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Villainess: Reloaded!

BLOWING AWAY

BAD **ENDS** with

Modern
Weapons

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Prologue

While I was in my first year of college, I was swept into a different world: the world of an otome game.

I had been reincarnated in the world of an otome game called *Wish Upon a Shooting Star*! And I wasn't the main character, or even a background character; I was the villainess, of all things!

Yes, I was the villainess, Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg. I'd become a girl given the terrible fate of meeting with her destruction, no matter what route the main character chose to follow. Unless I did something, I was going to be hit with the one-two punch of being exiled while my family's domain was seized. I had to think of a way to prevent that from happening.

So I figured, what if I can obtain incredible power by fusing this world's magic with modern weapon technology? Maybe I could use my military might to crush the bad end that fate had in store for me. It seemed like the best option, so I put the plan into effect and made various weapons, including an automatic pistol, an automatic rifle, a shotgun, a machine gun, and a grenade launcher. I'd turned myself into a walking arsenal. When my fate finally arrived, I'd crush it!

At least, that was the idea. Thinking rationally, I realized that winning against the Plusen Empire was going to be difficult with only that level of firepower. With just a small amount of firepower on my side, I'd be fighting against both the nation's standing army and the armies of local rulers loyal to the emperor. I couldn't win against fate that way!

I'd also been trying to make sure I'd have support from the Braunschweig family, which my cousin Iris was from, and the Schleswig family, which my friend Vallia had married into. And yet that still didn't feel like enough to ensure victory.

The way things were, it looked like fate would trample me underfoot. I'd be exiled while my family lost its domain, thus putting an end to my noble lifestyle. In fact, I might even be executed.

I don't wanna be destroyed! I don't wanna be destroyed! I don't wanna be

destroyed!

But I knew that whatever god had thrown me into this cruel world would go on ignoring me, no matter how hard I prayed. It was up to me alone to forge a way forward for myself!

“Ah!” I awoke.

It was just a dream? Figures. There’s no way anyone could get reincarnated into an otome game. That was a really long dream though... I suppose I’d better head out for my college classes now.

While still bleary-eyed, I sat up in an awfully large bed. Then, with a great yawn...

“Ahh!”

I see a red-headed girl! Is that a ghost?!

“Wait, no... That’s a mirror...”

Which means...

“It wasn’t all a dream...”

It meant that I was still inside an otome game, and I was still fighting against fate. I was still living the same miserable life of doing whatever I could to avoid destruction. I’d have to continue defusing landmines, otherwise known as love interests, while also preparing for the arrival of the main character.

“Grr! It’s so unfair! I want a do-over!”

“Lady Astrid, what’s gotten into you this morning? Are you still half-asleep?” When my maid saw me getting mad at my own reflection, she looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

Y-Yeah... You’d think something was up if you saw someone getting mad at a mirror. If I can’t even keep it together at home, the maids are going to think something’s wrong with me...

“Lady Astrid, it’s almost time for breakfast. Your mother and father are waiting.”

“All right.” I reluctantly changed out of my nightgown and got ready to head

into the dining room.

A girl with bright red hair: that's what I saw moving around in the mirror.

"I suppose it's not all bad," I told myself while caressing the box containing the shotgun I'd made.

Being an otome game villainess might be a pain, but it's not so bad if it means getting to fire my favorite modern weapons as much as I like! Living in Japan always meant that I couldn't fire a gun without traveling to Guam or whatever. Living in an otome game world isn't so bad in that respect.

The only problem is that I have to use these weapons to somehow secure a victory against fate! Damn it, I want a do-over!

Chapter 1 — The Villainess and a Cannon

I was in my third year at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery's elementary school.

The sun's rays felt warm that day, and the weather was perfect for magic. Various things had kept me busy lately, leaving me no time for magic. But for once my schedule was free, meaning I could experiment with magic all I liked!

My latest project was a 120 mm caliber rifled gun. Yes, you heard right: I was trying to make a 120 mm caliber rifled gun.

The reality had hit me during the get-together: I wasn't ready to take on a nation with my current war potential. I needed much greater firepower for my showdown with fate—something far more destructive than a machine gun or a grenade launcher. I considered making an anti-tank rocket launcher, but even that wouldn't cut it. That's why I was trying to make the 120 mm caliber rifled gun found on Challenger 2 tanks, which was a type of main battle tank still in modern use.

The Challenger 2 was one of my favorite tanks. I'd made a plastic model of it during my past life, and I'd even gotten a chance to check out the interior of the real thing while visiting the Bovington Tank Museum. It meant that making the gun itself wasn't such a crazy idea.

The problem was how to load the shells.

"Do you think you could make this thing?"

"I could, but it won't work."

I was talking it over with Mister Gnome.

Initially, I'd thought that making a massive gun was as simple as making a massive gun barrel. But things got tricky when I wanted to make an autoloader system for loading fresh rounds, similar to what most modern main battle tanks used. Those autoloader systems were operated using the tank's power system, rather than being powered by the recoil at the time of firing. In other words, they used electricity. That was a problem.

I can't make electricity using magic!

Elemental magic worked through the water, fire, wind, and earth spirits, and none of those spirits could create electricity. And even if there were some way for them to make electricity, a humanities girl like me still couldn't make anything as complex as an autoloader. But without an autoloader, the weapon's firepower would nosedive, and firepower was the very thing I needed.

"If only I could power the things I make with mana..."

"That's impossible. From the moment you create a thing up until you erase it by imagining nothingness, it'll work according to the world's natural laws. It's the same thing that stops you from using magic to make your arrows rain down on enemy territory."

Well, I'm stuck then.

I could imagine the autoloaders I'd seen in online videos, but recreating them with magic was challenging—impossible, rather. I figured they worked using hydraulics, but a humanities girl like me had no idea how the hydraulics made the autoloader parts move.

Can't I simplify it somehow?

"I know! I'll just make a pistol but bigger!" A sudden flash of inspiration had come to me. "Mister Gnome, how about this? This part moves like this, this moves when you do this, this part hits the gunpowder—uh, the talisman, and bam!"

Mister Gnome nodded his head as I sketched a diagram on the ground and explained how it worked.

"I see, I see. This'll work, but when you fire it, the explosion from the first talisman's going to hit you too. What'll you do about that?"

"My fairy, Blau, is friendly with the wind elementals. I'll get her to handle it."

"Can you really use this barehanded? The recoil's going to be horrendous."

"It'll be fine if I always use it with my blood magic applied to the max!"

*The recoil's gonna be unreal if I'm wielding a tank gun with my bare hands.
But I can handle it! I've got blood magic!*

Dr. Wolff had warned me that reckless use of blood magic could tear my muscles apart, but daily training would solve that. Lately, I'd been secretly jumping from the third floor of the school building while using my blood magic. So far, I hadn't broken a single bone.

"Well, all right, I'll try it..." Mister Gnome still looked reluctant as he set about making the large gun that I'd designed.

I only had to wait a few seconds before he was done.

"We've done it!" I cried. "It's a 120 mm caliber 07-type rifled gun!"

The thing we'd created could only be described as a giant revolver. It was like a double-action revolver where pulling the trigger would automatically load the next round and ready the gun to fire. I vaguely remembered reading in a military magazine that this was a safety mechanism that reduced the chance of accidental discharge.

"This thing is pretty big," I noted.

"It is rather big," Mister Gnome agreed.

The finished product was overwhelmingly large. The revolver grip was as tall as a small child, and the trigger, which looked more like a lever, was made to the same scale. The gun also included a side grip for supporting the barrel and an optical sight to assist aiming. I could wrap my right arm around the grip and then fire it by using my entire arm to pull the trigger.

It's like a monster version of a pistol. Will I even be able to use this thing?



“Let’s start by test-firing it. I’ll load in some rounds.”

I was using blanks as my ammunition for now. The talisman packed into the projectile part would merely create smoke using wind magic. The structure of each round was essentially the same as the ones used in my grenade launcher.

“Blood magic, full power!” Mana rushed through my body, strengthening my bones and muscles. “Here goes!”

Fortunately, replacing gunpowder with talismans resulted in much lighter rounds, so they weren’t particularly heavy. It meant that I could hold the 120 mm caliber rifled cannon with ease, though blood magic probably played a large part too.

“Now, I’m going to aim at that figure three kilometers away.”

There was already a straw figure standing at the very edge of the ranch that was ready to be my target.

“Fire!”

The recoil sent a jolt through my body, but then the blood magic canceled it out.

“Load the next round!”

The revolver cylinder rotated to ready the next shell. *Nice. It’s working.*

I kept going until I’d fired all five of the rounds loaded into the cylinder. As for the gases that the revolver expelled, Blau used wind to redirect those, so all I felt was a little heat.

“Well? How was my accuracy?!” I trembled with excitement as I studied my target straw figure. “I missed more than I thought...”

I’d only hit with two shots out of five, but I couldn’t do much better without a computer control system.

“This weapon’s not made for precise strikes, but still...”

It was then that I had another flash of inspiration.

I’d once read a book on magic that said blood magic could make simple tools easier to handle. While testing a technique that made the body and a tool

operate in tandem, researchers and test subjects who'd never used a kitchen knife before found that they could use the knife to rapidly remove the skin from a grape while using blood magic. It had been as though they'd peeled away the skin with their own fingers.

"Could I use that here?" I considered whether I'd be able to use this same research result when handling my new weapon.

Simply making my body and the weapon move in tandem was pointless. I didn't just want it to be an extension of my arm: it also had to work with my eyes, or else my accuracy wouldn't improve at all. To reliably score hits, I had to be able to move the gun so that it followed my eyes as they tracked the target.

So if I can get all of that working in unison...

"All right, let's try it!"

Now that I'd had the idea, it was time to try it out. First, I loaded five new rounds and held the gun in the same way as before.

"Hmm... First I'll channel a thin layer of mana along the gun's surface to link it up with my blood magic..."

Ah. If I accidentally use too much mana here, I'll make the shells explode. I have to avoid that, no matter what.

"All right. Next, I have to link up the mana flowing through my body with the mana flowing in the tool..."

The parts working in tandem with my body were the grip and the side grip that supported the barrel along with the optical sight. A weak flow of mana linked them to my body, making the grips feel like they were part of me. It felt as though nothing was impeding my movements.

And then there was the optical sight. I could see through it without having to put my eye to it. The visual data flowing through my optic nerve included the optical sight's reticle. The reticle was appearing in the center of my vision at that moment, but moving the gun barrel made the reticle move at the same time.

The reticle also moved depending on the angle of the barrel, such that when I

pointed the barrel upward, I received information showing how the shell would fly further. I was like an optical distance meter in human form. When I lowered the barrel, the information updated to inform me that the shell would land closer.

Not bad at all! Now I just need to get the straw figure in the center of the reticle, and...

“Fire!”

I started by firing a single shot.

A hit!

Next, I fired the remaining four shells at the straw figure in the same way. Every shot was a hit. My aim was unaffected by involuntary hand movement, allowing me to accurately fire each shell into the target. It was a huge success!

“Yay! I did it!” I cheered while still surrounded by a cloud of hot air that had been heated by the discharged gases.

“Master, was it successful?” Blau asked, looking unsure.

“Hugely successful, Blau!” I told her, raising both fists in the air in celebration. “It’s perfect!”

“That’s great! I’m glad I could be of help!”

“Yup. You’ll get cookies later.”

Without Blau to redirect the discharged gases, this revolver-style rifled gun would never have been possible. Without Blau, I’d have suffered major burns.

“Now tell me...” Mister Gnome said. “Exactly what’re you planning with your excessive war potential?”

“Didn’t I tell you already? I’m going to crush my fate.”

This is gonna increase my army’s firepower dramatically! The problem now is that I can only fire five shots in succession. I’ve gotta come up with some way of making it easier to reload a revolver.

Fantasy games often featured mysterious bags that could hold a lot more than their appearance suggested, but those were absent from this world.

Instead of carrying a ton of ready-to-use ammo, I had to keep a bunch of talismans on me and then create my ammo on-site.

Solving those two problems with my new weapon was sure to give me another major boost in firepower. But for the time being, I had to be content with the gun I'd made. Those remaining issues necessitated further research.

Chapter 2 — The Villainess Takes on Finals

The atmosphere at the Round Table of Spirits was tense. That was only natural. Finals were near.

We elementary students could take it all in stride, but the middle and high school students were studying frantically.

You know, you wouldn't be in this mess if you'd all spent more time studying and less time chatting. The sight made me feel a little high and mighty.

"Laura, is your studying going well?"

