusion myself."

"Do you realize the implications of what you're suggesting? You'll be defying Her Majesty's own decree."

"I'm well aware."

"You of all people should know what happens to those who defy Her Majesty. Do you have a death wish?" One corner of Hilda's mouth curved into a scoff.

"As a member of the imperial family, it is my duty to think of the future of my people. I will change any foreign policy that endangers the citizens, even if it means defying Mother."

"And how do you propose you will do that? Pardon my rudeness, but for a member of the imperial family, you have little to no power to speak of. You're not the heir, nor do you have a large faction backing you."

"I know. That's why I want you to help me," said Philine.

Hilda fell silent.

Philine continued on regardless. "You have great political insight, as well as close ties to the Department of Magic Technology. If I had you by my side, I wouldn't be a powerless princess anymore."

Hilda remained silent, simply staring at Philine. To me, it seemed as though she were peering into Philine's heart to try and ascertain the truth of her.

"Please lend me your aid—for the empire, for its people." Philine made her plea with sincerity, then bowed her head. An imperial princess bowing her head to a subject, even a gifted government official like Hilda, was no small gesture.

And yet, Hilda's reply was: "What do I get out of this?"

"Huh?" Philine was taken aback by Hilda's tone, no longer formal, but frank and rough.

Hilda frowned, took out a cigarette, and put it to her lips. "You didn't seriously think I'd help you for nothing, did you, Philine? What's in it for me?"

"Well..."

"Did you expect me to help you for the empire's sake? The people's? The future's? Oh, how noble. It brings a tear to my eye to hear this from someone born with a silver spoon in her damned mouth."

"Hilda...?" Philine was left bewildered by Hilda's drastic change. Apparently, we'd hit the limit of what a day's worth of practice could achieve.

Hilda continued. "Do you have any idea what it took to get to where I am? Do you have any idea what I had to go through just to no longer worry whether I'd have food to eat the next day? Do you?"

Philine said nothing, unable to do anything but tremble.

"So? What'll it be, then? What's my reward for helping you, huh? Surely you wouldn't be stupid enough to think I'd help you out of the kindness of my heart?"

Philine still said nothing as Hilda continued to berate her.

I was about to say something to back up Philine when Claire stopped me with a look, her eyes telling me to let things play out some more.

"If you want someone's help, you need to give them something in return. If you can't do that much, then keep your trap shut and your head down like the damn ornament of a princess you are!" Hilda snarled.

Silence swallowed the room.

Moments ticked by. No matter how you looked at it, negotiations had ground to a halt. I was wondering if it would be best to end things then and there when Philine bravely cut through the silence.

“Are you finished?”

“Huh?” Hilda seethed. “Enough of this nonsense. Yeah, I’m finished here—”

“Sit down, Hilda.”

“No, I told you—”

“Sit down,” Philine said sternly, leaving no room for argument.

Hilda, about to stand, found herself sitting back down, abruptly overwhelmed.

“I understand what you mean to say. Certainly, I need to offer something in return for your service.”

“Right. And if you can’t do that, then you’re just wasting my—”

“Watch your tone,” Philine said. Her usual timidity was nowhere to be seen as she firmly reprimanded Hilda with composure and dignity. “I may be powerless, but I’m still a princess. Surely you understand what it means to insult me?”

“Hah! You’re resorting to authority now? Do it then. Try to punish me,” Hilda challenged.

“I may not be able to punish you for speaking down to me. But what about for drugging a princess?” Philine asked calmly.

“Wha—?!“ Hilda was at a loss for words.

Philine was referring to the time she’d almost strangled me. I’d told her something was strange about her condition afterward, and I’d linked it to the suggestive words Hilda had said to me moments before I entered the room. But was it really wise to play that hand here and now?

“I haven’t a clue what you mean,” Hilda said.

“So you’re choosing to play dumb. Understandably so, as you’ve left no evidence.”

“We’re done here, then.”

“But I wonder what the people over at the Department of Magic Technology would think if I accused you?”

“Are you blackmailing me?”

However involved Hilda was with the department, that didn’t mean they considered her irreplaceable. There was no guarantee that an official with a blemish on their record would remain in their good graces, and judging by Hilda’s reaction, she knew it.

“Threaten me all you like, but I won’t yield,” Hilda snapped. “Even if you do go through with it, I’ll retaliate. With my connections, I can have your status—”

“No, Hilda. You’re missing my point.” A smile returned to Philine’s face, as though her way of speaking up until now, akin to Dorothea’s, had been but an act.

Hilda frowned in confusion.

“What I demonstrated just now was Mother’s means of negotiation. Having your way by forcing your opponent to submit, only engendering enmity. Unpleasant, isn’t it? That’s not how I want to do things,” Philine said.

Hilda said nothing.

“I saw something peculiar some time ago. A group of small children were bullying an even smaller girl. When I went to admonish them, do you know what they said?” Philine asked.

“What?”

“They said they were just imitating Her Majesty Dorothea. What could I say to that?”

The Nur Empire’s philosophy of complete meritocracy was a double-edged sword. For the strong, it was paradise, but for the weak, it was hell. Of course, the empire

had some relief measures in place for the less fortunate, but they were nothing in comparison to the Bauer Kingdom's, which had undergone democratization.

"The empire has taken survival of the fittest too far," said Philine. "Someone needs to fix it."

"I understand what you mean to say," said Hilda, "But that changes nothing. You still haven't offered me anything."

"I'll appoint you to be my knight. Serving an imperial princess will give you the status and prestige you desire, will it not?"

Hilda's eyes went wide, as did mine. To tell the truth, I'd still underestimated Philine. I hadn't thought she could pull off something like this.

Philine had possessed the chips to negotiate with Hilda from the very start, but she had been unable to play them effectively so long as Hilda was leading the conversation. That was why she'd shifted to a confrontational approach to instill a sense of danger—then broken that tension and started negotiations from square one. Her ability to negotiate put even Claire to shame.

"Do you think that would be enough for me?" Hilda said.

"On the contrary, I'm curious as to why you're so hesitant to work for me. Certainly, you have your ties with our magic researchers netting you a fairly high position, but that's hardly stable. As I noted, they are free to cut you off whenever."

"It'd be the same if I served you."

"No, it wouldn't. We would be accomplices of sorts. I would be unable to betray you, and you would be unable to betray me."

Hilda stared intently at Philine. She was no doubt weighing the pros and cons carefully inside her head.

Philine continued. "Hey, Hilda? Don't you think it's about time we spoke frankly to one another? I've told you my true intentions already, so won't you drop the act for me?"

Hilda's eyes went wide again. Philine's intent was clear—she was overlooking Hilda's

earlier, foul-mouthed transgressions.

Philine smiled faintly. "I cannot offer you much. But I still want you by my side. Will you be my first ally in my mission to change the empire, Hilda?"

Once again, she asked for Hilda's help. In a sense, she was just repeating what she had said before, but this time around, the circumstances were different.

Hilda was silent for some time.

"Ha ha... ha ha ha..." Her shoulders trembled as she began to laugh. "Aha ha ha! Oh dear... You got me, Princess. Wonderful job. You truly do have Her Majesty's blood within you."

Tears filled Hilda's eyes, but she was smiling, bright and cheerily, as though the Hilda of moments prior were another person entirely.

"I don't much like being compared to Mother," Philine said.

"Oh, pardon me. Indeed, you aren't very much like Her Majesty at all. Her Majesty would have forced me to obey. But *you* didn't do that," said Hilda. "And I think that difference will prove useful."

"How so?"

"It would be contradictory for the person advocating reconciliation to use forceful means." Hilda appeared to value Philine's earnestness. "But please remember, my princess, that idealism is a rough road to walk in the world of politics and diplomacy. There will be times when you must make decisions that go against your beliefs."

"Hilda..."

"But I want you to remain as you are. Leave the dirty work to those beneath you."

"I could never!"

"Your role is to be someone people are willing to rally behind. You must remain faultless and pure, to the extent that others are willing to soil their hands for you. It's as daunting a role as being the ones who take on the grim and the filth, for no matter how backed into a corner you may feel, you can never stain your own hands." Hilda

turned to us, then. “Claire, Rae, thank you for listening and holding your tongues. If either of you had stepped in at any point, I believe I would have left immediately.”

“Because if Lady Philine is to achieve what she seeks, she has to at least be able to convince you by herself, correct?” Claire asked.

“Indeed. I see she has found some reliable allies.” Hilda nodded, satisfied.

“So you’ll help us, Hilda?” Philine asked.

“I will... is what I would like to say, but I can’t without demanding one condition,” Hilda replied.

“Name it,” Philine said.

“If I’m to serve by your side, I need something to placate the Department of Magic Technology—a gift or offering of some sort.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know much about what they research.”

“I’m aware. But I think I know just the thing you can do for them.”

“What is it?” Philine asked.

I never could have predicted what Hilda would suggest next.

“I want you three to solve the mystery left behind by the former chief researcher, Torrid Magic—the Box of the Forbidden.”

With Hilda leading the way, we arrived at one of the Department of Magic Technology’s research facilities. The guards posted at the entrance asked for identification, signifying the importance of the work done within.

Once we entered, I saw researchers dressed like alchemists working with various laboratory instruments I didn’t recognize. The ages and genders of the researchers varied, but I could presume they were all the cream of the crop, gathered in accordance with Dorothea’s meritocratic beliefs.

They glanced briefly our way upon noticing us, but they soon turned back to their work. I wondered if it was really all right for them to be so dismissive of outsiders, but perhaps that was what the guards were for, while theirs was to devote themselves to their research.

"We're here," Hilda said, gesturing us into a room at the back of the facility. The room was small, about the size of a single bedroom, and it was empty save for a pedestal toward the back, with what looked like a small strongbox atop it. "This is the Box of the Forbidden."

The impossibly named object was almost two feet cubed and made out of an unknown material that was neither stone nor metal. Three magic stones were embedded in its front face, which emitted faint black, blue, and red lights, respectively.

"You mentioned that somebody named Torrid Magic left this behind, but would that happen to be the same Torrid as the one now in Bauer?" Claire asked.

"Indeed. Torrid Magic, multi-caster. He was of the empire before he left for the Bauer Kingdom," Hilda answered.

As a reminder in case you forgot, Torrid Magic was our old magic teacher at the Royal Academy. He was the Bauer Kingdom's only multi-caster and currently acted as the Royal Academy's principal. In the past, he had greatly advanced the kingdom's knowledge of magic after they had fallen behind, having grown complacent due to their military strength. He had subsequently been knighted some time before the revolution.

I knew of the existence of the Box of the Forbidden from playing *Revo-Lily*, but I never would have imagined Mr. Torrid had made it—or even that he'd been in the empire at any point. His name had never come up once during any game scenes concerning the box.

"So this box won't open?" Philine asked, examining it up close.

"Correct. The researchers have made many attempts since Torrid left, but they've yet to open it," Hilda said. "The box is immensely durable too. Not even Her Majesty could leave a mark on it with her sword."

No surprise there. If things were the same as in *Revo-Lily*, then this box was made

out of adamantite, a metal said to be forged by the Spirit God itself. It could only be processed by magic and was near-impervious to physical force.

"It's said that a magical secret that Torrid discovered lies within this box," said Hilda. "A secret that cost many lives to uncover."

"So that's why it's called the Box of the Forbidden." Claire made a pained face.

"This box has stumped our researchers for years. The Department of Magic Technology will gladly support you if you can open it, Princess."

"I see..." Philine said.

"But is this all right?" Claire asked astutely. "Should you really be showing us something this important when we might not even be able to open it?"

"I won't lie; it is a gamble," said Hilda. "But I wasn't necessarily counting on you three to figure out how to open it yourselves."

"What do you mean?" Claire asked.

"Torrid is part of the Bauer Kingdom now, as are you and Rae. In fact, you're his coworkers, aren't you?"

"So you want us to ask Mr. Torrid how to open it?" I asked.

"You catch on quick, Rae Taylor."

If you can't open something yourself, contact whoever made it. Logical enough.

"But did he not seal whatever is in this box precisely because he wanted to hide it from the world? I highly doubt he'll tell us," Claire said.

"That is for you to figure out. I've stuck my neck out far enough already. It's your turn now." Hilda grinned wryly.

"Hey, Hilda. Do you think we could take the box ou—" Philine started,

"That would also be forbidden, of course."

“Right. Of course.”

“Please notify me once you figure out how to unseal it,” said Hilda. “After I’ve confirmed it’s open with my own eyes, I’ll arrange for the Department of Magic Technology to join Princess Philine’s faction. That is all I can do for you at this point.”

“I understand. You’ve done enough,” Philine said.

“We’ve come to an agreement, then. I wish you all the best of luck.”

“All that and I’m still stuck, completely reliant on you two...” Philine said.

We were walking home from the research facility. The sun had already begun to set.

Dole was looking after May and Aleah at home. Knowing his lack of homemaking skills, I suspected Aleah was cooking dinner about now. Then again, he might well have just taken them out to eat instead.

The three of us picked up our pace as we discussed what to do next. Philine sounded exhausted, likely from the demanding negotiation with Hilda.

“I see nothing wrong with that. You did your part by negotiating with Hilda—quite wonderfully, might I add—and now it’s time for us to do ours,” Claire commended her.

I had to admit that Philine had been kind of cool back there.

“Yeah,” I said. “I see you in a new light, Lady Philine. You’re not such a wimp after all.”

“W-wimp?” Philine stammered.

“Rae! How could you say such a thing to a princess?!” Claire exclaimed.

“Whoops. Pardon me.”

“No, it’s fine. A wimp is exactly what I was up until now.” Philine laughed sadly. “But I’ll change. I’ll get Hilda’s support, and I’ll somehow persuade the rebel forces, and I’ll change Mother’s mind—all for the sake of the empire’s future.”

"That's the spirit, Lady Philine," Claire said.

"Looks like you've got a *looong* way to go," I said.

"Rae!" Claire exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha..." Philine laughed weakly.

What can I say? I just don't do well with serious situations.

"We'll send a letter to Mr. Torrid tonight," Claire said.

"Thank you," Philine replied. "Let me know if he requests a reward in return, I'll do everything in my power to procure it."

"That'd be pointless," I said. "Mr. Torrid isn't the kind of person to care about rewards. He won't budge, no matter what bait we dangle in front of him."

"*Rae!* What on earth is the matter with you?" Claire demanded. "Why are you trying to shoot Philine down at every turn?!"

I humped. "I'm jealous because you've only been praising Philine!"

"But you didn't do a single thing this time," she said.

I will admit, she was right.

She continued, "If you want me to praise you, you need to achieve something first."

"That's true. Well, my time will come soon enough, I'm sure."

Perhaps it would come very soon.

You see, even without Mr. Torrid's help, I already knew how to open the Box of the Forbidden.

It had been around a week since we'd undertaken the request to open the Box of the Forbidden. We returned from the Academy to find a letter from Mr. Torrid waiting at

home. In immaculate handwriting, the letter said:

"It is with a heavy heart that I implore you to give up on opening that box. The things in it are better off left unknown, for they risk breaking this world's most sacred laws. If you do not wish to live the rest of your life being watched, you must not open that box."

"Unbelievable. He refused?" Sullen, Claire furrowed her brow. She was adorable when she was crestfallen too. "What should we do? Do you think you could open it with what you know?"

"I could, but I'm a little worried by what he said," I answered.

A sacred law of the world, being watched—both quite unsettling phrases, to say the least.

"Do you know what's in the box?" she asked.

"Yes, a magical tool he worked on while he was in the empire, and a notebook compiling his research."

"What does the magical tool do, and what's in the notebook?"

"The magical tool is a ring that amplifies magic. It's unstable, due to being unfinished, but if a person learned to use it, it would greatly increase their magic ability"

"I see..."

As many readers have likely already guessed, the one who learned to use said ring in *Revo-Lily* was the protagonist, Philine.

"As for the notebook, I don't know much. It should contain data on human experimentation conducted in the empire, as well as some writing lamenting said human experimentation. The notebook was only ever referred to as some anonymous researcher's work in *Revo-Lily*. Mr. Torrid's name never came up, but if everything else is the same, then he lost his own daughter to that research."

"How awful..."

I recall the research notes being quite vivid in their description and many of the

experiments being inhumane. I had a hard time believing a gentle person like Mr. Torrid could author those notes.

"But I don't see what he could mean by 'this world's most sacred laws' and 'being watched,'" I continued. "We should ask him again after we open the box."

"He'll probably be furious with us," she said.

I agreed, but this was Mr. Torrid we were talking about. He would probably understand and relent, saying, *Oh, what's done is done*. He'd also likely be willing to elaborate on his unsettling words, as he wasn't the type to leave someone in the dark.

"So how do we open the box, anyway?" Claire asked excitedly. The mystery had intrigued her.

"Do you remember the magical stones on its front?"

"Yes. They were black, blue, and red, so they must be correlated with earth, water, and fire magic, no?"

"That's correct. To open the box, you need to send the corresponding magic attribute into the stones."

"That's it?" Claire said, disappointed.

"Not quite. If it were that simple, it would have been opened long ago. You see, the source of all three attributes has to be the same person."

"Huh? You don't mean to say..."

"I do. Only a multi-caster or quad-caster with earth, water, and fire magic can open the box."

In this world, where dual-casters were scarce enough, multi-casters and quad-casters were few and far between. There might well have been more, but the only ones I knew of were Manaria, Mr. Torrid, and May. In *Revo-Lily*, Manaria helped open the box while on a visit to the Nur Empire, but that would be difficult, given the current state of affairs.

"Are you planning what I think you are?" Claire asked.

"Yes. We have to rely on May."

"Did somebody say my name?"

"Do you have business with May, Mothers?"

Two sharp-eared twins appeared from their room.

"We do, but first we want to ask you some questions, May," I said.

"Okay."

"You've learned to use magic, right?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Which attributes can you use, then?"

"All of them!"

"My little girl's a genius," I cooed. May's aptitude was still growing, but being able to use all four attributes at the age of six was incredible enough. "I see, I see. You must've practiced a lot. Do you think you could use three attributes at once?"

"Hmm... I dunno. I've never tried."

"Makes sense." Using multiple attributes at once was complicated. I was used to casting compound spells like Water Meteor, which I'd used when I fought Manaria, but the idea wouldn't even cross most people's minds.

"Let's try it. Start with two attributes: earth in your right hand and water in your left. Think you can do it?" I asked, demonstrating what I meant. This was just circulating magic, not weaving it into a spell.

May watched, rapt, before trying herself. She focused hard and clenched her hands open and closed. "Like this?"

"Wow, good job!" It should have been a fairly difficult task, but she'd pulled it off like

it was nothing. “Now one more. This time, add fire between your hands.”

“Okay, I’ll try.”

I only understood what lay beyond this point in theoretical terms, but I was willing to work with May every day until she learned.

“Oh, I think I did it,” she said.

“Seriously?” Sure enough, there was fire magic between her hands in addition to the other two attributes.

Turned out we wouldn’t need to wait at all. May wasn’t an especially fast learner like her sister, but she wasn’t a slow learner either, merely average. The only exception seemed to be in regard to magic.



"Perfect. You can stop now, May. Thank you."

"Whew... I'm tired..." May said, hugging Claire.

"No fair! Me too!" Aleah said.

"All right, all right, come here." Claire opened her arms to both.

"You can hug me too, you know?" I said.

Aleah sniffed. "Mother Rae's chest is too hard."

Mommy's not sad to hear that or anything...

"Looks like we can count on May," Claire said.

"Yes. I'll tell Hilda we can open the box then."

"Please do."

"There is one thing I'm worried about, however"

"What?"

"You see..." I went on to tell her about a certain problem that *might* occur.

"We can't bring May if something like that can happen!" she exclaimed.

"But we need May to open the box."

"I won't allow it! We'll have to find another method!"

"I understand how you feel, Miss Claire. Even I'm reluctant to go through with it."

"Then why are you suggesting it?!"

"Please calm down, Miss Claire." I put my hands on her shoulders and soothed her. "I know it's not one hundred percent safe, but I have my plan to counter it. Meanwhile, I want you to focus on protecting May."

"But I don't want you to be in danger either."

"I'll be fine. I have knowledge of what happens from *Revo-Lily*. I know how to deescalate the situation." Truth be told, I had some concerns, but voicing them wouldn't convince Claire. "Please, Miss Claire."

With some hesitation, she acquiesced. "All right."

It was finally time to open the Box of the Forbidden.

"Forgive me, I'm running a little late."

The next day, Claire and I went to the research facility again, and we brought May with us. We met up with Philine but couldn't enter without Hilda, who had just arrived.

"I assumed it would take longer to learn how to open the box and had busied myself with some other business," Hilda said.

"It's quite all right," Claire said.

"Thank you. Who might this child be?" Hilda's sharp gaze fell on May, who nervously gripped the hem of Claire's clothes.

"This is May, one of our daughters," said Claire. "Her help is needed to open the Box of the Forbidden."

"Oh?"

"What do you say, May?" Claire lightly pushed May forward.

May still looked a bit overwhelmed, but she said, "Hello, my name is May. I am six years old. Nice to meet you."

She bowed deeply, for which Claire praised her.

Hilda bent down to May's eye level. "It's nice to meet you, May. My name is Hildegard, but please call me Hilda. That was a wonderful little self-introduction."

She donned her classic swindler smile and gently patted May's head. May's expression was still a bit stiff, but her wariness seemed to ease.

"You mentioned we would need her help to open the box, but what exactly does that entail?" Hilda asked.

"Allow me to explain as we walk," Claire said.

"Very well. Right this way."

With Hilda as our escort, we were allowed to enter the facility. Like last time, the alchemist-like researchers were absorbed in their experiments. They occasionally sent a confused glance May's way as we passed. May was briefly intimidated by her new environment, but curiosity seemed to win out, and she began studying her surroundings with evident excitement.

"Did Torrid tell you how to open the Box of the Forbidden?" Hilda asked as we walked the corridor.

"Unfortunately, he did not," Claire said. "But we know how to open it regardless."

"Eh? But how, if Torrid didn't tell you?" Philine asked, confused.

"That, we cannot answer. Forgive us."

"No matter. How does it open?" Hilda looked doubtful for a brief moment, but she elected to prioritize moving forward.

"It opens when a single person uses three specific attributes of magic on it. That's why we brought May along. She's a quad-caster."

"A quad-caster, you say?" Hilda asked, surprised.

"She is, and I'm very proud of her."

May looked pleased by Claire's praise. Of course, as her mother, I was proud of May as well.

"Hmm... I see. So that's why nobody's been able to open it," Philine said.

"Are there no multi-casters or quad-casters in the empire?" Claire asked.

"As far as I know, there are not. We have quite a few dual-casters, however," Philine said.

It appeared that even a nation as magically advanced as the empire couldn't artificially increase the number of magical attributes a person had. I now saw why Salas had considered his secret, inhumane experiments so important.

"Looks like we were right to bring May," Claire said.

"It would seem so," Hilda said.

"Try your best, May," Philine said.

"Okaaay!"

We finally reached the room with the Box of the Forbidden.

"Please begin," Hilda said.

"Yes, ma'am. Right here, May." I brought May right up to the box. "Do you see those three magical stones?"

May nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"Can you send your earth magic into the black one, your water magic into the blue one, and your fire magic into the red one?"

"I'll try." May put her hands on the box and closed her eyes to concentrate.

"She's already learned how to use three attributes at the same time?" I overheard Philine ask Claire in a barely audible whisper.

"Indeed. She has also already learned to use all four attributes. May's a genius when it comes to magic," Claire bragged.

"That's amazing," Philine said with awe.

"Mother Rae?" May asked.

"Hm? Yes, May?" I replied.

"Is it okay to break the box?"

"Huh?"

"I think the box will break if I pour any more magic into it. Is that okay?"

While shocked to realize May could sense that much, I raised an eyebrow at Hilda.

Hilda nodded. "As long as the contents are safe, you may break the box. Please open it."

I smiled at my daughter. "There you have it, May."

"Okaaay. I'll try to open it without breaking it," she said light-heartedly. "I'll be getting a little serious now."

The room immediately filled with the sensation of powerful magic.

"Wh-what is this?"

"It's May's magic," Claire answered. May was releasing magic so dense, you wouldn't have thought the source was a six-year-old girl. The magic remained unstructured and therefore didn't form a spell, but the sheer quantity of raw power alone was breathtaking. It occurred to me that one day, her magic might well rival the ferocity of Claire's Magic Ray.

"Boom!" As May said this, the three colors of magic light shone even more brightly, enveloping the room in light.

Everyone covered their eyes when suddenly, we heard a heavy mechanical thunk.

"It's open!" May declared.

Once the light faded, I beheld the Box of the Forbidden still intact, its top open. May stood beside it, smiling happily.

"It opened..." Hilda murmured.

"Well done, May," Claire said.

"Well done," I echoed.

Philine stood silently, her mouth agape.

"Please confirm the contents," Claire said.

"R-right." Hilda approached the box. "It's... a ring and some documents?" She picked up the papers and scanned them. "It seems... to be a research report on magic amplification."

The documents seemed to line up with what I knew from *Revo-Lily*. I was a bit curious about the more minute details but doubted Hilda would let me read the report. I would just have to ask Mr. Torrid later.

"Then... this must be the rumored Ring of the Forbidden..." Hilda said as she reached out to the ring with a trembling hand.

"Please wait, Miss Hilda," I said. "It's better if you don't touch that."

"Why is that?"

"You'll understand once you read the research notes in more detail. That ring is an unfinished artefact. It'll overwhelm anyone not fit to wear it."

Hilda retracted her hand. "And how do you know such a thing?"

"Like how I knew the way to open the box, I can't explain that. But I'm certain it's true."

"Then who might be fit to wear it?"

"That's complicated. Not even Mr. Torrid himself knows the conditions required to wear it."

"So nobody can for now?"

"Not quite. There's one person I know for sure who can wear it: Lady Philine."

"Huh? Me?" Philine hadn't expected to hear her name.

At the same time, Hilda scowled. "Unbelievable."

"Hilda?" Philine asked with worry.

"Why's it always like this? The ones who have all the power, money, and status keep gaining more and more, while the ones at their feet are always left to toil for what little they have." Hilda swept up the ring and made to put it on.

I grabbed her arm to stop her. "I thought you were smarter than this."

"Unhand me, Rae Taylor," she demanded.

"I will not. You are not fit to wear this ring," I insisted. "I guarantee it'll overwhelm you."

"Then kill me when that happens. It shouldn't be hard for you." Hilda sneered, her true self rearing its ugly head. And yet, something about her expression looked pained.

"I could never do such a thing," I replied.

"And why's that?"

"I could never kill a comrade. We fought against that demon together, didn't we? Didn't that bring us closer at all?"

While Socrat had been ultimately almost single-handedly vanquished by Dorothea, Hilda had still risked her life to fight with us.

Hilda said nothing.

"Miss Hilda—no, Hilda. You do not need that power. Your wits aren't meant to be wasted like this. Your enemy isn't Lady Philine. You know this." I stared into her eyes as I spoke, as sincere as I could be. Hilda was smart. She wouldn't give in to a momentary outburst of emotion.

"Heh. You think we're comrades just because we fought together once?"

“We’ll fight together many more times from here on out.”

“What, you expect me to play along with your schemes?”

“Hm? Did you forget? You promised to help us in exchange for opening the box.”

“Right. Yes, a promise is a promise...” Hilda’s arm went slack—right before she flicked the ring with her thumb. It traced a high arc through the air, landing in Philine’s hand.

“Huh?” Philine startled, caught off guard.

“Go hand it to the chief researcher for me,” Hilda said.

“B-but, shouldn’t you do that?”

“I need some fresh air. Excuse me.” With that, Hilda left the room.

“Hilda!” Philine attempted to follow her out.

“Give her some time, Lady Philine,” Claire said. “She’ll be okay.”

“But...”

“She needs to sort her feelings out.”

Philine acquiesced. “Okay...”

Discreetly, I let out a great big sigh of relief. In *Revo-Lily*’s version of this exact scenario, Hilda put on the ring and went on a rampage. If Hilda’s affection level for Philine was high enough, Philine would stop her by using the power of love (whatever the heck that was), but that obviously wouldn’t work right now.

Hilda’s current affection level for Philine clearly wasn’t high enough, and even if it were, I wouldn’t want to risk lives over such a vaguely defined power. I’d been prepared to knock Hilda out if necessary, but thankfully, she’d given up of her own accord. I preferred not to resort to violence in front of May.

“Looks like everything worked out, Miss Claire,” I said.

"It came fairly close for a moment there. I'll have to punish you when we get home."

"Your punishments are but a reward to me."

In any case, we could now expect the backing of the Department of Magic Technology. Our plan to change the empire was one step closer to fruition.

We gained the support of the Department of Magic Technology relatively smoothly. Resolving their biggest concern, the Box of the Forbidden, did the trick, but it helped that Hilda kept her promise—and that some people in the department already recognized the dangers of letting the Nur Empire's prosperity rest solely on Dorothea's shoulders.

The Department of Magic Technology was in a difficult situation. While Dorothea's presence prevented them from gaining more political sway, the empire itself likely wouldn't last without her, leaving them with no better option than to maintain the status quo. That was why they were thrilled to back Philine, who offered them the opportunity to lessen the empire's reliance on Dorothea while simultaneously becoming bigger political players through greater influence on foreign policy. Whether things would go entirely as they hoped, however, would depend on Philine's efforts from here on out.

"And there you have it: We have a new ally on the team," said Philine. "Please give Hilda a warm welcome."

"Just what manner of introduction was that, Princess?"

Currently gathered in Philine's room were Philine, Hilda, Claire, and me. Yu and Misha weren't there—for reasons I'll disclose later.

"I'd like to forge an alliance with a new group now," Philine went on.

"Do you have one in mind?" Claire asked.

"I was thinking maybe the one you mentioned a while ago—the rebel forces."

"Ohh, them."

"Yes. I've made up my mind. I'll do anything for the sake of the empire's future." Philine really had become more reliable as of late.

"Please wait a moment," Hilda interrupted. "You want to work with rebels? This is news to me. I've never even heard of such a group before."

"Of course you haven't," Philine said. "They're putting their lives on the line just by existing. If someone close to the government, like you, discovered their existence, they'd be purged."

"I suppose..."

The circumstances here were different from those the Resistance had dealt with in Bauer. The Resistance had been able to operate in the open because the kingdom had been weak and the government had lost the backing of the commoners. Most would-be revolutionary forces recruited in secrecy, amassing numbers so they could one day strike before the government knew what hit them—and because if they didn't, they would be crushed.

"I'm against this alliance," Hilda declared.

"Hilda..." Philine frowned.

"A princess's actions must always be just, and anti-government forces are the precise opposite of that. Joining hands with them will only—"

"I wonder about that," Philine cut in.

"Eh?"

"While the way you say it—'anti-government forces'—sounds bad, Claire tells me they're actually a group of people from religious nations that were destroyed by the empire. Do you think they would consider the empire that took over their countries 'just'?"

"That's..." Hilda hesitated.

"They have their own grievances and their own notions of justice. I have no intention of joining hands with evil to succeed, but I can confidently say that *they* are not evil."

Floored, Hilda remained silent.

"U-um, Hilda? Did I say something wrong?" Philine gingerly asked.

"Not at all. I'm just surprised. You've changed..." Hilda shook her head. "No, maybe you've always been like this, but can now speak your mind."

"Are you praising me?"

"I am. You're correct—the rebel groups have their own sense of justice, and the wars that brought such groups into existence were not wars of justice against evil, but of justice against justice. I'm glad you understand." Hilda smiled.

"W-well, it wouldn't do for me to remain a useless princess forever. That's why I had Claire and Rae train me."

"Indeed? You'll have to fill me in on that later."

"Absolutely." Philine smiled. "Oh, we got off topic a bit there, didn't we? Claire, can I leave the explanation of the rebel forces to you?"