"Yes. I've put a lot of effort into memorizing history, and I was always good at magical engineering."

Laura had the composed air of someone victorious. She was leisurely sipping her tea while reading a history book that was popular among young girls recently. The other older students, meanwhile, were throwing themselves at their studies in a sort of desperation. She looked like a true victor.

"What kind of subject is magical engineering? I know that it's about understanding magic with logic, but I'm still not sure what it's used for in practice."

I was studying some high school subjects a little already, but I'd found magical engineering to be incomprehensible. It felt so much like science that I couldn't help but be put off. Sadly, I knew I'd have no choice but to study it someday.

"I'm sure you're familiar with the devices used to measure the mana of newborn babies. That's a similar sort of thing. Quantifying magical concepts is a key feature of magical engineering. We take concepts that can only be grasped through experience, and then we do our best to express them in terms of numerical values so that we can think about magic using logical reasoning."

Ugh. Just listening to that was hard work.

"It's really not that difficult. Once you've memorized a few important equations, the rest is easy."

"Equations..." As someone who hated science, that was my least favorite

word.

“Laura!” called one of the older students. “Could you help me out with this?”

“Lady Laura!” called another. “How do I make sense of this?!”

While we were chatting casually, a flock of lost lambs had begun gathering around Laura.

“You can use the Turing equation here...”

Wow. Laura’s putting her lost little sheep back on the right path, one after the other. That’s just like her.

Although magic was the main focus of the academy, ordinary subjects, such as math and history, were also taught. My problem was that the sciences were somewhat complicated, and they differed from what I’d been taught on Earth in many ways. I knew I had hard times ahead.

I was a humanities student who’d been taught about Pasteur’s experiments disproving the theory of spontaneous generation of life. In this world, however, there was a well-accepted theory that explained how fairies were spontaneously generated by naturally occurring mana. *Bah!*

I enjoyed subjects classed as humanities, and I could generally learn them by memorizing stories, so I always did well in those areas. High school science, on the other hand, was looking like hell.

Maybe the solution is to start studying it now? But it’s so boring...

“Iris, are you prepared for the tests?” I asked her while Laura tended to her lost sheep.

“I’m prepared! I’ve been studying hard!”

“Is there anything you don’t understand? I don’t mind teaching you.”

I definitely wasn’t about to fall behind at the elementary level. I was still confident in both sciences and humanities. It might have been another world, but it was still elementary school. Besides, I’d had other home tutors besides Dr. Wolff, and they’d taught me all I needed to know at this point.

“That’s all right.” Iris clenched her little fists and declared, “I’m going to get

full marks on the tests!”

This girl’s just too cute.



“Don’t you need to study at all, Astrid?”

Gah. Just when I’m being soothed by Iris, here comes Friedrich.

“I’ll be all right, Your Highness. I’m preparing for the tests in my own way.”

I’d hate to fail at the elementary level, but worse than that would be father forbidding me to use magic at home because of my poor grades. I even had to put my research on hold despite how eager I am to solve the problems with my 120 mm caliber rifled gun!

“Then perhaps we could study together? It would be splendid if we could all become closer by studying together before the test.”

Nooo! What an evil suggestion! You demon!

“Y-Yes, let’s do that. I’ll join your study group.”

Bleh. If the landmine named Friedrich is there, the landmines Adolf and Silvio are bound to be there too...

What the hell is this? How am I supposed to study in these conditions? But refusing could make him mad, so I’d better quietly accept my fate. But remember, I might be accepting you now, but you’ll get what’s coming to you sooner or later, fate!

My feet dragged along the floor as I let Friedrich lead me over to the corner of the Round Table’s room.

Adolf was already there scowling at a history book, and Silvio was reading a geography book with a pained expression. Both looked frantic. They’d both been studying on a daily basis, so they’d probably be fine without having to do anything like cramming all night before the tests.

“Which fields are you best at, Astrid?” Friedrich asked.

“Magic and humanities. I can help a little with any subject that counts as humanities.”

That made both Adolf and Silvio raise their heads.

“So...is there some trick to studying history?” Adolf asked.

“Let me think... Memorization is important, but you also have to interpret

history as a story. We tend to remember the names of characters in stories, and any inconsistencies in the sequence of events will stand out.”

I loved history. I’d read every history book I could get hold of in my past life—especially the ones about the history of war! In any case, history was easy to remember if it was interpreted like a story, whether it be war history or something else. Similarly to how wars started for a reason, there was a reason behind every historical event. These reasons then formed a sequence without any inconsistencies, just like a screenplay.

“I see. A story...”

I gave Adolf a book recommendation: “I think elementary-level history is more easily understood by reading *A Tale of Many Kingdoms* in the library, rather than the textbook. History really is a tale to be told. You’ll still have to memorize the year when each event occurred, however.”

After what had happened at the get-together, I’d stopped feeling quite so wary around Adolf. After all, I knew that he considered Minne his girlfriend. *Never let her go!*

I have to wonder what Minne and the others are doing. I talk to them a lot in the classroom, but it feels like we’re drifting apart because I’ve been spending so much time at the Round Table lately. I’ll have to arrange something with everyone.

That’s a good idea! Once tests are over, we’ll do something together!

“Miss Astrid, is there also a trick for learning geography?” Silvio asked.

Silvio, you look like you’re going to be sick. Are you all right?

“Geography is best memorized spatially, using a map. If you spread out a map in front of you and write the names of things like mines and local rulers on it, you’ll find them easier to memorize. Just remember that it’s more efficient to memorize where things are in space, rather than simply remembering place names.”

My major was world history, so my advice on studying geography is just what I heard from a friend. Sorry, Silvio.

“I see. A map? A map...”

“Start by drawing your own map. If you can draw the map yourself, it’ll help you memorize things more efficiently.”

The geography they teach us at elementary level is pretty limited. I’m sure he’ll be fine.

“That’s very helpful, Miss Astrid. I’ll give it my all.”

Something’s not right. Silvio studies hard every day. What’s he got to worry about?

“Astrid, perhaps you could teach me some techniques for using magic in practice,” Friedrich suggested.

“Y-Yes, all right. Shall we go outside?”

Firing off a few magic spells at the Round Table would annoy the other members, so we both went outside.

“Have you noticed, Astrid?”

“Noticed what?”

“Silvio’s behavior. Don’t you think something’s not right?”

I did notice that Silvio was acting weird. Is it a bug in the game?

“He was acting unusual indeed. Do you know the reason?”

“I believe he had a disagreement with his father, Chancellor Stefan. He even said that the two of them may break off all contact in the future.”

“Huh? Break contact?”

If someone won’t speak to their own father, that’s pretty serious.

“It’s all because my father, Wilhelm III, decided to pursue military expansion based on Chancellor Stefan’s advice. They claim that military expansion is the only way forward if we’re to unify the reich by defeating Osterreich while also preventing the Mellaria Empire from interfering.”

Ah. Wilhelm III was already in favor of military expansion, and it seems Chancellor Stefan sees things the same way. It’s no wonder they’ve expanded

their armed forces so smoothly. It all makes sense.

“Silvio seems to think that the decision is a mistake. He believes the matter can still be resolved through talks with the Osterreich Empire and the Mellaria Empire. He argues that it’ll be ordinary citizens who suffer if we deal with the matter by recklessly expanding our military and then waging war.”

He’s another one opposed to military expansion? I’ve no idea how pressing the international situation is because I’m just an elementary schooler, but they say that the age of iron and fire is close. Failing to prepare our military now would be idiocy.

“I take it Lord Silvio is already giving thought to international politics...”

“No, his concern is the role of the chancellor. The chancellor has a responsibility to offer good counsel to the emperor and restrict his actions when necessary. However, our current chancellor opposes my father on virtually no issues at all. That’s the source of Silvio’s dissatisfaction.”

Systems of government are complicated, so I don’t have much to say. But I do get the idea that there’s no one who can put on the brakes because the emperor and chancellor are rushing ahead without any debate. If they’ve made the wrong decision, the damage could be major.

Hmm. From what I’ve gathered about the Plusen Empire’s military preparations, we might be able to fight off the Osterreich Empire, but war with the Mellaria Empire would be tough. Their population is massive, and their infrastructure would make an invasion difficult.

Silvio’s right to think that war would be reckless right now. Not to mention that the destruction of the Plusen Empire would also mean destruction for me. I can’t have that. I can’t have that at all.

But if it’s all going according to the game, the war event won’t happen until I enter high school. By then, the Plusen Empire should have strengthened its military, and the Mellaria Empire might have undergone some political changes too.

I can look at all of this with the game’s happy ending in mind, so I know that any events that didn’t happen in the game won’t happen as long as I’m not

interfering with the political situation. Probably...

“What do you think, Astrid?”

“A war right now would be dangerous. We should try to appear friendly while awaiting the right timing. And even when our country has finished its military preparations, we should try to damage relations between the Osterreich Empire and Mellaria Empire rather than rushing into war with them.”

Fighting a war on two fronts is a common cause of defeat. Foreign nations should be overpowered one at a time to avoid the collapse of our own country. As large as the Plusen Empire might be, we lack the population required to prepare for a war with two enemies at once.

“It sounds as though you’re somewhat in favor of war, Astrid.”

“I’m simply thinking about how we can win. But this is just a child’s way of thinking, of course.”

Someone with a brain full of idealistic fantasies like you could do with being just a little more pro-war too. You might not be as bad as Moctezuma, but still.

“Now, perhaps you could teach me some techniques for using magic in practice.”

“Of course. Let’s start with the water element.”

We studied practical applications for magic together, but it was clear that Friedrich had only brought me out here to talk about Silvio because his applied magic was already flawless.

Why does he have to come to me to talk about Silvio? Isn’t that the heroine’s job?

I tried giving Silvio to Lotte, but he doesn’t seem to talk with her a whole lot. It’s looking like Silvio and Friedrich are both landmines that the heroine is going to have to defuse for me.

Later, it turned out that Minne had caught sight of me and Friedrich practicing applied magic together. She got incredibly excited and started asking whether we were finally engaged.

Don’t be ridiculous! And rather than sticking your nose in other people’s

business, you ought to be trying to make Adolf fall in love.

Chapter 3 — The Villainess Is Done with Tests and Wants to Celebrate Finals are over!

There were no incidents. There were no trick questions and no difficult practical exams. Even Adolf and the others who'd been studying furiously at the Round Table were bound to have sailed through. The fact that Friedrich had no problems went without saying.

With tests over, I decided it was time to have some fun.

"Everyone! Let's do something fun now that the tests are over!"

"Everyone" didn't mean Round Table members. I was talking to Minne and Lotte and two other girls in my class who I was starting to get on well with. Their names were Brigitte and Sandra, and both were daughters of viscounts.

"What a wonderful idea! With our tests over, I'd really appreciate a change of pace!"

"If you're to be there, Lady Astrid, then we would be delighted to accompany you."

Good, good. I like spending time with Round Table members, but I can't forget about my classmates. Especially not Minne and Lotte when I need them to defuse the landmines Adolf and Silvio for me.

"Will it just be the five of us?"

"Hmm. Maybe I could invite my cousin Iris? I mentioned my plans to her, and she said she wanted to come along."

That's right. I'd talked to her about going to have some fun once tests were over, and she'd insisted that I let her come with us. I couldn't see any problem with a first grader spending time with third graders, but it made me worry that Iris might not have any friends in her own year. I had seen her talk with others at the Round Table a little, though.

"I don't mind at all," Minne replied. "It would be an honor to meet a cousin of Lady Astrid."

“I don’t mind at all either,” agreed Lotte. “Please, by all means, invite Iris along.”

Brigitte and Sandra both nodded their heads too. *Oh, what good friends I’ve got!*

“So where will we be headed?”

“How about we visit the commercial district, have some tea, and do a little shopping?”

Not a bad idea at all. I might be a magic maniac, but I don’t spend every waking minute thinking about magic. I have some more feminine interests too, like fashion and desserts.

“Didn’t a bookstore open in the commercial district that sells nothing but specialist magic books? Not that we’d want to visit tha—”

“Please tell me more.” *Whoops. I guess a magic maniac can’t rebel against their true nature...*

“I-I think a better choice of bookstore would be Ackerman Books. There’s an impressive product lineup, and everything is arranged so that you can easily find the popular books.”

“That sounds great. We’ll stop by that bookstore while we’re there. Where’s a good place to eat something sweet?”

“Konditorei Sammer recently became well-known for their amazing cakes.”

Oh? Cake sounds nice. There are lots of desserts at the Round Table, but there’s no cake. My favorites are cheesecake and tiramisu. I wonder if I’ll find something similar.

Heh heh. My metabolism’s super fast lately. It’s probably because of all that moving around I do when I’m using my blood magic. I haven’t put on any stomach fat. Though it’s a shame that my chest doesn’t get bigger at all either...

“I’d also like to look at some dresses,” Minne said. “There’s a banquet coming up for my father’s birthday. I’m hoping to find a suitable, fashionable dress.”

“Okay! We’ll all pick out a dress for Minne!”

Ah. I feel like we're doing all the girly stuff now. This is a far throw from my history of reading military magazines with potato chips in one hand while wearing cheap, mass-market clothes...

Now I'm a duke's daughter. I'm the girliest of girls. I've grown out of junk food, and now I'm living the celebrity lifestyle. I wouldn't mind having the military magazines back though... I wonder what the armed forces of Earth are doing right now...

"Where should we all meet up?"

"Let's meet in front of the statue in Epenstein Square," Lotte suggested. "That way we won't get lost, and we can get there by carriage. It could be difficult to find each other in the crowd, but we won't go wrong if we know to meet at the statue."

"All right. We'll meet up in front of the statue in Epenstein Square."

Now our plan to celebrate the end of the tests was settled. I just had to inform Iris when I saw her at the Round Table so she'd know where to find us.

This weekend's gonna be nothing but fun!

....

The meeting time was ten hundred hours. I arrived at the statue in Epenstein Square ten minutes early.

The statue was hard to describe. The pose made it look as though *The Thinker* had finally come up with an idea, but he wasn't sure it was the right one. If I had to give it a title, I'd call it the *Here's a Thought* statue.

I'd actually known about this place for a while now. It appeared in the game after all: the heroine secretly met her chosen love interest here for a date, and when the selection options appeared for the place where they'd spend their date, the *Here's a Thought* statue was visible in the background. It meant that the *Here's a Thought* statue was a familiar sight, though I'd never seen it firsthand.

"Astrid!" I heard the voice of a cute girl as I waited beneath my parasol.

"Oh! Iris, you're lively today."

“I am! I’ve been so excited about going somewhere with you!”

Aw! Iris is always so cute!

“You don’t mind that my friends are coming along rather than it being just me?”

“It’s quite all right. After being around people from the Round Table, I’m not as shy as I used to be.”

Oh. Well done, Round Table. I didn’t like you much at first, but it turns out you’re kinda useful. I had you all wrong.

“Good day, Lady Astrid.”

“Good day, Minne.”

Minne and the others all gathered as the meeting time approached.

“Is this girl Iris?” Minne asked.

“That’s right. Isn’t she cute?” I introduced Iris to my friends. “Iris, from right to left, this is Minne, Lotte, Brigitte, and Sandra. They’re all in my class.”

“N-Nice to meet you. I’m Iris...”

Ah... I should have known she’d hide behind me. Looks like she hasn’t conquered her shyness just yet.

“Well, aren’t you cute? Nice to meet you, Iris.”

“This cute girl puts me at ease.”

Since they knew she was the daughter of Duke Braunschweig, they didn’t try to crowd around her like the Round Table members had. But I could tell that her cuteness had gotten through to them. I felt proud to be an older sister to her.

“So, where should we go first?” Minne asked.

It was Lotte who answered: “Let’s start with Ackerman Books. Then we’ll explore the commercial district. We can have lunch at Konditorei Sammer, and then we’ll go choose Minne’s dress. We can look around shops with whatever time we’ve got left.”

Lotte sure is organized...

“To the bookstore we go!” I cried.

The six of us set out for the commercial district in high spirits. First, we headed for Ackerman Books.

“Isn’t this the book I saw you reading, Iris?”

“That’s right. It’s a story about a prince and a little blue bird. It was really interesting.”

Iris would often borrow children’s books from the library to read at the Round Table. She seemed to like fairy tales, but so far, I’d never seen her reading any romance novels. Either those didn’t match her tastes, or she was still too young for them.

“Lady Astrid,” Lotte said, “I recommend this book. It’s oh-so romantic.”

“Oh? It looks a little mature...”

Her recommendation was a romance novel with a mature air about it. It had my interest because it seemed to be about a love affair between a noble’s son and another noble’s daughter who were separated by a large age gap. That was bound to get my attention since I was developing somewhat romantic feelings of my own toward Mr. Bernhard.

“I might go ahead and buy this...”

“Please, you must read it. I promise you won’t regret it.”

A magic maniac like me might benefit from a little romance.

Just when I had that thought, I heard a voice: “Miss Astrid?”

Huh?

“Mr. Bernhard? What brings you here?”

“I’m looking for materials to use in my classes. What about you and your friends?”

Now, this is a surprise encounter. What are the chances of me meeting Mr. Bernhard while I’m looking at a romance novel that’s filling my head with wild fantasies? Could this be fate?

“Could I help you find those materials, Mr. Bernhard?”

“I think you should just focus on enjoying your weekend, Miss Astrid.”

Bah! Just when I thought fate was in motion, he turns me down in short order.

“Mr. B-Bernhard, are things going well in the high school?”

“I’m getting by,” Mr. Bernhard replied with a distant look. “It was overwhelming at first, but once you get used to them, high schoolers are manageable.”

So this is what makes someone grow moody... He’s new to it all right now, but by the time I reach high school, he’ll have that moody persona that I like. Being a teacher must be tough, no matter whether it’s on Earth or another world.

“Lady Astrid? This month’s recommendations corner is over here.”

“Ah, I’ll be right there! See you later, Mr. Bernhard. Good luck finding those materials!”

He might be ticking all my boxes already, but any adult man who falls for an eight-year-old would have to be a pedo.

After parting with Mr. Bernhard, I went to look around in the recommendations corner, and eventually I bought the romance novel that Lotte had recommended. Iris, meanwhile, bought a new children’s book of some sort. *Reading a bunch makes you smart, so keep at it, Iris.*

Another unexpected encounter happened while we were exploring the commercial district. I saw a girl about my age carrying a basket. She should have been a complete stranger, but she seemed oddly familiar. *Could she be...?*

As she was walking, a man was running toward her from behind. She hadn’t noticed him approaching. *It’s looks like he’s about to—* “Ahhh!” the girl screamed.

“Move! Get outta the way, brat!”

They’d collided spectacularly. The girl dropped to her knees as the man kept on running.

“That girl. That’s her...”

“Lady Astrid?!”

I used blood magic to give myself a physical boost and leap toward the man as he tried to run away, and then I hit him in the back with a spinning kick. But don’t worry: despite my flaws, I knew not to overdo it.

“Guh...” The man made a strange groaning sound as he fell to the ground with precious jewels spilling from his pocket.

“Ah! You caught him!” As I was busy dealing out justice, a middle-aged gentleman who was somewhat out of breath came toward us from the same direction as the thief.

“Were you chasing after him?” I asked.

“He’s a thief. He came into my shop and ran off with a handful of jewels the minute my back was turned. Oh, aren’t you Duke Oldenburg’s—”

“The name’s Astrid. I’m glad I could help. I’d best be off.”

“W-Wait. Please, let me thank—”

Before the jewel store owner could finish his sentence, I turned and ran back toward the girl.

“Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes. I’m fine.”

You don’t look fine. You’ve scraped your knees, and they’re going to bruise.

“Give me a moment.” I placed my hand on the girl’s lap and used my blood magic. I wasn’t cursing her, nor enhancing her physical abilities. It was healing magic.

“Oh. Is this blood magic?”

“That’s right.” I told the girl with a slight smile. “Though you’d probably have done a better job yourself.”

No doubt about it... It’s her.

“Would you mind if I asked your name?”

“It’s Elsa. Elsa Eckart. I work at a bakery.”

I knew it!



Elsa Eckart: the heroine of *Wish Upon a Shooting Star*.

At this time, she was a commoner working at her parents' bakery, but this girl had at least as much mana as me. That high level of mana came with high expectations that would lead to her entering the academy's high school.

In reality, she was the daughter of Duke Franken's son Conrad and Conrad's wife Judith. The house of Franken was a great noble family that exceeded even the Oldenburgs. In other words, their family was more powerful than mine.

As for why someone like that would be working in a bakery: Conrad's wife Judith wasn't from a family of particularly high status, and her marriage to Conrad was what's known as a morganatic marriage. Conrad's father, Otto, had therefore declared that he'd only recognize the marriage if their firstborn was a boy, but ordered them to separate if the child was a girl.

And then Elsa was born. Fearing that his parents would annul his marriage, Conrad sent Elsa off to live with a family of commoners. However, Conrad promised that he'd come for his daughter when Otto had passed away and he'd inherited the title of Duke Franken.

That was the day that the game would end, bringing about my destruction: the day of graduation in my third year of high school.

With her lineage revealed, she was a figure who commanded respect. The Astrid from the game had bullied her and called her a commoner without knowing her true identity, thus causing her own downfall.

But now that I knew who she really was, I wasn't about to show her disrespect. I was going to win her over and eliminate another potential trigger of my destruction. *Heh heh heh. Well, hello there, little lady! Does it hurt anywhere?*

Given that the heroine's special talent was healing blood magic, there was probably very little reason for me to heal her, however.

"Thank you. Could I ask your name?" Elsa asked gingerly.

"Astrid," I replied. "Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg. Nice to meet you."

"Lady Astrid, what happened?" Minne asked.

“This girl looked a little interesting, so I thought I’d say hello. Now let’s get going.”

Elsa’s face had gone blank when she realized I was a noble, but I couldn’t devote all my attention to her. I’d put more energy into winning her over once she joined the academy. A more immediate priority was enjoying my time off with Iris, Minne, and the others.

I also didn’t want to deal with Minne saying mean things to the “commoner.” Minne was a nice girl, but she could still behave like a high-and-mighty noble.

“It’s about time we had lunch,” I declared. “I can’t wait to try those cakes.”

“I can’t wait either!” Iris was smiling, suggesting that she was gradually getting used to being around Minne and the others.

Once we’ve had lunch, we can pick out that dress for Minne.

Chapter 4 — The Villainess and Dress Choices

We had lunch at Konditorei Sammer, just like Lotte had recommended. I had a sweet pastry with tea for my main course, and then I enjoyed some cheesecake for dessert. It really was delicious.

As for the price, it was exorbitant. At times like this, I could enjoy the pleasures that came with being one of the elite. That's why I wanted to avoid my destruction.

"Isn't it delicious, Astrid?"

"It sure is, Iris. Do you want some of my cheesecake?" I offered some of my dessert to Iris while I was watching her happily eat her own chocolate cake.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! Of course. Seeing you eat is enough to make me happy."

I wanted Iris to smile more because her happy face was so cute. Being around Iris truly was soothing. For once, I was able to relax without worrying about the struggle of being a minesweeper defusing her landmines.

Indeed, my life at the academy was the life of a minesweeper. Dealing with deadly mines like Friedrich, Adolf and Silvio each day had taken its toll on me mentally. I was always on edge as I tried to avoid accidentally doing anything to trigger my destruction. And yet, these landmines wouldn't sit quietly where they'd been buried; they whizzed around beneath my feet, inviting me to step on them. I wished they'd just give me a break.

"Astrid."

Exactly! That's exactly how he says my name! It always makes my stomach—
"Huh? Prince Friedrich?"

Who should appear behind us after we'd left the store but Friedrich himself. His hangers-on, Adolf and Silvio, were there too. I was facing the full set of landmines.

Why did you guys have to show up?! I'm trying to enjoy my day off!

"Are you and your friends celebrating the end of the tests too?" Friedrich asked me.

"That's r-right."

"What a coincidence."

Not a happy coincidence! I cursed whatever god was orchestrating these events.

"Since we're all here, why don't we do something together? The more the merrier, as they say."

"Um. We were just about to choose a dress for Minne, and I'm sure you would be bored if—" That was as far as I got before another idea came to my mind. "Lord Adolf, would you assist us in choosing a dress for Minne? We'd appreciate a gentleman's opinion."

This was a good chance to make Adolf and Minne get closer. If all went well, maybe Silvio and Lotte would get closer too. Lately, Lotte felt that Silvio had been ignoring her.

The only problem was that I'd have to deal with Friedrich myself...

"Then let's head there now. I know of a store that sells fine dresses, so I can guide you all."

You're so used to luxury that I worry you're going to leave Minne feeling overwhelmed. But I can't really refuse.

We followed Friedrich as he led us to the dress store.

"Lady Astrid..." Minne whispered to me. "Please warn me in advance before surprises like this."

"Surprises?" I looked at her in confusion. "I'm the one who's surprised."