"But of course," Claire said. "There are currently three rebel groups active in the empire. Melica, Dana, and Kiko: all countries with state religions that were destroyed by the empire."

"So there's three of them..." Hilda shuddered.

As an aside, Claire knew this information because I'd drilled all that *Revo-Lily* knowledge into her before we left for the empire. I was so proud of her.

"The three countries' religions were all different sects of the Spiritual Church, so their doctrines and interpretations differ," Claire explained.

It was similar to Buddhism in my old world, in that there were various sects with the same foundation that had at some point in time branched off from each other. The oldest and most influential sect was the one based in the Bauer Church, but many other sects were influential enough to claim a whole country for their own.

I hadn't invited Yu and Misha because this was a bit of a touchy subject, considering their religious ties to the Bauer Cathedral, heart of Bauer's sect. I intended to ask for

their approval later, once things were underway. For now, it was better to keep this discreet.

"The three groups originally acted independently," Claire continued. "But they've lately started pooling their efforts—probably because of the proposed three-nation alliance between Sousse, the Alpes, and Bauer."

"We think they're taking advantage of this opportunity to strike against the empire," I said.

These particular nuggets of information had been gathered by Dole, who had his own information network even here in the empire.

"The group taking the lead seems to be the most influential one, the one from Melica. The congregations from Kiko and Dana seem to have yielded authority to them," Claire said.

Rather than squabble amongst themselves, they'd decided to cooperate to strike back against the empire together. Perhaps they believed the opportunity created by the alliance was their last chance to avenge their homelands.

"So we just need to meet with the Melica people and gain their support?" Philine asked.

"I wish it were that easy, but I doubt it will be," Claire said.

"Why is that?"

"They're concealing their backgrounds and are fully prepared to commit suicide on the spot if they're outed as part of the brewing rebellion."

"Th-they would go that far?" Philine whimpered.

The things that faith compelled people to do were sometimes incomprehensible to those who lacked it. It was hard for me to understand, as someone who was raised in an irreligious country, but some people valued their faith over their own lives. Back when a certain viral disease ran rampant in my old world, quite a few priests risked their lives to give proper funerals to people who couldn't be with their family in their last moments. Those who lived by faith sometimes valued it over their own lives.

"Is it impossible, then?" Hilda asked, looking about ready to give up.

"There's a way, but it'll be difficult," I said.

"What is it?" Hilda pressed.

"We need to find someone from Melica who's in no position to commit suicide. Like... former royalty, for example," I answered, pausing for dramatic effect.

Some readers might already have an idea of who I had in mind. But to Hilda, my words likely sounded like grasping at straws.

"Yes, that might work. But such a person would undoubtedly be careful to remain hidden. How would you find them?" she asked.

"There's no need to find anyone. I already know where they are."

"I've been wondering this since the Box of the Forbidden incident, but exactly where are you getting your information?"

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," I joked. I mean, I couldn't just up and tell her that her reality was a game I'd once played.

"Enough putting on airs, Rae. Who is this person?" Philine asked impatiently.

Hey, I wasn't putting on airs! I glanced at her. "It's someone you know very well, Lady Philine."

"Huh?"

"Frieda."

"Ohh, Frieda... I see." Philine froze up. "Whaaaat?!"

The shocked look on her face told me just exactly what kind of person she'd taken Frieda for.

"You wanted to talk with *moi*?" Frieda placed a tray of five teacups on the table. A

slight hint of confusion crossed her otherwise jovial face.

We were at Frieda's place, a room in a boarding house. My first impression of her room was that it was *too* normal, as though it had been deliberately modeled to resemble the *idea* of an average citizen's room. It lacked any religious designs, altars, or ceremonial objects, which only made it feel more artificial, as the Spiritual Faith was practically universal in this world.

"I sincerely apologize for dropping by unannounced. We are in great need of your assistance," Claire said.

"*Non, non,*" Frieda said. "Beautiful *dames* like yourselves are always welcome! Claire, Rae, Philine, I thank you for coming! And of all people, Lilly as well!"

"Th-thank you for having me," Lilly said.

Indeed—Claire, Philine, and I had been joined by none other than Lilly. You might think bringing someone from another religious sect along could only be a recipe for disaster, and I was inclined to agree, but this was necessary. Why? You'll see soon enough.

"Please, drink some tea. It's from my homeland. I hope you like it," Frieda said, passing out the teacups. The tea had a curious hue and gave off a sugary fragrance. It looked to be black tea, but I knew of no black tea with this particular smell. Perhaps it was flavored?

"Oh, it's delicious," Claire remarked.

"Indeed. Quite a unique flavor," Philine said.

"I-It's delicious," Lilly stammered.

The three of them seemed to enjoy the tea. I cast some detoxifying magic on mine, only then taking a sip.

Mmm. It really was good.

"I'm glad you are enjoying it. Would you like sweets?" Frieda offered.

"That's quite all right. We've already overindulged in your hospitality as is," Claire

said.

"Oh, that's too bad." Frieda seemed genuinely disappointed. I wondered just how much of her was a facade.

"Allow us to cut to the chase. Lady Philine, if you would, please." Claire, having led the conversation to this point, passed the baton to Philine.

"Thank you, Claire." Philine seemed a bit nervous as she stood up and took a deep breath. "Frieda, please lend us your assistance!"

"Of course, my dear Philine! Why, I'd do maybe anything for a *belle fille* like yourself!" Frieda met Philine's earnest request with her usual carefree delight. From how brightly she smiled, you'd never think she had a darker side to her.

And yet—

Philine continued, "We want to use your connections to the citizens of Melica to—"

The sound of metal striking metal rang out.

A beat later, Philine froze, having just then noticed the blade mere inches from her neck, stopped by another blade.

Frieda, the same bright smile still plastered on her face, had swung at Philine—only for her blade to be met by Lilly's.

I had predicted some violence, but the suddenness almost gave me a heart attack.

"F-Frieda, please listen to what I have to say first," Philine said.

"*Non.* I refuse." Frieda twisted her short sword, parrying Lilly's own away and swinging again toward Philine's neck.

Lilly lost her balance for a brief moment, but she instantly stepped forward to recover her balance and blocked the incoming blade with her other short sword. She then shoved Frieda's blade away, creating some distance between Frieda and Philine. That said, we were indoors, and in a fairly narrow room at that. Frieda could easily strike again. Claire and I were already up and ready to fight.

"How did you know?" Frieda asked, bracing her short sword with the same smile still on her face. The disconnect between her actions and expression was a little unnerving... No, it was downright terrifying. "Ah, punaise! Did someone betray me? Tell me now, who was it?!"

Her sword gleamed as she leapt forward. She'd once boasted that she was skilled at close-quarter combat, and it seemed she wasn't lying. I would have been sliced to ribbons in seconds if I were her opponent, and I had a feeling Claire wouldn't have fared much better. It was a good thing we'd brought Lilly, who proved strong enough to stave off Frieda.

"Frieda, please hear us out! We want to help you!" Philine pleaded, causing Frieda to stop. Seeing this, Philine smiled, but that smile soon slipped away.

"Help... me?"

Frieda's smile was gone—no, that wasn't quite right. Her face was still *shaped* into a smile, but the chills running down my back told me it was anything but.

"The *saleté de princesse* of the country that destroyed my homeland says she wants to *help me?* What joke is this?" Frieda's face was filled with rancor that had built up over the years, which now seeped through the mask that was her smile.

"F-Frieda..." Philine said weakly.

"Now that you know my secret, you all must die." Frieda readied her sword once again.

"Are you really going to let anger steal a chance to revive your country?" I asked.

Frieda's face twisted. "Explain."

"Lady Philine aims to change the foreign policy of the empire," I said. "In exchange for your help, she can also pursue the restoration of your country."

Frieda didn't lower her sword, but an ounce of reason returned to her face. "You think those lies will trick *moi*?"

"It's not a lie," Claire said. "Lady Philine intends to change the empire."

"If it's not a lie, then I question her sanity. Dorothea is Philine's mother, no?"

"Please, hear me out, Frieda... no, Friedelinde Ur Melica!" Philine said.

"What?! How do you know that name?!" Frieda stared, shocked. Her true identity was a secret kept from even most of her allies. "Sacrebleu... Who betrayed me?!"

"Nobody did," Philine insisted. "I'm sure you've heard the rumors about the heroes of the revolution? Well, Claire and Rae have the power to foresee the future."

"Impossible..."

"I ask you then, do you believe there are any among your comrades who would betray you?"

Frieda said nothing, her eyes still hesitant.

Philine pressed on. "I plan to challenge Mother for the throne. I'll make her abdicate, and then I'll change the empire itself. No longer will it be a force of torment. I'll make it a gentle place, where no one need cry again."

"You truly think you can do that?" Frieda scoffed. I thought I heard a tinge of self-derision in her voice, but it could just as easily have been regret for how she and her allies had achieved nothing of note, even after all this time.

"Not alone. But I know I can do it with your help, Frieda."

Frieda went silent again.

"Please. I need your help." Philine pleaded from her heart.

But it wasn't enough.

"I can't trust your words alone," Frieda said.

Claire cut in. "I had a feeling you might say something like that. Lilly?"

"Y-yes!" Lilly brought out what looked to be a letter and placed it on the floor.

"What's this?" Frieda asked.

"I-It's a secret message from the Spiritual Church. Pl-please, read it."

Frieda looked uncertain for a moment, but she cautiously approached and picked up the letter. "This is... a cardinal's seal of authenticity!"

The secret message within contained the Church's assurance that Philine's words were genuine. As I touched on before, to swear by God in this world carried significant meaning. A verbal promise between common folk was binding enough, but the word of a cardinal of the Spiritual Church was even more so.

Naturally, the cardinal who had issued this message was Yu. Once it was certain we were going to seek alliance with the rebel forces, we had gone and asked Yu for help. She had been shocked, of course. She and Misha initially objected but eventually relented. They were citizens of Bauer before they were members of the Church.

"Frieda, won't you at least hear us out?" Philine met Frieda's eyes head-on.

Frieda studied Philine's expression for a while, but at length, she let out a deep sigh. "Okay. I will listen some. But it better be worthwhile."

Finally, she lowered her weapon.

"You may have the Church's backing, but that doesn't mean my people and I will help you."

We'd finally made Frieda listen, but we were still a long way from getting her support.

"But why? What more could your people want than the revival of your country?" Philine naively asked.

It was an ignorant question that didn't take Frieda's feelings into account.

Fried still wore her hollow smile. "The empire itself destroyed my country. How arrogant you are, to demand my help in return for undoing what you wrought yourself."

"I apologize. I lacked understanding," Philine said.

Frieda was in the right here. Asking her to treat Philine as her savior was the same as expecting a reward for putting out a fire you'd started.

Frieda continued. "That said, I am willing to turn a blind eye to some things for the sake of my country."

"Really?! Then—"

"Be quiet. I'm not finished speaking." Frieda cut Philine's words short. "I take it you know who I really am if you know my true name?"

"Indeed," Claire answered. "You are Friedelinde Ur Melica, supreme leader and living god of the conquered nation of Melica."

"We also know the former people of Melica are joining hands with those of Kiko and Dana to amass rebel forces," I added.

I mentioned Melica's state religion was a sect of the Spiritual Church before, but I have yet to explain how it differed from the most widespread sect, the one based out of the Bauer Cathedral. In Melica's religion, a single person was worshipped as the incarnation of the Spirit God itself. Currently, that person was Frieda.

"Just how do you know that, I wonder...? But yes, I am Melica's ruler. The citizens will do almost anything I say."

"In that case—" Philine said.

"*But* that only goes for the citizens of Melica," Frieda continued. "And right now, our three-sect alliance has a problem, one that threatens to collapse our coalition."

"Hm?" Her words caught me by surprise. There'd been no mention of the three-sect alliance having such problems in *Revo-Lily*. Sure, there was some friction between the sects but not to the degree where the whole alliance was at risk of falling apart.

"A follower of Melica was murdered, and the culprit hasn't been found. It's likely not a coincidence either, as the one killed was an important person," Frieda said.

"Please, continue," Claire urged.

"Many people of Kiko and Dana are unhappy with Melica's leading role, and they

therefore might have had reason to do it. Of course, they deny this, but I don't believe them."

"What do you want us to do?" I asked, seeing where this was leading.

"Find the killer for me. If it's a misunderstanding, then all is well. The alliance will be reaffirmed, and if I have my way, Kiko and Dana will help you too."

"W-wait! B-but what if the killer is actually from Kiko or Dana? Won't the alliance fall apart?" Lilly asked. She was right—finding the culprit might not yield the results we desired.

"If so?" Frieda shrugged. "You will have to curse your luck and give up."

"That's... not fair," Lilly said.

"But as things are, the alliance will fall apart. That will be a problem for you too, no? What choice do you have?" Despite her usual flippant attitude, it turned out that Frieda had the negotiation skills befitting a ruler of a country. "So what will it be?"

"I understand. We'll search for your killer," Philine answered.

"But, Lady Philine..." Claire said.

"Regardless of whether it ends in earning their support, a murder in the empire is something I cannot ignore."

Spoken like a true royal. Even if Philine was working toward a grander cause, she wouldn't ignore the problems before her. I was impressed by her nobility.

Th-that doesn't count as cheating. Okay?!

"Oh? You pity even those who oppose the empire?" Frieda asked.

"It's the empire's own actions that made them oppose us. Besides, as a member of the imperial family, I have a duty to secure the well-being of every citizen, even those who plot against us."

Frieda made a face at Philine's words, caught between respect and doubt.

"Do you have any leads we can use?" I asked Frieda. This likely wouldn't be a cut-and-dried case, for if it were, Frieda and her people would have solved it themselves. I at least wanted a clue to go off of.

"The victim's name is Arnaud Jannsen, an ordinary citizen of the empire," said Frieda.
"He was once a merchant of Melica."

Age: 21. Occupation: Worked as a competent merchant in the Nur Empire while secretly procuring supplies for rebel forces. Cause of death: Knife wound.

"We have narrowed it down to three suspects. We haven't questioned them directly yet, but they are the only ones with motive," Frieda explained. She reached into her desk and pulled out a paper, likely an investigation report. "The first suspect is Achim Baltzer, a prominent merchant in the capital."

Age: 60. Boss of the victim, Arnaud. A rumor suggests he killed Arnaud for being too successful, threatening to inherit the trading firm over Achim's only son.

"The second suspect is Ilsa Gröllmann, an administrative official," Frieda said.

Age: 25. Employed at a municipal office in the capital. Has had prior work complications with Arnaud.

"The third suspect is someone you all know well. Anna Gesner, a student of the Imperial Academy," Frieda said.

"Anna's a suspect?!" Philine exclaimed.

Anna was one of Philine's few friends, as well as the one who could report the affection levels of Philine's love interests to us. Apparently, she'd been in a relationship with Arnaud and had been seen quarrelling with him after they apparently split up.

"That's all the information I can provide," Frieda said. "The rest is up to you."

"Understood," Claire said.

"Any other questions?" Frieda asked.

There was, in fact, something I wanted to ask—something that had been bugging me

since the time I played *Revo-Lily*.

"Frieda, you're a living god. In other words, the most important figure in Melica's religion, correct?"

"*Oui.*"

"Is it really acceptable for such an important person to live alone in a place like this? No security or anything?" I always wondered why there weren't at least one or two security personnel living here under the guise of roommates. Of course, it was that same lack of security that had allowed us to even get to this point.

"Oh, that. Well, you know... I am very strong," she answered.

"You are indeed superb at close-quarter combat, but is it not a bit careless?" Claire asked.

"I do not wish to say. Leave it at that." Frieda seemed uneasy and even less open to discussion than when she had been swinging her sword around earlier. I was curious as to why, but I doubted she would talk.

"Good luck on your investigation. *Au revoir.*"

With a lingering sense of unfinished business, we left Frieda's place.

"You needed something? Please make it quick. I may not look like it, but I'm quite a busy man."

So we were greeted by Achim Baltzer, our first suspect.

We had been invited into the drawing room of Baltzer Trading. Finely made chairs accompanied a finely made table, paintings decorated the walls, and vases stood tall in the corners. Everything looked antique. The firm was clearly doing well.

Achim was an elderly man with a proud beard. According to Frieda, he was sixty, but he definitely seemed younger.

"We're sorry to trouble you during your busy day," said Claire. "We wanted to ask you

about Arnaud.”

“Arnaud? What about him?”

“He’s dead,” Philine said.

“Wh-what? Truly, Princess?” Achime seemed to be in disbelief. “That can’t be... Since when?”

“A mere three days ago,” Claire said. “Were you not made aware? I was under the impression he worked for you.”

“Arnaud was supposed to be out of the capital, purchasing more product. He was to return next week. I can’t believe he’s gone...”

“Do you have any idea why someone might want to kill him?” Claire asked.

“Somebody *killed* him? Unbelievable... I knew the man well. While he vexed me occasionally, he was by far my best employee. But he never let that get to his head, and he always worked well with others. I can’t think of a reason anyone would want to kill him.”

“I heard you two had your disagreements regarding inheriting the business. Care to explain?” I asked.

This difficult question earned a frown from him.

“For a brief while, yes. But he made clear he had no interest in taking over the business. My son Bruno will be assuming control instead. The preparations are already complete.” Achim looked uncomfortable, but he answered calmly.

“Y-you look a bit young for retirement, sir,” Lilly said.

“You flatter me. I am already an old man. My memory’s been spotty as of late, a disastrous thing for a merchant,” he answered calmly yet again. It seemed he wanted to pass things to the next generation while he was still well enough to do so competently.

“May I ask what you were doing at the time of his death?” I asked.

"Wha—do you suspect me?!" he asked, now not so calm. A normal reaction, I supposed. Nobody enjoyed being under suspicion of murder.

"We simply wish to clear your good name, sir. Please," Claire said.

"Very well. When was he killed?" Achim asked.

"Oh? Have you already forgotten? We said he was killed three days ago," I purposefully teased.

He sneered. "And I told you, I'm a busy man. I meet a number of people and visit many places every day. Do you want me to recount everything I did three days ago?"

Clocks hadn't been invented in this world yet, so we could only tell time roughly by the hour instead of minutes. Hopefully, that would be enough.

"Arnaud was killed three days ago, sometime in the early morning between five and six o'clock," Claire answered.

"At that time, I was out of the capital for a meeting," Achim said. "A merchant I've been in contact with for a while. I needed their assistance for something concerning the succession." As though rewinding his memory, he looked to the upper-right.

"Might we have a name?" I asked.

"Skeptical girl, aren't you? His name was Kato. That should be enough, right? Please leave."

With that, we left the firm behind.

"Yes, there were some slight complications between us."

Our second suspect, Ilsa Gröllmann, readily admitted to having had trouble with Arnaud.

We were in the lounge of one of the empire's municipal offices. The furnishings were modest, with nothing that really stood out save for a thoughtfully placed vase of flowers. The four of us sat on a sofa across from Ilsa, who was tall and slender, with

her long hair bundled up in a professional style.

"What was this complication?" Claire asked.

"Nothing, really," Ilsa said. "I thought there was an error on his tax payment form and inquired about it. It turned out to be a misunderstanding on my part, and I apologized, but he never forgave me for it. Such things are common in this line of work, I suppose." She sighed deeply.

"Was it really a misunderstanding?" I asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"Perhaps he was committing tax evasion and you overlooked it for a bribe?"

"Absolutely not. We municipal workers have been entrusted with this work by Her Majesty Dorothea herself. We would never commit such injustices."

I should mention that asking these tough questions was my role as the bad cop. You see, police did this thing in interrogations called "good cop/bad cop," where one officer sympathized with the suspect while the other antagonized them. Or at least, they did in the mystery novels I'd read.

"Were you aware Arnaud was murdered?" Claire asked.

"Yes. I heard from a coworker. It's truly regrettable." Contrary to Ilsa's words, I saw a tinge of relief on her face.

"Can you think of a reason why anyone would want to kill him?" Philine was the next to ask.

Ilsa thought for a moment. "As big a firm as Baltzer Trading is, I'm sure he had his fair share of enemies. Maybe one of them did something? I really don't know." The vagueness of the answer spoke to her indifference.

"What were you doing at his time of death, three days ago, between five and six in the morning?" Claire asked.

"I would have been asleep then. Unfortunately, I have no way to prove it. But I swear, I am not the culprit," Ilsa asserted, her face expressionless.

"A-Arnaud's... dead?"

Anna covered her mouth in shock as we broke the news. We were at her home, the inside of which was decorated with small, cutesy trinkets—exactly what one would expect from a young girl's place. We had moved into the living room to sit down and talk.

She began to cry, and Claire, sitting next to her, gently rubbed her back.

"Were you and Arnaud in a relationship?" Claire asked after Anna had calmed down a bit.

"Yes. We were childhood friends. There was an age gap between us, but we were raised like siblings... I had loved him for the longest time, so I confessed to him, and we started seeing each other. But lately, he'd been acting a bit strange..."

"How so?" Philine pressed.

"He didn't make time for me anymore. He said it was because he was having some problems at work, but... I started thinking that maybe he had fallen in love with someone else. Arnaud said it was a misunderstanding, that he still wanted to be with me, but I was confused and... suggested we take a break... If I'd known this would've happened, I wouldn't have bottled everything up inside! There's still so much I want to say to him, to do with him, I, I..."

Anna began crying again, and Claire hugged her to comfort her.

"Anna, have you any idea why someone might want to kill him?" I asked.

"No... that's impossible. Arnaud was so kind. Everyone loved him. Why would anybody ever want to kill him...?" she said with teary eyes.

"I'm only asking because it's part of our procedure, but can you tell me what you were doing three days ago between five and six in the morning?" I asked.

"You need an alibi, right? I would've been running around the neighborhood then. I run daily, you see. Somebody might have seen me, but I'm not sure. I'm sorry I can't be of more help," she said weakly. "Please find Arnaud's killer."

She saw us off with grief-stricken eyes.

With that, we'd met with each of the suspects. But which of them was the culprit?

Two days after our initial visits to the suspects, a figure slipped out of the imperial capital to go visit a particular merchant in the dead of night. Their eyes darted about, paranoid.

"How can this be?" The figure seemed to mumble something fearfully.

A voice reached his ears.

"Why... Mr. Achim..."

"N-no, no, that can't be..." The figure, Achim Baltzer, heard a voice no longer of this world. "A-Arnaud, you should be dead!"

"Yes... you killed me."

"I-I had no choice! If I didn't, my son would have been... Agh!" Achim covered his ears to escape the voice, shaking his head in denial. But the voice wouldn't stop.

"Why did you kill me... after all I did for Baltzer Trading...?"

"I did what I had to! I—I..."

"Murderer... Murderer..."

"No... Please, no more...!"

Achim fled from the voice, leaving the capital farther behind. He ran straight toward a building a short distance away, but before he could reach it—

"Would you care to explain yourself?" A sharp voice pierced the darkness, belonging to none other than my beloved Claire.

The voice Achim had been hearing had been projected via wind magic by Misha, also present.

"Wh-why are you here?" he stammered.

"We're here to arrest you for the murder of Arnaud Jannsen," Philine said.

"Princess Philine..." Achim muttered. His eyes went wide as he realized what had just transpired.

"Your words earlier will be taken as a confession," she continued. "Do you plead guilty?"

In the democratic countries of my world, making an arrest based on a confession alone would have been absurd, but this wasn't my world. Here, a confession was as damning as evidence.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked.

"Your own words gave you away," I said. "You claimed to be a busy merchant with a tight schedule."

"Yes, and what's wrong with that?" he asked, confused.

"When we asked you for your alibi, you answered immediately, without needing to check."

"That's all? But wouldn't it be more natural to believe I had a strong memory? I am a merchant, after all."

"You said yourself that your memory had been failing you of late," I said. "I also have a hard time believing that you wouldn't double-check the accuracy of your alibi in a murder investigation, especially as a merchant."

Claire followed up. "The man you claimed to meet, Kato, also confessed. You bribed him into lying."

"I see. You two weren't called the heroes of the revolution for nothing, then. Perhaps I can entrust this matter to you..." he said cryptically.

"What do you mean?" Philine asked.

"I—"

"Oh? Mr. Achim?" Someone emerged from within the building. It was Kato, the man who had confessed to being bribed to fake Achim's alibi. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"Kato! Save me!" Achim—who had been calm up to this point—did an about-face and shamelessly clung to Kato, begging for help.

Huh? Does he still think he can get out of this mess?

"I see what's going on. Do not touch me, lowly human."

"Ah! Be careful, everyone!" Claire braced for a fight upon noticing the change in Kato's tone.

At her warning, we did the same.

"I see my plans have failed, then."

Kato's form began to shift before our eyes. His skin melted into a smooth, liquid, metallic substance, a single large eye formed on his face, and bat wings sprouted from his back. There was no doubt about it. He was a—

"Demon!" I called.

"Call me Kato, human."

What was going on? Was a demon involved in this murder case?

"Foul humans, I shall kill you where you stand. Achim! How long do you intend to cling to me, you failure?!" Kato sneered at Achim as though he were filth, raising an arm that had at some point morphed into a longsword.

I hurriedly prepared to fire an ice arrow, even knowing I wouldn't make it in time.

That was when Achim said: "All according to plan."

"What?"

"Kato, you're the mastermind behind this all!" As soon as those words left Achim's mouth, his body began to burn.

“Graah! You fool!” Kato exclaimed.

“Heroes of the revolution! I left a letter in my desk! The rest is up to you!” Achim yelled as he clung to Kato, burning all the while.

It was clearly no ordinary flame, as his body was entirely consumed in moments. We had no clue what was going on, but that didn’t matter. There was only one thing to do.

“Miss Claire, let’s take this guy down!” I yelled.

“Yes! Lilly, take the front. Misha, Rae, get behind! I’ll take the middle!”

“Y-yes!”

“On it.”

As we moved into battle formation, Kato stood back up. “Lowly humans... Don’t underestimate me!”

His wings had been left in tatters by Achim’s fire. I didn’t understand why Achim had done it, but thanks to him, Kato couldn’t flee.

“Injuries of this level won’t stop me from killing all of you!” Kato’s arm stretched out. The tip tapered to a sharp point like a lance, aimed at Claire and Lilly.

“N-no you don’t!” Lilly dodged and parried the arm-lance before closing the distance to him with blinding speed. Misha must have used her wind magic on her at some point.

“Oh, but I think I do, Saint!” Kato’s outstretched arm went limp as Lilly passed it, then turned to attack her from behind.

“A-ah!”

“Not on my watch!” Claire let loose a flame spear, striking and melting Kato’s arm.

“Gaaah?!”

“Now, Lilly!”

“R-right!” Lilly moved just before him and swung down her right short sword.

“As if!” Kato’s face twisted with delight as a lance-like shape erupted from his chest, aiming for Lilly. “What?!”

But the lance only hit air, as I had lifted him a full head off the ground with my spell, Uplift. “It’s over.”

In the blink of an eye, Lilly was behind him with her short sword flashing crossways. An instant later, Kato was sliced into four pieces, his heart at the center of the X.

“Foolish humans... Why do you not accept your fated ruin?” he spat, reduced to a head on the ground.

“What kind of question is that?” I asked, still guarded. “I don’t know, maybe I’m just not suicidal?”

“Rae Taylor... One day, you shall know.”

“Know what, pray tell?”

“What it means to desire an end.” Leaving behind those foreboding words, he withered to dust.

What did that mean? I shook my head. “Any injuries, Miss Claire, Miss Lilly?”

“None, Rae.”

“N-none here too.”

We’d killed a demon without a single injury this time around. It seemed that regular demons were nothing compared to the Three Great Archdemons.

“It seems I wasn’t needed much in the end,” Misha remarked.

“That’s not true. If you hadn’t been here, we wouldn’t have been able to back Achim into a corner in the first place,” I said.

“About Achim... He said something strange, didn’t he?” Claire asked.

"Y-yeah, something about leaving the rest to us...?" Lilly asked.

We all looked at each other, puzzled.

"Anyway, let's head back to the capital for now," I said.

Mysteries remained, but all we could do for now was return.

There was a letter in Achim's desk, as he had claimed there would be. In it was an explanation for everything that had transpired, along with a confession.

As I likely needn't remind you, demons were powerful beings. If they ever attacked cities in full force, there wouldn't be much humans could do to fight back. Yet human cities endured—even the empire's, with their close proximity to demon territory. This was all thanks to the barriers.

"Th-the Church provides powerful barriers to all major cities. No demons can pass through them, no matter how strong they are."

According to Lilly's explanation, the barriers were formed by concealed magical tools installed around cities. Demons had no hope of getting in without finding the magical tools and breaking them. Socrat's attempted assassination of the pope was an exception, as teleportation magic cast from within the barrier had been used to bring him in.

In other words, we were safe as long as we stayed within Ruhm. No wonder Dorothea could afford to be so careless.

"We're merchants, you see," Achim wrote. *"We can't just hole up within the city walls at all times but must brave the dangers outside to venture out."*

On one such occasion, Achim's son was taken hostage by a demon.

"Kato took my son and threatened me into poisoning the Bauer dorm's food."

This was news to me, but apparently the Bauer dorm's food was provided by Baltzer Trading. Wary of being poisoned by the empire, we'd been casting detoxification magic on everything we ate, but Achim had found a way around that by gradually

mixing nutmeg into our food—a spice that causes organ failure when consumed in large quantities. Being an ordinary spice, nutmeg wasn't affected by detoxification magic. This method served the dual purpose of tricking Kato.

"It will take time, but eventually, the toxins will build up and cause their organs to stop."

Those were the words he used to buy time from Kato. During that bought time, we'd arrived to interrogate him. As it turned out, his slip of the tongue had been intentional. He'd meant to lead us to Kato without breaking the curse placed on him.

"Do not cross me, Achim. If you so much as speak a word of who I am or strike against me, your body will be engulfed in flames."

Despite being bound with this geas, Achim hadn't feared death. He'd simply wanted to save his son. Though he had suspected, deep down, that his son was already dead, he had clung to hope, continuing to poison the dorm. Arnaud had caught him in the act and, after a quarrel, had been murdered by Achim.

"I've... killed the man who was like a second son to me."

Despite the conflict over who would inherit the business, Achim had thought of Arnaud like his own son. He deeply regretted his death.

"That demon said he took my son, but he never said a word about keeping him alive, nor of returning him. In hindsight, it's so obvious... My dear sons, my beloved wife, forgive me. I will be joining you soon..."

Achim had been unwilling to remain dancing in the palm of the demon's hand. He had the resolve and fury to strike back.

"...but not without bringing him with me."

And the rest was history. Achim had used his life to weaken Kato and left the rest to us. His crime was unforgivable, but I could sympathize somewhat, considering the situation. In the aftermath, it came to light that his son had indeed already been killed. Yet another victim of the demons.

We informed the newspapers that the demon had been looking for ways to harm the capital without passing the barrier. Of course, we said nothing about the rebel forces.

In the end, we'd proved the murder had nothing to do with the internal tensions between the rebel forces. Our investigation was at an end.

"Well done. We will support you as promised," Frieda said.

Afterward, Frieda arranged for us to meet with the higher-ups of the Melica, Dana, and Kiko sects. Philine debated them with dignity, having clearly honed her arguments, and she even promised that the late Arnaud would receive proper funereal rites. He was apparently being considered for canonization by the sects.

With this, Philine had succeeded in gaining the support of both the Department of Magic Technology and the rebel forces.

"Welcome, Rae Taylor, Claire François."

Days after the incident, Dorothea summoned Claire, Philine, and me. This was the first time this particular lineup had been called before her. Why the three of us, I wondered?

"I-I'm here too, Mother!" Philine asserted her presence.

"Mm-hmm, indeed. Welcome, Philine." Dorothea addressed her daughter flatly. This seemed to be enough for Philine, who smiled. "I shall give you a reward for stopping the demon. Name it."

As always, Dorothea spoke haughtily, her elbow resting on her throne and propping up her chin. Beside her was Josef, a gloomy look on his face. He was always pained to see Dorothea's slovenly mannerisms—or not? I got the impression that something else was on his mind.

"I have nothing in particular to request," Claire answered. "I would appreciate it if you continued training Aleah in the art of the sword, however."

"Ah, yes, Aleah. That girl has talent. She might even be the one to inherit my blades. There is meaning in teaching her; I would continue even if you didn't ask. I would go so far as to say her training has become a pastime."

I didn't quite like her calling it a "pastime," but I was glad to hear her praise Aleah.

Claire seemed pleased too, as she smiled.

"I don't need anything either" I answered. "Let's just say you owe me one."

"The prospect of owing you is an intimidating one, Rae Taylor. But very well... I'll overlook what you've done this time."

Hm? What does she mean by that?

"Philine," Dorothea said.

"Yes, Mother. I humbly request that you—"

"No. I have no reward for you."

"Huh?"

Philine had meant to take this opportunity to request that her mother change the Empire's foreign policy. But it wasn't meant to be.

"Philine Nur," Dorothea's face remained expressionless as she spoke her daughter's name, her dignified voice echoing throughout the audience chamber. "You are hereby exiled for high treason."

CHAPTER 14

MY DEAR STUDENT

“E-EXILED...?” Philine’s voice trembled in disbelief.

“Please wait, Your Majesty! For what—”

“Silence, Claire François. It is not your place to speak in matters of the empire.”

“B-but...” Claire refused to back down.

Dorothea wore a sadistic smile. “Or what? Would your plans go awry if Philine were to disappear?”

She knew. She knew we were turning Philine against her.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice? Even if she’s useless, Philine’s still a princess. She is always under protection, her every action monitored.”

We’d been careless. Philine hadn’t realized she was being watched. I’d thought we were careful to not be seen, but it seemed Dorothea was just leagues ahead of us.

“I could overlook the connections you made with my researchers. I even wanted to commend you for taking action on your own, for once.” Dorothea glared at Philine.
“But I can’t overlook

conspiring with rebel forces. They dare to rebel against me, and by association, so have you.”

She made a beckoning gesture, and the audience hall doors opened to admit armed imperial guards. I rose to my feet, taking a position in front of Claire, and prepared for a fight.

“At ease, Rae Taylor,” Dorothea said. “I’ll excuse your actions on account of how you handled the demon incident, as well as my prior debt to you. But don’t think I’ll show such kindness twice.”

The guards restrained Philine as Dorothea spoke. Philine didn't attempt to resist. But just when I thought she had resigned herself, she raised her voice.

"Mother! Please, hear me out! At this rate, the empire will fall!" A fierce light shone in Philine's eyes. She hadn't given up yet.

"Oh? Interesting. Let's hear it, then." Dorothea grinned as though expecting a show.

"The empire has made far too many enemies! Soon, there will be too many of us to resist!"

"If our foes stand in our way, we trample them. That's what we've always done, and that's what we will continue to do." Dorothea's words reminded me of what Hilda had once said.

"That might work so long as you're alive, but what happens when you're gone?! The empire has grown dependent on your presence! That can't last!"

"I'm not about to die just yet, and what happens after my death is a concern for those that come after me."

"That's absurd!"

How irresponsible. I didn't expect those in power to always be paragons of virtue, but it wasn't unreasonable to expect them to at least strive toward a better future for their country. Philine was right—the empire's future seemed dark. How could Dorothea openly admit she only cared what happened during her rule?

"Mother, just what do you think it means to wear the crown?!" Philine cried.

"The crown? It means nothing to me. I simply do as I like. If you want to change my mind, do so through force." Dorothea just kept spouting nonsense. "You have your own sense of justice. That much is a given. But you're naive to think politics is about justice opposing evil. Politics is always a conflict of justice against justice. If you want to enforce your vision of justice, you need the power to back it up."

"Mother..."

"If you wish to change something, you must do it yourself. Those without power have no voice."

Nonsense. Everything she said was illogical nonsense... and yet, there was truth within it. No matter how lofty your ideals, they meant nothing if you didn't have the power to put them into practice. No wonder they called politics a struggle for power. Even so—

“Mother... Acquiring power in itself is adding zeros.”

“What are you saying?”

Philine wouldn't bend. In the face of Dorothea's overwhelming authority, she continued, unfaltering. “No matter how many zeros you add up together, their value remains null. Only when you put something before those zeros, like justice, does the number have value. But if that justice were twisted, the number would only equate to the degree of violence you'd incite.”

What Philine was trying to say was this: No matter how many zeros you had, they would always equal zero. But the moment you put an integer in front of them, the zeros transformed into a mighty number. But if that integer was something *negative*, then the more power—in other words, the more zeros—you had, the more terrible the end result.

“If your notion of justice is flawed, all the power in the world can't right it. I accept that power is important, Mother, but being just is even more so. Your way of thinking is wrong.” Philine, still restrained by the guards, declared this with resolve. The once weak-willed girl now debated her mother on an equal footing.

“You would say *I'm wrong?*” Dorothea asked.

“Yes.”

“I'm impressed. You're the first to speak out against me like this. I'm sure you know what this means?”

“I do.”

Philine's face was as tranquil as a martyr's.

No. This isn't the way, Philine.

She was betting her life to try to appeal to her mother, but that wasn't going to work

for her.

If one wanted to preach their justice, their ideals, they had to live long enough to see them through. Dying achieved nothing. Claire had thought to do the same during the revolution, but there was *nothing* noble about dying for your ideals. I wasn't about to let her go like this.

But just as I was about to beg Dorothea to spare Philine, a voice interrupted.

"Please wait, Your Majesty."

It was Josef.

"Stay out of this, old man," Dorothea said.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that. Lady Philine is an extraordinarily brilliant individual. I believe she is more suited to rule than your other children, who don't have the heart to speak against you." He spoke calmly, as though trying to pacify her.

"But she has defied me."

"Lady Philine is still young. Children make errors. Once she sees more of the world and learns the reality of governance, she'll come to understand the truth in Your Majesty's words."

"I—" Philine started.

"Lady Philine," Josef cut her short. "I implore you, hold your tongue."

Faced with his earnest request, Philine reluctantly stayed silent. Studying him closely, I saw sweat lining his brow. It seemed to me that he had foreseen where this conversation would lead if he stepped in—not exile but execution. He didn't want to lose Philine, who was perhaps the empire's sole chance for reform.

"Humph... So you'll go that far, old man?" Dorothea snorted. "Very well. Philine's sentence will remain as it was. Exile."

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

"Take her away."

Philine looked like she still had something to say but kept quiet, obediently allowing herself to be removed from the premises.

"Rae Taylor, Claire François. I originally intended to exile you two as well, but I will dismiss your transgressions on account of my debt to you. However, there will be no such clemency in the future."

With those words, Dorothea stood. Claire and I could do nothing but bow as she left.

"It's over."

A few days had passed since Philine had been sentenced to exile, and Claire, Hilda, Josef, and I had come to see her off before she left the country. Frieda wasn't with us, as Dorothea had caught wind of the rebel forces and thereby sent most of them into hiding.

We were seeing her off from Ruhm's eastern gate. I was reminded of the time we said our goodbyes to Lene after she was banished from Bauer, but the imperial gate was far grander in terms of size, security, and traffic. The number of inspections was higher as well. I couldn't help but think Philine, the truth of her departure a secret, looked small and insignificant in the long line of others awaiting their inspections.

"I'm so sorry. After all the trouble everyone went through to help me, I couldn't achieve a single thing..." Philine looked deeply apologetic.

Officially speaking, she was visiting a neighboring country. But the period of her visit was indefinite, meaning she was effectively banished. She had been given five attendants who were allowed to carry the absolute minimum of luggage—far from a leisurely vacation an imperial princess might take.

"We're the sorry ones—sorry we couldn't help more," said Claire. "We desperately underestimated Her Majesty Dorothea."

Philine demurred, dismissing Claire's words of comfort. "No, it's all my fault. I should've been more aware of my security detail."

"Hey, things might not have worked out, but at least you avoided the death penalty," I said. "It looked like you were going to be executed on the spot for a moment back

there."

My comrades might have disagreed, but I truly believed that as long as you were alive, there were always things that could be done.

"I may have survived, but what can I do now that I've been exiled?"

"Oh, Lady Philine..."

All this doom and gloom... you'd think they were at a wake.

"You can do whatever you want now," I said. "Being exiled just means you're no longer tied down by your country. The world's your oyster."

"Ha ha. You always were the optimistic one, Rae." Philine laughed.

"No, she's simply too simple-minded to take things seriously," Claire said.

"That's not true," I protested. "I understand the sadness you might feel at times like these, but you'll always eventually need to move forward. Once you've hit rock bottom, you can only go up."

So I said, but it really depended on the person.

"That being said," said Claire. "I must confess I'm terribly disappointed in Her Majesty."

"With Mother?"

"Yes." Claire frowned. "I knew she was a tyrant, but I thought it was for her country's sake. I may not agree with her methods, but she is undeniably talented. I wanted to believe her rule was worthy, in its own way."

"Ah, I get it," I said. "You don't like that she said she doesn't care what happens after she's dead."

"Yes. No ruler should ever say such a thing," Claire declared with a huff.

"Aha ha... I'm sorry about my mother." Philine apologized weakly.

"Remember when we discussed our impressions of Her Majesty after our first audience with her?" Claire asked. "Your assessment of her was the most accurate, Rae. She's a child. A child with too much power."

I think Claire felt betrayed. She might not have liked Dorothea personally, but she had at least respected her as a ruler. But that respect had been betrayed, which infuriated Claire.

"You misunderstand Her Majesty." A calm voice gently rebuked us. It was Josef. "Her Majesty is not as quick-tempered as she appears. Her declaration that what comes after her death falls to others to decide, it... does invite misunderstanding, but she has given the matter proper thought."

"She has?" Philine asked curiously. Even after being exiled by her, she held a deep fascination and respect for her mother.

"Her Majesty is aware the empire is too dependent on her presence, as you all stated," Josef said.

"But then why would she say such an awful thing?" Philine asked.

"Her Majesty once let slip that she regretted undertaking so much herself, and she wished that those who came after her passing would work together to govern the empire... Her Majesty, you see, isn't very good at explaining herself." Josef muttered the last words sadly. "You misunderstand how she feels about you as well, Lady Philine."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes. Her Majesty has always wished for your well-being."

"But... no, that can't be true."

"It is. Her Majesty didn't wish for you to be involved in political struggles, and so she arranged for you to be moved to another country."

Philine wore a complicated expression. She couldn't so easily believe his words, yet she wanted to.

"Lady Philine," Josef continued. "Your actions were not wrong. I believe it's time for

the empire to reconcile with other countries as well. But please understand that Her Majesty does not uphold the current policy by choice."

"Then why?"

"That, I do not know. I only know Her Majesty has suffered for a horribly long time and that she was never the type to spill blood needlessly."

It was hard to believe his words. It was an undeniable fact that Dorothea had put the empire on a militaristic path and invaded countless nations. Even if she had her reasons, that was small comfort to those who'd suffered at her hand.

"We must be off soon, Lady Philine," the coachman called.

It was time.

Philine looked crestfallen as she boarded. We didn't even have time to exchange words of parting before the coach moved forward.

Suddenly, Philine stuck her head out of the coach window. "Claire, Rae, Hilda, Josef. I've made up my mind!"

"Lady Philine?!" we exclaimed in unison.

"I'm going to believe in Mother! And because I believe in her, I won't give up on the empire's future! I swear, I'll be back one day!" A powerful conviction burned in her eyes. The shy, powerless girl she'd been when we first met was gone. The next time we met, she would surely have grown even more.

The coach gradually faded from view. We stood there and watched as it left.

"She's really gone," Claire said.

"Indeed..." Hilda said.

"Are you okay leaving things like this, Hilda?" I asked. "You didn't say a word to her in the end."

"Yes, well... I didn't have anything in particular to say. Actually, I think she ignored me entirely throughout."

"Ah. Must be revenge for the ball." I bet Philine had things she wanted to say to Hilda, though. "It looks like our plan to change the empire is back to square one, Miss Claire."

"Indeed, Rae."

"Ahem... I ask that you not discuss such things in my presence." Josef looked visibly uncomfortable.

"Oh? Don't you also oppose the current empire?" I asked.

"I do, but first and foremost, I support Her Majesty Dorothea."

"Ohh, I see."

Such a worldly-wise man, I thought, impressed.

That was when a young man in a uniform approached us.

"So this is where you were, Sir Josef."

"Is something the matter?"

"A letter has arrived from Sousse. Her Majesty has already seen it, but you should as well."

"Hm?" Josef took the letter and swiftly looked over it. His expression stiffened.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Rae, stop," Claire said. "It's a correspondence between two nations; he isn't going to tell us what it says."

"Actually, I can, as I'm sure the Bauer party has already received a similar letter."

Josef passed us the letter, which read:

I request a summit between Sousse, the Alpes, Bauer, and Nur.

“Oh, Rae, Claire. Welcome home,” Dole welcomed us as we returned to the Bauer dorm, which seemed more hectic than usual, with people and objects racing back and forth.

“I take it the dorm has already been informed, then,” Claire said.

“You mean that Sousse proposed a summit? Yes.”

Dole suggested we talk inside, so we followed him to our lodging. Once there, May and Aleah immediately rushed to Claire.

“Welcome home, Mama Claire!”

“Welcome home, Mother Claire!”

“Thank you, dears. I’m home.” Claire smiled happily and kissed their foreheads.

“Um, I’m here too, you know?”

“Welcome home, Mama Rae.”

“Welcome home.”

“So cold.” I sighed. *It’s fine... I’m not sad, not one bit.*

“The two of us have to talk with Father. Can you girls go play in your room?” Claire asked.

“Is it something bad?” May asked.

“I wish to talk with Grandfather as well!” Aleah said.

Hmm? Is Master Dole more popular with the kids than me? I’m not jealous... No, definitely not.

“I’m sorry, May, Aleah,” Dole said. “But we need to talk about grown-up things. I’ll

come play with you later, so please let it slide this once.”

“Okaaay, but you need to pinky promise!” May said.

“Pinky promise, Grandfather!” Aleah said.

May and Aleah made pinky promises with Dole before going to their room. It was a minor detail but still odd to see someone make a pinky promise in this medieval Europe-based world. Just another strange, out-of-place touch of Japanese culture rearing its head.

“Will the living room do, Father? Rae, can you serve some tea?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you.”

I started to prepare some black tea as they sat at the table.

“Is it true Sousse is proposing a summit?” Claire asked, too eager to wait for the tea—which was fine, as I was still in earshot.

“Yes. The notice arrived a short while ago. It seems Queen Manaria is the one who proposed it.”

Manaria was putting everything she had into being a diplomat. She was even the one who’d suggested the three-nation alliance.

“I don’t understand why she wants this now, of all times,” Claire said. “Shouldn’t the establishment of the three-nation alliance take precedence?”

I brought over the tea, passed it to the other two, and sat down myself.

“This is just my theory, but I think Queen Manaria is worried that establishing the alliance will create a clear divide between the Nur Empire and the three nations.” Dole sipped the tea, then complimented it, much to my delight.

“But hasn’t that always been the case? I thought the three-nation alliance was meant to prepare for the coming war with the empire?” Claire asked.

"Not quite. The goal of the alliance was to prevent the empire from taking further aggressive action—in other words, to achieve a peaceful victory by amassing more force than the empire."

"So that's no longer possible, then."

"Indeed." Dole grimaced. "The peace treaty the empire sent Bauer before the alliance could be formed bought them time. They've spent the last few months expanding their forces. Of course, the other three nations haven't been idle either, but the empire has overtaken us nonetheless."

It appeared Dorothea had far more diplomatic savvy than we gave her credit for. I hadn't thought she could be so crafty, but the results spoke for themselves. Maybe she just had talented people working under her.

"Regardless, doing nothing will only put us back where we started. That's why Queen Manaria is hoping to add the empire to the alliance to create a new, unified international front. This summit is to lay the groundwork for that," Dole said.

Rather than create a three-nation alliance to fight the empire, it would be better to wrangle the empire by including them in the alliance—or so Manaria believed.

"Now wait just a moment. Is this really viable? The empire's the most powerful state at present. Wouldn't they just exploit a unified international power however they saw fit?" Claire's concern was warranted. Even in my old world, the United Nations had often been at the beck and call of the world's superpowers.

"That will depend on how well Queen Manaria and the rest can maneuver. Besides, if it does go that way, the other three nations can reverse course to face the empire as their own united front."

"So all this is being done under the assumption of possible failure?"

"To put it bluntly, yes. But that's just politics—excessively roundabout." Dole shook his head and sighed. "Claire, Rae, what are your thoughts on the empire? How do you think Empress Dorothea will respond?"

Claire thought for a moment. "I cannot see Dorothea's aggression relenting."

"Why is that?"

"Only moments prior, we saw off Princess Philine as she went into exile. I believe Dorothea wouldn't have exiled her daughter if she had even the slightest inclination toward reconciliation, as her daughter was heavily in favor of it."

"Hmm... I see. And you, Rae?"

"I agree with Miss Claire. But it seems Dorothea has some reason for her aggressive stance. We might be able to sway her if we discover those reasons."

Josef had said Dorothea wasn't upholding her current policy by choice. Of course, I didn't think I could forgive her, no matter her reasons... but now that I really thought about it, she had never once tried to *justify* any of her actions. When we'd had our first audience with her, she hadn't protested Claire's condemnation of the empire's actions—in fact, she'd said Claire's words were logical. I was starting to think she viewed whatever she was doing as a necessary evil.

"Do you have any idea what that reason might be?" Dole asked.

"Unfortunately, I haven't a clue. In fact, not even the person closest to Dorothea, her manservant, seems to know. I suspect only she could explain herself," I answered.

"It seems there's nothing we can do there, then," Claire said.

"Yeah..." Although, I did recall that during our initial audience, Dorothea had said she would explain herself... if we agreed to serve her.

"Rae, what about that... what was it again, a book of prophecies?" asked Dole. "Was there any information in it about Empress Dorothea's motive?" He was referring to my *Revo-Lily* knowledge. I had given him the same explanation I'd given Claire, way back during my interview to become Claire's maid.

"Not a single thing. Her true motivations remained a mystery in each and every possible scenario," I answered.

In the Dorothea route, where the mother and daughter pair became lovers, Philine and Dorothea teamed up and ventured forth to conquer the world. In the revolution route, Philine began a revolution in the Nur Empire and fought against Dorothea to the bitter end. The other routes featured Dorothea less but still shared one common feature: they never revealed Dorothea's true motives.

"Perhaps this summit Queen Manaria proposes will be a chance to learn Dorothea's true motives, then," said Dole. "If there's a reason she can't curb her state's aggressions, like Rae thinks, then perhaps we can hear what it is and try to change her mind from there."

Her reason, huh? You know, I'd really thought there was a good chance Dorothea was just a warmonger... But then again, perhaps the world of politics was just a dog-eat-dog world and her actions were par for the course. But I wasn't a politician, nor did I care to view the world in such a way.

"Whatever the future may hold, we're bound to be busy. I'll have even less time to play with May and Aleah now, I suppose," Dole grumbled.

"I thought you withdrew from political matters?" I asked, refilling his cup.

"That was the idea, but I was badgered into assisting with this whole affair. I insisted I wouldn't, but they forced my hand by saying they'd go to you two if I didn't."

It seemed Arla and Irvine had had no choice but to basically strongarm Dole back onto the political stage. Bauer seemed to still be struggling to get back on its feet.

"I wouldn't mind if you left it to us, Father," Claire said.

"Yeah. You've done enough already," I said.

"Ha ha ha, thank you. But you overestimate yourselves. You still don't have what it takes to stand at the forefront of the political world."

"I can't argue otherwise." Claire sighed.

"Indeed," I said.

Claire and I often insisted the revolution hadn't been achieved by our efforts alone—despite being heralded as the heroes of the revolution—because, well... it was true! Dole had assisted my every action from the shadows, and he'd even been the one to initially set the stage for commoners to overthrow the nobility. You could even say that Claire and I had been nothing more than pawns in his game, although that might be stretching it. I could guarantee Dole would insist otherwise.

"Bah, if my efforts mean a better future for May and Aleah, then I suppose I can give

it a shot," he said.

"If you need any help, please let us know," Claire said.

"Yes, anything," I affirmed.

"Ha ha, thank you, you two."

Suddenly, there was a frenzied knock at the door. Claire and Dole looked at each other, wondering who it could be, while I left my seat to open the door.

"Yes?... Oh, it's you, Lana. What's up?"

"I-It's Joel! Th-they—"

"Whoa. Okay, calm down and breathe. What happened?"

Lana's face was pale, and she fought to catch her breath. "The imperial soldiers took Joel away!"

"I didn't do a thing."

That was the first thing out of Joel's mouth. We were underground in a section of the Department of Public Safety—the equivalent of a police department in my old world. Joel sat in a cell with his hands bound behind his back and a surly look on his face, which was bruised.

"Why did the imperial soldiers cart you off then?" Claire asked, partially out of doubt but mainly out of worry.

"I don't know," he answered. "But there was this woman stalking me. Maybe she had something to do with it."

"Is this a lovers' spat?" she asked.

"Of course not. I didn't even know her name before I was arrested. She just kept one-sidedly pestering me." Joel's face was weary, and he looked genuinely fed up with the whole ordeal.

But was he telling the truth?

"I'll go ask what happened upstairs," I said. "Can you stay here and hear what Joel has to say for me, Miss Claire?"

"Of course."

I left them behind and moved to the aboveground portion of the building to find the soldier in charge. "Excuse me, I'm here about Joel Santana."

"Are you family?" the soldier at the reception desk asked.

"No, but I am something like his guardian. He's my student back in our homeland."

"Oh, I see. Right this way then." The soldier manning the reception desk led me to the soldier handling Joel's case—a woman, to my surprise.

"On what charge was Joel arrested on?" I asked.

"The bastard assaulted an upstanding citizen of the empire." The soldier made no effort to hide her disdain.

"Just to make sure: Is the one pressing charges a woman?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course, obviously!"

It might be obvious to you, lady, but that's not always the case...

"Is there evidence?" I asked.

"Yes. Her body is covered in bruises. She'll likely have lasting scars." The soldier grimaced as though remembering the state the woman had been in.

"I understand there's no doubt the victim was assaulted, but is there any proof the assailant was Joel?"

"The victim herself testified as much, and it was daytime, so there's no doubt she got a clear look." The soldier spoke as though it were a cut-and-dried case, but the only evidence was the victim's testimony.

"Isn't there a chance she might be lying?" I asked.

"What reason would she have to lie? The one hiding the truth is your student. He won't say where he was at the time of the crime *or* what he was doing."

Oh, really? I thought. "Might I be able to meet with the victim?"

"You're joking! The poor girl is frightened out of her mind right now. And I'm not so foolish as to let an acquaintance of the assailant meet the victim!"

"I see..."

This was a problem. Both science and the judicial system were underdeveloped in this world, meaning criminal investigations relied heavily on testimonies and eyewitness accounts. As someone with 21st-century sensibilities, this kind of investigation felt shallow and spotty, but it was likely the best they could do with what they had available.

Furthermore, I couldn't rule out the possibility Joel *had* committed the crime. He was my student, and I believed in his integrity as a person, but I couldn't let preconceptions sway me. If, by some chance, he had indeed committed the crime, I wanted him to atone for it.

That being said, nothing was set in stone at this point. Seeing how the soldiers appeared convinced that Joel was the culprit, I wanted to make sure he got a fair shot at proving his innocence.

In any case—

"I need to meet up with Miss Claire first."

"First off, the woman's name is Berta."

Claire summarized the information she had received from Joel. He had first met Berta while drinking alone at a pub in the shopping district. Berta, who worked there, had incessantly tried to talk to him, but Joel, completely disinterested, had ignored her. That apparently hurt her pride, as she was well known as a beauty, causing her to pester him even more, which in turn caused him to pay and leave the

establishment.

Their second meeting was the day of the incident. Joel went out to the shopping district on some business and met Berta in a certain store.

As for the rest, Joel refused to say. He wouldn't say what store he'd gone to or even what business took him there. It was no wonder the soldiers had thought him guilty.

"It's hard to deny the possibility that he might well have done it," Claire said.

"Indeed. Still, I can't imagine him ever doing such a thing."

"Neither can I. But I don't intend to let my opinion of him obscure the truth."

In other words, we couldn't let our biases cloud our judgment. Now, what to do?

"Miss Claire, let's trust in Joel while fully doubting him."

"You... realize that's contradictory, Rae?"

"I believe in Joel's innocence. But that doesn't change the fact that someone was assaulted here."

"I suppose... Wait, are you sticking your nose where it doesn't belong again?"

"You bet I am."

"By the look on your face, it doesn't seem I can stop you." Claire sighed. She'd really come to understand me as of late. Oh, how happy that made me!

"Stop me? If anything, you're going to help!" I said.

"Goodness. All right. What are you planning then?"

"We'll begin by asking around for information, starting with where Joel was and what he was doing at the time of the crime."

"Haven't the imperial soldiers done that already?"

"They likely have, so we might as well ask them too, but I really want to get first-

hand information.”

“So you really believe Joel’s innocent then? I’m surprised.”

“Hm? Did you think I hated Joel or something?” If anything, that was what was surprising here.

“Not at all. I just had you pegged as the type to unconditionally take the woman’s side.”

“Ohh... I certainly do tend to, I’ll admit it. But I don’t despise guys or anything, you know?”

I was a woman who liked women, so I naturally leaned toward supporting women more often. But it was precisely because I was aware of that bias that I tried my hardest to remain neutral at times like these. Completely excising your internal biases was close to impossible—that was why you had to be aware of them and work to counter them.

“Men have their own good qualities. I won’t deny that. I just don’t believe I could ever love a man romantically. Nothing more, nothing less,” I said.

“I see. I’m a little relieved to hear that.”

“We’re still discovering new things about each other even after marriage! This relationship isn’t cooling off anytime soon, it seems!”

“E-enough fooling around. This is important, Rae. Shall we split up and investigate?” Claire suggested.

That did sound most efficient, but...

“No, we should ask around together.”

“Why is that?”

“Even if it’s just for a little longer, I want to be together with you.”

She gave me a look.

"Oh, do I adore that cold stare of yours!" I exclaimed. "But all jokes aside, I think we should play it safe after what happened with Philine, even if Dorothea says we're off the hook."

"Oh, now that you mention it..."

We'd attempted to conspire with rebel forces on foreign land. Normally, that would impel the death penalty, no questions asked. I didn't think Dorothea was the type to go back on her word, but I also didn't think that meant we should be careless.

At any rate, we had reached an agreement for now.

"We'll start tomorrow then," Claire said.

"I look forward to our special little date."

"It is very much *not* a date!"

"Quiet please. The court is now in session," the elderly presiding judge solemnly announced.

Claire and I were at one of Ruhm's courthouses, attending Joel's trial as his character witnesses. Trials in this world were different than in modern Japan because, while still conducted by law, verdicts weren't entirely objective. Instead, they were heavily influenced by how well one could appeal to the presiding judge. Because of this, the defendant tended to be at a disadvantage, compared to the prosecution. This world could really choose weird ways in which to be antiquated.

I should also mention that the presiding judge was a clergyman sent from the Spiritual Church, as the Church handled the administration of justice in this world.

There were other spectators too, all standing, as there were no audience seats.

"The prosecution may begin their opening statement."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

The man sitting opposite us, who had to be the attorney, stood up. He was incredibly

average in terms of build and height, but he had sharp eyes, giving him a shrewd look. He said something to the woman by his side—Berta, I presumed—who then went to the witness stand.

“My client, Berta Bahlke, was assaulted by the defendant, Joel Santana. The crime in question occurred on Imperial Date...”

Standing at the prosecution’s table, the attorney outlined Berta’s account of the events in a clear, sonorous voice. I was impressed by the confidence he exuded in his tone and body language, but then again, he was an expert who had likely done this dozens of times before. He had prepared his client beforehand too, as she shed tears the moment he recounted the violence that had occurred.

“From these facts, the defendant’s guilt is clear.”

“Hmm...” The presiding judge nodded thoughtfully. Things weren’t looking great for us. “The defendant may begin their opening statement.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” our side’s attorney replied as Joel took the witness stand. “The prosecution’s case rests entirely on circumstantial evidence. Even more concerning, there is no evidence outside of the plaintiff’s testimony.”

“Objection, Your Honor,” Berta’s attorney interrupted. “The plaintiff’s body is covered in injuries, amongst which are some of the most severe and terrible wounds a woman may suffer. My client has no reason to lie.”

“Objection sustained. The prosecution makes a fair point.”

Oh dear. This wasn’t going well at all.

“B-but, Your Honor! There were no witnesses at the location where the crime allegedly took place! It would be illogical to let a single person’s testimony deem a man guilty!”

Our side’s attorney was the equivalent of a public defender in my world—in other words, an attorney appointed by the country for those who couldn’t procure their own. I didn’t think he was incapable, but he was definitely less skilled than an expensive attorney.

“I shall give the defendant a chance to rebut the claims, then. Where were you and

“what were you doing at the time of the incident?” the presiding judge asked Joel.

“I decline to answer,” Joel replied curtly from the witness stand.

As he did so, I saw a smile rise to the face of Berta’s attorney.

“Did I hear that correctly? You decline your right to rebut?” the presiding judge asked. “If that’s the case, then I’m left with no choice but to deem you guilty.”

“I am innocent of any crime,” Joel said. “But I cannot answer the question you’ve asked me.”

“I see.”

The fact that the presiding judge didn’t deem Joel guilty on the spot showed that he did possess patience. I dread to think what would have happened if he’d been a more quick-tempered man.

I raised my hand. “Your Honor, I request the right to speak.”

“What is your relationship with the defendant?” he asked.

“We come from the same country, and I am his teacher.”

“Hmm... Very well. You may speak.”

“Thank you very much, Your Honor.” I stood and looked at Joel. He regarded me coldly. “Joel, I looked into where you were and what you were doing at the time of the crime. You were at Berta’s house, were you not?”

The spectators began to murmur.

“Hold on, you’re here to *defend* Joel Santana, correct?” the presiding judge asked.

“Yes, without a doubt,” I answered.

He didn’t look wholly satisfied. “Very well then. You may continue.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” I turned my gaze from Joel to Berta. “While Berta works at the pub, she has another job, a secret one.”

"Objection, Your Honor. She has no evidence," Berta's attorney said.

"But I do have evidence. If you would, Miss Claire."

Claire brought the documents to the presiding judge.

"These are testimonies of Berta's side job," I explained. "I would like to submit them as evidence."

"These are from stage actors and actresses who commissioned... makeup?" the presiding judge asked.

"Yes," I answered. "Berta worked as a makeup artist on the side."

Berta's face contorted with shame. As I touched on a bit when discussing the empire's food situation, the empire looked down on occupations that were considered nonessential. Anyone would be hesitant to say they worked as a makeup artist, even if makeup was considered normal for women, so it came as no surprise that Berta hid this fact.

"Berta is well known for being a talented makeup artist. Joel visited her for that reason, not knowing her identity. Am I right?" I asked Joel, who didn't reply.

"I don't understand," the presiding judge said. "What does that have to do with this trial? You've proved Joel went to meet Berta, which only serves to further incriminate him. What point do you intend to make here?"

He was confused, and understandably so. I only hoped that what followed wouldn't confuse him even further, as not many people understood the subject.

"Joel, is it all right if I continue?" I asked. "If you'd rather keep this to yourself and accept these false charges, I'll respect your wishes and back down here."

Joel didn't respond.

"If I do continue, you probably won't be able to stay in the empire, no matter the verdict," I continued. "So I won't force you to do anything. But even so—" I looked him squarely in the eyes, "—allow me to say one thing. I don't want to see you accept these false charges, and I'm ready to accept you for who you are. Let me help you, Joel."