"You mean to say that you didn't arrange for us to meet up with Prince

Friedrich here?"

"I don't know Prince Friedrich well enough to set up something like that."

What kind of relationship does Minne think I have with Friedrich?

"I have to admit that I'm happy to have Lord Adolf choosing my dress. Thank you for that, Lady Astrid."

"That's nice. But you need to be more forward, or some other girl will steal him from you."

You've gotta look out for Elsa, our heroine. I'd much rather she was the one to eliminate the nuclear landmine Friedrich. I'm counting on you and Lotte to lay claim to Adolf and Silvio before she gets here.

"This is the store."

Wow... It was a gorgeous store that looked specifically like it catered to the bourgeoisie. It was the kind of store that was obviously high-class at a glance. Minne was left speechless.

"P-Please, don't be concerned," Friedrich reassured her. "This is my treat!"

"I can't accept that..."

Friedrich, you idiot! You've chosen this store as if she's an imperial family member!

"I'll be happy to pay, so please choose your dress freely."

Friedrich, no. Putting it that way just makes it harder for Minne to choose! Do you have no idea how big of a deal it is to have the imperial family treat you to something?!

"Th-Thank you..."

Friedrich left us no choice but to accept his crass display of generosity as we entered the store.

"Welcome," an attendant greeted us as we entered.

The store was filled with only the most beautiful dresses. They had a diverse array of products, including everything from fashionable open-back dresses to standard dresses decorated with beautiful frills and lace. It was no surprise that

the imperial family recommended this store.

“Lord Adolf, what type of dress would suit Minne, in your opinion?”

“You’re asking me? I don’t know much about girl’s clothes.”

Here I am doing my best to make Minne and Adolf get closer, and Adolf is making all my effort go to waste. What a jerk!

“This dress might suit her, maybe.”

Adolf had chosen a dress that exposed very little skin. It was a timeless style that featured a corset at the waist for showing off one’s curves—not that an eight-year-old was going to have many curves to show off.

“What do you think, Minne?”

“I’d like this one! It’s the one Lord Adolf chose for me, after all!”

Minne was getting very excited around Adolf. Meanwhile, Adolf was blushing bashfully as he avoided Minne’s gaze.

What an innocent reaction. There’s definitely a spark there. Go for it, Minne! I need your help if I’m going to avoid destruction.

“While we’re here, why doesn’t Lord Silvio help Lotte choose a dress?”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

Yeah, I’m sure! We’ve gotta get all that money in Friedrich’s wallet injected back into the Plusen Empire’s economy.

“Lord Silvio, is there a dress here that would suit me?”

“Let me see. I think this vermilion dress would suit you. The color is striking, and the ribbon is a cute touch. These open-backed dresses are in fashion recently, so you’re unlikely to fall behind the times while wearing it.” Silvio gave his recommendation in his usual explanatory tone.

I can’t help but think that Silvio’s a totally different person today than he was before the tests. Maybe he was tired, but there was no reason to be so on-edge.

“If Lord Silvio says so, then I’m sure it’s a fine choice of dress.”

“No... My words carry no particular worth.”

And there's his negativity creeping in again... His relationship with his dad must be getting worse. Based on the game, this is when he starts his rebellious phase and starts being a pain in the neck. Is Lotte going to be able to handle him? I guess I've got no choice but to help her out.

"Lord Silvio, you should have more confidence. I have no idea what sort of chancellor your father is, but I'm sure you'll make a fine one yourself. After all, you're already giving proper thought to how a chancellor should behave."

"But I'm just..."

"If the chancellor is there to hold back the emperor, then does that make it your job to prevent the chancellor from running wild? Is that what you're thinking? You're only eight years old. You don't have to shoulder such responsibility. Now is the time to focus on your studies so that you can become the chancellor you aspire to be in the future."

I hate spineless boys. Get yourself together!

"I take your point. I'll think about what you've said." Silvio smiled just a little, but he didn't seem fully convinced.

"Aren't you going to choose a dress, Astrid?" Friedrich asked.

"I d-don't think I'll have any opportunities to wear a new dress."

Eight-year-olds grow fast. Any dress I bought wouldn't be wearable for very long. I also got the feeling that accepting gifts from Friedrich could trigger my destruction.

"It's just, I was thinking that this dress would suit you well." Friedrich pointed to a fashionable dress with indigo blue and white colors.

It's a nice dress; I just don't have a use for it.

"Lady Astrid, perhaps you'd like to join us for the banquet celebrating my father's birthday? If you wore that dress, I'm sure you'd look stunning," Minne suggested.

"I don't think it would be appropriate of me to make myself stand out when it's your father's birthday."

Minne was always trying to make Friedrich and I get closer. Despite her good

intentions, it was a real nuisance.

“I’m really not in need of a dress right now. If I ever do need one, I’ll pick one that looks similar.”

“I see. That’s a shame...”

Friedrich looked disappointed. *I’ve got no sympathy. It’s decided that you end up with the heroine, Elsa.*

“Is there a dress you’d like, Iris?”

“That dress over there looks cute.” Iris was pointing to an indigo blue dress with a ribbon around the waist, designed for children.

You’ve chosen the same color as Friedrich...

“All right. I’ll buy it for you.” I wasn’t about to let Friedrich pay for Iris’s dress too, especially not when Iris hated Friedrich.

“Thank you so much, Astrid.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I bought the dress for Iris while Friedrich paid for the dresses that Adolf and Silvio had chosen for Minne and Lotte. The prices were pretty high, but Friedrich was laid-back about it.

As a result, our day spent celebrating the end of our tests concluded peacefully, despite the appearance of three intruders.

“Why not buy a dress to use as loungewear?”

“No, that’s quite all right.”

Friedrich made one last attempt to buy me a dress, but I politely rejected his offer once more. *I hope I’m not making Friedrich mad.*

Chapter 5 — The Villainess Says Farewell to the Older Students

Time passed, and I was about to enter my first year of middle school at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery. An end-of-year ceremony would be held in March, and then we'd simply advance to the first year of middle school.

But before that came the graduation ceremony. Many of the older senior students I knew at the academy would be graduating, including Laura, the Round Table's chair. Fourth-year elementary students couldn't attend the graduation ceremony, but we gathered to see off the students who'd taken care of us at the Round Table.

Although some students would be going on to study for a degree rather than graduating, those were almost all boys. The total fraction of Round Table members going on to study at the university was quite small. This was, after all, a gathering place for the children of high-ranking nobles; once they'd learned the basics of magic and finished their ordinary education, they wouldn't remain at the academy. Instead, they'd go on to receive training at home in preparation for becoming the next generation of influential nobles. Their parents would teach them how to rule their domain, how to maintain an army, how to associate with other nobles, and other such skills.

Ordinary students, on the other hand, often went on to study for a degree, aiming to become a court mage or some other such role. Either they weren't firstborn sons, and thus couldn't inherit a noble title, or their domain didn't generate enough income to sustain their lifestyle. Those students needed further study to make up for those shortcomings.

As for me, father was likely to strongly oppose any attempt to study for a degree. He'd told me in no uncertain terms that I would never be a court mage.

All I want is to learn more magic. Poor, poor me... At any rate, I need to focus on overcoming the events that'll lead to my destruction in my third year of high school so I can live freely in the future.

But what kind of marriage am I going to get? As a duke's daughter, I've got no

choice but to marry someone, but I can't even imagine it. Father's dead set on Friedrich, but I haven't the slightest bit of interest in being stuck with him.

Assuming the heroine, Elsa, takes care of Friedrich, who does that leave for me? If only I could marry Iris's older brother so that we'd be sisters for real. Pity she doesn't have one...

Which means it'll be the son of another duke... I might even have to marry a foreigner. I'd hate that. Even if my husband were from Osterreich, where they speak the same language, it would basically make me a hostage, wouldn't it? It'd be totally humiliating.

But if father does allow me to stay in the country, can he find someone I actually like? It's hard to see that happening. There's often a big age gap when nobles marry, so I might even end up with some old man.

I can't see any hope for my future at all. No matter what happens, I'm going to end up unhappy. The one person I like is Mr. Bernhard, but he's the second son of a viscount. I can already guess how much father would hate that. It's a cruel world.

I haven't met anyone who'd be a good match for me at the Round Table, and pretty much everyone here goes on to marry someone their parents chose. I suppose I'll have to marry someone my father chooses too...and hopefully not Friedrich.

Well, whatever. I'm sure he wants happiness for his daughter, and he's a duke, so he gets to take his pick. I shouldn't worry about it so much.

I decided to forget about my future for the time being and instead focus on the students who'd be leaving.

"Congratulations to you all on your graduation!"

Elementary and middle school students had gathered at the Round Table to see off the older students. A middle school student approached Laura with a bouquet of flowers on behalf of the remaining students, and then...

Huh? She's not giving it to Laura?

For some reason, rather than giving it to Laura, the middle school girl gave the

bouquet to the boy who was our vice chair. The middle school girl then said her goodbyes, and we were free to do as we chose.

“Laura, Laura.” I ran over to Laura, unsure about what had just happened.
“Laura, aren’t you graduating?”

“No, I’m not. I’m staying here at the academy.”

Huh? How? Didn’t she get enough course credits? That can’t be it.

“I’m going on to study for a degree. My fiancé isn’t old enough to marry me yet, so father has given me permission to do as I please until he comes of age.”

“I see. So you’re studying for a degree...”

Wow! The Round Table members are all high-ranking nobles, and yet Laura, a girl, gets to study for a degree! I’m so jealous!

“Can I ask what your major will be?”

“Blood magic-related magical engineering. But the truth is, I’ll have to get married before I can finish the course, so it’s unlikely I’ll ever get my degree.”

Blood magic engineering! Now I’ve absolutely got to drop by Laura’s lab at some point.

“I’ll come to visit you at some point,” I told her. “I’d love to study for a degree myself.”

“Oh?” Laura sounded surprised. “I thought you’d be getting married as soon as you graduate.”

“Huh? Who would I marry?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Prince Friedrich. Am I wrong?”

Gah! What a horrible thought!

“Of course not. His Highness treats me well because of his kind heart, but I believe there is another target for his affections. I’m sure of it, in fact. There’s doubtless another girl who has won his heart.”

“Is that so? I’d always thought you had your eyes on Friedrich the whole time, but maybe I was wrong.”

Who'd go chasing after that nuclear landmine, Laura? No one in their right mind!

"At the end of the day, nobles like us don't have much say when it comes to who we end up with. I'd prefer someone older than myself, and yet I'm marrying a boy three years my junior. Though I suppose younger boys have their cute side too. I'll be able to help him with his studies."

Ugh. She says it like she's unhappy, but she sounds glad. I prefer older men too!

"Live a good life by working hard in your studies and enjoying a little romance. A life without fun would be terribly dull, and you'd lose your passion for living."

"You too, Laura. Give it your all during your degree course."

Must be nice. Blood magic engineering? If I studied that, I'd be able to boost my abilities even further and sync up my guns with my nervous system. That'd be so useful in whatever battles fate has in store!

But my destruction will get here before I can reach degree level. I don't have time for it. I barely have time for anything, really. One minute I thought I could take it easy because I had ten years to go, but now there are only six years left. How did it come to this?

"Astrid."

Gah. Just as I'm worrying about my future, here comes Friedrich. My life is a nightmare...

"Astrid, you look as though you're deep in thought. Are you thinking about those graduating?"

"That's r-right. I'm thinking about how lonely I'll be."

I'm thinking about how I'm going to tear you apart!

"Yes, indeed. The Round Table won't be the same with everyone gone. But doesn't the thought of new students joining offer just a little consolation?"

Well, the fresh new first graders might be cute.

Iris was gradually getting over her shyness, but it was going to take time

before she was used to being around people. Iris was always cautious, making sure those around her didn't pose a threat, and then waiting for them to talk to her first. She was the type of girl who never started a conversation with anyone. I couldn't deny that it was cute, but I worried about how Iris would fit in with society in the future. I still didn't want her to be quite as forward and outspoken as me, however.

That reminds me. Cute little Iris will have to get married someday too. Now I've made myself sad...

"Speaking of new students, Adolf's little brother is joining the academy. Did you hear?"

"Is he really?"

Huh? Adolf had a little brother? He wasn't in the game, so I had no idea.

Iris was another character who'd never appeared in the game, so I had no idea how the two would get along. I had no worries about a girl as cute as Iris getting a bad end, though.

The fate of Minne and my other friends was something else uncertain. In the game, Astrid had several accomplices who helped to bully Elsa, but their punishments were never mentioned.