Joel's face twisted with agony. He had to be conflicted. How could he not be with such a burden? I waited patiently for his answer.

At last, he said, "Do it."

"Okay."

He had made his decision. All that remained was for me to clear his good name.

"As I said earlier, Joel went to Berta's house to avail himself of her services as a makeup artist."

"I don't understand. Joel is not a stage actor. What reason would he have to visit her?" the presiding judge asked.

"Nothing special, really. She just wanted her makeup done." As looks of confusion rose to everyone's faces, I said, "Joel is a woman."

"Pardon? Joel Santana is a man. It even says so on his immigration form."

"Yes, Your Honor. Biologically speaking, Joel is indeed a male."

"I haven't a clue what you're trying to say here." The presiding judge looked perplexed, which, again, was understandable. This perspective was fairly uncommon in this world—and it wasn't even fully accepted in mine.

"Besides the gender of the body, there also exists a gender of the mind, Your Honor," I explained.

"A gender of the mind?"

"Yes. For most people, the two correspond. But for some people, they don't—which causes them great hardship."

"And you're saying Joel Santana is one of these people?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

The presiding judge looked unblinkingly at Joel, whose build and facial features could only be described as masculine.

"Certainly," he said, "I've heard of plays in which men look like women or women look like men, but I can't see Joel here as anything but a man."

"It's not a matter of appearance. It's a matter of which gender they understand themselves to be," I replied. Joel had gender dysphoria, something I've previously explained in regard to Yu's plight. "Joel, can you explain a bit of what you've gone through and how you feel?"

She pursed her lips in hesitation, but eventually, she began to speak.

"I was born the eldest son to a family of soldiers," she said in her baritone. "I was raised as a boy, and I was taught I needed to be a strong man to become a soldier."

It broke my heart to hear her sound so indifferent.

"But I always wondered to myself: Why was I trapped in this body that wasn't mine?"

Such a question was common amongst those with gender dysphoria.

"The more I trained, the burlier my body became, and the more I grew, the greater the sense of unease inside me. At some point, the revulsion I felt toward my own body became unbearable."

Joel spoke flatly, as though she were doing everything she could to prevent any emotion from surfacing.

"Sometimes, I would secretly put on my mother's makeup. Of course, it looked terrible on a face like mine, but it was the only time I ever felt at ease."

Some might call this sort of thing compensatory behavior, or tricking oneself, or even dancing around the problem with symptomatic treatment. But I believe there are times when people *need* alleviation from their pain, even if the thing they do does nothing to change their circumstances.

"While at Bauer, I heard a rumor about a talented makeup artist in the Nur Empire known to be a miracle worker. So I looked for them when I got here, thinking maybe... they could change me, even with a face like this."

That would explain why we had spotted Joel in the red-light district. She hadn't been looking to play with girls but been hunting down the rumored makeup artist.

"That was when I met Berta. I heard she was a skilled artist, so I went to her home. I didn't realize we had met before, but she remembered me, and when she asked me why I wanted my makeup done, I answered honestly. But..." Joel grimaced. "She told me to pay her or else she would expose my secret. She demanded an exorbitant amount, far higher than her standard fee. I refused, after which she said she would tell everyone. I left fully prepared for her to do so. The rest is as Rae said."

Joel's voice remained devoid of emotion the whole time. But she hadn't clarified one important element of this story.

"Joel, I know this is a tough question to answer, but there's just one more thing," I said. "Romantically speaking, do you like men or women?"

"Men."

A murmur ran through the spectators. I hated how they gawked at my pupil like some exotic animal, but right now, clearing Joel of suspicion came first.

"Your Honor, as established, Joel had no reason to assault Berta," I said.

"Hmm... But then where did her wounds come from?" he asked.

Claire cut in. "I believe I can answer that, Your Honor. Permission to speak?"

"Granted."

Claire stood. "Berta and a man named Damian Carossa have been... involved for quite some time. According to testimony from one of her coworkers at the pub, Damian seems to be blackmailing the plaintiff and often extorts money from her. I have Damian's own testimony attesting to this."

"What do you mean?" the presiding judge asked.

"Damian has been using unlawful narcotics and is currently not of sound mind. This is only conjecture, but I believe the one who truly assaulted Berta was Damian. Am I right, Berta?"

Berta said nothing, simply hanging her head.

“Objection, Your Honor! Her claims are baseless!” Berta’s attorney exclaimed.

“Objection overruled. Berta Bahlke, I ask you to swear to God and tell the truth: Was Damian Carossa the one who assaulted you?”

Berta remained silent. She’d likely been instructed by her attorney to say nothing that would worsen their position.

“You may choose to remain silent. However, I must dismiss your accusation against Joel Santana then. Is that what you wish?” the presiding judge asked.

“Please wait, Your Honor!” Berta’s attorney exclaimed.

“Please dismiss the complaint,” Berta said in a feeble voice.

“Berta, no! We can still win!”

“No, it’s all right. It’s... all right.” Her voice was a barely audible whisper as she sat down at her stand.

Why she’d covered for Damian and pinned the crime on Joel was a mystery only she could solve. In my past life, I’d read many novels and seen many anime wherein malicious women pressed false charges of sexual assault against men—but such things rarely occurred in reality. I didn’t mean to say it never happened, but these cases were few and far between.

Even a woman like me could understand men’s fear of false accusations. But one had to remember that most women had no reason to do such a thing. Of course, that didn’t mean women were always telling the truth when they accused someone. I’d be the first to admit that trials in Japan were sometimes guilty of condemning people on testimony alone—but we must examine each case on its own merits.

In the end, I didn’t know Berta’s circumstances. Perhaps Damian was the one to blame for all this, or perhaps Berta had acted entirely of her own accord. We could only speculate.

“One more thing,” the presiding judge said. “Joel Santana, I have a separate sentence for you. Your right to remain in the Nur Empire as an exchange student is hereby

revoked.”

I wasn’t surprised. I’d had a feeling this would happen.

“I understand your circumstances, but your body is a gift from God. To deny it is a sin, and I cannot allow a sinner to remain in the empire.”

Joel showed no surprise either, as though she had expected this and had already resolved herself to her fate. Her circumstances were decidedly different from Yu’s. Yu—despite what the upper crust of Bauer might insist—had reverted back to her original body, whereas Joel was denying the body she had been born with. The two cases were worlds apart as far as the Spiritual Church’s doctrine was concerned.

In modern Japan, such a verdict would never occur. But this world was far, far behind mine in some of its values.

The presiding judge continued. “Joel Santana, you are to be deported to the Bauer Kingdom. You will have one month to depart. Court adjourned.”

And with that, the trial ended—with no victors to be found.

“Where are you taking me, Rae?”

“Don’t worry about it!”

“Yes, don’t worry. We’re not taking you anywhere bad.”

Two weeks had passed since the trial. Having received a certain notice we had been waiting for, Claire and I were now taking Joel to a certain place.

“All right, I might as well. I do owe you two, after all.” Joel smiled weakly. She had to be referring to the trial.

“That’s not true,” I said sadly. “It’s our fault you’re being exiled.”

“Even if it was to clear your name, we still brought you great shame,” Claire added just as sadly. It hurt not being able to help your own pupil.

"Don't say that. I actually feel better now, like a weight's been lifted off my shoulders." Joel smiled weakly again. "Anyway, don't you think it's about time you told me where you're taking me?"

"Right here," I said.

We had arrived at a Spiritual Church clinic.

"Why here?" she asked.

"Let's head in first." I took Joel's hand and pulled her inside. The clinic was bigger than the one at the Royal Academy, and a few people were in the waiting room, awaiting their medical exams. The interior was immaculate and spotlessly clean.

"Hey, you came."

"You're late."

Yu and Misha greeted the three of us. They volunteered here as members of the Church, despite their busy schedule as students. We were meeting up because I'd asked for their help on something.

"Where's Julia?" I asked.

"This way," Yu answered before leading us farther into the clinic. She stopped before a door. "Julia, can we come in?"

"Yes," a voice replied. We all entered the room to see a familiar person lying on the bed.

"How are you feeling, Julia?" Claire asked.

"I'm okay, Miss Claire."

The patient was Julia, one of the children we occasionally visited at the convent. She didn't seem to like me much, but she had completely opened up to Claire—as well as to the pope, apparently, for the duration we had switched places.

"Um...?" Joel seemed confused by why she had been brought here.

"This girl's being treated for a particular curse," said Yu. "One that Rae asked me to alert her to, if I came across it. The Crosswise Curse."

Joel's eyes went wide with realization. For her sake, I had been searching for someone with the Crosswise Curse. If this were modern-day Japan, leaking a patient's private information would have been a problem, but such things were more lax in this world. Still, I'd never expected Julia to have the curse.

"Rae, you didn't..." Joel said.

"I did. How would you like to try contracting the Crosswise Curse?" I asked.

A quick explanation for those who forgot: The Crosswise Curse was communicable, and it effectively transformed one's body into that of the opposite gender's. For most people, having your gender suddenly swapped was an unwelcome experience, but it was a gleaming opportunity for someone who desired that change, like Joel.

"Just to temper your expectations a bit, there's no guarantee the Crosswise Curse will give you the ideal body you desire, especially with how masculine your current body is," I explained.

Yu's case had gone as well as could be hoped, but she'd had a feminine face to start with—and had been born female in the first place. Not only that, if Joel did contract the Crosswise Curse, she would still have to be careful on nights of the full moon; under that light, her former body would be revealed.

"If you're still okay with that," I said, "I can transfer Julia's Crosswise Curse to you."

"Is such a thing... possible?" she asked.

"Mm-hmm."

"I find myself yet again curious as to how you know these things, Rae," said Yu. "But I suppose you'd rather I not ask?"

"I would rather. Sorry, Yu."

"So, what will it be, Joel?" Claire asked.

Joel thought for a moment. As she'd mentioned during the trial, she had been born to

a family of soldiers and raised in hopes that she would become a soldier as well. While there were plenty of female soldiers around, it was undeniable that a female body came with some handicaps.

Even so, she wanted to change.

“Do it. No, I mean... Please do it, Ms. Rae.” Joel straightened herself before bowing deeply.

“Got it. Let’s do it right away.”

To cut straight to the point, it was a success.

“Wow... I can’t believe you became so beautiful,” I said.

“Truly,” Claire agreed.

“Quit it,” Joel replied sheepishly.

We had left the clinic, and we were walking back to the Bauer dorm together.

Yu grinned. “She became a beauty, just like me. A different type, though.”

“It’s shameless to call yourself a beauty, Lady Yu,” Misha chastised.

“What do you think, Joel? How’s the body you wanted?” I asked.

“I still can’t believe it. It feels like a dream.” Joel stared at her now-slender fingers as though uncertain they were real, but when I saw her smile, I knew I was glad that this was a world of magic and curses.

In my old world, people with gender dysphoria couldn’t achieve physical transition so easily. In fact, too few—whether they be male-to-female or female-to-male—could achieve a transition they considered successful. It was a different story if one started hormonal treatment before the development of secondary sex characteristics, but for those that couldn’t—especially those whose bodies had fully matured—that degree of change was extraordinarily difficult.

Misaki, my close friend with gender dysphoria, had started hormonal treatment after his secondary sex characteristics had already developed. Because of that, his stature and build had remained fairly feminine, and his voice hadn't dropped much. This had made him apprehensive about communicating with people, and, well... you know the rest.

To clarify, I don't mean to say that one has to look beautiful or handsome to have "successfully" transitioned. I did wish we lived in an ideal society where trans individuals could live happily as they looked regardless of conventional attractiveness; but unfortunately, society puts great weight on appearance. I even recalled a study in my old world that showed attractive job applicants tended to get hired more easily.

No... my idea of a successful transition was one that brought a person's body closer to their identity. All the theories and support in the world didn't mean a thing if they didn't bring the change people needed to live with themselves.

This world I was in now wasn't always perfect, but it had shown Joel kindness. Wherever Misaki was now, I hoped it was a world like this.

Joel grabbed my attention again. "Thank you, Ms. Rae. I'll never forget this debt."

"Oh, please. It's nothing, really. More importantly, things are going to be tough for you from here on out. I wish you luck."

"Yeah... I dread the talk I'll have to have with my parents, but I think I can do it." Her smile seemed softer than before. Perhaps it was because her heart now matched her body.

"Oh, right. Here, take this, Rae." Yu handed me something. "A lot of unexpected things can happen after transitioning. Use this on her body to temporarily undo the Crosswise Curse if needed."

I looked in my hand to see the Tears of the Moon. "Is it really all right for me to take this?"

"Of course. I know just how painful gender can be at times. Let me help, if even just a bit." Yu smiled radiantly.

"Thank you very much. I'll take great care of it."

The sun had already set by the time we reached the dorm. I like to think the beauty of that evening glow wasn't my imagination.

"And that's everything."

"Whaaat, no fair! I wanna see what Joel looks like now!"

"I don't particularly care."

I was regaling Lana and Eve with the latest news while we went to the imperial government offices on some business.

"He's—er, she's already back in Bauer by now, right?" Lana asked.

"Yup," I answered.

Nothing of concern had occurred with Joel's body since, and she had grown accustomed to it. Eventually, with the deportation deadline looming, she had left for Bauer. I'd never needed to use the Tears of the Moon, which currently sat in my pocket.

I'd best return it to Yu soon.

"She was too shy to say goodbye in person, but she wanted me to give everyone her regards," I said.

"Awwww, why's she gotta be such a stranger?" Lana expressed regret at not getting a chance to say goodbye. Eve seemed to genuinely not care. "Was she pretty?"

"Yup. You'll definitely be surprised if you ever meet her again in Bauer."

"For real? I'm totes looking forward to that!" Lana bounced with excitement.

"Whatever," Eve said, indifferent to the end. She sighed. "Look, I won't tell you not to talk, but if you keep stopping, we'll never get this done."



"Ah, sorry, Eve," I said.

"Sooorry!" Lana said.

We were drafting documents for the imminent four-nation summit—more specifically, compiling information on the Nur Empire for the bigwigs of Bauer. Of course, this government office was an imperial facility, so foreigners like us couldn't access all its records, but what we could access was plentiful enough.

The information we were compiling concerned public records and statistics about the empire, among other things. This world didn't have the internet, so such information was usually communicated to other countries by way of letters and, as such, was always slightly out of date. Our purpose was to supplement the information Bauer already had with more accurate, updated statistics.

"Oh, but I'm basically done."

"That was quick, Lana. I shouldn't be long, either. How about you, Eve?"

"Just a bit more."

Surprisingly, Lana was a fast worker. Her grades in school were far from flattering, but it seemed she was in her element with clerical-type work.

"Oh, hey, you're not with Ms. Claire today," Lana said, only now noticing.

"Miss Claire went to welcome some political VIPs. Master Dole is with her as well," I answered.

"Huh? Then who's watching May and Aleah?"

"They're at home by themselves right now. They're at an age where they can manage that." That said, I still worried. They went to elementary school most days and had Dole with them on days off when Claire and I were too busy, meaning this was their first time home alone in a long while.

"Is that really safe?" Lana asked.

"I can't say I'm not worried, but I think it'll be all right. They're surprisingly reliable."

"They'd have to be, with a mother like you," Eve said coldly.

Things hadn't improved between us.

"Why don't I head back to the dorm first and check on them?" Lana offered.

"Huh?" I blinked.

"I mean, I'm about done here, and I'm sure you're still worried, even though you say they can take care of themselves."

My two girls knew Lana. She came over to our room to play with them every now and then—really just an excuse to hit on me—so they weren't shy around her.

"Come on, let me help out. Our relationship's at that level at least, right?" Lana teased.

"What relationship?" I grinned at her joke.

"Disgusting." Eve stared at me coldly.

How was that my fault? I shrugged it off. "Please do then, Lana. I'll head over as soon as I finish too."

"Right-o. Oooh, why don't you two take this time to clear up the bad blood between you?" She clearly meant the way Eve had it out for me.

"Mind your own business, Lana."

"Oh, good idea," I said.

"This *is* my own business," Lana insisted. "My teacher and my best friend have been at odds with each other for months. It's honestly hard to watch."

"Well, I don't particularly dislike Eve or anything," I said.

Eve stopped working and glared at me. "Tsk... that's exactly what—"

"Okaaay, gonna cut you short there, Eve," Lana interrupted. It was strange to see her mediate. I'd had her pegged as the frivolous, airheaded type, but she was acting

pretty mature right now. Perhaps her usual personality was more of an act? "Look, Eve... You gotta tell her what's botherin' you, or nothing will change. It's probably just a misunderstanding, like she says."

"It's not a mis—"

"All the more reason to tell her what's got you riled. It's no fair to be so crabby without telling her why."

Eve said nothing more. She probably understood her actions were logically wrong but couldn't help it, emotionally.

"Anyway, I'm done now, so I'll be heading over to your place. Catch ya later!"

"Thank you, Lana," I called.

"It's nothing. Oh, but you could give me a kiss as a reward."

"Unfortunately, these lips are reserved for Miss Claire."

"Darn, you're a tough nut to crack. But that's exactly what I love about you!" Lana wiggled with delight. I wondered for a moment if this side of her was an act too, but I concluded it had to be her true nature.

"Just hurry up and leave," Eve said.

"I'm going, I'm going. You two make sure you talk things out, all right?"

"We will. Take care, Lana."

"Humph."

"Leave May and Aleah to me! I just know today's the day I get them to call me Big Sister!" Lana waved us goodbye and left.

"That girl's like a storm," I said.

"You're one to talk," Eve said.

"Am I like that to you?"

"Basically. You both do what you like without caring who you trouble. Lana does it because she's an airhead, but you do it intentionally."

"Whaaat, that's definitely a misunderstanding..." Why was her impression of me so negative? "Hey, don't you think it's about time you told me what's up? I heard from Lana that it had something to do with a lover, but I seriously haven't a clue who that could be."

"Really now? The fact that you don't even realize it, that's what I hate most about you. Just what is it about you that other people find so...?" Eve's hand stopped writing. "'I'll only ever love you'—even though I got to hear those words..."

"Is this the person Lana mentioned? Are they from Euclid?" I asked, a possibility occurring to me. "Was it Louie?"

In the original *Revolution*, Louie had been in love with the main character—in other words, me. If he'd given Eve the cold shoulder as a result, then her frustration made sense.

But it appeared I was wrong.

"Huh? Who in the world is that?" Eve gave me a puzzled look.

"Er, that's a no then?"

"What do you think? Besides, that's a guy's name, right? In the first place, I have no interest in guys."

Whoa, did she just come out to me like it was nothing?

"Then who is it?" I asked.

"You still haven't figured it out?" Eve stared at me resentfully. "The one you took from me was Lady Manaria Sousse."

INTERMISSION

A REUNION WITH THE PAST

(MANARIA SOUSSE)

“SISTER!”

“Hey, Claire. It’s been a while.”

After a long carriage ride, I arrived in Ruhm to find my dear “little sister” waiting for me.

“You’re as cute as ever, Claire. Is it just me, or have you grown even more beautiful in the time we’ve been apart?”

“Hee hee, oh, you flatter me.”

The way she giggled was simply lovely. She had once been thorny and guarded, but she had mellowed these days. “I mean it, though. You really are just so cute. Perhaps I should thank Rae for that?”

“O-oh, stop it! You sound like Rae, Sister!” she complained, cheeks flushed red, but she certainly didn’t seem wholly displeased.

“I take it I’ve hit the mark then, seeing as you won’t deny it. I’m sad, you know? It feels like my little sister was swept away from me.”

“What are you saying? I’ll always be a little sister to you.” Claire hugged me. There was a time when she had viewed me

as an object of affection, but no longer. I hadn’t returned her feelings at the time, and now and again, I wondered if that was for the best. Perhaps it was only human to regret.

“Heh, that’s good to hear. You look well, Claire.”

"I am well. You look the same as ever, Sister... Oh. Should I be calling you Your Majesty now?"

"Don't. Being called that gives me goosebumps, even now. I put up with it in formal settings, but I'd rather we be as we always were, otherwise."

"Hee hee, most certainly." Claire looked at me teasingly. She really had changed. If this were the old Claire, I would have seen mischievousness in her eyes, but at present, I only saw warm tenderness.

"How's Rae been?" I asked.

"Well enough to cause me trouble."

"Figures. I'm sorry I couldn't attend the wedding."

"Nonsense. You're the ruler of a country now, and we're but ordinary citizens. You couldn't help it."

"Thank you, Claire." It had hurt to not attend my dear little sister's special day, but this was the path I had chosen to take. "I saw Mr. Torrid earlier, but have His Majesty Thane and the others arrived yet?"

"Yes, they arrived just moments ago. I showed them the way before coming to welcome you."

"I see. Thanks, Claire." I shot her a smile.

She returned my smile. "You're so very welcome."

"How's life in the empire?" I asked. "It was quite a shock when I heard Bauer was sending you. I was so angry, I even considered cutting off support to the kingdom."

"Jeez, you fret too much, Sister. Life here is surprisingly comfortable. I will admit that I was apprehensive at first, but the empire's been good."

"Because you're with Rae?"

"Cease your teasing at once." Claire turned away with a huff. It was terribly cute.

"Aha ha, sorry, sorry. Just write it off as my chagrin at having drifted apart from my precious sister."

"I wouldn't say we've drifted apart, though? I still wish for you to dote on me, Sister."

"Oh, how happy I'd be if that were true."

"It *is* true, though."

That was when a servant urged us to move forward.

"Shall we continue our conversation as we walk?" I asked, offering her my arm.

"Yes, let's." Claire took my arm, and together we walked.

"Regarding the three-nation alliance... I feel I must apologize for what happened to Bauer," I said.

The alliance between Sousse, the Alps, and Bauer ultimately had not come to fruition. Far from it. The Nur Empire had narrowed its sights on Bauer alone, leading Claire, her family, and her students to be sent as what might as well have been hostages.

"You have nothing to apologize for," she said. "You have a responsibility to place your country first. As a former noble, I understand."

"Thank you, Claire."

Claire was better at seeing the bigger picture now. She had once seen things solely in her own terms—which had been cute in its own way—but she had matured. It pained me a bit to think the one that changed her wasn't me.

"Was Rae angry about it?"

"At first, yes. But once she saw I was determined, she immediately shifted to planning with me. I'm sure she doesn't blame you either."

"I'd hope so."

Rae Taylor—the second love of my life. She loved Claire beyond all else and was the

one who had changed the look in Claire's eyes. Despite what Claire said, I was certain Rae resented me. Perhaps she indeed understood that I was bound by duty, as Claire said, but she would surely still criticize me for doing nothing as Claire was sent into harm's way.

"Don't worry, Sister. Rae thinks dearly of you as well." Claire smiled in an attempt to comfort me. She really had grown.

It was a shame I'd never fallen for her. She'd grown into a spectacular woman. I didn't think I could ever bring myself to love her in that way, though. She was too similar to a certain other girl, both in appearance and personality.

My first love—one mired in pain and regret.

"Where's Rae?" I asked. "It's not often you two are apart."

"His Majesty Thane asked the same thing earlier. Goodness, I'll have you know, the two of us aren't always together!"

"Bet you wish you were," I teased.

"I do *not!*" Her reaction was perfect. This part of Claire reminded me of that girl as well. "Rae's busy compiling information with some other Bauer exchange students."

"Is that right? I bet Rae gets along well with her students."

"You'd be surprised. She's well liked by most of her students, but one girl in particular seems to have something against her."

"Oh, really? What kind of girl is she?" I found myself a little curious. Just what kind of person could hate the girl I loved?

"She's a bit withdrawn, doesn't speak much, and has a rather sharp tongue. Oh, and she also wears glasses—a rather uncommon feature."

"Oh?" How curious. That description matched the certain someone I'd been reminiscing about just moments prior. "What a strange girl. She sounds like someone I know. What's her name?"

"Eve, I recall. Eve Nuhn."

“Huh?” That name sent a shock through me. “W-wait, you said Eve? Eve Nuhn?”

“I did. Is something the matter, Sister?”

“That... that can’t be...”

A mistake that could never be undone...

I’d hurt her, the one so dear to me. And she’d disappeared from my life like a phantom.

“Sister?”

“Claire, take me to her! Right this instant!”

“Wh-what?! Calm yourself! What do you need to see Eve for?” Claire was flustered, but not as flustered as I, for—

“That girl was once my maid—and my first love!”

“Lady Manaria? Really?” I asked.

“You still have the gall to feign ignorance after seducing her?” Eve said.

“I’ve done no such thing, though.”

Eve was Manaria’s lover?

“Manaria loved me. I left her for her sake, but I will never forget her love.” Eve stared me down, perhaps madly so. Something was wrong here—I could feel it in my gut, but I couldn’t place the source. “And yet, you... you! How could you?!”

“You misunderstand, Eve. There’s nothing between Manaria and me.”

“Liar!” Eve swung at me.

I hurriedly twisted my body to dodge, then distanced myself as she stumbled. Regrettably, she was between me and the door, and the reference room lacked

windows to prevent the books from deteriorating.

"Eve... Where exactly did you know Lady Manaria?" I asked.

"What's it matter?"

"I just want to make sure of something."

"Like what? That she loves you more than me?"

"Like I said, you misunderstand!"

Eve ignored me as she withdrew a small knife hidden in an inner pocket of her shirt.
"Lady Manaria belongs to me... I devoted my body and soul to serving her!"

Serving her? Oh.

Eve had to be the maid Manaria had mentioned. The one who'd left the Sousse Royal Palace, leaving Manaria distraught. There seemed to be quite an age gap between them, but I recalled Eve mentioning she was older than she looked around the time I'd chased Joel into the red-light district, which meant the age gap couldn't be the source of unease I felt.

What was it, then?

"You took Lady Manaria from me! Give her back! Give her back to me!" Eve lunged forward with the knife, which I dodged by a hair's breadth. Her close-combat skills were poor, but the same was true for me. Claire had tried teaching me a number of times, but it still hadn't really stuck.

If I used magic, I would win hands down. I remembered Eve being much better at magic than close combat, but I was still leagues ahead of her. The problem was that I likely couldn't use my magic without harming her, and I wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

I was reminded of my fight against Louie long ago.

Wait a minute.

"Wait, Eve. You said you were from the same hometown as Lana, right?"

“Is now really the best time for this?”

“Just answer me. Are you or are you not from the same hometown as Lana?”

“I am.”

Right... So something was strange after all.

“Then how could you have met Lady Manaria? Did you really work in the Sousse Royal Palace if you were born in Euclid?”

“H-huh?” Eve’s eyes shot wide.

Sousse wasn’t a complete meritocracy, unlike the empire. I could understand somebody with status like Claire having crossed Manaria’s path, but a commoner like Eve couldn’t even visit the Royal Palace, much less serve royalty.

In peacetime, it might have been possible. But even then, as Manaria had been vying for the throne, she likely wouldn’t have risked hiring an unknown foreign commoner as a maid.

“Think carefully, Eve. Were you really Lady Manaria’s maid? Or were you born in Euclid? Which is it?”

“Ngh, I...” Eve grimaced, as though fearful of what was to come. She grabbed her head and writhed in pain, breaking into a scream. “Ah... aah... aaaagh!”

“Eve!” I drew close, knocking the knife out of her hand and grabbing her. The light was gone from her eyes, her face overtaken by a dangerous look. I had seen something similar to this before, and very recently at that.

Suggestion magic!

I didn’t know how, but Eve was under the effect of Salas’s hypnotic suggestions, meaning she wasn’t in control of herself. That being the case, I drew the you-know-what from my inner pocket.

“O moonlight, drive out the evil dwelling in this body!” I chanted the Tears of the Moon’s activation phrase, causing the ring to glow. A soft light began to shine on Eve.

"Ah... ngh..." The pain gradually faded from Eve's face. It had been a gamble, but it seemed Salas's hypnosis was indeed considered a status ailment.

Eventually, Eve stopped struggling and collapsed. I hurriedly caught her.

"Eve! Eve! Pull yourself together!" I gently slapped her cheek. Thankfully, she had only lost consciousness, and she soon woke up.

"Ms. Rae...? Where am I?"

"You're in a reference room in the Nur Empire. Do you remember what happened?"

Eve was still disoriented. She turned side to side, scanning the room. "I was... working on something with you and Lana... then..."

"Go on," I urged.

"Then... I... ah!" Eve shot up to her feet, wide-eyed. "No, how could I have..."

"Calm down... None of it was your fault," I soothed.

"But—"

"It's fine. Calm down. Let's take some deep breaths, okay? In... out..."

Eve did as I said, taking deep breaths. Her piercing, hateful stare was gone. I could surmise that whatever had been affecting her—likely Salas's power—was dispelled.

"Okay, let's clarify some things," I said. "You are, without a doubt, Manaria's ex-lover and maid?"

"Yes."

"And because of that, you hate me?"

"I thought I did, but now I'm not so sure. I don't know why I felt that way..."

"Right, so... it looks like you had a form of hypnosis cast on you. Don't worry, none of what you did is your fault."

I hugged Eve tightly and felt her sag in my arms with her head facing down.

“I... don’t belong by Lady Manaria’s side anymore. My presence was a problem, so I left her...”

“I know.”

“I left Sousse and worked as a maid in various places. Then... then...” Eve looked up suddenly, as though remembering something important. “Ms. Rae, you need to go back to the dorm now!”

“Huh?”

“May and Aleah are in danger!”

“Wh-what?!” Her sudden urgency bewildered me. But her next words quickly pulled me back to reality.

“The one who put the suggestion on me was Lana!”

“Rae!”

“Miss Claire...” I could only let out a weak murmur as Claire burst into the room. I moved to hug her, and she reciprocated, squeezing me tight once before looking me in the face.

“Is it true May and Aleah were kidnapped?” she asked.

“Yes... I let my guard down. I’m so sorry...”

Crying wouldn’t achieve anything; now was the time to think and formulate a plan. But I just couldn’t. My emotions were like a tempest, and my mind wouldn’t *work*. Just the thought of what May and Aleah might be going through left me paralyzed. *If something were to happen to them, I—*

“Calm down, Rae. You’re not the only one at fault,” Claire consoled me.

“But... but...” I should’ve been more careful. How could I have left them home alone?

How could I have put off dealing with Eve until now? How could I have let this happen?

“Rae, look at me.”

“Miss Claire?” As I lost myself to panic, she looked me square in the eye with her powerful gaze. She had to be as worried for May and Aleah as I was, if not more, yet her eyes had lost neither her determination nor the light of reason.

“Rae, if we’re to get our children back, I need you. Come back to me. Show me the strong Rae I know and love.” She spoke slowly, choosing each word with great care. I could feel her trust in me reflected in those words. She didn’t blame me in the slightest. The only thing she felt was a sincere desire to rescue our children, together. That realization washed over me, calming me down.

“Forgive me. I’m okay now,” I said.

“Thank you, Rae.”

“No, thank *you*, Miss Claire.”

I wiped my tears with a handkerchief, then gently slapped my cheeks with my hands to motivate myself. *Let’s do this!*

“Let’s confirm what we know first,” Dole said, stroking his moustache. “Are we certain May and Aleah were kidnapped?”

“Almost one hundred percent certain. According to Eve, Lana is definitely involved with Salas in some way,” I replied.

Eve had told me of her first meeting with Lana in Euclid. Eve had been working at a pub when Lana came by. The two hit it off surprisingly well, and Eve ended up telling Lana about her past.

That was when Lana said, “*Wow. That’s, like, rough. I know some magic that can help with painful memories, though... Wanna try it?*”

Eve refused at first, but she eventually gave in to Lana’s persistence under the condition that the magic not go too far. The one who ultimately cast the spell on her was a silver-haired, red-eyed person with a handsome face. Her memories after that

were a jumbled mess.

Eve had been used. Salas had likely taken advantage of her feelings for Manaria to control her, making her believe she was both from Euclid and Lana's friend.

"The neighbors say they saw Lana take the girls outside," I continued, "but the gatekeeper was knocked unconscious..."

"Hmm..." Dole continued to stroke his moustache.

"There was also this letter left in their room," I said. The sender of the letter was one *Salas Lilium*.

"Have you read it?" he asked.

"Not yet, I wanted to wait for Miss Claire," I replied.

"Go ahead and open it," Claire urged.

We looked inside to see:

Rae Taylor, Claire François, you have until sundown to come to the specified location. Bring no one else, or the lives of your children will be forfeit.

The specified location was a slum on the outskirts of the imperial capital—outside the range of the anti-demon barrier.

"This is most certainly a trap." Dole furrowed his brows.

"But what choice do we have?" Claire asked. "They have May and Aleah hostage."

"I understand, but it's too reckless to go without a plan."

"There's no time to plan anything; it'll be evening soon," Claire said, a bit more impatiently.

"Don't rush this, either of you. You know how twisted Salas is. There's no guarantee May and Aleah will be safe even if we do what he says."

"Still—"

"I know. Even I wish for nothing more than May and Aleah's safety. But it's precisely because we wish for their safety that we need to do everything we can before we act." Dole was our voice of reason, calming us both. It helped to have someone with many more years of experience at times like this.

He continued. "We can assume you two have no choice but to go alone, as they'll likely be watching our movements. That means you will have to manage without backup."

"Right," Claire said.

"We don't know what he'll demand, but it likely won't be good. The most important thing is to not give in to his demands until you can negotiate May and Aleah's safety."

"What if he threatens them?" I asked.

"You mustn't give in, even then. I know it sounds harsh, but if you let him hold all the cards, all four of you will be beyond saving. We have to avoid that at all costs," Dole said firmly. "I'll teach you how to counter some of the things he might demand. There's not much time, but do your best to memorize these ploys."

"Please do, Father."

"Please do."

With that, Dole taught us his negotiation techniques, making full use of our remaining time.

"Rae, I have a request to make of you," Claire said out of the blue. Having received Dole's instruction, the two of us were hurrying to the location Salas specified.

"I refuse."

“You haven’t even heard what I have to say yet.”

“I can guess what it is, and I refuse.”

“Rae...” Claire frowned. I knew what she wanted to say: If it comes down to it, let *me* be the sacrifice.

Like I would let her.

“If you sacrifice yourself, I’ll follow you shortly after,” I said.

“You mustn’t!”

“That’s... what I might have said in the past.”

“Rae?”

“But that’s not an option anymore. Let’s make sure the four of us make it home together, Miss Claire.”

“Yes, let’s.”

To save a life at the cost of another would leave permanent scars on the survivor’s heart. I didn’t intend to give such scars to my daughters, nor to Claire. We would take two back and return home as four. I would make sure of it.

“We’re almost there, Miss Claire.”

“Yes.”

The designated location was a half-crumbled, dilapidated house. Perhaps once a grander structure, its size stuck out like a sore thumb against the surrounding slum. Of course, that didn’t change the fact that it was in tatters now.

“I’ll enter first,” I said.

“Be careful.”

I opened the door to the smell of dust and the sound of a voice.

"Took you long enough, Ms. Rae."

The one waiting for us in that place was Lana Lahna.

INTERMISSION

PAPA'S VOICE

(LANA LAHNA)

“I DON’T THINK you should be doing this, Lana.”

“Indeed. This won’t end well for you.”

Two innocent voices spoke to me. One belonged to a little girl with a haircut like Ms. Rae’s, and the other belonged to a little girl with long hair like Ms. Claire’s—May and Aleah, Ms. Rae and Ms. Claire’s adopted children.

Something akin to a collar encircled May’s neck; this magical tool sealed magic. As a quad-caster, May could likely have hurt me if she wanted to, so I’d tricked her into donning the magical tool, which I got from Papa, by telling her it was a gift.

Meanwhile, Aleah was supposedly a talented swordsman, but without a weapon, she was just another powerless child. I easily tricked both girls into coming with me by telling them Ms. Rae was waiting for us.

I studied their familiar faces and found I couldn’t find any trace of despair or worry in them. Something about that irritated me.

“Hahhh, aren’t you two rather calm right now? Or do you not realize what’s happening to you? You’ve been kidnapped,” I said threateningly.

But they didn’t react as I wanted.

“We’ll be okay, right, Aleah?”

“Right!”

The twins looked at each other.

"And what makes you think that?" I asked.

"Mama Rae and Mama Claire will definitely save us!"

"Yeah! So we're not scared!"

The twins smiled. It pissed me off. "How do you know that for sure? They might not come, you know?"

"No, they'll come!"

"They'll absolutely come!"

Their faith in their mothers was unshakable.

"How can you trust them so blindly? Disgusting."

"Huh? But wouldn't your mommy and daddy do the same for you?"

"If Lana were in trouble, they would come, right?"

Their innocent question made my blood boil. Why couldn't I just kill them now?

"Lana. You mustn't."

"Papa..."

A quiet voice admonished me, and I loosened my grip on the knife in my hand.

Papa—Salas Lilium—continued, smiling. "*These children are the bait with which we will lure out Rae Taylor and Claire François. You mustn't kill them.*"

"Okay. I'm sorry." His calming voice reverberated in the back of my mind. Oh, what was I thinking? How could I imagine doing something that went against Papa's orders?

"Lana... my dear Lana. Listen carefully. I'll explain what you need to do from here."

"Okay."

Papa's voice was music to my ears. Listening to him intoxicated me like drinking alcohol. I wanted to listen to him forever. I wanted to obey him forever.

"Is that person really your papa, Lana?" May asked.

"Why is your father making you do bad things?" Aleah asked.

But two noises obscured Papa's voice. These twins were getting on my nerves.

"You two wouldn't understand. A parent's orders are absolute to a child. There is no room for right or wrong."

Yes, exactly. All I needed to do was follow Papa's orders.

"Huh? Really? But Mama Rae is *always* making mistakes, right, Aleah?"

"Indeed. Mother Claire has to scold Mother Rae daily."

The twins disagreed. They were annoying little things.

"Papa, let these children hear your voice too. Shut them up for me," I said, but he shook his head sadly.

"These children have a special disposition that doesn't allow my voice to reach them... But even if they didn't—" Papa put his hand to my cheek. *"You're the only one I need to hear me."*

"Papa..."

"My dear Lana... I know you will succeed, for you are my masterpiece, my cute little doll."

Masterpiece. I couldn't help but get hung up on that word.

"Wasn't Lilly your masterpiece, Papa?"

What a terrible daughter I was to doubt Papa's words. And yet he smiled at this terrible daughter of his. *"Lilly was a failed creation. You are far, far, greater than she ever was, Lana."*

"Really?" I was happy. No longer was I beneath Lilly. Papa only had eyes for me now. If I succeeded here, then surely...

I gently brushed the headband on my head. This headband was precious to me, a gift from Papa. I couldn't take it off or else I wouldn't be able to hear Papa's voice.

"Who might you be talking to, Lana?" Aleah asked.

"I'm talking to Papa, of course."

"Who's 'Papa'? It's only the three of us here."

"What do you mean? Papa's right here."

The twins looked back at me, confused. Poor things. It appeared they couldn't perceive Papa.

"Papa's always here, right by my side. I hear him, only me, just me..."

"It's okay, Lana. Our mamas will help you too!" May said.

"Indeed. I'm certain Mother Rae and Mother Claire will figure out some way to help you," Aleah said.

"Shut up." I didn't want to hear it. The only thing I needed to hear was Papa's voice. He was all I had, and a child who couldn't do what their Papa said was abandoned.

"Papa... it'll only be a little longer. Watch me. I'll do it... I'll show you I can do it!" I was no longer an unwanted child. I was better than Lilly now. Papa said so. He said I was his favorite. So I had to show him that I was worthy of being his favorite.

Then I heard footsteps approach the building.

"Mama Rae! Mama Claire!"

"See? I told you they would come," Aleah said.

"And I told you to *shut up*." Their blind trust in their mothers irritated me to no end. *Why, though?* I wondered. *Why does it irritate me?*

“Huh... Are you jealous, Lana?” May asked.

“Is that why you look so sad?” Aleah asked.

Krk.

I heard something crack. But I ignored it.

“Don’t be stupid. Who would be jea—”

“But I feel sorry for you, Lana,” May interrupted. “I don’t know hard adult things, but you look like you’re really sad.”

“Having no one to scold you after you do bad things isn’t good, Lana,” Aleah said.

Krik—the crack widened. I ignored it again.

“*Lana... They’re here. Do as I said.*”

“Yes, Papa.”

The door swung open with a creak. The first to step forward was Ms. Rae.

“Took you long enough, Ms. Rae,” I said.

It was time. I had to do things right so Papa would praise me... But why did I already feel like things wouldn’t go well?

Lana looked no different than she always did as she greeted us, a bright smile on her face.

A lamp, caked in dust, barely lit the room. The ceiling was in shambles and even revealed a glimpse of the overcast sky in one spot. Lana stood at the back of the room in front of May and Aleah, who were tied up.

“May! Aleah!” I cried.

“Mama Rae!”

“You came!”

The twins were unharmed, at least for the time being. I discreetly looked over them to see they were in their outdoor clothes and were properly wearing their shoes. Most importantly, however, May held her usual pouch. Good.

“Wait for me, dears. We’ll save you soon,” Claire said.

“Okay!”

“Yes, Mother!”

Claire also looked somewhat relieved to see them safe and sound.

“Hahhh, what a heartfelt reunion.” Lana held a knife in her hand, pointed at May and Aleah. I was about to take a step forward when she said, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. One more step forward and one of these girls is losing an ear.”

“Don’t!” I yelled, hurriedly stopping my foot. My plan to get in leaping range to knock the knife out of her hand had failed.

“No magic either,” she said, “or one of these girls is losing an eye.”

“We understand, so please don’t hurt them,” Claire said. Their safety came first, above all else.

“Hmm? You two seem worried. Are these children really that important?”

“Of course they are. They’re our daughters,” Claire answered.

“Even though you’re not related by blood?”

“Even then.”

“Hmm.” Lana’s bubbly smile disappeared for a brief moment as her eyes darted between Claire and the children. “I seriously just don’t get it. Children are just pawns for their parents. Aren’t you two idiots for coming here knowing the danger?”

“That’s...” Claire began, but she stopped.

Lana didn't seem to understand our affection for our daughters. Perhaps it was something that could only be understood once one became a parent themselves.

"Well, whatever. Let's finish this. You two want to save these children, right?" Lana asked.

"Of course," I answered.

"Yes," Claire said.

A cruel smile rose to Lana's face. "Then, Ms. Rae... kill Ms. Claire."

"What?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear me? I said kill Ms. Claire. Do that, and I'll free these children. Chop-chop now."

"Lana, quit being stupid and let the children go," I said.

"I don't really like repeating myself... Perhaps I should cut off a nose to help you understand?" Lana wore the same easygoing smile she always did as she said those disquieting words. She moved the knife closer to May's face, making the girl stiffen.

"Well? What'll it be?" she said, pushing me to make a decision as she flaunted the knife.

I had to kill Claire to save May and Aleah. If I didn't kill Claire, I couldn't save May and Aleah. Claire or my children.

An impossible choice.

The worst-case scenario I had envisioned shortly after the pope's attempted assassination had come to life.

My answer?

"I refuse."

"What?"

“I said I refuse, Lana.”

A resounding no.

“H-hah! Figures your lover’s life would be more precious! Of course! That’s all children amount to for parents!”

“You’re wrong, Lana. We’re saving the twins, no matter what. But sacrificing ourselves isn’t the way.”

“There will be no negotiations until our children’s safety is guaranteed,” Claire said.

We stood our ground, following Dole’s teaching. The first thing we had to do was ensure that Lana wasn’t the one in control.

I had long racked my brain about this impossible choice and concluded the best option was neither of the two options presented, but a third: To be greedy and protect both Claire and my children. Who said I had only two choices in the first place?

Dissatisfied with our answer, Lana’s expression became villainous. “Oh, really?” she asked threateningly. “I guess you don’t care if I—”

“If you so much as scratch the twins, I’ll turn you to ash right where you stand,” Claire interrupted coldly.

“Ngh.”

Of course, we didn’t want our daughters to be hurt, but we could at least hold Lana in check by threatening her life. I couldn’t be sure, but I suspected she hadn’t realized our trump card was already on site. We’d had the upper hand in this negotiation from the start.

“Well, I don’t really value my life, so—whatever!” Lana said. “If it’s for Papa’s sake, I don’t—”

“By Papa, do you mean Salas?” I asked.

“That’s right! Papa said if I dispose of you, he’ll love me and me alone!”

“Lana...”

She smiled, but something about it felt hollow. Even her gaze, full of joy, was somehow empty and vacant.

“Mama Rae, Mama Claire, please help Lana,” May said.

“She has something bad in her,” Aleah said.

The twins showed concern for Lana even after what she’d done to them. They believed she wasn’t herself and that the nice girl who occasionally played with them was the real Lana.

“Of course we will, dears,” Claire said.

“Leave it to us,” I said.

“Shut up!” Lana suddenly shrieked. She had been acting strange for a while now. I was worried she might hurt the twins in her agitation; perhaps it would be best to tread lightly from here on out.

“I’m... I’m fine... As long as I have Papa... As... as long as I obey Papa’s voice...” Lana mumbled. She appeared to be under Salas’s hypnosis as well. “Papa, tell me... what do I do?”

In an instant, her face went expressionless, and she spoke in a flat, toneless voice that was not quite her own. “Kill one of the twins. They will reconsider things then.”

“Okay, Papa!” With a look of glee, Lana gripped her knife and swung down at May’s neck. Claire and I sprang forward immediately.

Just when I thought we wouldn’t make it, our trump card played itself.

“Agh, what is this?!” Lana exclaimed.

Something soft and translucent intercepted her knife before it could reach May’s neck. It was Ralaire, who had been hiding in May’s pouch up until that moment. She was always by the twins’ side, both as a bodyguard and to neutralize the curse in their blood.

"Absolute Zero!" I cast the fastest spell I knew at the knife in Lana's hand.

"Ngh?!" The entirety of the knife and her hand froze.

Now without a usable weapon, Lana fell into panic. Claire and I took the opening to continue our onslaught.

"Flame!"

"Uplift!"

Claire made an opening in the already half-crumbled ceiling, which I then lifted May and Aleah through. The spell I used was one of my own creation, far faster to cast than the spell I'd based it off of.

"Wh-what?" Lana was bewildered.

Claire took advantage of Lana's bewilderment to close in and put Lana's frozen hand into an armlock on the ground. "Surrender yourself."

"Ngh... Let me go!"

"Rae, use the Tears of the Moon!"

"Right. O moonlight, drive out the evil dwelling in this body!" A soft light began to shine on Lana, but...

"Let me go! Papa! Papa!" Lana was unaffected and continued to thrash underneath Claire.

"Mama Rae, it's the headband!" May said from above.

"Lana said she got it from her father," Aleah explained.

"No! Don't!" Lana began to thrash even more furiously at the mention of the headband. Was it a magical tool? "You can't take this from me! It's the only thing Papa's ever given me!"

"Lana," Claire said, "I sympathize with your plight. But it is time you were freed from Salas's binding. Do it, Rae."

With Claire's hands occupied with restraining Lana, I removed the headband in her stead.

"No! Stop it—" The moment I removed the headband, Lana's eyes rolled back as she lost consciousness—likely the effects of being freed from the magical tool's power. Her thrashing came to a stop as well.

"Whew... I suppose that's it, then?" Claire asked.

"It would seem so."

Lana was neutralized, and May and Aleah were both safe. So why did I feel such a sense of unease? Would that schemer really be satisfied with such a simple plan?

"Mama Rae, there's something in the sky," May said.

"A lot of scary black things are flying this way," Aleah said.

I felt a chill run down my spine. "May, Aleah, get down—"

Before I could finish, a torrent of dark beams struck the abandoned house.

"Ngh."

I returned to my senses to find my surroundings changed. The half-crumbled house had been fully destroyed, a crater carved into the earth where it had stood.

The moment my mind registered that we had been attacked, I began looking around and calling for my family. "May?! Aleah?! Miss Claire?!"

"I'm here, Rae."

"Miss Claire! Thank goodness."

"More importantly, where are May and Aleah?"

Having been caught off guard, I hadn't had time to put up defensive magic. It was a miracle we'd come out unscathed.

“We’re okay!” I heard May’s lively voice from above the pillar I’d made with Uplift.

“May and Ralaire protected me!” Aleah said. As I peered, I saw a magic barrier was spread above them, created by May and Ralaire. I later learned that the magical tool sealing May’s magic had been destroyed by a piece of rubble when I cast Uplift.

I let out a sigh of relief knowing that the twins were safe.

“I’ll let you down now,” I said, lowering the pillar until it was level with the earth.

The twins ran up to us.

“Are you two okay?! Any injuries?! ” Claire worriedly asked.

“We’re okay, but—”

“Mother, more of those black lights are coming!”

I looked in the direction Aleah pointed to see black beams fast approaching. I hurriedly put up a barrier with my earth magic.

Just then, a figure crept out from the safety of my barrier.

“Lana! What are you doing? Get behind the barrier!” I yelled.

“I can’t... I... betrayed everyone...” she muttered, the color drained from her face.

“That wasn’t your fault! You were being controlled!”

“Even so... Life’s not worth living if Papa’s abandoned me.”

So that was how it was. The barrage of black beams were targeting not only us but Lana as well. Salas intended to kill us all, her included. She was despairing, having realized she’d lost the only thing she clung to.

“Just... let me die.”

“No!” Maintaining the barrier with one hand, I pulled Lana back with my other. It was difficult, on account of my exhaustion and her heavier body, but I managed to pull her back just as what I presumed was demon magic impacted the barrier.

It's a longer barrage this time!

"Just let me die, Ms. Rae..."

"I refuse!" I stopped Lana as she tried to leave the safety of the barrier again.

"Why...? Why are you doing this for me?"

"Something like that should be obvious! You're my student, Lana! I won't abandon you, not as long as you call me 'Ms. Rae'!" Mustering all my strength, I pulled her back. She fell toward me just as the barrage of magic ended.

"You... you idiot," she mumbled.

"I get that a lot."

"Why won't you let me die? I did something terrible to your children."

"And you'll be chastised for that dearly later," Claire said.

Lana began to cry, even as she smiled faintly. The twins rushed over to her.

"Lana, you did something bad," May said.

"You're supposed to be scolded after you do bad things, you know?" Aleah said.

They put their hands on Lana's back and pushed, saying, "One, two, I'm sorry," as they lowered their heads with her.

"Hick... guh... waah! I'm sorry... I'm sorry!" The dam finally burst, and Lana sobbed, bowing profusely all the while.

May and Aleah comforted her as she did so. It was a strange sight—in that moment, they looked far more mature than the much-older Lana.

Perhaps Lana's mental growth had been inhibited somehow. I couldn't be certain, but if Lana had been experimented on like Lilly and her mind had been controlled by Salas, then it wasn't unreasonable to think that, as a result, she might indeed be mentally younger than May or Aleah.

“Don’t cry, Lana...”

“If you cry, then we’ll start to cry too...”

The twins began sniffling, the terror of being kidnapped perhaps only now finally catching up to them.

“Mama!”

“It was so scary!”

The two girls threw themselves into Claire’s embrace. Claire began to sob as she held them tight. She must have been worried sick, despite the brave front she’d shown me.

“It’s all right, dears... Everything’s all right now...” She wore a look of relief as she tearfully hugged them. It felt like our ordeal was finally over.

No more barrages of black beams came after that, and we were able to return to the capital. And so came an end to the kidnapping incident.

Afterward, Lana was privately questioned by people from Bauer. Kidnapping was a crime, of course, but Claire and I didn’t want to file a report with the empire’s authorities.

According to her, she had been one of Salas’s human subjects, like Lilly—just as I thought. She and the other subjects had been made to compete with each other and raised to be dependent on Salas.

After his success with Lilly, Salas abandoned Lana and the others... until a year ago, when someone calling themselves a representative of Salas approached her.

“I was so happy. I thought I was needed again,” Lana explained. Salas took advantage of her loneliness to control her. She had long come to dearly treasure her only gift from Salas, a white headband. Of course, it was actually a magical tool he used to manipulate her, but Lana had only known it as proof of his trust in her.

Like with Joel, Lana and Eve were both to be sent back to Bauer. The two would

receive more thorough questioning there and assist with Salas's capture.

We spoke a bit before they departed.

"Thank you for being my teacher, Ms. Rae."

"It was a pleasure to have you as a student, Lana."

"Papa ordered me to say I liked you, but... I think I've come to really like you now."

"I can't return those feelings, you know?"

"Ha ha, I know!" Lana smiled. "Ms. Rae, Ms. Claire, I'm really sorry about what I did. I don't deserve to be forgiven, but I'll at least try to make it up to you one day. If I can ever help you with anything, please, let me know."

"Those words alone are enough," I replied.

"Indeed. Rather, please focus on capturing Salas for now," Claire said.

"Right. It's time I overcame my Papa." While I could tell Lana felt guilt and regret for what she had done, part of her sounded as though she'd been freed from something holding her back. "C'mon, Eve. You say something too."

"I don't even know how I can begin to apologize," Eve said uneasily. She was to return to Bauer temporarily, and from there she would go to Sousse—at Manaria's request.

"You're not at fault either, Eve. The only one to blame here is Salas," I said.

"But had I been stronger-willed, I—"

"No, Eve," Claire interrupted Eve's self-disparaging comment. "Magic is a powerful force. It isn't something one can resist by will alone. None of this was your fault."

"Still..."

"If there's anything you need to reflect on, it's leaving my sister without saying a word to her. Make sure you have a nice, long talk with her when you return to Sousse," Claire said.

"I'll think about it." Eve grinned wryly. She still had some reservations, it seemed. Her relationship with Manaria was none of my business, but I really wanted to help somehow.

"We'll be departing soon," the coachman called. It was time.

"So... until we meet again, Ms. Rae. Later," Lana said.

"Thank you for everything," Eve said.

"Be well," I said.

"Stay safe, you two," Claire said.

We shook hands before they left.

The moment before she boarded the coach, Lana turned as though she'd just remembered something. "Hey, Ms. Rae? Can you tell the twins something for me?"

"Of course," I replied.

"Can you tell them... I'm glad I got scolded in the end."

"I'll tell them." I nodded, which made Lana smile broadly.

Claire and I watched as the coach faded into the distance.

"Miss Claire?"

"Yes?"

"Salas is a monster."

"He is indeed."

"I despised him before, but this incident was the final straw."

"I couldn't agree more." Claire nodded deeply.

"We'll capture him—won't we, Miss Claire?"

“Absolutely.”

The two of us wordlessly—yet resolutely—nodded at one another. We would bring that man to justice no matter what.

“Shall we return?” I asked.

“Yes. To where our beloved daughters await us.”

Having learned from this incident, the security around the Bauer dorm was strengthened. May and Aleah were also never left unattended again. At that moment, Dole was watching them.

I wouldn’t let what happened that day happen ever again.

Never again.

CHAPTER 15

THE SUMMIT

“AND WITH THAT, our plan to change the empire is back to square one.”

“I see.”

Claire and I were visiting Thane in the lodging provided to visiting Bauer delegates. We told him everything that had happened, from how the empire reacted to our scheming to the incidents with our students, and we even described the kidnapping incident. We’d brought May and Aleah as well, though they were off playing in another room.

Thane’s accommodations were far neater and tidier than our own, with a bluish hue to the furnishings that gave it an oceanic feel. We were meeting in the study.

Once we were done with our report, he nodded. “I understand. Thank you for your report. There’s something I must apologize to you both for, however.”

“Apologize? What for?” Claire asked.

Thane frowned, looking uncomfortable. “I apologize for sending you to the Nur Empire as exchange students.”

“You needn’t worry about that, Your Majesty. We both understand Bauer had no other choice.”

“Besides, it’s not your fault,” I added. “If anything, the blame lies with Lady Manaria for stirring the pot, or the empire for being the cause of all the pot stirring in the first place.”

“I wonder...” Thane grinned wryly, not wholly convinced. “Regardless, I am the highest authority in the Bauer government, and as such, I bear responsibility for what happened. Forgive me.”

He slowly rose from his chair and bowed his head.

"Wha—Your Majesty, you mustn't!" Claire exclaimed.

"Just let him, Miss Claire," I said. "I'm sure His Majesty wants to make amends."

"It's as Rae says. Please accept my apology, Claire."

"Very well, then," Claire reluctantly said.

That was when the fourth person in attendance spoke up. "Why don't we leave it at that and turn our attention to what lies ahead?"

"Anything to report on the empire?" Thane addressed my father-in-law, Dole François. Assisting with political matters per request of the current Bauer government, Dole had tagged along to report to Thane, too.

Now would be a good time to explain the governmental structure the Bauer Kingdom had settled on.

Thane was the king of Bauer. He represented the kingdom and had both official and ceremonial duties to uphold as part of his position. The executive power, however, lay entirely with the government, the current chancellor of which was Irvine Manuel. It was similar to the system of government used in Japan and the United Kingdom in my old world.

As a quick refresher for those who forgot, Irvine Manuel was the younger brother of former Resistance leader Arla Manuel, and he had formerly served as treasurer for the Resistance. Arla was *technically* part of the new government as well, but she only served as an honorary advisor and didn't take on any real duties. Her job had ended with the triumph of the revolution.

A parliament had been established, with the members all voted to power by the citizens—now granted universal suffrage. You might remember how Claire fought for women's right to participate in government. Well, she was ultimately successful, and there were now female members of parliament, if only a few.

The Spiritual Church served as Bauer's judiciary, as it always had. That said, a vote of no confidence had been passed against the judges—in other words, the clergy—somewhat limiting the influence of the Church.

And that was the gist of Bauer's current state of governance. Now, back to the story.

"The empire is as uncompromising as ever. Dorothea is being stubborn to the end," Dole nonchalantly said. He had been a harsh man, but he had mellowed—softened, even. Still, you can't judge a book by its cover. He remained a frighteningly capable politician despite his genial demeanor.

Of course, that wasn't all he had going on for him.

Dole continued. "It's merely a rumor, but I've heard word that the recently exiled Princess Philine, of the reconciliation faction, has been assassinated."

I couldn't believe my ears. *Philine was... assassinated?*

"Father, is that true?!" Claire asked.

"It's unconfirmed, but a lock of her hair was sent to the imperial family. The blood was confirmed to be hers by magical tools," he answered.

"That can't be..." Claire was dismayed, and who could blame her? We might only have known Philine for a few months, but we were close friends. How could she not feel anything?

I tried to comfort her. "Miss Claire, I'm sure Philine is all right."

"B-but..."

"Trust me."

My words didn't ease her worries completely.

"This is a significant blow to reconciliation efforts with the empire," Thane said. "That being the case, how likely do you believe the empire is to accept our demands at the summit?"

"At best, around thirty percent," Dole answered. "Queen Manaria is capable, but she sorely lacks experience. The same can be said for Irvine. Dorothea is much shrewder than both of them."

"Hmm..."

"Bill should be able to perform, however. We should let him take the lead at the

summit.”

“Who is this Bill, Father?” Claire asked.

“Oh dear, I seem to have used his nickname by accident. I meant William. You’ve met William before, Claire. The king of the Alpes.”

“Ahh, His Majesty William,” Claire said. The two seemed acquainted with the Alpecian king—especially Dole, who had a nickname for him.

“But before we continue, I think it would be best for you two to head home,” Dole said.

“Huh? Why, Father? How are we supposed to prepare if we don’t know what’s going on?” Claire asked.

I wondered the same thing as well.

His next words surprised both of us. “There’s nothing to prepare for. You won’t be attending the summit.”

“Huh?” Claire said.

“Bauer has relied on your help far too much. As your father, I can no longer turn a blind eye.”

He went on to explain. “You’ve both been far too involved in our political affairs. You were even before the revolution. Not only is it not in Bauer’s best interests for you to be such lynchpins, but as a father, I can’t stand to see my daughter—and daughter-in-law—exploited any further.”

“I agree with Dole,” said Thane. “You two have done enough. We couldn’t possibly ask you two to do anything else.”

“But we came to the empire of our own volition! To create a better future for May and Aleah! We can’t just stop now!” Claire protested.

“I understand how you feel. But practically speaking, there is no need for either of you to be at the summit. Leave this to the political experts,” Dole said.

"But..." Claire frowned.

"Claire, you've done enough. You can live your own lives now. No—in fact, I'm sorry. You should have been living your own lives long before now," Dole said with sincerity.

This was just my speculation, but I believed Dole was afraid that Claire would end up like him. He'd been involved in politics since he was born, which had led to him masterminding a revolution in a way that should have ended with his execution. Now, even after the turmoil of the revolution, he still couldn't escape the world of politics. I believed he didn't want her to endure the same hardships.

"Let's do as Master Dole asks, Miss Claire," I said.

"Rae..."

"There are ways for us to help outside the political realm."

"Indeed," Dole said. "You are both intelligent and adept at magic, and you can study at school and raise your daughters. Isn't that a good enough life already?"

When he said it like that, it sounded like archaic gender roles of the variety that society forced on women... but perhaps that was the life Dole himself wished he could have led.

"I shall take my leave!" Claire declared.

"Ah, wait, Miss Claire! I shall take my leave here as well." I chased after Claire, who stormed off, feelings clearly hurt.

"Forgive me," I heard Dole murmur as I left. "Even if the world were to need you both, I would still wish for your safety instead."

Those words were probably what he truly wanted to say to her.

"Thank you for taking the time to come," the middle-aged man said as he prepared us tea.

"Not at all, Mr. Torrid. Rather, I'm sorry we didn't visit earlier," Claire said.

It had been a full day since Dole told us to withdraw from political matters when Mr. Torrid called us to him. He had arrived around the same time as Thane and the other attendees of the summit.

Torrid Magic: One of the world's few multi-casters and a brilliant scholar of magic. He had once been a researcher at the empire's Department of Magic Technology, but he had left after his inhumane experiments led to the discovery of what he called forbidden magic. He was currently the principal of Bauer's Royal Academy.

As for why such a man would want to return to the empire...

"I see... So you've opened it, then," he said, a pained but somewhat resigned look on his face.

Back when Philine was trying to gather support for her reconciliation efforts, we had opened something he left behind known as the Box of the Forbidden. It supposedly contained the culmination of the inhumane research he had conducted and, in his own words, was best left unopened. Of course, we had opened it anyway.

"I cannot apologize enough for what we did," Claire said. "Even if we believed it to be necessary, we still went against your wishes."

"Thank you. But perhaps this was simply meant to be. Human curiosity knows no bounds. I'm sure someone would eventually have discovered the same things I did, even if you hadn't opened the box." He smiled weakly. "I've returned to the empire to set things right. I doubt they'll extend me a warm welcome, but that research is simply too dangerous. I must warn them."

"Warn them?" Claire asked.

"Come to think of it, didn't the letter you sent us contain a warning? Something about being watched," I said, remembering the missive we'd received after asking him how to open the box.

"I cannot go into detail," he said. "I don't want to see you two dragged into this."

"Can't you, please?" Claire asked. "Right now, we need all the power we can get."

"Ms. Claire, you are more than powerful enough. I doubt there are many in this world who can best you or Ms. Rae when it comes to magic." He addressed us in that way because he insisted on treating us as fellow teachers of the Royal Academy.

"But the demons remain leagues above us," I said. "Miss Claire and I have been made painfully aware of this fact many times already."

By human standards, Claire and I were certainly powerful. But the Three Great Archdemons were far stronger than us. Even if you claimed Aristo and Platos had run circles around us because we'd been half-spent at the time, we'd fought Socrat at our best and hadn't so much as scratched him. If Dorothea hadn't been there, we would all have been wiped out.

We needed to be stronger.

"I don't mean to be unreasonable," Claire said, "but we simply cannot remain as we are if we are to protect those dear to us... like May and Aleah."