Well, Minne is passionate about Adolf. I can't see her facing destruction like me. Then again, isn't there a chance of Elsa targeting Adolf? Maybe we should hide Adolf away somewhere once Elsa joins the academy... Let's just wish Elsa a happy future and let her take on Friedrich. Consider yourself lucky, future empress! I'm not just forcing him on you to make him stay away from me or anything.

"Astrid?"

"Oh, excuse me, Your Highness. I was just wondering what kind of boy Lord Adolf's younger brother is."

Whoops. I got lost in thought and went quiet without realizing it.

"His little brother's name is Dietrich. He's a talented mage, just like you. I hope we can give him a warm welcome here at the Round Table."

“Indeed, Your Highness.”

His younger brother can't be a landmine because he's not one of the game's love interests. Right? If more landmines appear, I'll cry. I'll scream!

“Astrid, are you busy?” Iris came over to talk to me.

“No, we've just finished our conversation. Did you need something?”

I greeted my little sister with a smile. *You're the one person I can relax around.*

“The truth is, I'm worried about something father told me today.”

“Oh? Do you want to talk about it?” If my cute little sister had a problem, I couldn't refuse to hear her out.

“The thing is, I have a fiancé...”

“Huh? That's the first I've heard...”

A fiancé?! Little Iris has one even though I don't?!

“Wh-What's his name?”

“I heard that his name is Werner Albrecht von Württemberg and that he's entering the academy this year. It seems that he's Duke Württemberg's heir.”

A duke's daughter marrying another duke's son—no surprises there. Iris doesn't have a brother, so maybe their marriage could unify the Braunschweig and Württemberg families. They're both heirs to their own households right now, but the question is whether she'll get along with this Werner boy.

“Are you worried, Iris?”

“Yes. I've no idea what kind of person Lord Werner is because we've never met. I'm worried that I might not be able to marry him. And perhaps he'll tell me he doesn't like me...”

“If he tells you that, I'll shoot this Werner kid in the face with rubber bullets.”

Any brat who complains about marrying my cute little sister deserves rubber bullets! I wish I could be marrying her myself!

“Did you say Werner?”

Oh, Friedrich is still here. I wish he wouldn't intrude on my private time with my sister.

"I've heard much about him, and I believe he's a good-natured boy. His magical talent is on par with Dietrich. I'm sure he'll grow into a fine husband."

That's the imperial family for you. It's like they know everything about every noble in their country.

"Aren't you relieved, Iris?"

"Yes, I feel a little better."

Iris gets a good fiancé for herself, and meanwhile I'm stuck in this minefield... Life is so unfair.

Chapter 6 — The Villainess Wants to Start a Magic Research Club After saying goodbye to Laura and the others, I officially began my first year of middle school. And now that I was a middle schooler, there was something I wanted to try. That’s right, a club!

Elementary schoolers couldn’t enter clubs, but there were unified clubs for both middle schoolers and high schoolers. Club activities included everything from sports to indoor hobbies.

I’d enjoyed camping and mountain climbing in an outdoor activities club in my past life, but in this life, I was going to try an indoor club. That was because this academy had a magic research club that appeared to have been created especially for me!

“I’m the first to check it out!”

To find out what kind of activities the magic research club carried out, I went to the club building and knocked on the club room door.

“Come on in.”

“Pardon me!” I opened the door, and inside the room I saw...

Inside were four lazy-looking girls and some desserts laid out on a table. They did have some test tubes, beakers, and mana measuring equipment, but it was all covered in dust. *It doesn’t look like activities of any kind are going on here...*

“Um... Is this the magic research club?”

“That’s right. We’re the magic research club.”

Bah. I thought I could come here to practice my magic and carry out research every day, but they’re just a bunch of slackers! What a letdown. Feels like I might faint.

“Is the club active right now?” I asked bluntly.

“Kind of. See these cookies?” A high school girl who was probably the club’s leader smiled and picked up a cookie.

“One of these cookies contains a blood magic spell. Whoever eats it won’t be able to stop sneezing!”

“Whoa! That’s so dull that I’m actually surprised!”

They’re just making prank cookies! What’s the point in that?!

“Maybe it sounds dull to you, but the purpose of this magic research club is to find nice and simple magic that we can use in our daily lives. We’re not specialists here.”

“Doesn’t the club do *any* kind of specialist magic research?”

“Not right now. We do enough specialist magic during classes.”

What a joke! These people are just here to kill time!

“Want to join? New members are welcome.”

“I already know a place where I can gossip over a few snacks, thanks!”

Who’d want to join this brainless bunch? My future’s riding on my magic research. You think I’ve got time to sit around and make sneeze cookies that any elementary schooler could make?

“Oh? It sounds as though you’re a Round Table member.”

“That’s right. The name’s Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg. I’m terribly sorry for wasting your time. Now, if you’ll excuse me!”

What a total letdown! I’m shaken to my core! And yet that’s the only club that does any magic research... Now what? I suppose I could join a sports club if I just want to increase my base strength... No, I’ve got a better idea!

“I can just create the perfect magic research club!” It was like a lightbulb came on in my head. “I don’t need to count on existing clubs. I should be able to make my own club, which means I can create a *real* magic research club!”

With my decision made, I began to run. I used blood magic to accelerate, and then I kept sprinting until I was in the staff room. The teaching staff got quite a

shock when I burst into the room moving faster than a horse, but I paid them no mind.

“Excuse me! Who’s in charge of club activities?!” I asked the nearest teacher.

“Th-That would be Mr. Oppenheim...” they replied, pointing to another teacher with a magnificently smooth head.

“Thank you!”

Thanks for the info, whatever your name is!

I was about to sprint again, but that was too much trouble, so I leaped. A single bound took me right over to Mr. Oppenheim, and kicking off from the ceiling put me back down on the ground. *Nice landing!*

“Mr. Oppenheim!”

“Whoa! Wh-What is it?”

Mr. Oppenheim looked quite shocked when I suddenly appeared before him, but I wasn’t worried about that. I had important work to do!

“I want to start a new club. How do I do it?!”

“Y-You want to start a new club? W-Well, first I’d like you to calm down. It’s bad for my heart when people suddenly drop down from the ceiling...”

Whatever, just tell me how to make a new club, please!

“First of all, there’s the new club application form. You write the name of the new club here...”

“Thanks!” I snatched the form out of Mr. Oppenheim’s hand and used a quill that was on his desk to write the name of my new club, made by me, for me.

“Okay! Is that it?!”

““Real magic research club’... Are you trying to pick a fight with the existing magic research club?”

“They started it.”

This is the real magic research club! I’ll show everyone we’re on a whole other level from that pathetic, lazy, fake magic research club!

“I’ll turn a blind eye to the name for now. The problem is that you need the names of at least four students to form a club. You write the names here. Oh, and...please don’t include any fictional students or anyone who hasn’t agreed to join.”

Gah. I kinda figured there’d be a minimum member limit, but I didn’t think they’d stop me from including fictional and non-consenting students! That’s my plan ruined... Can this teacher read minds?

“Once you’ve got some names, come submit the form.”

“Got it...”

Four names... That means I need three people besides myself. Iris can’t join because she’s still in elementary school. Friedrich and his buddies would be the perfect number, but that’s out of the question. Why would I want to be surrounded by landmines even when I’m not at the Round Table? I’m sick of minesweeping already.

“I suppose I’ll invite Minne and the others...”

I’ll have five members if my friends join, but they’re probably planning on joining other clubs, so it won’t be that easy. Well...if I can’t get enough members, I’ll just join the athletics club. At least I’d build some strength.

....

“Club activities?”

I’d asked Minne and the others whether they planned to join any clubs.

“I don’t have any plans to join one.”

“I don’t have a particular club in mind either.”

Oh? That’s a good reaction from Minne and Lotte. Maybe this’ll work.

“I haven’t any particular interest in club activities either.”

“Me neither.”

Those are good responses from Brigitte and Sandra too. Though I don’t like the way they say they’re not interested...

“Then why don’t you all join the club I’m starting?”

“You’re starting a new club, Lady Astrid?”

I put my application form for the real magic research club down on the desk, and as Minne and the others examined it, their surprise showed clearly on their faces.

I wrote the name in the heat of the moment, but now I’m thinking “real magic research club” sounds a bit hostile, like I was just trying to get a reaction...

“It sounds fun to me. What kinds of things will we do?”

“That’s a good question. As part of the club’s activities, we’ll diligently study magic that’ll make our daily lives easier, try out the things we’ve learned, and then exchange reports on our findings. We’re not going to be making anything like prank cookies.”

Huh? Now they’re all frowning as if my explanation put them off.

“We might even make some love potions, just like every girl dreams about.”

I can make a love potion. If you put someone’s brain in an excited state with blood magic, they’ll think that the excitement’s caused by love. It’s a little trick I stumbled upon while studying blood magic.

“A love potion!”

“You can really make one? Really?”

I got a bite! Now to reel these ladies in.

“Yeah, I can make one. But you’ll have to agree to join my club first.”

Heh heh heh. A deal with the devil is too tempting to ignore.

“I’ll join! I’ve always respected you, Lady Astrid, and engaging in these club activities alongside you sounds wonderful!”

“M-Me too!”

I’ve got Minne and Lotte! What about the other two?

“I’ll join too. These club activities could turn out to be a lot of fun.”

Sandra’s joining too!

“I have just one question. Will I have the chance to learn magic from you

during club activities? I'm not particularly good at magic, and I feel as though I'll be a burden to everyone..."

"Don't worry about that. I'll teach you everything you need to know."

Brigitte seemed unsure of herself, but it was needless worry. As club president, I was going to look out for everyone.

"In that case, I'll join too."

All right! Yay! I've got five members!

"Okay, write your names here. Then I'll go submit it."

"Very well." Minne and the others began writing their names on the form.

Heh heh heh. Mr. Oppenheim is in for a surprise. I've actually got real members!

"I'm gonna go submit this!"

Before anyone could make me change my mind, I grabbed the application form and sprinted back to the staff room. I ran like a horse—or maybe even a car—dodging between multiple teachers with my accelerated nervous system before scoring a hole in one at the staff room.

"Mr. Oppenheim! I've filled out the club application form! Now, please, can I have a room for the real magic research club?!"

"Please, calm down. When you came charging in at that ridiculous speed, you made my heart start racing again."

Isn't that just because you're not taking good care of your health?

"Looks like you have five members. They're all middle schoolers, but that's fine. Now you just need to find a club adviser, although I'm not sure any teachers are free..."

What?! There are more conditions besides finding members?! I need a teacher too?!

"Oh, there is one teacher who's available. Bernhard, can you come over here for a minute?"

"How can I be of assistance?"

Wow! It's Mr. Bernhard! But he's looking a lot more worn out than when I saw him at the bookstore during my third year of elementary school. There's blood magic for reducing fatigue, but nothing for mental exhaustion. In that case, his weariness must be something emotional.

"Bernhard, you don't mind becoming the adviser for the real magic research club, do you?"

"A club adviser? Real magic research club...?" Mr. Bernhard's expression darkened.

Ah! He was tired out already, and now he's being pressured into becoming a club adviser. Sorry, Mr. Bernhard...

"Very well." Mr. Bernhard consented, but he still looked as though he might start groaning. "As the adviser, I'll bear responsibility for managing club expenses and other such matters."

I might leave a bad impression on him because of this...

"Might I ask who is the club president?" Mr. Bernhard asked.

"That would be Miss Astrid here." Mr. Oppenheim pointed at me.

"Oh, it's Miss Astrid. I doubt you'll create too much work for me. I feel better about accepting the task now. It's good to be working with you, Miss Astrid."

"I'm truly grateful that you're helping me when you're already so busy."

I got to start the club I wanted, but now I've placed more burden on my beloved Mr. Bernhard... I'll just have to do my best not to make trouble for him with our club activities. Otherwise, I'm going to give him a stomach ulcer.

"Middle schoolers are so easy to deal with. If only high schoolers..." Mr. Bernhard trailed off as he left us.

"Now that you've got members and an adviser, you just need a room. The rightmost room on the first floor of the club building is free, so make use of that one. And please, give my regards to Duke Oldenburg."

Oh? Mr. Oppenheim's just another sycophant looking for connections to high-ranking nobles, is he? Well, he did help me get my club set up, so I suppose I can mention it to father. Anyhow, the club I was dreaming of is now complete! Now

we just need to start doing stuff! Aim for grand mage!