"Please, Mr. Torrid," I said, "can't you teach us something that will allow us to become stronger? Anything that can help will do, even that so-called forbidden whatnot you fear so much."

He pondered quietly for a while. Minutes passed before he finally said, "Have you two ever wondered just what magic is?"

"I'm sorry?" I asked, caught off guard. Just what kind of question was that?

"The ability to cause phenomena through the usage of magical power to activate magic stones... perhaps?" Claire answered.

"An exemplary answer, Ms. Claire. Then for you, Ms. Rae. What is this magical power?" he asked.

"Um... a power each person has that corresponds with their magic aptitude?" I asked, unsure.

"Precisely," he said, to my surprise. "Then to go one step further, where does this power come from?"

"Huh? Well, it comes from the body, does it not?" Claire asked.

"That answer isn't wrong, but it is hardly the whole story. There exists a step just before it forms in the human body."

"And that is..." I pressed.

His expression stiffened suddenly. "To continue the discussion beyond this point will take us into heretical territory. To know is to live being watched by the Church."

"Huh? The Church?" I asked. What did the Church have to do with this? And what did he mean by watching?

"This world has secrets," he said. "I learned but one of those secrets, and I have been monitored by the Church ever since. I fear they might be watching us at this very moment."

I hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

But it didn't matter.

"I don't care. If it gives us the strength to protect our daughters, I will do anything," Claire said.

"I feel the same way," I said. Claire and I had the resolve. How could we protect those we loved if we weren't prepared to brave a few dangers?

"You two remind me of my daughter," Mr. Torrid sighed.

"The one who died during your research?"

"Rae!" Claire rebuked.

"So you knew," he said. "Yes, my research killed my very own daughter. She couldn't bring herself to abandon the pursuit of truth, believing what lay beyond would bring happiness to many."

He looked at us with pained eyes, as though the image of his daughter were overlaid upon us. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I cannot tell you after all. I just know you would follow the same path she took, and I do not wish to see any more victims."

"Mr. Torrid, please!" Claire begged.

"Forgive me. This conversation ends here," he said with finality—when suddenly there was a knock at the door. "Hm? Who is it?"

"My name is Lilly Lilium. Do you mind if we talk a bit?"

Lilly? Why would she be visiting Mr. Torrid? I wondered.

Claire seemed to be wondering the same thing. But Mr. Torrid's reaction was far more severe.

"Th-the Church?!" he exclaimed. The color drained from his face, and sweat beaded his brow. He regarded the door with an air of great vigilance. "What does the Church want with me?"

"Mmm... how about you let me in first?" Lilly asked.

"State your business!"

"Right... How about... I came because I heard Rae and Miss Claire were here?"

I was about to reflexively respond when Mr. Torrid stopped me.

"You must have misheard. They are not," he said.

"I know they are. I have some business with them, so—oh, just open the damned door already." Lilly's voice turned cold and harsh, a far cry from her usual bouts of involuntary swearing.

"Ngh... Forgive me, Ms. Rae, Ms. Claire. It would appear I was too late," Mr. Torrid said.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Claire asked. We couldn't hide our confusion as to what was going on.

Mr. Torrid reluctantly walked over and unlocked the door.

"Good afternoon, Rae, Miss Claire." The one who walked in was unmistakably Lilly... but something was off about her. "You need to quit being so stubborn, Torrid. We're always watching you. There's no point in trying to trick us."

"I beg you, leave them out of this!" he pleaded.

"Oh, stop it... You're making me look like the bad guy here. Far from it, I'm here to help these two." Lilly smiled coldly. The sense of unease I felt heightened.

"You're not Lilly, are you?" Claire asked, her magic wand already at the ready.

"Very astute, Miss Claire. I figured you'd be the first to realize. You're correct, I am not Lilly. But that doesn't matter right now. I'll free her once we're done."

"It couldn't be—Salas?!" I exclaimed, thinking he had used his hypnosis magic on Lilly.

"No, that man has nothing to do with this," Mr. Torrid said. "She... is an apostle."

Lilly—rather, the apostle—smiled broadly at Mr. Torrid's words.

"Apostle?" Claire said, puzzled.

Even I, with my knowledge from having played *Revolution*, didn't know what Mr. Torrid meant.

"Why don't we sit down and talk? Oh, no tea for me, thank you," the apostle with Lilly's face said.

Mr. Torrid, Claire, and I looked warily at each other, but we ultimately concluded it would be best to do as this entity said.

We sat around the four sides of the table, with the apostle sitting nearest the entrance and Mr. Torrid sitting furthest. Claire and I took the remaining sides.

"Why don't I start by introducing myself? Oh, I already know all about you three, so don't worry about introducing yourselves," the apostle teased. I nodded, seeing no reason to object. The apostle smiled, satisfied, before continuing. "We are known as the apostles. We carry out the will of the Spiritual Church by intervening behind the scenes to maintain the balance of the world."

"What's your connection to Lilly? Are you her split personality?" Claire asked. There

were a lot of questions dying to be asked, but this seemed the most pressing. No matter how you looked at it, Lilly wasn't herself right now. I hoped she was all right.

"Lilly Lilium is indeed asleep at the moment, but I am not some split personality of hers. That personality is a product of Salas Lilium's meddling, and *he* is already a part of her," the apostle answered.

What did she mean by that? Had Lilly's split personality already been synthesized into her or something? But there were more pressing questions.

"Just what in the world are you, then?" Claire asked.

"Like I said, an apostle. An individual who borrows the bodies of Spiritual Church members to maintain the balance of the world. We're the fixers, if you will."

I felt out of my depth all of a sudden. What was she talking about?

"You mentioned you intervene with the world, but what exactly does that entail?" Claire asked.

"I can't quite tell you our secrets, but it involves warning and monitoring any humans who come too close to learning the inner workings of the world."

Essentially what had happened to Mr. Torrid, then. Did that mean the inner workings of the world had something to do with magic?

"So you're here to issue us a warning?" Claire asked. That seemed like the obvious assumption, with how things were going, but to my surprise, the apostle shook her head.

"No. I'm here today to make sure you get the strength you seek."

"Huh?" I murmured, perplexed. Why would a group focused on manipulating the world behind the scenes want to help us?

"You are both too weak to fight the demons. I thought granting you blessed weapons would be enough, but apparently not," the apostle said.

"Wait... were you Lilly at that time?" Claire asked.

"No, that was the true Lilly Lilium. However, the one who granted her the weapons to offer was us, the will of the Church." So she claimed. She was the spitting image of Lilly, though. If the apostle had been imitating her speech and conduct, I would have had no way to tell them apart.

"Let's get back on topic," the apostle continued. "I want Torrid Magic to teach the two of you the basics of *true* magic."

"Enough! Don't involve them any further!" Mr. Torrid exclaimed.

The apostle smiled thinly. "You misunderstand, Torrid Magic."

"How so?"

"These two aren't involved in anything due to your actions. The Spiritual Church simply needs them alive, and you just so happen to be useful for that purpose."

I took a quick glance at Claire. She looked back at me and nodded, having arrived at the same conclusion as me: The apostle's manner of speaking resembled that of the demons we'd met. We didn't yet know the significance of that, but it was clear they both regarded Claire and me as special in some way.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Torrid asked.

"That is not for you to know, Torrid Magic. Rae Taylor and Claire François, on the other hand, will be told when the time comes." The apostle coldly brushed off Mr. Torrid's question before turning to Claire and me. "You must increase your proficiency in magic at least to the point where you can do tandem casting."

"Tandem casting?" Claire asked.

The apostle nodded. "Common spells are performed by a single individual, and these fall under the category of solo casting. The opposite, tandem casting, involves multiple casters performing one spell."

"Is such a thing even possible?" Claire asked.

"It is. You can ask Torrid Magic for the details. He's already figured out the underlying theory."

"Wait!" Mr. Torrid cried. "Tandem casting is too risky! The conditions are exceptionally difficult, and if you fail—"

"Right, right. The casters will experience backlash," the apostle said nonchalantly.

Judging by Mr. Torrid's reaction, said backlash was something to be feared.

"There's no need to worry, though," the apostle said. "I guarantee these two girls won't experience any backlash."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Again, that is not for you to know, Torrid Magic. All you need to do is teach these two how to perform tandem casting."

Mr. Torrid wore a vexed look. The apostle's attitude toward him had been awful so far—as though she considered him nothing more than a tool, meant to be used.

"How rude!" Claire exclaimed. "If you're going to ask someone for something, the least you can do is show some courtesy!"

The apostle looked bewildered for a moment, before bursting into laughter. "Hee hee... aha ha ha ha!"

"Wh-what's so funny?" Claire asked.

"Oh, forgive me. I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of your statement. It's as though you think we apostles are human."

"Huh?! Are you not?!"

"No, we are not."

I felt like the more I heard, the less I understood. The ones controlling this world from the wings weren't even human? Then just what were they?

And what was this world?

The apostle continued. "We... Yes, for now, you can think of us as someone with ties to the Spirit God."

“Huh?” Claire frowned.

“There’s a more fitting term, but I doubt you would be familiar with it, Claire François. Although...” The apostle paused and looked toward me. “I suppose Rae Taylor might be.”

I hadn’t a clue what the apostle could be alluding to—or much else of what she had been saying, for that matter.

“Anyway. Rae Taylor, Claire François, please learn the basics of tandem casting from Torrid Magic and master it as best you can.”

“And if we refuse?” Claire asked.

“You won’t.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I know you won’t pass up the opportunity to obtain the strength needed to defend your family.”

“Humph.” Claire huffed. The apostle was right on the money. Claire and I would do anything to better protect our family.

“I shall take my leave, then. This girl’s about to wake up soon, anyway.” The apostle vacated her seat. She moved toward the door, then stopped and turned. “Oh, right, one last thing. Keep this a secret... or something just might happen to May and Aleah.”

Claire shot the apostle a fierce stare, but she simply left, showing no indication of caring.

That was our first contact with the apostle—no, the truth of the world.

“I don’t quite understand what’s going on, but... I cannot defy the apostle’s orders. I’ll teach you everything I know.”

As soon as the apostle left, Mr. Torrid agreed to teach us the basics of a new form of

magic. We moved to a vacant lot to the rear of the Bauer dorm. I thought it was a little narrow for practicing magic, but he said it would do fine.

Claire and I withdrew our wands and waited for his instruction.

"The apostle already said as much, but I'll reiterate just in case: I'll be teaching you a technique called tandem casting. Think of it as multiple people working together to cast a single spell."

"Is such a thing even possible?" Claire asked.

"Yes. Well, in theory it is," Mr. Torrid replied. It sounded like it was tricky to put the theory into practice. "Are you familiar with the fact that there are different types of human blood?"

"I've heard of it. Something about certain types not being compatible with others," Claire answered.

They were talking about blood types. This world lacked my world's level of medical knowledge, but it seemed they had still somehow managed to work out blood had a variety of compositions.

"It's as you say, Ms. Claire. Magic, like blood, can be compatible or incompatible as well. Tandem casting requires the casters to mix their magic, but if their magic is not compatible, there will be a rejection. At worst, this can lead to death."

He paused for a moment.

"Using this theory as a basis, I made that ring I sealed away in the Box of the Forbidden. The ring amplifies a certain type of magic but causes those incompatible with it to go berserk. I've... sacrificed countless people, including my own daughter. And yet my research has accomplished next to nothing," he said, voice laden with self-derision.

"Oh, Mr. Torrid..." Claire tried to comfort him.

"Ah, forgive me. Now's not the time for me to wallow in self-pity, is it? Let's continue. The mixing of magic is a requirement for tandem casting. Let's start by having you two practice overlapping your power."

I was suddenly reminded of my time as a student at the Royal Academy. Claire and I had received our first lesson with Mr. Torrid in a moment quite like this, not long before I encountered Ralaire. It hadn't been more than two years, but it felt like an eternity ago—perhaps a testament to just how fulfilling my time with Claire had been.

"Please start by holding hands," he said.

"Like this?" Claire asked as she held my hand. If this were the old Claire, she would have complained about having to touch a filthy commoner's fingers. Oh, how she had changed...

"Tighter, please. Interlace your fingers one by one," he said.

"Oh, like lovers?" I said.

"L-L-L-Lo-Lovers?!" Claire exclaimed. Despite her shock, she obeyed his instruction. We'd long been close enough to share nights in each other's embrace, yet there were still times when she acted like a child experiencing her first love. Oh, how adorable she was.

"I understand your hesitation, Ms. Claire, but this is a necessary step. Now, please focus on each other's presence," he said.

"Rae makes her presence known enough already..." Claire muttered.

"Ahh, Miss Claire's hand is *sooo* soft."

"Eeek! Cease stroking my palm at once!"

C'mon, it's not every day we hold hands like lovers. I'd be remiss not to enjoy it as much as I can!

Mr. Torrid continued. "Next, try channeling a small amount of pure, attribute-less magic through your hand."

"Right-o," I said.

"Wait just a moment, Rae! What are you thinking, Mr. Torrid?!" Claire said, incredulously.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Yes, of course! Sending pure magic into another person is extremely harmful. This is elementary magic theory!”

“Ohh, really?” I asked.

“You didn’t know?!” she exclaimed.

Such a fact hadn’t been anywhere in *Revolution*. I suspected it was such common sense in this world that it wasn’t even worth mentioning.

“You are correct, Ms. Claire,” Mr. Torrid said. “Under normal circumstances, it isn’t safe. I lost my daughter in just such a way. But the apostle insisted you two would be fine, so...”

“So we have no choice but to try it,” I said.

“Fine. In the event something goes wrong, I’m trusting you to heal us, Mr. Torrid.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

What we had to do was similar to what May had done when she opened the Box of the Forbidden. Attribute-less magic dispersed rather easily, so controlling it proved somewhat difficult. Taking extreme care, I slowly sent my magic into Claire’s hand.

“How is it? Do you feel sick in any way?” I asked.

“No, not particularly. In fact, I feel something warm flowing from your hand. It’s comforting.”

“Well, your magic makes me feel all hot and tingly inside.”

“Phrasing, Rae.”

What? It’s true.

“Hmm... It would seem the apostle was telling the truth,” Mr. Torrid said. “Your magics must be compatible—they’re melding together very well. Tandem casting shouldn’t be a problem, then. Let’s give it a go. You should be able to jointly cast any

magic either of you have an attribute for?"

"Meaning, between Rae and me, we can cast earth, water, or fire magic?" Claire asked.

"Indeed," Mr. Torrid confirmed. "It'll likely be a bit hard to control at first, so start by casting an extremely simple fire bullet."

"Understood. Are you ready, Rae?"

"Yes." Fire magic was uncharted territory for me. I wasn't certain how well I could do.

"Extend your connected hands forward," Mr. Torrid instructed.

"Like this?" Claire asked.

"Good. Now imagine a fire bullet forming in front of your hands. Let's have Ms. Claire focus on controlling the magic while Ms. Rae focuses on supporting."

Positioned as though we were about to begin ballroom dancing, Claire and I focused as hard as we could. We held our wand hands forward as we kept our other hands joined together by our opposite sides. But nothing happened.

"Take your time," Mr. Torrid said. "Tandem casting is an incredibly difficult technique. It can take upward of months or years of study to—"

"Oh," we chorused in unison.

A fire bullet shot from our outstretched wands, turning the tree we were aiming at to ash. The size of the projectile surprised me, as I had been limiting the strength of my magic as best I could.

"Or... I suppose not?" Mr. Torrid was at a loss for words.

"I... guess we did it," I said.

"It would seem so," Claire said.

It had taken Mr. Torrid and his daughter an inordinate amount of time to achieve tandem casting, and here we were, doing it like it was nothing. It felt... strange.

"Er, right, I suppose congratulations are in order. Well done, both of you." Mr. Torrid smiled kindly, despite being so outdone. What a heart of gold he had.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Torrid," I said.

"Thank you very much," Claire said.

"As you've experienced just now, tandem casting can create tremendously powerful magic," he said. "That was just a simple fire bullet, but imagine how devastating it would be if it were Ms. Claire's Magic Ray or Ms. Rae's Absolute Zero instead. Just remember to be careful where you use this technique—and to not to lose control."

"I see... Thank you," I said.

"I recall you could use compound spells, Ms. Rae?" he asked.

"Yes, a few."

"You should have the fire attribute available to you now, through tandem casting. If you have time, I recommend devising some compound spells with Ms. Claire."

"Thank you, we will," Claire said.

"We have lots to practice, Miss Claire."

"Indeed... but do we have to hold hands every time?" She blushed.

"What? You don't like it?"

"It's not that I don't like it. It's just... embarrassing."

"Bit late for that. We've done far more *embarrassing* things than this, you know?"

"Rae!"

"Ha ha ha!" Mr. Torrid laughed. "It's good you two are getting along, but aren't you forgetting my presence?"

"Oops. Forgive me," I said.

“Rae, look what you’ve done now!”

Sorry, but I saw a chance to tease and had to take it. Everything’s been so serious lately, I just want my flirting time with you.

“That’s all I can teach you about tandem casting itself. Let’s end by discussing a few practical applications of the technique,” Mr. Torrid said.

He proceeded to instruct us until late into the evening. We had successfully added a new weapon to our arsenal, and I was glad for it. But there were some things I couldn’t help but wonder about, such as: How had Claire’s magic and mine so easily mixed? And how had the apostle known they would?

I wouldn’t get my answers until much, much later.

The day after we had received Mr. Torrid’s tandem casting technique, we were attending class as usual—as it was a weekday.

I looked around, taking note of how few of us remained. Lana was being questioned in Bauer regarding Salas. Eve was being questioned as well, but she should soon be sent to Sousse. Joel had been deported to Bauer on grounds of blaspheming against the Spiritual Church’s doctrine. Philine was exiled and rumored to be assassinated, which of course I didn’t believe. And lastly, Frieda had disappeared around the time of Philine’s exile.

The classroom felt empty with so many people gone.

“Rae, you’ll be reprimanded if you’re not paying attention.” Noticing I had my head in the clouds, Claire poked my hand with her pen.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about how everyone’s really gone, you know?”

“I understand what you mean, but please focus on class right now.”

“Right.” I picked up the pen sitting on my notebook and turned my attention forward.

“Let’s see...” the teacher said, “Otto, can you come up and answer this question?”

Otto silently stood and walked over to the blackboard, a disgruntled look on his face. He quickly answered the problem.

"Very good. You may sit back down."

As silently as he stood, Otto returned to his seat.

Something was up. As I mentioned before, Otto was a bit of a problem child and would always, without fail, complain when asked to do something by the teacher. Yet he seemed meek today, not offering the slightest complaint—although his face still betrayed his irritation.

"Something's different about Otto today," Claire said, also taking notice.

"Yeah." *We're on the same wavelength, Miss Claire!*—is what I would have exclaimed if class weren't in session.

"I wonder if something happened," she said.

"Are you worried for him?"

"Of course. He's my classmate." The fact that she could have genuine concern for someone just because they were her classmate spoke to her virtue. I, on the other hand, didn't quite share the same goodwill, having only mild curiosity to spur me on.

"Why don't we try talking to him after class?" I suggested.

"Yes, let's do just that," she agreed.

"Huh? Why the hell would I eat lunch with you two? Get lost."

Yup, I knew it, I thought. It was actually kind of refreshing to see Otto's regular rudeness return.

We had tried inviting Otto to lunch, but he rejected us flatly. Of course, Claire wasn't the type to give up so easily.

"There's something bothering you, isn't there, Otto? Please, let us be of some help."

Claire stubbornly persisted. She was the type to go out of her way to help someone once they got on her good side. Of course, she was also liable to torment those who got on her bad side... but I digress.

"There's nothin' bothering me! Now leave me alone," Otto spat, but there was no real harshness to his voice, as though his mind were preoccupied with other things.

Oh, my. Could it be that one rumored sickness? I thought.

"Psst, Otto..." I whispered.

"What? Not you too now," he groaned.

"You seem a bit... distracted."

"You're imagining things."

"Am I? Or are you..." I paused for suspense. "*Lovesick?*"

He sighed. "Like hell I am. I'm not some nutjob with nothing but love on their mind—like you."

Oh. I guess not. And I was so certain of it too... "Well, whatever. Why don't we eat lunch here, Miss Claire?"

"Great idea, Rae."

"Wha—hey! You can't just sit where you like!"

We ignored his complaints and spread out our lunch.

"Lunch looks as delicious as ever. Thank you, Rae."

"You're welcome, Miss Claire."

"Oh, do what you want!" Otto said, fed up. He pulled out a lunch of his own and began eating.

"Did you make your lunch yourself?" I asked.

"Yeah. Got a problem with that?"

"Not at all. I just thought it looked well made."

"Not really. This stuff's pretty whatever," he said as he thrust a fork into a rolled omelet and took a bite.

"I'm not so sure I'd call making rolled omelets 'whatever'..." said Claire.

"Huh? Omelets are as whatever as it gets. You just add seasoning and heat it," Otto objected.

"But my omelets always turn out strangely crunchy even before I season them..."

"What are you—wait, do you not even know how to crack eggs right?!" he exclaimed.

Nice retort, Otto!

"I heard you come from a family of soldiers," I said. "Does that include your parents, Otto?"

"Huh? Why do you care?"

"I was just wondering if that's why you make lunch yourself."

"Yeah, I guess. No one else has the time to make it."

This was an unexpected side of Otto. Our first impression of him had been terrible, but maybe we could actually get along.

"Is your family just your parents? No siblings?" I continued.

"Why're you pelting me with all these questions?!"

"Nobody said you couldn't ask me questions back. Ask away!"

"Ugh." Otto scratched his head. "I have an older sister, I guess."

"Really? What's she like?" Claire asked. "Does she attend the Academy as well?"

"Nah, she's already graduated. She's... training to join the Imperial Army now." His tone dropped at the end. Was something up with his sister?

"So your older sister's going to become a soldier as well?" Claire asked.

"I guess. Mom and Dad were against it, but she ignored them. Wouldn't listen to me either..."

"You don't want her to become a soldier?" Claire asked.

"Well, duh. It's dangerous."

"Indeed," Claire said. "The empire is always at war with some country or another. She'll be sent to the battlefield one day—"

"One day, my ass!" he suddenly yelled. Confused, Claire and I looked at each other. "She hasn't even been assigned anywhere yet, but she still—"

"She what?" Claire asked, but Otto seemed to have come to his senses and stopped.

"Nothing. Forget about it," he said.

"Otto, please, let us help you," Claire said.

"I said forget about it!"

Otto stood, slamming his hands on his desk. The classroom went silent.

"Hm? What's this?" I said. Something had fluttered out of his desk when he slammed it. With no particular ill will, I picked it up.

"Give that back!" Otto shouted as he snatched the paper out of my hand. "Did you see it?"

"Yeah. Sorry," I said.

"Rae?" Claire asked, confused.

His eyes turned bloodshot. This wasn't good.

"Let's move to a different location," I suggested. "We need to have a nice, long talk."

"Tch."

"What in the world is going on with you two?" Claire said.

"You should come along too, Miss Claire. You okay with that, Otto?"

"Whatever."

The three of us put away our half-eaten lunches and relocated to the ever-unpopular courtyard.

I sat down on a bench. "All right, start explaining, Otto. What made you plan such a thing?"

"What thing? Don't leave me in the dark here," Claire said, confused.

Otto remained silent, so I answered in his stead. "Otto is planning to assassinate Dorothea."

"There's... a group of those who support Philine within the army."

After persistent badgering from Claire and me, Otto gradually began to talk.

"Like a faction?" Claire asked.

"Nothing that grand. Just a small number of people at the military training camp who idolize her."

"Huh? Idolize?" she said.

"Isn't this that one thing Philine mentioned, Miss Claire?" I cut in. "You know, about how some people in the army respect her for helping them?"

"Ohh, yes. She did say something like that." Back when we had been brainstorming plans to change the empire, Philine had recounted the time she saved a group of non-commissioned officers and soldiers from an instructor who was overworking them,

thus earning their respect.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Otto confirmed. "They keep passing down the story of what she did over at the military training camp. That place is mentally and physically grueling, and it's kind of the only thing giving them hope. Eventually, a group formed with the intent of supporting her. One of the non-commissioned officers Philine directly helped was a senior member whom my sister respected. Before long, she too became a devotee of Philine."

"I see... but what does any of that have to do with wanting to assassinate Her Majesty Dorothea?" Claire asked. I was dying to know as well.

He said, "You know how Philine got exiled? Well, that sent her supporters at the military training camp nuts. And then there was that rumor of her being assassinated. I'm sure you heard it."

"We did. But it's just a rumor, isn't it?" Claire asked.

"Dunno, but her supporters sure don't think so. They blame Her Majesty Dorothea for Philine's death, saying it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't exiled her. There's also the fact that she overlooked you two foreigners, which is a whole 'nother can of worms."

"Ah, right..." I muttered. As far as those soldiers devoted to Philine were concerned, Dorothea might as well have ordered Philine's death herself. The fact that Dorothea pardoned a couple of foreigners at the same time only added fuel to the fire as, from what I could gather, those soldiers were fairly nationalist.

Otto continued. "Because of all that, the group's thinking of starting a coup d'état."

"A c-coup d'état?!" I exclaimed. That had come completely out left field. I was expecting them to maybe protest or submit a formal complaint, but overthrowing the government? *You're kidding.*

"That's reckless!" Claire exclaimed. "I don't know how many people they have, but surely they realize they would be up against the world's greatest army—as well as Her Majesty Dorothea herself, right?"

"It's reckless, all right, and they know it. They don't plan to succeed," Otto explained.

"Then why?" Claire asked.

"Y'know why people become soldiers?"

"Huh?" Claire said, surprised by the sudden change in topic. "Um... because they want to protect their country?"

"Yeah. There's also some who do it just 'cause their family's been doing it for years, or for the money, or whatever. But deep down, everybody's doing it because they want to defend their country. Nobody'd put up with the grueling training for that."

"I imagined as much," Claire said.

"But what do you do when that same country goes to hell, and the elites at the top don't have the slightest inclination of fixing it? Or worse, they kill those that try?"

Claire could say nothing to this.

"This coup is their message. An appeal from a bunch of guys wanting to change the sorry state of this country," Otto said. His sister and her comrades didn't expect success in the slightest. They simply wanted Dorothea to know they were serious, even at the cost of their lives.

"I doubt Her Majesty Dorothea would care," said Claire. "Their deaths will be meaningless."

"Honestly, I think so too," he said.

"Then tell your sister that, Otto. Don't waste your life on this coup," Claire insisted.

"The heck? I ain't a part of the coup."

"Huh?"

That was unexpected. I had been certain he and his sister were working together.

"Then why did you have a rough blueprint of the Imperial Castle with guard shifts in your desk?" I asked. "You even had arrows pointing out an infiltration route."

"How'd you figure out that much?" he asked.

"The two of us worked security for the pope's visit," Claire answered.

"Just from that? Man, what a mess this turned out to be..." Otto scratched his head. "I found a suicide note my sister wrote for the family."

"O-oh..." Claire said.

"I noticed she was being weird when she stopped by home a week ago. Like, acting all nice even though she usually ignored me. So I sneaked into her room after she went back to the military training camp and found the note in her desk."

I couldn't imagine how distressed he must have been. It had to have been horrifying to find a family member's suicide note.

"She wrote, 'There's something important I gotta do. I'll be crossing over first, but you gotta live on, Otto.' Can you believe the nerve?" He clenched his fists and hung his head. Maybe he was crying; I couldn't tell. He'd done nothing but complain about her so far, but from what I could tell—

"You love your sister, don't you, Otto?" I said.

"Wh-what?! Oh, shut up," he said.

"Oh, yeah. One hundred percent." My bad habit of joking around when things turned serious had reared its ugly head again, but I earnestly believed Otto cared deeply for his sister. Whether he had feelings for her romantically or as family was lost on me, but he had said he wasn't a 'nutjob with nothing but love on their mind' like me, so it was probably just familial love.

"So essentially, you're planning to kill Her Majesty Dorothea before your sister tries to?" Claire asked.

"Got a problem with that?"

"I do. It's suicide," she said.

"I know that already! I don't need you to tell me!" And yet he had planned it. He probably couldn't bring himself to do nothing.

"We should consult with Father," Claire suggested.

"Yes," I replied after a moment's hesitation. "Master Dole might come up with a good plan."

"You're going to help me?" Otto said, nonplussed. I understood his surprise. We stood to gain nothing from this. But even so—

"We won't assist with any assassination plots, but we can't very well do nothing while a classmate needs our help," Claire said.

"I... tried to punch you before, though."

"Did you? I only recall you making a fool of yourself."

"Sh-shut up!" He blushed like an abashed child. I had been older in my past life, so part of me saw Otto as a young, immature boy.

"Do you know when the coup is meant to take place?" Claire asked.

"You know that summit coming soon? It'll be the same day," he said.

"That doesn't leave us a lot of time. Rae, let's take a half-day to return to the dorm and form a plan."

"Good idea."

"Should I do anything?" Otto asked enthusiastically.

"Nothing, for the time being. Take particular care not to do anything rash, unless you want to ruin everything," Claire said.

"Ngh..."

"Just leave things to us and wait. We'll make sure your sister stays safe," she continued.

"All right. I'm counting on you."

We'd succeeded in preventing Otto from doing anything reckless. Now we just had to deal with Philine's supporters.

The bell signaling the end of lunchtime rang.

"Can you tell the teacher we left early?" Claire asked Otto.

"Yeah."

"Let's hurry home, Rae."

"Let's."

Jeez, Claire was truly too sweet-natured for her own good. But that was exactly what I loved about her.

"A coup d'état..."

After returning from the Academy, we went to Dole's lodgings and told him everything we'd heard from Otto. His apartment was slightly smaller than ours, with only a kitchen, a living and dining room, and a bedroom. The furniture was plain, valuing function over form—especially the sort of form an ex-noble would be used to.

The three of us sat around a table with full teacups in front of us. Dole was wide-eyed with shock at first, but he gradually grew despondent.

"More young lives will be lost at this rate," he said.

"Can you lend us any wisdom, Master Dole?"

"Please, call me Father-in-Law, Rae."

"You're quite particular over something so trivial, Father-in-Law."

"There's nothing trivial about it."

The two of us bantered, but I could tell his smile didn't reach his eyes. Dole made me uncomfortable when he acted like this. It meant he was thinking up something grim—something I wouldn't like. It didn't help that he was often justified too.

"Where are May and Aleah?" he asked.

"They're playing in their room," Claire answered. "Don't worry, the guards you hired are with them."

"Good. Any price for my granddaughters."

After the kidnapping incident, Dole had hired guards for the twins. Both were women, former bodyguards of Dole's from back when he was a noble, so he could attest to their skill. They looked like nothing more than shrewd career women to me, but apparently, they were both experts in hand-to-hand combat as well as magic. Of course, that meant their services cost a pretty penny, but Dole generously paid for it all out of the salary he had come to earn after returning to the political scene.

I actually knew one of the women, but that's a topic best saved for later.

"They truly are a big help," I said. I couldn't help but wonder why he was so interested in confirming May and Aleah's whereabouts all of a sudden. Was he about to say something he didn't want them to hear? I had a bad feeling about this...

"Claire, Rae," he said.

"Yes, Father?"

"Did you come up with a good idea?"

The two of us urged him on hopefully. But those hopes were soon dashed.

"Give up on Otto's sister and the rest," he said.

"Give... up? What do you mean?!" Claire exclaimed.

"Just that. Don't try to save them. Let them attempt their coup."

"How could you say such a thing?!" Claire looked at her father with disbelief, as though she were regarding a stranger. "You want us to do nothing as they die?!"

"That's not how I'd phrase it. I'm saying we should respect their wishes," he said.

"That's the same thing! I won't accept such a reason! Explain yourself!" Claire

pressed him, raising her voice.

I felt the same way she did... but I'd also had a feeling it would end this way from the very moment she suggested asking Dole for help.

"The coup d'état is the empire's problem," he said. "It's not something we should concern ourselves with. Surely you understand it's not our place to intervene in another country's politics?"

"But—"

"Most importantly, Claire, the coup will be beneficial to Bauer." Dole stroked his moustache. His usual gentle expression was gone, replaced by the impersonal one he reserved for work. A chill ran down my spine.

"Wha—do you realize people will *die*, Father?!" Enraged, Claire stood—slamming her hands on the table as she did so.

"Please calm down, Miss Claire," I said.

"Not you too, Rae! How can I be calm when—"

"Please, Miss Claire. I sympathize with you so much, it hurts. But let's hear him out. We're the ones who came to him, remember?"

"Gah!" Claire, with a fierce look of indignation, relented and sat down. Her anger still raged, but she couldn't forgo civility. She scowled at Dole as the discussion resumed.

"By beneficial, I assume you mean politically?" I asked Dole.

"Exactly." He nodded, then took a sip of his tea. Perhaps hoping to calm Claire, he took ample pause before continuing. "We don't know the scale of the coup, nor how it will affect Dorothea, but it is a coup nonetheless. It will be a blow to the empire, and an opening for us."

He spoke in a frighteningly matter-of-fact tone. I was reminded of the time he'd insistently defended the nobility to Claire.

"Think about it: The coup will happen on the day of the summit. With so many foreign leaders present, the empire will *have* to take responsibility, no matter how

easily the attempt is suppressed. That is a powerful diplomatic advantage to have." A faint smile rose to his face. His explanation was clear: Bauer's prosperity came first, even at the cost of lives.

"You would use the lives of those youths as political *bargaining chips*!?" Claire asked, incredulously.

"They are not my people. And if we do not strike the empire while we can, it *will* be the lives of our people instead."

"That's... that's...!" Claire couldn't accept it. She knew, however, that if she were to weigh the lives of Bauer's youths against the empire's, the scales would not be even. But that didn't excuse doing nothing as people died. Not to Claire.

Seeing his daughter so worked up, Dole sighed understandingly and looked her in the eyes. "Claire, you're too arrogant."

"I am? Are you sure you don't mean yourself, who sees human beings as mere pawns?" she seethed.

"Since when have you been mighty enough to save everyone?" he asked.

"Wh-what... I..." That was all it took to leave Claire at a loss for words. She hadn't intended to think so highly of her own ability, but that only made it all the more painful a realization.

Dole didn't relent. "Man is not God. We must choose the few we can save. I won't disavow having ideals, but you must realize they are nothing more than that, ideals. You cannot escape reality."

Claire could say nothing in return.

"Or what? Did being called the *hero* of the revolution make you think you actually were one?" he asked, a clear malice in his mocking tone.

Claire snapped. Her face twisted with rage as she raised her hand. Dole didn't so much as blink, calmly watching his daughter move.

"All right, that's enough." A hand caught Claire's before it could strike Dole. A hand that wasn't mine.

“Bill...”

“Master William?!”

“Hey, Dole. Hey, Claire. It’s been a while.” That casual voice felt entirely out of place in this tense situation. The speaker was a man in the prime of his life who had seemingly appeared out of thin air. I was about to pull out my wand when a woman next to him stopped me.

“Hey, Rae. It’s been, what, how long since the cook-off?”

“Lene? Then this must be...”

“Yup.”

Lene, now a citizen of the Alpes, appeared to be attending to this man. I connected the dots and realized who he was.

“You must be Rae Taylor,” said the man. “I’ve heard a lot about you... Though you look more normal than I thought you would.”

“O-oh, really?” I said.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. Well, you can probably already guess.” With that, the man gracefully put his hand over his chest and nonchalantly said, “I’m William. I may not look it, but I’m actually the King of the Alpes. Feel free to call me Bill.”

“This isn’t your place to interfere, Bill,” Dole said sternly.

William countered with a tactful smile, playing with what I assumed to be naturally curly hair as his olive-brown eyes calmly surveyed Dole. His build and height were similar to Dole’s, but he had a different air. Dole’s was that of a shrewd politician, while William had the loose aura of a pick-up artist or a swindler.

“You’re too serious, Dole, and too clever for your own good. You’re so clever, you’ve gone full circle back to foolish,” he said.

"Don't patronize me. We're discussing something serious here," Dole replied.

"Hey, I know. I can be serious too, although nobody ever believes me for some reason. Aha ha ha!" he laughed.

"How do the two know each other?" I asked Lene.

"Master Dole studied abroad in the Alpes when he was younger," she said.

According to her, the two had hit it off right away. They'd both been gifted students looking for someone they could debate with as an equal and quickly recognized each other as a once in a lifetime rival. Their bond had lasted for almost twenty years now.

"You're trying to play the villain for Claire's ideals, aren't you, Dole?" William asked teasingly.

Dole glared at him.

"What do you mean, Master Bill?" Claire inquired, surprised.

"He's trying to protect you *and* your lofty ideals. He knows you can't succeed based on ideals alone, so he's trying to be kind by shooting you down instead."

"Father...?" Claire looked over, but Dole awkwardly averted his eyes. It appeared William was spot on.

Dole's number one priority was, without a doubt, Bauer. He wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice his daughter in pursuit of a better future for his country—that much had been made clear during the Bauer Revolution. But that didn't mean he didn't love his daughter. He just loved her in his own way, even if the way he expressed it wasn't the clearest.

"Why, Father? You could have told me from the start. You didn't need to insult me. I would have listened," Claire said.

"What difference does it make? I still believe we should allow the coup to occur." Dole crossed his arms and shut his eyes. I couldn't help but think it was clear which parent had given Claire her stubborn nature.

"Oh, you needn't be so obstinate, Dole," William said.

"Humph. Let's hear it then. What's your opinion on the matter?"

"A coup d'état would be unseemly. I say we prevent it."

"Master Bill!" Claire smiled, overjoyed to finally have a supporter.

"You're going to allow this opportunity to slip by?" Dole said.

"This isn't an *opportunity*, Dole. If anything, it's a risk."

"How so?"

"The coup will be on the day of the summit, right?"

"Yes," Dole replied. "It's perfect. The empire will be at fault for endangering everyone."

"Who's to say the empire won't blame us for inciting the coup?"

"That's a baseless fear."

"Is it though?" William tilted his head. "The truth is, you see, we've known about the planned coup for a while now. And yet we haven't done a single thing about it."

"Knowing and inciting are completely different things."

"Sure. But do you really think Dorothea will care about that if she suspects us?"

"Humph."

"They could even, say, torture those involved with the coup until someone 'confesses' that they were supported by Bauer."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Dole protested, and understandably so.

William nodded. "Right. But is it any more ridiculous than thinking a coup would be *purely* beneficial to us?"

"That's..." Dole hemmed and hawed.

"And did you forget who we're dealing with here? Dorothea's the kind to declare war with the same composure with which one pours milk into their tea. No matter what path we take here, the end result is going to be messy. So we might as well take the path where we stand to lose the least."

"So that's it then? You'd stop the coup just to defend Claire's naive ideals?" Dole scoffed.

"Don't be an idiot. What matters here are real human lives." William paused. "Look... being able to view things through a political lens is good and all, but once you forget the value of life, you're nothing but a monster."

"Sophistry." Dole dismissed him out of hand.

"I still haven't forgiven you for what you did during the Bauer Revolution," William said. "Without even consulting me, your friend, you tried to kill yourself, and you were even ready to let Claire die. You're too willing to sacrifice lives for the greater good."

"And what's wrong with that?" Dole challenged.

"Everything. Is that the kind of world you want your grandchildren to live in?"

"Ngh..." Dole was at a loss for words, unable to refute such a statement. One more push should be enough.

"Master Dole, may I speak?" I asked.

"You needn't ask permission from your father-in-law. Speak."

"Thank you. Even supposing allowing the coup to happen were the diplomatically practical option, don't you think it would leave a bad taste in your mouth? At best, those involved with the coup would be given the death penalty. At worst, their families would *also* be executed as a preventive measure."

"That is true."

"It's also a fact that the citizens adore Dorothea and are more likely to believe her than foreigners. She could easily turn the coup into an opportunity to rile the citizens against Bauer. If anything, this coup might strengthen the empire's unity."

Dole said nothing, thinking.

I continued. "If the coup truly was nothing but advantageous for Bauer, then it would be best to make use of it as you say. But as it stands, I don't believe that to be the case."

"Hmm..." Dole thought quietly for a moment. "Claire, let me hear your thoughts."

"I..." Claire cast her eyes down once before looking up and firmly meeting Dole's gaze. "I want to help those people. I think they will be the key to changing the empire."

"Go on."

"Princess Philine planted the seed of hope within them. That hope is still only a bud, but if we stand by doing nothing, it will be nipped before it blooms."

"Is that a decision based purely on emotion?"

"No," she resolutely declared. "If Dorothea's dictatorship is to end, it needs to be at the hands of the empire's own citizens. If the people learn to think for themselves and come to question the status quo, the dictatorship will naturally be undone."

"In other words, the survival of those planning the coup is beneficial to Bauer?"

"Yes. We mustn't allow them to die if we're to change the empire."

Dole carefully considered Claire's words. No doubt, countless profit-loss calculations, strategies, and numbers were flitting about in his head. Eventually, he said, "Very well. We'll try to stop the coup."

"Oh, thank you, Father!" Claire said, overjoyed.

"It's still too early to rejoice, Claire," William warned. "We still haven't any idea how to stop the coup in question."

"Then... what if Rae and I tried to convi—"

"I don't think that's a very good idea. The two of you are partially responsible for Princess Philine's exile, right? I doubt they would be so inclined to listen to you,"

William said.

"That's... true..." Claire began to brood.

"Um, I have an idea," I said.

"Oh? What is it?" William asked.

"If they won't listen to us, why don't we bring a third party to our side and send them over?"

"That could work. You got anyone in mind?"

"In fact, I do. Josef Gesner, Dorothea's manservant and a sympathizer of Princess Philine's. I think we have a good shot at convincing him to join our cause."

We had come to the barracks adjoining Nur's military training camp. After saying we were there to meet with Otto's older sister, we were taken to a reception room. Outsiders wouldn't usually have been admitted, but thanks to a certain person's influence, we were allowed.

Being merely a place for non-commissioned officers and soldiers-in-training to live, the barracks were practical without so much as a hint of elegance. Even the reception room was no different, which really drove home that this only functioned as a place for people to sleep and eat.

"Adelina Reiner, reporting!"

Whoa—that must be a military thing.

The booming voice of Adelina, Otto's older sister, could be heard before she opened the door. She was a tall woman with a short, masculine haircut and a well-built body. I could certainly see a bit of Otto in her. She wore a brown uniform tailored with practicality in mind. I assumed this was the uniform provided to all soldiers-in-training.

Noticing Claire and me, she glared and bellowed, "What are these Bauer dogs doing here?!"

Such a reaction was undoubtedly due to the circumstances surrounding Philine's exile, but still! What a thing to call someone.

"That's quite the greeting. Are all imperial soldiers so crass?" Claire asked.

Ah... I knew Claire wasn't the kind of person to take an insult sitting down, but I would have preferred if she refrained for the sake of our objective.

"There's no need to shout like that," said a calm voice.

Adelina's eyes widened in surprise as she noticed the speaker. "M-Master Josef?!"

"Yes. I apologize for our sudden visit."

Accompanying Claire and me was none other than Dorothea's manservant, Josef. It was thanks to him that we'd even been allowed into the barracks.

"Why are you with the enemy?!" Adelina asked, glancing back at our faces.

"They are *not* our enemy," Josef said more severely. "We have an armistice with Bauer."

"Only on the surface," she replied. "Besides, it's because of them that Lady Philine..."

"We're here today to talk about that very Philine. Please sit down first," he said.

You wouldn't think it, what with how easily Dorothea blew him off, but Josef conducted himself with the skill expected of one who served an empress. He was able to talk Adelina down—and although she still wore a look of protest, she obeyed, sitting down.

"We know what you're plotting and have come in hopes of stopping you." Josef skirted around the truth, but his meaning was clear.

Adelina's face whitened. Still, she attempted ignorance. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about." She was probably trying to protect the others involved in the coup.

"Then allow me to be more direct," Josef continued. "We know you're planning a coup d'état on the day of the summit and have come to stop you."

This time, there was no ambiguity in Josef's words. Adelina went pale as a ghost. The man who served as Dorothea's personal manservant knew of the plot, which had to mean that, by extension, the empire knew as well.

"You can still turn back. Her Majesty Dorothea is unforgiving to those who defy her but tolerant of those who repent. I implore you to make the right choice," he said.

"The right choice?" Adelina muttered. "Then I ask you, was exiling Lady Philine, Dorothea's own daughter, who so cared for the future of this country, the right choice? It's because of her that Lady Philine is... is..."

Adelina couldn't bring herself to say those last words. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes as she clenched her fists. She had clearly adored Philine.

"While a soldier such as yourself would normally not be privy to such details, Her Majesty's decision was made with Lady Philine's best interests in mind," said Josef. "Her Majesty was thinking of Philine's well-being, in her own—"

"But Lady Philine died because of her!" Adelina yelled, cutting him off. She made no attempts to hide the tears spilling forth as emotion overtook her. "Lady Philine wasn't meant to die in vain! She was meant to build a new future for this country, together with us! So why... why?!"

The Philine I knew was an introverted, weak-willed, and clumsy young girl. The Philine these soldiers idolized was someone else entirely. To be blunt, I never would have imagined Philine could garner such a following. Maybe it was some kind of hidden advantage she got for being *Revo-Lily*'s protagonist, like plot armor?

Josef allowed her to agonize uninterrupted for a while before solemnly stating, "You are a soldier. It is not a soldier's role to think about the empire's future. Your role is simply to obey the orders that come from above. Were you not taught that?"

"I'm well aware of what I'm meant to do! But do you really believe the empire is well?! Are we not slipping further and further from our ideals with every passing day?!"

"Know your place, Adelina Reiner." The gravity with which Josef said those words caused not just Adelina, but Claire and me to straighten in our seats as well. "Do you know why you soldiers are allowed to carry weapons? Because the empire grants them to you."

His words were cold and blunt. He reminded me of the way Dole got whenever politics were involved.

"Do not misunderstand. The power you have is not your own. it is the empire's. The money used to train you comes from the empire. The army exists to serve the empire and nothing else."

Every word he uttered had been drilled repeatedly into the minds of every soldier here. He was deliberately trying to dredge up those memories.

"And another thing... I believe you misunderstand Lady Philine's present circumstances. She is not dead," he said.

"What?" Adelina looked like she couldn't believe her ears. That was probably the last thing she'd expected to hear.

He continued. "As you know, the empire has many enemies. Her death was faked in order to circumvent the possibility of assassination."

"B-but a lock of her hair was sent to the imperial family!" she said.

"The hair, as well as the blood on said hair, were real. We needed to make her death look all the more convincing," he said matter-of-factly.

But Adeline remained skeptical. "I understand... But can you prove she's alive?"

"Why would we leave proof behind if we're trying to fake her death?"

"I... don't know what to believe," she said hesitantly.

Josef rubbed his temples. "Adelina... I don't understand why your people didn't question such a thing in the first place. Think about it: Her assassination was only days after her exile, and we announced it all too quickly. And do you really believe Her Majesty of all people wouldn't try to take revenge if her daughter were killed? Most people would realize it was all an act."

He looked over our way as he said that. I, for one, had indeed figured such was the case.

"Then... Lady Philine is alive?" she asked.

"That she is. She should be poring over her studies as we speak."

Adelina buried her face with her hands and wept, saying, "Thank goodness... thank goodness," over and over.

Wow. Philine, you got a real die-hard fan.

"Do you understand now?" he continued. "You have no reason to start a coup. It'll only cause trouble for—"

"No," she stated clearly. Wiping away her tears, she continued, "My convictions are only stronger now that I know she is alive. We will carry out the coup and install Philine as the new empress."

"Were you not listening, Adelina? Lady Philine is alive." A hint of alarm crossed Josef's face as things took an unexpected turn.

"That is all the more reason to go through with the coup. We must succeed so she can return." In contrast to Josef, Adelina appeared as though she had cast away all her worries.

Personally, I thought she sounded insane.

"Please reconsider," he pleaded. "Surely you know Her Majesty's strength? Your little insurrection will amount to nothing."

"Then so be it. My comrades fear not death but rather an empire without a future."

Whoa, whoa, whoa! This isn't going anywhere near according to plan!

That was when Claire interjected. "Excuse me, but what in the *world* are you thinking? Was the coup not planned because you believed Lady Philine had died? What meaning is there in carrying it out now?"

"Silence, dog of Bauer. You wouldn't understand."

"*Pardon?*" Claire's countenance changed completely.

Oh, she's pissed. I mean, I do love her angry face, but now isn't the time for it... I interrupted, "Please calm down, Miss Claire. And Adelina, I believe you've said a little too much."

"Humph!"

"Humph!"

The two of them both turned away with a huff.

Yikes... I shook my head. "Why are you so insistent on going through with the coup?"

"I'm not repeating myself again." Adelina shot me right down.

Jeez. "I see. By the way, are you aware that treason is a crime?"

"Of course."

"Right, of course. You're a soldier, after all. But were you also aware that all men within three degrees of kinship to you will be executed, and that all women and children over six will be sentenced to work at mining camps for life?"

"I've known. I've sent my parents a letter telling them to leave the country that should arrive around the time of the coup."

It appeared she'd put *some* thought into this. But—

"Where will they go?" I asked.

"That's... M-my family will figure it out; I believe in them."

"Would the family of your collaborators be as safe though?" I asked. "There's also the fact that escaping the empire would mean forgoing its protection. I'm sure you're aware how other countries view the empire. You wouldn't be planning a coup, otherwise. What kind of welcome do you think they'd give those who ran from it?"

A look of shock crossed Adelina's face. It seemed she hadn't thought that far.

"What are you trying to say?!" she demanded, still stubborn.

“I’m saying your actions will have consequences for people other than you.”

I genuinely believed she’d come around if she thought this through clearly. So I continued, speaking calmly so as not to agitate her. “Let’s assume your families don’t escape the country. Even if they avoid being sentenced by amnesty or pardon, they’ll still never be able to return to their old lives. Their friends will stop associating with them. Their workplaces will fire them. Stores might even refuse to sell them food. That’s what happens to the families of traitors.”

“Th—that’s...”

Betraying your country carried lasting consequences. That wasn’t to say I believed one should never rise up against oppressive dictatorships—which Adelina believed was now the time to do—but one needed to be aware of all the risks inherent in doing so.

I continued. “Above all else, the family you leave behind might come to resent you.”

“I wouldn’t mind that. For the greater good, I—”

“It hurts, you know. Being hated by your own family.”

I thought back to Misaki, my friend from my past life. The only ones who mourned him after he committed suicide were his friends—the ones who understood his plight. That included Kosaki, Shiko, and me, of course. Misaki’s family had ended up resenting him.

When someone commits suicide, people’s reactions generally take one of two forms: sympathy for the victim and/or blame for those around them. People can’t help but question why such a thing could have been allowed to happen. Misaki’s family never accepted him being gay nor acknowledged him as a man, so when they wound up being blamed for his death, any love they’d ever had for him died an all too easy death. From their perspective, he’d said some nonsense and then died, leaving their family to bear the disgrace.

My heart hurt every time I remembered it.

“Otto’s worried about you, you know,” I said.

“He is?”

"Yes. He might not be all that forthright about it, but he's worried about what you're trying to do. Are you really willing to trample his feelings?"

Adelina went silent. Not all families got along, but from what I could tell, the Reiner family was tight-knit. Could she really ignore her brother's concerns?

"I also don't believe Lady Philine would want a coup to take place," I went on.

"What do you know about her? You're the reason she was exiled in the first place."

"That way of thinking is disrespectful to Lady Philine. She isn't the type to be so easily deceived. She took action because she wanted to change this country herself."

I couldn't deny that Claire and I had our own ulterior motives, but Philine had acted in pursuit of her own beliefs. We'd only ever given her the opportunity and support she needed.

"Going back a bit," I said, "remember how Philine's hair was sent as proof of her death? Why do you think she would send her hair?"

"What do you mean why? It's not like she could cut off bits of her ear or nose, now could she?"

"I think her hair was a message to Her Majesty."

"Huh?" Adelina looked puzzled.

"The Philine you know is dead,' or something along those lines. Like a Dear John letter... although I suppose that might not be a thing in this world. Erm... a declaration, perhaps."

A look of understanding rose to Adelina's face.

"I don't think Lady Philine's given up. She still has things she needs to do," I said. Of course, I was possibly *wildly* off the mark, but hey. "That being the case, would it not be better to wait for her and find out what she truly wants instead of digging your own grave now? She will need people like you when she returns."

"And if she doesn't return?"

"If she doesn't return, then somebody will need to carry on her will. And who better to do that than you guys, as her followers? For now, I recommend you rise up the ranks within the army. You're going to need influence if you're to achieve anything."

The Nur Empire was a military state. Gaining rank in the army could give Adelina the chance to influence the country the way she wanted.

"And... personally, I don't want to see one of the few precious things Lady Philine managed to earn for herself be so meaninglessly lost," I said.

"You mean...?"

"Yes. You all."

Back when we'd first started strategizing together, the only people Philine had on her side, other than Claire and me, had been Adelina and the other soldiers. They were the only allies she had gained through her efforts alone. I couldn't bear to see them lost for no reason.

Adelina pondered pensively for a time. Her inner turmoil was surely intense. The decision to attempt a coup d'état couldn't have been a whim, but the result of much thought and deliberation. No matter how much logic I used to refute her, the decision to back down at this point was not an easy one.

"Just what about this is so difficult for you to understand?" Claire said impatiently. "If you go through with the coup, you are all but sure to fail. Your households will be left in ruins. What more is there to consider?"

"You're not from the empire. You wouldn't understand," Adelina said.

"It's precisely because I'm not from the empire that there are some things I *can* understand."

"And what would those be?"

"I understand you and your people care about the future of this country."

Adelina's eyes opened wide.

"But for that future's sake, you must wait," Claire went on. "Now is not the time."

Adelina said nothing, listening.

"Your people have an unwavering will, and you do not fear Her Majesty. That fact won't change, will it?"

"Of course not," Adelina replied.

"Then you must endure the wait for now. You mustn't do anything rash. At least not until Lady Philine makes her intentions known."

At Claire's words, Adelina seemed to come to some realization. She remained silent, as if turning those words over in her head.

"I implore you as well, Adelina. Please reconsider" Josef lowered his head.

After some further deliberation, she reluctantly said, "All right. I'll try talking to my comrades."

Several days had passed since we managed to talk down Adelina, and now the four-nation summit was upon us.

The summit was held in one of the Nur Empire's finest hotels, a lavish, elegant building that sharply contrasted with the cold practicality the empire was known for. The sculpted reliefs adorning the entrance were just one of many fine examples of craftsmanship that could have put Bauer's Royal Palace to shame.

With so many high-profile people present, the security was understandably through the roof. A number of soldiers were posted at the entrance, carefully performing body searches on anyone passing through. I underwent a body search as well, although I felt they took a particularly long time to check me. Thankfully, they made sure the people performing the pat downs were of the same gender as the ones being searched.

Why was I attending the summit, you might ask? Well, I'd been hired to help out with security. Claire and I were some of Bauer's most distinguished magic users, so the security team had headhunted us. Dole and Thane protested to the bitter end, of course.

Claire and I were searched, then received our wands from an attendant, since obviously, we needed our wands to do our jobs. We could use magic without wands, but nowhere near as proficiently. Naturally, our wands were also blessed, as we'd had a number of run-ins with demons since coming to the empire.

The Bauer dignitaries were searched after us, among them Thane, Dole, and Mr. Torrid. A few people were accompanying them for secretarial purposes, but those three formed the main contingent, while Claire and I served as their escorts.

After the Bauer dignitaries were searched, the dignitaries from Sousse and the Alpes followed. Among the Sousse dignitaries was Manaria, and among the Alpes dignitaries were William and Lene. Manaria's presence was a given, but it was a surprise to see Lene—formerly an exiled vagabond without a country to call her own—attending an international conference as an advisor of sorts. It felt like destiny had brought us back together again, but I knew it was her hard work that had made this possible.

The empire's staff led the three groups to the venue. Flowers and paintings lined the corridor, meant to engage guests throughout the walk. Few of us felt inclined to appreciate them, however, with somber looks on our faces as our thoughts fixed on the conference ahead.

"We have arrived." The attendant pushed open the door. My eyes fought to adjust to the blinding light for a moment. Once they did, a large round table came into view.

"You've come. I am Dorothea Nur. Let this conference be productive."

The attendees from the empire were already seated, and Dorothea greeted us as their representative. As with the conference with the pope, she kept her words short and succinct.

"Please be seated," the attendant instructed us. The three groups obeyed.

In all—with the entrance situated to the south—we sat at the table with Bauer to the east, Sousse to the west, Nur to the south, and the Alpes to the north. In Japan, we had something called kamiza, or the seat of honor, where the distinguished guest sat furthest from the entrance, but it appeared that wasn't a custom in this world. Perhaps that was why they used a round table, so nobody would argue about who got what seat.

"I would like to get straight to the point, as I'm not one for wasting time. Any objections?" Dorothea said, scanning the table. No one objected.

And so, the summit finally began.

"Let's get to the point. What are your demands?" The first to get the ball rolling was Dorothea, barreling through with her own brand of logic.

"We ask but one thing," Manaria replied. "Cease your aggression and start working toward peace." Instead of the Royal Academy uniform I was so used to seeing her in, she wore a dark-blue suit jacket with gray slacks—looking killer as she broke gender norms.

"Hmm..." Dorothea frowned.

"I mean, you don't really believe the empire can keep going if it continues making enemies at this rate, right? If we're ever to reconcile, now is the time," William said, half-joking and half-serious.

"I see no reason to," Dorothea said. "The empire has strength to spare."

"So you say, but the rest of us are prepared to join hands and fight if need be," Thane replied concisely, face fixed in its usual dour expression. "Our kingdom still hasn't forgotten the underhanded schemes you subjected us to during our revolution."

"Humph. All is fair in war. Or were you under the false impression that those schemes were carried out because we were weak?" she asked.

The air grew charged between them. This was *exactly* why I hated politics. Just watching made my stomach churn. Never in a million years would I have gotten involved if I hadn't had my daughters and Claire to think about.

Of course, Claire's opinion on the subject differed.

"Besides," Dorothea continued, "Bauer isn't one to shy from scheming either, are you?"

"What do you mean to say?" Thane asked.

"Did you not try to entice my soldiers to revolt? I'm not as blind as you'd like to believe."

She was talking about the now-abandoned coup d'état headed by Adelina and her fellows. I didn't object, not wanting to out their identities, but I didn't like Dorothea framing the coup as something Bauer had tried to instigate.

"What's that? You're such a poor leader, you can't even keep your own army in check?" William cut in as the situation turned precarious.

"Why, you—"

"Aha ha ha! Hey, now, it's just a joke! But really, I think it's best you leave the baseless accusations at that."

On the surface, William's words sounded like simple buffoonery, but I could tell he was skillfully maneuvering the conversation. I could see why Dole trusted him so.

"You mean to say it's a coincidence that a coup d'état was planned for the very same day you all just so happened to be in my empire?" she asked.

"No, no, I doubt that's a coincidence at all. That's probably the way they figured they could best get at you, Dorothea."

"Is that right? But from my perspective, it's plain as day that Bauer tried to spur those fools to rebellion."

"Uh-huh, and let me guess: You're going to torture one of those fools until they tell you what you want to hear?" William asked.

"That's not a bad idea. Then I could even go public and demand reparations."

"Sure, take credit for putting out the fire you started."

While roundabout, the conversation was tense—one slip and we would have a full-scale conflict on our hands. Still, I found myself surprised. I hadn't thought Dorothea had the patience to talk at such length. Perhaps I'd been unfair to call her a child given too much power.

"Let's leave the jokes at that, if you would," Dole said.

"You're Claire François's father, if I recall," Dorothea said.

"Indeed. The name is Dole François. I am humbled to make your acquaintance."

"Very well then. What do you have to say?"

"Before I begin, may I have permission to be so impudent as to criticize Your Majesty?"

"How amusing. I'll allow it." Her lips curved into a smile. Absolutely incredible. Dole had a perfect handle on Dorothea's personality.

"Thank you. Now then, allow me to explain the current state of the empire."

For the first time ever, Dole François, the mastermind who had orchestrated the revolution in Bauer from behind the scenes, bared his fangs in public.

"As we all know, the Nur Empire has boldly waged war all over the world." Dole flipped through the documents in his hand and, without pause, began listing more countries than I could count.

"I didn't think you would actually dare to be so impudent," Dorothea said.

"You don't particularly mind, do you?" he asked.

"It continues to amuse, so I'll allow it. Go on."

"Then I shall," he said, before going on to explain that if push came to shove, the empire could be fighting against a united front composed of not just Sousse, the Alpes, and Bauer, but myriad other countries as well.

"You really believe such a thing is feasible?" she asked.

"I do. And while the territories under your rule are obedient for now, who's to say they wouldn't rebel, given such an opportunity?"

The empire was spread thin and surrounded by enemies; if relations soured all at once, things could disintegrate pretty quick.

Even so, Dorothea remained unfazed. “The outskirts of my territory matter not so long as its heart is safe. For as long as I stand, so shall the empire.”

Not many in this world could declare such a thing and mean it, and even fewer could do so with such confidence. Luckily, Dole was also one of those few—and her equal.

“Decay begins at the extremities,” he said. “You can find data regarding the empire’s food self-sufficiency rate in these documents here. Funding has gradually shifted away from sustainability and toward the military.”

“We are at war. Such things are necessary,” she stated.

“Perhaps. But if the fields near your borders were continually burned... Well, you would be met with a terrible famine in but a few years’ time.” A cruel smile graced Dole’s face as those unsettling words so nonchalantly left his mouth. “If anything, I look forward to it—watching our mortal enemies waste away from afar, that is. We wouldn’t even need to overstep our bounds and pursue offensive action. No, simply defending the right locations while our countries provided ample supplies from behind would do the trick.”

“Humph. We could just loot what we need from you.”

“Could you really? Your country is strong, but in the end, it is but one country. For every successful act of pillaging, would you not be met five times in return?”

“Well spoken, Dole François.”

“I am humbled to have my name remembered.”

There was sense in Dole’s words. No matter how strong the empire was, they couldn’t win if surrounded by enemies on all sides. Of course, I doubt it would go as smoothly as Dole said, but it was feasible, and that was enough.

Even so—

“Huh...”

“Is something on your mind, Rae?” Claire asked me.

“Yes, well... I can’t help but think Dorothea reminds me of someone. Not in

appearance but more so that overbearing high-handedness..."

"I doubt there are many as tyrannical as her."

Perhaps, but something about her was familiar..."Oh, I got it. She's just like Master Dole before the revolution."

"What are you—oh."

There was a time Dole had made himself out to be the villain in order to serve a greater cause. I saw a bit of overlap in Dorothea's demeanor, but I could have been imagining things.

"In the first place," Dole continued, "I cannot comprehend why you are so desperate to achieve something as unrealistic as bringing the whole world under your empire's rule, especially when you're so soft."

"*Soft?* Did you truly just call me soft?" Dorothea's tone turned threatening, but Dole paid it no mind.

"You exiled your daughter, who planned treason against you, to save her. You even forgave her foreign collaborators. What can that be called if not soft?"

I recalled Josef saying something similar—something about how Dorothea had Philine's well-being in mind. Perhaps Dorothea was indeed... soft.

"Humph. Don't speak as though you understand," Dorothea said. "Only those who've borne children can comprehend the bond between a mother and her daughter."

"Such a truth is every father's regret. Even so, there remains one thing I know we share."

"Is that so? And what is that?"