Chapter 7 — The Villainess and New Students

A miniature version of Adolf introduced himself: “My name is Dietrich Ruprecht von Wallenstein, and I’ll be in your care from today onward. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He was Adolf’s brother Dietrich. He really did look like a miniature Adolf, but the relaxed tone he used when he introduced himself suggested that his personality was much more laid-back.

“Nice to meet you, Dietrich. I’m Astrid, a first-year middle schooler. This is my cousin Iris, a third-year elementary schooler. Let’s all be good friends.”

“I-I’m Iris. Nice to meet you.”

The sight of an unfamiliar face had made Iris hide behind me. *You like it back there, don’t you?*

“N-Nice to meet you, Miss Iris.”

What’s this? Dietrich is blushing. Did he just fall in love with Iris? That’s no good. Iris already has a fiancé.

We’d barely said more than a few words to each other when another boy appeared and seemed to take Dietrich’s place before us. It was obvious at a glance that he was a high-ranking noble.

“My name is Werner Albrecht von Württemberg. I’m your fiancé, Miss Iris. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

So this boy is the Werner I’ve heard about. His face was so strikingly manly that it was hard to believe he was a first grader. This boy would be the head of the house of Württemberg someday. *That’s quite a catch you’ve got there, Iris.*

I was impressed, but Iris remained silent. *That’s unsurprising. If you introduce yourself as her fiancé to someone super shy like Iris, it’ll just make her nervous. It’s like he skipped the “let’s start out as friends” phase and went straight to*

“let’s get married.” That’s a little much for shy Iris.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Iris’s cousin, Astrid. Feel free to talk to me whenever.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I saw the way that Werner’s cheeks turned red when he looked at Iris. If Iris can make two boys fall for her this quickly, she must be bewitching them somehow.

“Iris, are you still struggling to talk to Werner?”

“Yes. I’m scared that I might say something to upset him...”

That’s an intense case of shyness.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. I’m here too. Let’s both talk to Werner. You have to get along with him now because he’s your fiancé, and it’s important to find out what sort of person he is. Wouldn’t you rather marry someone you’ve made friends with rather than a complete stranger?”

“I’d much rather marry you, Astrid.”

I appreciate the thought, but we’ll never be able to marry. Maybe I would if I could...

“Come on, we’ll talk to him. I’ll be right beside you.”

“All right!” Iris became more enthusiastic and stood up from her chair.

“Werner, have you got a minute?”

“What is it, Miss Astrid?” Werner replied.

“Would you talk with me and Iris for a while?”

“Of course. I’d be more than willing to get to know my fiancée better.” A warm smile appeared on Werner’s face. “Miss Iris, how are you finding the academy?”

“It’s not bad... I can spend time with my big sister Astrid here...” Iris replied in a small voice that was almost a whisper.

“I’m hoping I’ll soon begin to feel at home at the academy too. In the same way that you’re enjoying your time here by spending it with Miss Astrid, I feel

like I might be able to enjoy my time here if I'm with you."

Werner was trying to win Iris over with his eloquent speech. Meanwhile, Iris was turning bright red.

Then, to the surprise of us all, Dietrich called over to us. "Werner, are you truly Miss Iris's fiancé?"

"Yes. We're to marry so that the ducal houses of Württemberg and Braunschweig are united as one."

"A political marriage?" spat Dietrich. "And Miss Iris accepted this willingly, did she?"

"Of course. Isn't that right, Miss Iris?"

Whoa! Are they going to start fighting over Iris?! They're both in the first year of elementary school, but they're already fighting over girls...

This world's rather advanced in a lot of ways... It's nothing like elementary school in my past life...

"I... Well... My marriage was arranged by my father..." Iris hid behind my back as she stumbled on her words.

"Your fiancée doesn't seem enthusiastic about your marriage."

"That's not true. Your odd questioning is making it difficult for her to explain her feelings. Our marriage is far more important than you seem to realize."

"It seems to me that you're after her title. How petty."

Hold it, boys! This is all about Iris, and you've made her start trembling behind my back. Spare her a thought, will you? You're scaring a little girl here.

"Very well! I challenge you to a duel! If I win, you'll leave her be!"

"I accept! Miss Iris is my fiancée!"



Uh oh... It's finally turned into a fight. A few words from Iris would end this, but she's too shy for that. Maybe someone should step in? It's not just a fight; they're calling it a duel. If someone gets injured, won't the blame fall on the older students watching them? Is this okay?

Adolf! Stop your little brother instead of sitting there and looking disinterested! You too, Friedrich! A prince has a duty to stop things like this! Does no one in this salon have any common sense?! Am I the only reasonable person?!

"Y-You two should stop before someone gets hurt," I told them.

But Werner refused to back down. "No, this is something I must do to defend my honor as a man of the empire!"

Your "honor as a man of the empire"? Do you think you're a samurai? Are you gonna commit seppuku next?

"Let's take this outside where we can settle the matter."

"Good idea."

Wow! They're really doing it!

"Lord Adolf! Prince Friedrich! These elementary school boys are talking about having a duel! Aren't you going to stop them?!"

You're the guardians here! Do your job!

"It's a duel between six-year-olds," Adolf replied. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"If there's a dispute between the two of them and their reputations are at stake, then that's not something outsiders should interfere with," Friedrich replied.

You're both useless as guardians! Especially you, Adolf! He's your little brother!

"W-Well, you two should at least let me witness the duel. Let's make sure no one gets hurt."

"I'm not afraid of getting hurt."

I'm afraid! I've got a responsibility here as your senior!

"Come on. I'll head outside with both of you boys. I can use blood magic to heal anyone who gets hurt, but even so, don't do anything stupid. If you injure a future friend, won't you feel awkward at the Round Table later?" I led Iris and the two over-excited boys toward a school courtyard.

Mr. Bernhard must have had to deal with this sort of thing a lot back when he was a trainee teacher. I'll bet it really wore him down. Schoolteacher is the one job I never want, no matter what.

....

"Now, let me explain the rules." I addressed both of the problem children after I'd led them out into the courtyard. "Neither of you have sabers, so I'll have you both use rubber swords that I'll make myself. This will make sure that you don't cause any serious injuries when you hit each other."

I used earth elemental magic to create two fairly soft rubber swords from the same material that I used to make rubber bullets. With these as their weapons, they wouldn't cause any harm unless one of them hit the other in a bad spot.

"We can't have a serious contest with these!"

"It's about the spirit of it. The spirit."

The day you pick up real sabers is the day I force you both to stop. I'll slap you both if I have to. I'm just glad the academy isn't a lawless zone that lets them carry actual blades around...

"The first one to land a blow on the opponent's body wins. But hits to the face are absolutely forbidden. Do you understand?"

"Is this even a duel...?"

Dietrich and Werner both looked unhappy with the rules I'd given them.

"I'll make sure that anyone who doesn't follow the rules never speaks to Iris again."

At that, they both gasped in unison.

No matter what they said, I was going to insist that they followed my rules. I

didn't want to see anyone injured. I had no idea how the teachers might react afterward. If something made the Württembergs or the Wallensteins angry, that rage would be aimed at senior students like me. I couldn't make an enemy out of the Württemberg family when I needed all the military might I could get in order to oppose the imperial family. I was hoping the Württembergs would become my allies after Iris's marriage. That would mean that many of the Plusen Empire's influential nobles would be willing to rise up and aid the Oldenburgs...hopefully.

"Miss Astrid, may we use magic?"

"Sure. But not any magic that might be life-threatening."

I'm sure the level of magic two first-graders can use is limited.

"Now take your places."

I took the sun's position into consideration so I'd make the conditions fair for the two of them. I'd end up with a stomachache later if the loser complained that I'd rigged the duel.

"At the ready. Fight!"

Both boys took action the moment I announced the start of the duel. Dietrich was quickest, as one would expect from the son of the head of an order of knights. He quickly closed the gap between him and Werner before slashing his sword horizontally.

But Werner wasn't so easily outdone. He met Dietrich's attack with his own sword and parried the blow, and it looked like the exchange would leave Dietrich wide open.

Dietrich was quick to recover. Although he'd been parried, he regained his stance with one fluid movement, leaving him just barely enough time to dodge a second attack from Werner.

Are you boys really first-year elementary schoolers? You didn't download the souls of two great sword masters?

As the two continued to exchange blows, I began to worry that one of them was going to get hurt. Iris was growing anxious too, and then Werner

attempted a new form of attack.

“Wind!”

It was very basic elemental magic, but it had some force behind it. The gust that hit Dietrich was strong enough that he struggled to maintain his footing. Then Werner seized the opportunity to strike with his sword.

Just when I thought the contest was decided...

“Hah!” Dietrich leaped with more power than should have been possible, allowing him to dodge Werner’s strike.

No way. He’s using blood magic?

Werner sounded frustrated: “Fire!”

Whoa! Werner’s using fire magic even after I said life-threatening magic wasn’t allowed! This idiot!

But I was wrong. The flames merely appeared behind Dietrich rather than hitting him directly. Their purpose was to prevent him from retreating.

“Water!” Werner followed this up by firing water magic at Dietrich, making the ground at his feet wet. “Haah!”

“Damn you!”

Werner and Dietrich leaped at one another, and then each passed the other by.

“Guhh...”

Both boys had hit each other with the rubber swords I’d made. Dietrich and Werner had both been hit simultaneously.

“I declare the duel a draw!”

“Huh?!”

The two of them looked at me in astonishment.

“My sword hit him first!” Werner cried.

“No, my sword hit first!” Dietrich argued.

Oh, good. I feel much better when children stick to arguing childishly.

“No, you hit at the same time. As the witness to the duel, that’s my judgment, and there’s no mistaking it. Iris, it looked like two simultaneous hits, didn’t it?”

“Y-Yes! Both hit at the same time!”

Iris’s agreement left Werner and Dietrich openly disappointed. *I know you both want to show off because you’re boys, but you’ve both got a long way to go before you stop being children.*

“Let me take a look at you two. I know that they’re rubber swords, but I’m sure it hurt a lot. Did you bruise, Dietrich?”

“N-No, I’m fine, Miss Astrid.”

I tried to take off Dietrich’s shirt so I could see where the rubber sword had hit, but he resisted frantically. *I’m not some pedo who wants to see a first grader’s naked body. You don’t have to panic.*

“What’s this?! There really is a bruise. Let me heal it.”

Werner must have hit him full force because the bruise was huge. His parents were bound to suspect he was being bullied if they saw it. I had to destroy the evidence, so I used healing blood magic to erase it. *Feels like I’m healing people’s bruises a lot lately...*

“There we go. You should be fine now. Does it still hurt?”

“It never hurt in the first place. But...I-I’m grateful...” Dietrich’s face turned bright red as he replied.

Can you not turn bright red after I force you to take your shirt off? You’re a first grader, and now I feel like a criminal.

“Let me check you too, Werner.”

“I-I’m fine! It didn’t hurt at all!”

Werner tried to struggle, but I held him down and removed his shirt. *Another bruise, and this one’s worse than Dietrich’s. Dietrich must have used blood magic when he hit him. They might be first graders, but that fight was dangerous.*

“Sure it didn’t... Now, let me heal you.” I healed Werner in the same way that

I'd healed Dietrich. While I was at it, I also made sure he had no internal injuries. Hitting someone while using blood magic could easily cause organ damage. "There we go. You're all good. Nothing to worry about."

"Th-Thank you, Miss Astrid."

Please, don't turn red...

"Miss Iris." Now that he was healed, Werner turned to Iris.

"Have you lost faith in me? I didn't win..."

"N-No," Iris replied nervously. "I'd rather you didn't fight at all. I...I prefer kind people like Astrid, so..."

"I understand. I'll try to become more like Miss Astrid. Please, don't lose your faith in me."

"All right..."

Guh. These elementary schoolers are flirting already! And here I am with no one to flirt with!

Well, anyhow, I'm glad that's over with. Hopefully, this'll help Iris open up to Werner a little more. I've got to feel sorry for Dietrich though. He lost Iris... But what's it matter? I'm sure the girls will be all over a good-looking boy with a talent for magic like you. Stay strong, kid!