"Love for our daughters."

Dorothea's eyes widened with surprise.

Dole continued. "I thank you for the kindness you've shown Claire and Rae."

"Enough. Now is not the place for that," she said, taken aback by his sudden words of gratitude.

"Dorothea, I think it's about time you told us what you're really planning. I know you've been working alone toward something this whole time, but is it not possible for us to work together?"

Dorothea didn't respond. Numerous mysteries surrounded her motives. While she had provided a variety of justifications for her aggression, her true goals remained unknown to us even now.

"I could very well let this summit be our final warning to you before hostilities commence. But after what you've done for my daughters, I would rather not. Please, would you be willing to tell us what's really going on?"

Dole wasn't so much asking as he was pleading at this point. The politician in Dole respected Dorothea as a ruler, and he didn't want to see her life lost in vain.

But things could never be that easy.

"You've overstepped your bounds, Dole François," she replied coldly. "You're a fool if you think I, of all people, would be so weak as to show kindness."

"How long do you intend to keep up this act?" William interjected. "If this were chess, you would already be in check, you know?"

Manaria and Thane nodded at his words. But Dorothea was stubborn.

"If you wish to make me—that is to say, my empire—surrender, then do so through force. Go on, establish that alliance you're so eager for. I'll crush it like it's nothing." As Dorothea made this declaration, her expression bordered madness. Such a feat was surely impossible, but it sounded believable when it came from her mouth.

Manaria gave the last ultimatum. "Dorothea, this is your last chance. Reform your policies and join us as part of a new, unified international power."

But all she received in reply was: "This grows tedious. I bend to no one, for I am Dorothea Nur."

Clear refusal. Starting with Dole, a look of disappointment washed over the rest of

the participants. The room fell silent for some time.

"Humph. So negotiations have broken down," Dorothea eventually said. "In that case—"

"Rae, look out!"

I'd never dreamed she would dare do such a thing. But before I knew what was happening, Manaria was on her knees with blood flowing from her shoulder.

"Sister Manaria?!" Claire exclaimed.

"Lady Manaria?!" I exclaimed as well.

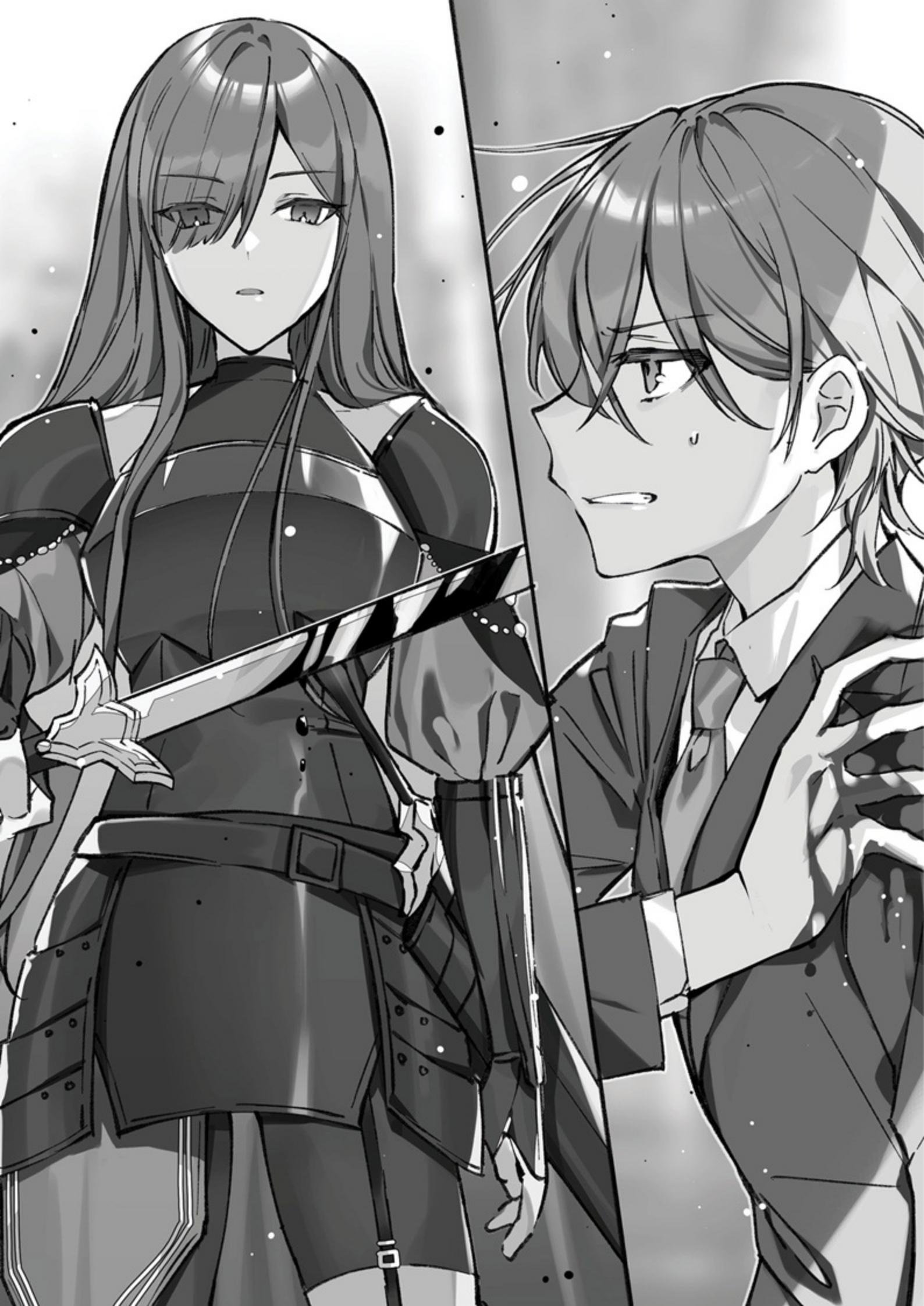
I hadn't yet fully grasped what had happened yet, but I knew Manaria had protected me. The assailant—

"It's common sense to start with the biggest threat, is it not?"

—was Dorothea, her sword drawn before anybody could react.

"What is the meaning of this, Dorothea?!" Manaria demanded as she applied pressure to the shoulder of her blood-stained suit jacket.

"Do you really not understand? It's simple. My enemies have seen fit to gather in one place, so I might as well take care of them all at once."



"You monster!" Manaria snarled.

"Rae!" Claire's shrill voice reached my ears. Before I had realized it, Dorothea was right before me.

"No, you don't!"

Dorothea's sword had come rushing toward me faster than the eye could see, but stopping it was Manaria's own blade.

"Manaria Sousse. Your weakness is your inability to abandon the ones you love."

"That's very much fine by me if it means I'm not like you!" Manaria lunged forward and parried Dorothea's sword, causing the latter to move back.

"Tch..."

"Lady Manaria!"

"Rae! Heal me, quick—"

"It's futile. All futile." Dorothea raised her sword above her head. "Now you're all going to die for me."

The summit descended into chaos. It was clear none of the soldiers had been informed this would happen, as they seemed at a complete loss as to what to do. In contrast, our three-nation group responded quickly, with noncombatants falling back while those who could fight encircled Dorothea, who held her sword at the ready, completely still.

"Those who value their life may flee..." she began. "Or, that's what I originally intended to say, but the circumstances have changed. Forgive me, but you must all die."

"Not if we can help it!" said Claire, launching a flame spear—a single massive one, just like the spell she'd fired at Ralaire's mother all that time ago.

However—

"Do you wish to be the first to die, Claire François?" Dorothea rushed forward, ignoring the flame spear and appearing before Claire.

"Ah!" Claire exclaimed.

"Pitfall!" I collapsed the ground under Dorothea's feet, ruining her balance. Her blade swung a hair's breadth short of Claire. "Be careful, Miss Claire. Magic doesn't work on Dorothea."

"How could I have forgotten? This isn't going to be an easy fight..."

I agreed. Dorothea's immunity to magic left us with little in the way of options. Indirect tactics like the pitfall I'd just made had worked, but direct attacks like flame spears or ice bullets had no effect whatsoever. The same went for Claire's Magic Ray, of course.

"Protect His Majesty!"

"Somebody heal the queen!"

The escort soldiers quickly scrambled, but none of them dared to carelessly approach Dorothea. One false move meant death. They surrounded her instead, swords and spears pointed inward toward her.

"You think common soldiers... are worthy of being my opponents?!"

There was a gleam of black light as her pitch-black sword glided through the air, dropping the soldiers like flies, one after another.

"Rae, heal Sister, quickly!" Claire yelled. "She's the only one who can match Dorothea's sword!"

"Her wounds are deep! I need more time!" I snapped.

Dorothea was sly. She knew the only one who could hold their ground against her, Manaria, had a weakness. That was why she'd attacked me.

"This is enough. Let me go."

"Lady Manaria... I can't. You—"

"My soldiers are dying. As their ruler, how can I turn a blind eye and do nothing?" Manaria gripped her sword with her left hand and stood. It seemed her dominant right arm wasn't working.

"You can't, Sister! You're in no condition to fight her!" Claire protested.

"Even so, I must. Dorothea was right. The moment she attacked, I prioritized Rae's life over my own. In the grand scheme of things, that was clearly a mistake."

As queen of Sousse, Manaria should have prioritized herself over me. But she hadn't. She had thrown herself into harm's way for my sake.

"I won't make that mistake again. So, Claire. You need to protect Rae for me."

"Sister..."

"Take her and run. I'll buy you two some time." Manaria's face was pale, yet she smiled. It was a weak smile, so very unlike her.

"Wait, Lady Manaria," I said. "It's too early to give up hope."

"Always cracking the whip, Rae. Got another plan up your sleeve?"

"Yes. But we'll need to buy as much time as possible."

I'd received some important news before the summit that I hoped would prove useful. The odds were against us, but what other choice did we have?

"Is your little strategy meeting done?" Dorothea slowly paced toward us. Countless bloodied bodies littered the floor behind her.

Her eyes suddenly darted to the side. I followed her gaze to see an imperial official leave the room.

Strange... For the first time ever, I feel like Dorothea's full of openings.

"Now, Miss Claire!"

"Back me up, Rae!"

What followed was a blur. I did what I could to support Claire as she fought Dorothea directly. Claire's martial arts experience showed in her movements, and she empowered her sword with her magic, all while Manaria provided cover—but even all that wasn't enough. Dorothea was just too strong.

"It's over, Rae Taylor," she declared like a judge passing sentence, or the grim reaper itself. Claire and I were battered, our magic power almost depleted. Manaria, already drained of magic, now lay unconscious.

There was nothing more to do. But that didn't mean we could just kick the bucket without getting a few words in.

"Haaah... haaah..." I panted. "You're strong... I'll admit that, Dorothea."

"That goes without saying," she replied.

"But... to be blunt, you're third-rate at best."

"What was that?"

"Haaah... haaah... What Rae's trying to say is... for an individual, you are strong. Perhaps among the strongest in history," Claire said.

"I don't need your flattery."

"But that's ultimately only a single person's strength," Claire went on. "There's so much more to being strong than you understand."

"Hah. What nonsense. You wish to say the masses have strength? Laughable. It's because they are weak that they swarm together." Dorothea sneered contemptuously.

"You only see people as sheep. That is your weakness, Dorothea."

"The words of a sore loser. Pathetic."

Dorothea only believed in the strength of the individual. I admit, she was strong. But there was so much more to people than that.

"You're wrong," I said. "There's a power that connects people. A power called bonds."

"How childish. You believe you can defeat me with these bonds?"

"Oh? Have you forgotten already?" I teased.

"What?"

I clasped Claire's hand and felt her squeeze back. A steady warmth came to life between our connected palms and flowed into us. "You tried stirring internal conflict within Bauer, remember? How did that end again, Miss Claire?"

"Hee hee... We overcame it using the bonds between us—and so many more people."

Bonds were not imaginary or fantastical. They were real.

"I'll admit, that plan failed..." Dorothea said. "Yes, I should have crushed Bauer in the aftermath, right then and there."

"Are those the words of a sore loser?" I asked impishly.

Dorothea's eyebrow twitched. It appeared she didn't like having her own insults used against her.

"Enough. It's time you two died." She held her sword high.

I felt magic gradually seep out of Claire's hand as she entrusted the last of her power to me. "There's a saying where I come from," I said. "It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings!"

I used the last dregs of our magic to cast what would truly be our last spell. Dorothea deflected it with her sword and backed away.

"So you kept a secret weapon tucked away. But such cheap tricks won't—" She stopped mid-insult and looked toward the entrance of the room. Faintly, the echo of footsteps could be heard. The footsteps grew louder, and it gradually became more apparent that they belonged to not one person but a group.

Thank goodness. They made it.

"Have you realized it yet, Dorothea?" Claire asked.

“What?”

“You lost long ago. Long before this summit. In the very moment you released that girl. Ha ha... Ha ha...”

If she were so inclined, Dorothea could have closed the distance and cut us down in an instant. There was no way we could have fought back at that point. Claire was terrified. Hell, I was terrified. Even so, my beloved proudly declared our victory with that resounding laugh of hers.

“*Oooooho ho ho ho ho!*”

“What are you doing?” Dorothea clicked her tongue in irritation.

That was when our savior arrived.

“Haaah... haaah... I made it!”

Bursting into the room and panting heavily was—

“Philine...?” Dorothea murmured.

Indeed.

The one and only, supposedly exiled, Philine Nur.

“Haaah... haaah... I’ve returned, Mother.”

“Philine? Why are you here?” Dorothea looked doubtfully at Philine, who fought to catch her breath. Her confusion was understandable; Philine was probably the last person she’d expected to appear.

“Please wait, Lady Philine!”

“Princess Philine!”

A crowd of people poured in behind her. Many of them wore military uniforms—more specifically the uniform of the soldiers-in-training.

"You're... Adelina Reiner, Otto Reiner, Hildegard Eichrodt, and Friedelinde Eimer?" murmured Dorothea.

"We've come to make an appeal, Your Majesty."

"Hey."

"Forgive me, I just couldn't say no to the Princess."

"I've come to avenge my homeland!"

Each of the people who appeared to stand against Dorothea had something to say to her.

A patriot who had once planned a coup d'état to try to save her country, Adelina.

A boy who had plotted to assassinate the Empress out of concern for his sister, Otto.

An official working toward peace with Philine, Hilda.

And a princess trying to revive her country, Frieda.

"What farce is this, Philine?" Dorothea demanded.

"This is no farce, Mother. We're here to tell you it's over. You've been beaten," Philine boldly declared. Not a trace of her former weakness remained.

"Ha... ha ha ha... ha ha ha ha ha! You, of all people, think you can win against me, Dorothea Nur?" Dorothea broke out into wild laughter, as if the very idea of Philine beating her was a joke. She continued to laugh for some time before saying, "How humorous. Show me how you'll beat me, then. If you can't, I shall cut you down here and now."

For the time being, she had agreed to hear Philine out.

Philine reached into her bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "I spent my exile visiting various countries to negotiate the establishment of an anti-Dorothea alliance."

Dorothea's eyes opened wide with shock.

Around the time that we had managed to convince Adelina to abandon her coup, Josef discreetly informed me that Philine would be returning on this day. I had always believed she wouldn't give up, and sure enough, I was right. She had spent her exile meeting with influential people across many countries. Through a mixture of perseverance, incentives, and cunning, she had gained their support.

"This is an agreement between six countries bordering the empire, with oaths signed in blood stating they will no longer submit to you, but will commence hostilities against the empire if it doesn't join the new unified national power."

"Philine...!" Dorothea seethed.

Philine had succeeded in what Dole had only threatened just earlier. She, the former crybaby, now dared to strike back at her mother, thought to be indomitable, and she had succeeded. Perhaps the apple really didn't fall far from the tree.

"Are you going to kill me here? You could, if you like. I'm ready for it," Philine said.

"Are you now..."

"But regardless of what happens to me, regardless of what you do, the empire is diplomatically cornered. This is checkmate, Mother."

"Ngh...!"

It was over. Dorothea was strong, stronger than any individual person, but she wasn't stronger than the connections Philine had built herself. In the end, Dorothea had lost to the very bonds she held in such contempt.

"Damn you!" Dorothea held her sword aloft. Philine didn't so much as blink, staring back at her mother.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Dorothea?" I asked.

She stopped her sword a hair's breadth from Philine's head. "You have something to say, Rae Taylor?"

"Your defeat is certain already. So don't be a sore loser. Accept it."

"I can still—"

"If you kill Philine here, you'll only be immortalizing her as a martyr who died at her beloved mother's hands as she tried to save her country."

"It will be easy to gain the public's sympathy for someone who lost their life for a just cause," Claire added.

The two of us rubbed salt in Dorothea's wounds. She had caused us a great deal of grief up until now, so surely nobody could fault us for getting back at her a little.

It was true that killing Philine would change nothing for Dorothea. While Philine had indeed established the anti-Dorothea alliance, she wasn't integral to its survival. Dorothea's defeat was certain, even with Philine's death.

"Then I've... I've really lost..." she muttered.

"Yes. You've lost completely, Mother," Philine said tenderly.

"And to a powerless little girl..."

"Indeed."

Dorothea sat down on the floor with a thud, allowing her sword to fall as she stared up at the nothingness above. She seemed at peace, as though freed from some madness.

"So it's over, then," Dole said, being the first noncombatant to step out of cover. As luck would have it, none of the noncombatants seemed harmed.

"Yes, it would appear so," Claire said. "But many soldiers lost their lives in the process."

"Indeed..." I said. The soldiers had given their lives to protect everyone... or so I had thought.

"No. They're all alive," Dorothea muttered absently, shocking everyone. I sprang to check on the knights and found them bloodied and hamstrung, but as she claimed, their hearts still beat.

"Dorothea?" I muttered, confused.

"Why?" Claire asked.

"Rae Taylor, Claire François, Philine—the three of you have defeated me. I entrust the rest to you."

Her words were incomprehensible. "What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Build up your forces. The demons will soon advance upon us."

I grew worried. Had Dorothea's first defeat broken her mind? But she immediately dashed the thought.

"I'm sane. The demon spy I deliberately allowed to escape from this room earlier should have reported that I killed everyone."

"What?" Demons? What did she mean?

"Mother, please explain yourself from the beginning."

"There is no time. I've begun a war with the demons, and the ones to continue it will be you three."

I hadn't a clue what she was talking about. *Would it kill you to explain yourself more?!*

"Fine. Then at least tell us the bare minimum," I said. "How are we supposed to know what to do if you don't?"

"Humph... I trust that you're aware that the Nur Empire is the front line between the human countries and the demon territories?"

"Of course."

"It was on that very front line that I... I met her."

"Who?"

Dorothea paled at my question. *Dorothea*, of all people.

"The ruler of the demons—the Demon Queen."

INTERMISSION

THE BEGINNING OF THE END (???)

THE MESSENGER returned.

Now is our chance. The world leaders have gathered in the Nur Empire and have been slaughtered by Dorothea.

Indeed, this was a splendid chance. Perhaps even a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

For what, you might ask? That much should be obvious.

“To bring about the end of the world, of course.”

BONUS CHAPTER

HOT & COLD

I WAS CLEANING THE ROOM when I found a narrow box about a foot long that I had never seen before. I figured it had to be Claire's, since it definitely wasn't mine.

"Miss Claire, what's this?" I asked.

"Oh, that? That's my whip," she answered.

Her what?! I thought as she opened the box to reveal a somewhat short leather whip. It looked to be of rather fine make, perhaps even commissioned.

"I didn't know you were a *queen*, Miss Claire..." I said.

"Sorry? Rae, I'm not nobility anymore, much less royalty. You know this."

"No, I mean the... fetish kind of queen."

"The what?" She wore a look of absolute confusion.

At this, I whispered into her ear what I meant.

"A-are you daft?! I have no such inclinations! This whip is for horse riding!" she exclaimed.

"Ohhh, I see. From back when you were a noble," I said. *Huh? But I thought most of her possessions were seized after the revolution?*

I was about to ask Claire for clarification when she said, "It's a memento. Do you see how short it is? That's because it was mine as a child, back when Mother was teaching me how to ride." She sounded wistful, as though reliving an old memory. "I was told to discard anything nonessential, but I just couldn't bring myself to part with this."

"Because it's one of the few things you have to remind you of Miss Melia?" I asked.

“Yes...”

Oh, jeez. I felt terrible for doing that whole fetish queen bit now.

“I should have known,” I said. “You’re not a queen but a tsundere.”

“I’ve heard you say that word quite a few times before, but just what does it mean?” she asked. Having finished her affectionate reminiscence with the whip, she carefully placed it back into the box.

Oh dear. She’d only *just* been embarrassed by learning about queens, and she was already running headlong into more trouble. Did she not know that curiosity killed the cat? Or was her thirst for knowledge simply too great to care?

“A tsundere is a person who normally treats their significant other coldly but fawns over them in private,” I said.

“How absurd!” she exclaimed, blushing. “Just what about me qualifies as a tsundere?!”

“Well, there’s how you’re acting right now, for starters. You’re harsh now, but when we’re in bed—”

“*Not. Another. Word.*”

She didn’t let me finish, but you get the idea.

“Goodness, such nonsense...” she muttered.

“But I really do love the tsundere side of you, Miss Claire.”

“E-enough...” she said, blushing from the straight ball I’d thrown right down the center.

“C’mモン, Miss Claire. Show me more of your cold side again.”

“I-I will not!”

“Good, just like that!”

"Wha—it's not like I'm being cold toward you or anything!"

She said the line, folks! What an angel!

"Sublime. Absolutely sublime. Could you keep that cold treatment going for me a little while more?" I asked.

"Humph!" Claire turned away with a huff, but I could tell she wasn't wholly displeased.

Much as I welcomed the cold treatment, I could never in my wildest dreams have foreseen the effects it would go on to have.

"Dinner will be ready soon, Master Dole. May, Aleah, you two get ready to eat as well."

It was evening a few days later, and Dole had come over to play with the twins, leaving me plenty of time to flirt with Claire before preparing dinner. Having mostly finished setting the table, I went over to the twins' room to fetch the three of them.

They appeared to be playing with wooden blocks, as a plethora of differently shaped pieces were scattered about on the floor. Dole, for some reason, was on the ground looking as though the world were ending.

"M-Master Dole...?" I ventured.

"Rae... I don't think I can live on anymore..." he murmured. I wondered what could possibly have caused the tears streaming down his gentlemanly face.

"Is something the matter?"

"Observe, if you would." He wiped his tears, forced a somewhat strained smile, and turned toward May and Aleah. "Oh, is that a castle? Very well done."

He praised the twins, as he often did. He would scold them when it was necessary, but praise was the far more common occurrence.

The twins' faces brightened for a moment, but they just as soon turned away with a

huff.

“Something like this is nothing worth praising,” May said.

“I-It’s not like I’m happy to be praised by Grandfather or anything!” Aleah said.

Dole’s face stiffened. “That’s not true. You did very well, May. And Aleah, do you not like it when I praise you? I really do mean it, you know?”

“Humph!” They turned away.

Dole fell to the ground again.

“Hey, now, you two. That kind of attitude isn’t okay,” I said.

“Huh? But why?” May asked.

“Mother Claire was doing it,” Aleah said.

“Miss Claire was?” I asked. *How strange.*

There’d been some discord between Claire and Dole once upon a time, but their relationship had improved since the revolution, hadn’t it?

“Hmm... Well, let’s clean up and have dinner for now,” I said.

“Humph!” May huffed. “I know to do that much without you telling me!”

“I-It’s not like I’m doing it because you told me to or anything!” Aleah said.

There really was something up with these two.

“Is something the matter, Rae? Father?” Claire showed up, likely wondering why we were taking so long.

“Oh, Miss Claire,” I said.

“Claire...” Dole groaned.

“My, you two cleaned up so wonderfully.” Claire praised the twins just as Dole had

moments ago. Like father, like daughter.

"Humph!" May huffed.

"It's not like I'm happy you praised me or anything!" Aleah said.

Claire looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I could only weakly shake my head.

"Rae, did they..."

"I fear they did. They seem to have learned from your example."

Children were constantly observing adults. Naturally, they often also imitated what they saw, from the slightest of gestures to the most complex of sentences. Such imitation was how they learned, and as such, it was typically welcomed by their parents.

The problem, however, was that children frequently didn't comprehend the intent behind adults' actions, leading to incidents like this, where they inadvertently imitated things you'd prefer they didn't.

"Put that attitude to rest, you two," Dole said sternly.

"Why? Mama Claire was doing it," May said.

"And Mother Rae was happy about it," Aleah said.

"Sh-she... was?" Dole looked at me sharply, making me sweat. It was certain now. The twins were, in fact, copying us.

"That kind of conduct is for grown-ups, dears," Claire said.

"Well, I want to be a grown-up as fast as I can!" May said.

"Indeed. And Mother Rae and Mother Claire are always telling us to become big girls."

"Those are different matters," I said. *Oh dear. We might have really screwed the pooch this time.*

"I'm hungry!" May said.

"Me too!" Aleah said.

The twins slipped past Claire and into the living room—after they had already cleaned up their toys, of course, those little angels.

"Ah, wait just a moment!" Claire said to try to stop them.

"Oh dear..." I sighed.

What had started out as a bit of fun between wives had developed into a full-scale problem. The two of us could probably overlook their behavior with a wry smile, but letting them interact with Dole or the neighborhood kids like this would end in trouble.

"What do we do, Rae?" she asked.

"Hmm... We're just going to have to overwrite their behavior, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's eat for now. We can discuss things later tonight."

We managed to get through the day with no further disasters. Consoling Dole was a real challenge, but when we told him we would do something to fix our mistake, he looked us in the eyes and said, "I'm counting on you," as though the fate of the world were on the line.

That night, Claire and I had a strategy meeting.

"It's morning, girls," Claire called. "Time to wake up."

"Mhn... I'm still sleepy..." May said.

"Five more minutes please..." Aleah said.

On the morning of the next day, I opened the curtains as Claire tried to rouse the two

sleepy, mumbling girls.

"They don't seem to want to get up, sw... sweetheart. What should we do?" Claire asked.

"Hmm... How about we let them sleep for just a bit more, my beloved?" I replied.

"Mh?" Still on their sides, the two girls opened their eyes, curious, and looked over.

"Oh my, it would appear they're awake now, h-honey," Claire said.

"It would appear so, Miss Claire. They must have noticed how much cuter than usual you are today."

"Mmmh?" The twins were now looking at us with great interest, as though something entirely new had appeared before them.

As you've probably realized by now, this was the plan Claire and I had come up with, dubbed Operation Sweetheart. Children always craved new things, so what better way to change their behavior than by presenting them new behavior to imitate? Imitating such over-the-top sweetness would surely be good for them. By no means had I suggested this just so I could enjoy Claire fawning over me. No, never in a million years.

"Mama Rae, Mama Claire, what's going on?" May asked.

"You two are acting really nice to each other," Aleah said.

Despite their young age, they knew when something was up. But that didn't mean we could back down.

"What are you saying?" I asked. "Miss Claire and I are always this lovey-dovey."

"Th-that's right," Claire affirmed. "We're always obviously madly in love with each other."

I was completely fine spouting such words, but Claire was greatly embarrassed. It was absolutely lovely. Just a side benefit of this plan.

"C'mon, girls. It's time to eat," I said.

"Rae made an absolutely wonderful breakfast for you two," Claire said.

"Okay."

"Yes, Mothers."

The twins still looked suspicious, but they got out of bed regardless. I had a feeling our plan was going well.

"Open wide, Miss Claire."

"O-okay..."

We continued the plan throughout breakfast.

"Mm-hmm... The scent of Miss Claire..."

"What do you think... O-oh, Rae, you silly goose..."

And throughout laundry.

"Pardon me, honey. Could you move your angelic little feet out of the way for just a moment?"

"You're like a completely different... Er, y-yes, of course."

And throughout the cleanup afterward.

"Aw, you're both just so cute. You must take after Miss Claire!"

"Isn't this plan just Rae doing what she wants? N-no, that can't be... It's just a coincidence... surely."

And even throughout playtime with the kids.

"It's morning, girls," I called. "Come get breakfast."

A few days later, I came to wake the twins just as I would on any other day. I opened

the curtains to let sunlight fill their room, finding the weather outside to be pleasant yet again.

"Mhn... Mama Rae?" May said.

"Is it morning already...?" Aleah said.

The twins were awake.

"Good morning, you two," I said with a smile.

"Morning... I love you, Mama Rae," May said.

"Good morning... my dear Mother Rae," Aleah said.

The two of them hugged me.

"...Wuh?!"

Whoa—I'd almost lost consciousness for a moment there. The girls always went to Claire for hugs instead of me, so the sheer shock of being hugged had entirely bowled me over.

"What's wrong, Mama Rae?" May asked.

"I want to hurry up and eat Mother Rae's delicious, delicious breakfast," Aleah said.

I stared blankly down at the two.

Whoa?! I almost lost consciousness again. Their sweetness was possibly even more destructive than their prior cold attitudes.

"What's taking so long? Breakfast is getting cold," Claire said.

"Good morning, Mama Claire. I love you!" May said.

"You look beautiful yet again, Mother," Aleah said.

The two turned their sweetness on Claire next, causing her to freeze in place.

I get it, I really do...

And there you had it: We'd successfully brought an end to their cold attitudes, but at what cost? Despite normally being shy, the twins rained destruction on the neighborhood kids, knocking them all out with sweetness with no regard for gender. I feared we'd created two little forces to be reckoned with.

"I love you, Grandpa!" May said.

"Hold me, Grandfather!" Aleah said.

Dole, who'd come by to play with the children again, wasn't spared either. He fell to the ground once more but for different reasons this time.

AFTERWORD

THANK YOU SO MUCH for purchasing Volume 4 of *I'm in Love with the Villainess*. I'm the author, Inori. This volume includes Chapters 12 through 15 of the web novel, as well as an end-of-volume special. I hope you enjoyed it.

We managed to release a fourth volume thanks to everyone's kind support. I can let out a sigh of relief now, knowing the series wasn't canceled. I was worried about how Act 2 of the series would go over with the audience, as it was so different from Act 1, but it seems people are enjoying it. I'm truly blessed to have such open-minded readers. Thank you. Please continue to support the series until the end.

Now then, how did you enjoy the conclusion to the Empire Arc? As with Act 1, Rae and Claire remain the focus of the story, but Philine could be said to be the real protagonist of Act 2. She may have been unreliable at first, but as the story progressed, she grew more resolute. As you probably already know from reading, Philine is no longer the girl she once was, trembling in her mother's shadow. She still has a role to play in the upcoming volume (if it comes out), so please look forward to her appearance then.

This volume ended on a real cliffhanger, didn't it? I hope to delve into all the mysteries of the *I'm in Love with the Villainess* world in the next volume. At the time of writing this afterword, the web novel will be in the finale of Act 2. The developments that follow this volume in Chapters 16 and 17 are really quite something; I've already greatly enjoyed the cries of those who've read it while wearing a sadistic smile on my face. I hope you'll enjoy the coming conclusion to Rae and Claire's story—one about a love that can shape the future.

I'd like to end with some acknowledgments.

Firstly, to Nakamura of the GL Novel editing department: Thank you for all your help; I know you've been busy. I hope to have your support in the publishing of a fifth volume.

Hanagata, I still haven't seen your illustrations yet at the time of writing this, but I'm sure they'll be wonderful as always. I'm looking forward to seeing them.

To my partner, Aki: Volume 4 is finished. I've also finished my manuscripts for the whole story now, so let's go celebrate again.

And lastly, as always, I offer my deepest gratitude to the readers who bought this book. Thank you all so very much.

As I mentioned, I've already written all the way up to the epilogue of Act 2; so as long as the readers want it enough, I believe a fifth volume is possible. I end this afterward praying we don't get canceled.

—INORI, NOVEMBER 29, 2020

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