Chapter 8 — The Villainess and Older Men

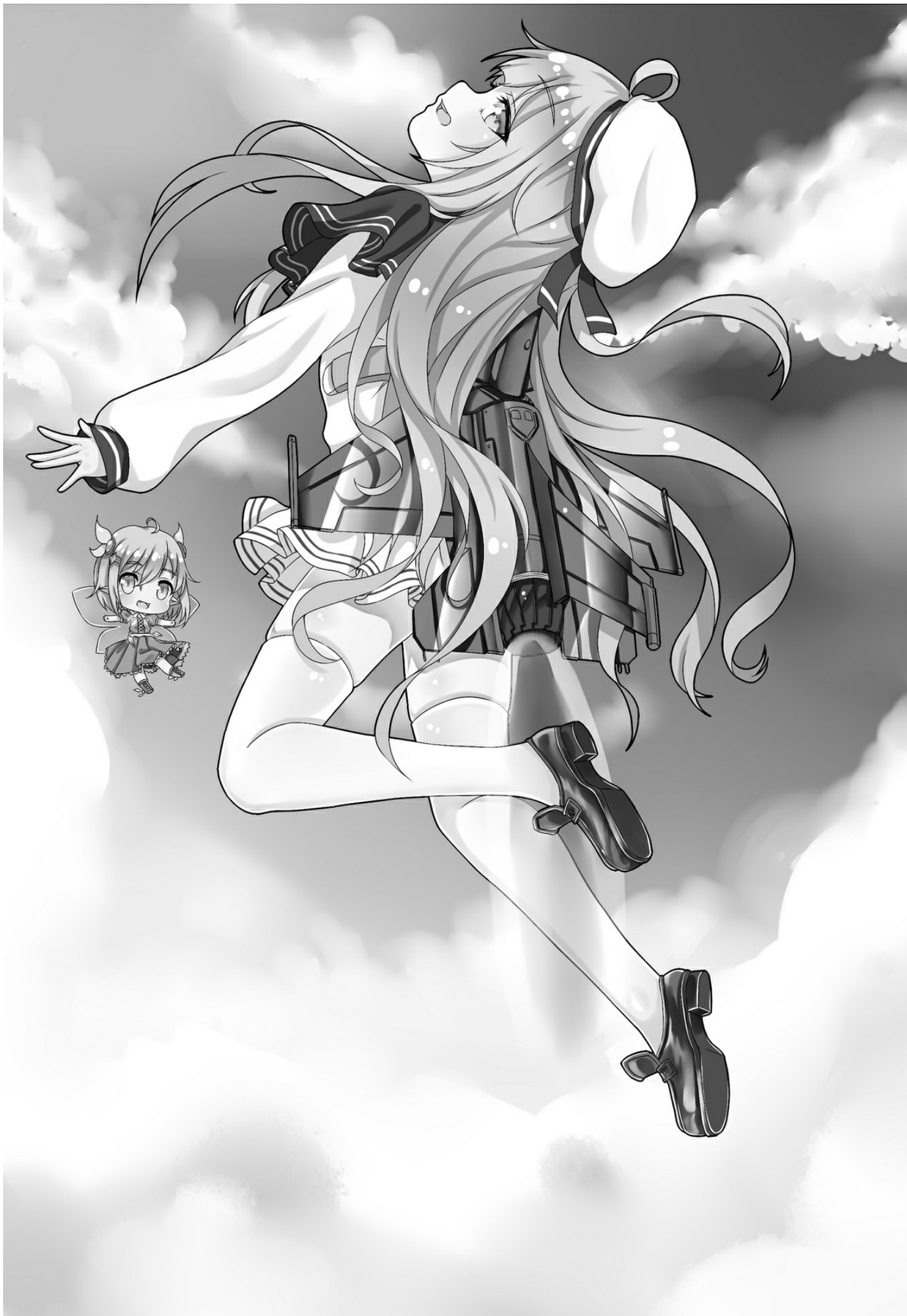
I was in my first year of middle school, the sun was in the sky, and my father was away on business. *Now I can finally do what I want!*

“Lady Astrid, wait...”

“Take off!”

While ignoring the maid who called after me, I generated propulsion by using wind magic to compress the air and fire magic to heat it, and then I took to the skies wearing my 04-type Flight Unit.

The wind feels so good! Nothing beats the open sky!



I flew in circles above the imperial capital Havel, enjoying the feeling of flying through the sky. The palace lacked any defenses against an aerial assault, making it look incredibly vulnerable. I could see the interior of the palace grounds clearly. *That's where Friedrich sets out from.*

I could also see the commercial district. It was full of people busy at work even though it was still early morning. I imagined Elsa busy with the morning's preparations in her bakery. *Don't worry; someday you'll be a duke's daughter and then the empress.*

And then the academy came into view. It was a massive complex where elementary school, middle school, high school, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctorate programs were all taught. It was an impressive sight when viewed from above. Numerous carriages were coming and going as the noble children made their usual commute to school.

No student besides me can make their commute by air! I'm the one and only!

"Blau! Doesn't the wind feel great?"

"Yes, Master! I love the wind!"

That's a good little fairy. You'll get some desserts at the Round Table later.

My landing point had been decided in advance: the grounds often used by the athletics club, in a garden to the rear. It was an open space that no one visited in the early morning while people were still arriving. Apparently, early morning training wasn't something athletics clubs of this world did.

I turned and lined myself up to prepare to descend, then I gradually lowered my speed as my altitude slowly dropped. This required great caution because any sudden drops in speed or altitude could cause me to crash, just like with a real aircraft.

On the other hand, I was using blood magic to strengthen my muscles and bones. I knew from experience that this would protect me from damage, even if I jumped off one of the academy's roofs! But blood magic could only protect my body: it couldn't do anything to prevent damaging the trust the teachers had in me!

The teachers would be pretty shocked if I came flying into school from the sky, and it would show that I'd done no soul-searching whatsoever since making them angry at me for jumping from the roof. Fortunately, that wouldn't matter if I could land quietly without anyone noticing.

Flaps, check! Speed, check! Altitude, check! Brace for landing!

My feet finally touched the ground, and I ran across the surface with heavy footsteps.

"Nice landing!"

"What do you mean, nice landing?"

Huh? There shouldn't be anyone here, but I just heard a voice...

"Mr. Bernhard?"

"I thought I saw something coming down from the sky. Seems it was you, Miss Astrid..." Mr. Bernhard was there on the athletics ground that should have been deserted.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Bernhard?" I asked.

"Well, it's rather bold of you to ask me that question," Mr. Bernhard replied with a sigh. "I don't think any other academy student has ever arrived here from the sky. What possessed you to travel to school by air?"

"Uh... The sky looked so clear, it was like it was calling me!"

"I assume there'd be no problem with me informing Duke Oldenburg of this?"

"Please, anything but that."

I made sure to head out when father wasn't around!

"Now, may I ask why you're here?"

"I'm taking a break. There's no one around to ask things of me here."

So he slacks off too! Now he can't complain about me!

"I agreed to be the adviser for the real magic research club without a whole lot of thought. You're not experimenting with magic like this every day, are you?"

“Of course not. We just do a few simple experiments with blood magic.”

Mr. Bernhard's really getting into his moody phase. I'll bet he's under a lot of stress. I can't do anything with my club activities that'll create even more trouble. I've got to make sure I conduct my research without placing a burden on him.

“You're sure you're not going to cause problems?”

“I won't do anything to cause you trouble!”

That's right! I wanna try a few little blood magic experiments, that's all!

“I'll take your word for it. So, how's life here at the academy? I heard there was a duel between Duke Württemberg's son and the Wallenstein boy, and that you were there to control them. Does trouble just happen to follow you around?”

“Please, allow me to explain. Two of the first graders had a duel over an elementary school girl. I made sure they didn't use blades, but I couldn't stop them bruising each other. Those two hotheads are quite a handful.”

Apparently, Mr. Bernhard knew about the duel at the Round Table. It meant I had a chance to vent. Adolf had acted like it was none of his business, and Friedrich had merely mumbled something about being glad they weren't injured.

“Oh, I know it all too well.” Mr. Bernhard began to nod his head. “The children at this academy are precocious. Each one is a noble's child, so they let their pride get the better of them and start arguing over the smallest things. And it's not just the elementary schoolers; I'm afraid the high schoolers never grow out of it either.”

“Huh? Didn't you graduate from this academy too, Mr. Bernhard?”

“That's right. They were an argumentative bunch in my day too. Now that I'm a teacher and I can see the bigger picture, I've realized that the trouble went far beyond what was happening around me.”

I'll never accept a teaching job in a million years...

“What made you decide to become a teacher?”

“That’s a story for another day. You’d better get going, or you’ll be late for class.”

Oh crap! Even after flying here, I’m still gonna be late! Perfect attendance and punctuality was my one redeeming feature!

“See you, Mr. Bernhard! Until next time!”

“Yes, but make sure you’re walking along the ground next time.”

With a blood magic boost, I sprinted all the way to my classroom.

“I’ll bet she can cause just as much damage while walking...”

I chose not to hear Mr. Bernhard’s complaints about me.

....

“Dr. Wolff!”

Time had passed and classes were over.

A long, long time ago, I’d promised to pay Dr. Wolff’s research lab a visit, and now I was actually doing it.

“Oh, Lady Astrid. It’s been so long.”

“It has been a long time!”

Dr. Wolff’s research lab was a neat and orderly room containing magical engineering books, magic-related equipment of various sorts, and guinea pigs for use in blood magic experiments. It was *very* different from a certain fake magic research club.

“What are you researching right now, Dr. Wolff?”

“It’s research into controlling the brain with blood magic. Recent thinking has it that the brain may actually be the seat of consciousness, rather than the heart.”

Oh. Seems there are still things undiscovered that were obvious back on Earth.

“Isn’t it dangerous to use blood magic on the brain?”

“Not if I follow several important steps. I intend to verify its safety through animal experimentation before I begin monitoring the effects on human test

subjects. I'll need to monitor my subjects twenty-four hours a day to ensure no abnormalities arise."

Interesting. I've been thinking about brain research since way back, but now it might be reality...

"I'm guessing these guinea pigs are going to be used in your experiments?"

"Oh, those? These are here because I enjoy looking after them. The experiments will actually be performed on monkeys. Their brain is similar in size to that of a human."

Makes sense. Tiny little guinea pig brains won't tell us much.

"Are monkeys easy to get hold of?"

"Here in the university, yes; we can breed them, after all. However, you'll find they're rather expensive anywhere else."

Monkeys are expensive? Japan has no shortage of macaques. They're always messing up everyone's fields.

"Blood magic's normally used for physical performance boosts and healing. Were those things developed using animal experiments too?"

"They didn't teach you that in school yet? Blood magic started with experiments on humans. Scientific ethics were somewhat lacking in those days. In fact, discoveries were mostly made through trial and error, and we'd hardly consider such things experiments today."

Ah! Even when Joseph Jünger was the first to use healing blood magic, right from the get go, he was trying it on actual soldiers injured in battle. It all turned out well because he was successful, but human lives mustn't have carried as much worth in those days...

"Would you let me see some of your research?"

"Of course. After all, I was the one who invited you to come visit."

Dr. Wolff's so kind to me. If only he wasn't twenty-one years my senior...

"Oh, did they give you an official job here yet, Dr. Wolff?"

"Indeed, I'm an assistant professor now," Professor Wolff told me with a

broad smile. “I finally got hired. The long journey to get here is finally over, but now I find myself needing some major research results if I’m to continue moving up the ladder. Honestly, every day is nothing but research.”

He really is passionate about magic research. I wish I could get so deep into research, I mused while skimming through a research paper he’d written. *Interesting. Actions of the brain—the firing of neurons, in other words—can be monitored and deliberately guided to heal mental illnesses once thought incurable... This is amazing. If he had a neuroscientist from Earth working with him, they’d probably get a Nobel Prize.*

I began carefully reading about the processes used in his experiments while I was having these thoughts. I wanted to try similar experiments myself at some point, so now was the time to learn the techniques.

Obligation to keep the subject informed... Ethics surrounding animal experiments... These experiments look like a real chore.

Professor Wolff noticed me intently studying his research. “There’s no mistaking your love for magic, Lady Astrid,” he said while bringing me a cup of coffee.

Lots of sugar. Just what I wanted.

“In my case, my fate’s riding on it. A battle’s approaching, and I absolutely have to win.”

“That’s true of us all. My daily experiments and analysis are also part of a battle I must win. You’d have a hard time finding anyone who isn’t in that situation.”

Really? It doesn’t look like anyone else is dealing with anything like my crucial battle against Friedrich...

That said, I get that I’m not the only one fighting against fate. Minne and Lotte will have to fight their own battles to prevent Elsa from stealing Adolf and Silvio. Hmm... I’ve been thinking about it like I’m special. I’ve got to fix that.

“Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask you for some time: can you use blood magic to control the operation of internal organs? I’ve seen books in the library about healing damage to organs with blood magic, but nothing about whether their

activity can be manipulated.”

“It’s possible. When treating a drowning person, for example, lifesaving measures include a procedure where the heart’s functioning is controlled through external stimulation. Another example would be inducing vomiting to treat someone who accidentally ingested poison.”

Hmm. Those are both cases where the movements of the organ are controlled. I want to know whether I could control something like hormone secretion.

I spent about an hour sitting in Professor Wolff’s lab thinking about these things. I also got to see an experiment on a monkey before I left to go home.

Naturally, I traveled home by carriage. I was worried that someone might tell father if I traveled by any other means.

Chapter 9 — I'm the Villainess, and My Club Room's Complete

"This is the real magic research club room!" I declared proudly as I showed the members our glorious lab.

The walls were lined with bookshelves that held dissertations and specialist books, and experimental equipment was arranged on the shelves and tables. We even had a caged monkey for use in experiments. There were cages ready for raising guinea pigs too. Overall, it was like a more compact version of Professor Wolff's lab. I hadn't just visited him for fun: I'd also been there to decide on the layout for our club room.

Of course, there was some space set up for eating desserts while enjoying girly chats as well. The desserts were stolen from the Round Table.

"Wow! It's amazing, Lady Astrid!"

"It looks so professional..."

Minne, Lotte, Brigitte, and Sandra couldn't help but be impressed at how well the club room had turned out.

"We're not here to play around with sneeze cookies like the fake magic research club! We're here for actual magic research!"

We're the real magic research club! There's a big difference between us and the fake magic research club!

"But let's leave research aside for today. Now that we've got our club room set up, it's time to celebrate with a tea ceremony. I've brought some tea and desserts from the Round Table."

"Lady Astrid, I couldn't possibly allow you to spend your time on such a task."

"Don't be silly. I'm just making us some tea."

"L-Leave that to us. You can take a seat, Lady Astrid!"

Well...I think Minne and the others are a lot less guarded around me now, but they're still calling me Lady, and they still insist on handling all the small tasks.

Vallia was right when she said that being from a family with too much status makes it extra hard to make friends. It makes me wonder how Iris is getting along.

“Here, Lady Astrid. Please enjoy some tea.” Minne had made tea for everyone.

“Thanks. Let’s all sit down and enjoy it.” I gestured toward the chairs. “Let us raise a toast to the completion of our club room!”

“Um... Lady Astrid... I don’t think you can ‘raise a toast’ while drinking tea.”

“It’s the feeling that matters, Lotte.”

Even I’m not clueless enough to think that you’d normally raise a toast with tea.

“What’s everyone think of the room?” I asked enthusiastically.

“It looks like the kind of laboratory a university student might have,” Brigitte replied. “It’s as though we’ll be working on professional magic research.”

“I feel as though it’s too good for us,” Sandra added.

“We can all use the equipment here whenever we like,” I told them. “And as for the club’s expenses, I’ll be handling all that, so no one else has to worry.”

“Lady Astrid! We can’t allow that!”

“Like I’ve said, the main reason we’re here is for the sake of my hobbies. It wouldn’t be fair of me to ask everyone to contribute money toward that.”

It’s true. The club’s an extension of my hobbies. Even when I asked them to join the club, I was making everyone go along with what I wanted to do, so asking for money would be really unfair.

“Please allow us to contribute a little at least! I don’t mind bearing some of the cost if it’s for you, Lady Astrid!”

“I agree! You do so much for us every day, Lady Astrid!”

Wow. How nice! I’ve got some good friends here.

“I suppose I can let you contribute a little to the club expenses. I’ll use it to buy our everyday consumables.”

I'd begged my father to provide the money for furnishing the club room. He didn't seem happy about it, but in the end, he'd coughed up so much money for his cute daughter that I'd been able to amass all the equipment we now had. In return, I'd had to agree that I'd never be a court mage...

"How about we all decide on our objectives?" I proposed.

"Objectives?" Lotte seemed unsure of what I meant.

"That's right. Athletics club members aim to win in sports events. An indoor club might aim to write a novel. We need to have objectives of our own, or else we'll become as decadent as the fake magic research club."

Objectives are key. Having an objective in mind gives you some motivation to put your heart into club activities. People without a goal tend to get lazy and spend their days on pranks, so one of my objectives is making sure my club never turns decadent!

"Would improving my magic grades be a suitable enough objective?"

"That's great! Let's decide on a specific position in the magic test result rankings!"

Brigitte wants to improve her grades. Not a bad objective! If only there were magic contests, we could aim to do well in those, but this world has nothing like that... All we've got are our school grades.

"Could I aim to improve my test scores too?" Sandra asked. "The truth is, I'd like to be a court mage someday..."

"Oh! You want to be a court mage?! Sure! That's great!"

Becoming a court mage might be off limits for me, but Sandra's a viscount's daughter, so it could be acceptable for someone with her status. Must be nice... Knowing she can get a job that uses magic makes me jealous.

"Lotte and I were thinking that perhaps we might prepare that love potion..."

"Oh? Sure! Let's research it!"

Oh ho. They must be thinking about Adolf and Silvio. Seeing them putting some effort in helps me relax. Eliminating the mines known as Adolf and Silvio is going to require continuous work from these two.

“Looks like our objectives are decided. As club president, I’ll help with those while I work hard on my own research. My objective is to fully adapt my body for combat! That’s what I’ll be working hard on!”

Although I was the club president, I still needed to have an objective. My aim was to research magic that could prepare my body for combat. Blood magic that made me better suited to combat would be essential for my showdown with fate!

It’s not a far-fetched idea. If I can amplify certain reflexes and boost my strength at the same time, that ought to be enough. Anything beyond that is going to require university-level knowledge and facilities, so that’s going way beyond what a club in the academy’s middle school can do. I need to keep making progress by focusing on what I can do right now.

“Lady Astrid...perhaps it’s my imagination, but your objective sounds highly aggressive.”

“Yes, it *is* just your imagination. My objective is every bit as feminine as everyone else’s.”

It’s not feminine in the slightest, is it?

“Now, let’s all write down our ambitions!” I said while putting down some paper.

“I’m going to aim to have my magic grades be in the top twenty.”

“I’ll try to be in the top twenty too!”

Brigitte and Sandra both wrote “Obtain magic grades in the top twenty.”

“Hmm. Maybe something like ‘Develop magic that makes oneself appealing to gentlemen’?”

“I-I was thinking ‘Investigate the utility of blood magic in romantic endeavors.’”

Minne and Lotte both wrote down their strange and rather vague objectives, as though simply writing “make a love potion” was too embarrassing for them. *Heh heh. They’re both so innocent.*

“I’ll go with ‘Adapt my body for combat.’”

Once I'd written that down, the real magic research club was finished setting objectives.

"Let's put these up on the wall here. This way we won't forget what our objectives are." I used thumbtacks to affix the paper listing our objectives to the wall.

"Now this positively feels like a club room."

"It reminds me of the athletics club. They have 'Aim for the Championship!' on their wall."

My friends all sounded pleased now that we had our objectives on display.

"Now, let's forget about objectives so that I can spend our first day testing you on your understanding of magic." I dropped a stack of papers onto the table with a thump. "It's time for a pop quiz! This'll show me what everyone's level of understanding is—but don't worry, it's not like you'll be kicked out or forced to take the test again if you do badly. I'll be here to teach you anything you don't understand over time."

"A-A pop quiz?" The pop quiz was so completely unexpected that it surprised everyone.

"That's right. It's less of a test, and more a way of checking your understanding. It'll be easier to advance toward our objectives if I know how well everyone here understands magic."

The truth was, although I knew that Minne had good magic grades, I didn't know how much magic knowledge the other three had. Teaching them what they already knew would be a waste of time and no fun at all, so I'd decided to gauge their understanding now. The questions were made to test their understanding of both blood and elemental magic, and they started off simple but gradually became more difficult.

Let's see how they handle this...

"Ah, blood magic... I find that rather difficult since we've only just begun learning it."

"Ah, oh dear... I feel this won't go well..."

Seeing everyone take this seriously makes me glad I created the real magic research club. If we can accomplish more than the degenerate fake research club, then maybe we'll be able to chase them out of the club building.

Time passed while I sat thinking, and then the test came to an end.

“Now I'll grade everyone. We're done for today, so you can all either go home or stick around to chat.”

“Let's take the opportunity to get to know one another better.”

While everyone talked to each other, I graded their tests.

Minne had done well, which was unsurprising given her magic grades. Even on the blood magic questions, she'd shown a good understanding for a middle schooler. But the high school-level parts must have been too difficult since she'd left those questions blank.

It looked as though Lotte still had a lot to learn about blood magic. Sandra didn't understand blood magic very well either, and Brigitte had a firm understanding of elemental magic only.

Everyone did at least have a reasonable understanding of first-year middle school content. They'd done as well as you'd expect for girls who were aiming to be court mages or who were passionate about romance. It made me want to change our objectives to say that we'd all get grades within the top ten.

“I see you all have a good understanding of magic. I'll be here to teach everyone, so your grades are going to climb, and your love lives will be fruitful too!”

“Ohh!” they cried.

With that, our tea ceremony commemorating the opening of the real magic research club's club room came to an end.

It felt like I'd forced everyone to join this club with me, but I was relieved to know they'd all be able to join in with the club activities without any problems.

Chapter 10 — A Younger Boy Admires the Villainess?

Summer had come around once again.

Brigitte and Sandra put in huge effort on their finals, and now they ranked among the top twenty-five students in our year. They only needed to go just a little further to reach the top twenty. Once they'd reached that point, they could probably start aiming for the top ten.

As for me, I was under pressure because my father wouldn't have accepted me doing badly after he'd just given me so much money. I did my best and got first place! Hooray!

I did worry that knocking Friedrich off the top spot might incur the wrath of a few girls—girls with rather questionable tastes—who were fans of his. However, that didn't happen, and even at the Round Table, no one bullied me at all.

In fact, it gave more fuel to the horrible delusions that made people say things like, "Now I see why it has to be Lady Astrid who marries Prince Friedrich." Convincing everyone otherwise was a lot of effort. I wished they'd give me a break.

Listen here... My type is older men who take the lead. I've no use for weaklings.

Which brings me to Adolf. He'd really thrown himself into his studies lately; I often saw him reading books that he'd borrowed from the library. I'd provided him with a few book recommendations via Minne, and now Adolf was steadily learning everything from the basics onward. It probably increased his opinion of Minne too.

Minne told me that Adolf had been talking to her about his blood magic lately, and I got the impression he trusted her. I'd also heard that they'd had a date in the library recently. It was all good news, and I was proud to be her friend.

The problem was Silvio. He was the type who kept his concerns bottled up, and despite being close to Lotte, he was being very guarded in his conversations with her lately. I often saw him becoming lost in thought at the Round Table, though he would sometimes discuss things with Friedrich.

Lotte really needs that love potion. If she can lure in Silvio and make him her own, he'll probably start discussing his problems with her. I've already told Lotte what sort of things Silvio is worrying about, so she should be able to get through to him. Hopefully.

What about Friedrich? Who cares about him? Next!

One thing that made me worry a little was that Adolf never ever spoke to his younger brother, Dietrich. As brothers, they should have at least talked a little, but they wouldn't even look at each other. Even during Dietrich's recent duel, Adolf had been completely indifferent.

Do they not get along despite being brothers?

As an only child, I couldn't quite imagine what life was like for two brothers. I thought of Iris as a little sister, but even so, we'd never lived together like actual sisters do.

In addition to all of that, my immediate surroundings were now quite different.

"Miss Iris, you must try these delicious desserts."

"Miss Iris, perhaps you'd like to read this book? It's very interesting."

My precious Iris now had herself a reverse harem made up of two boys from the year below.

"Th-Thank you."

Iris stayed close to me so that she could hide from them at any time, which meant that the average age of the children around me had dropped dramatically. The older members would just smile at us from a distance. *Do they think I'm one of the elementary schoolers now?*

I understood that Iris would want to be nice to her fiancé, Werner, but I had to quietly warn her that being too nice to Dietrich would cause problems. It

made me wish that Dietrich would find himself another girl, but it seemed he was set on Iris.

Well, Iris is cute, after all. If I knew such a cute older student, I'd hang around them too. It's just that Dietrich being friendly toward Iris is genuinely going to cause problems for her. Can't someone else talk to him? Sadly, I don't know much about the elementary schoolers, so it's not like I can say, "I know just the girl for you!"

I tried suggesting to Iris that she introduce Dietrich to some of her friends, but it seemed she didn't actually have any school friends outside of the Round Table. The Round Table members included several elementary school girls, but none were in Iris's year, and all were more interested in the older students around them. *These precocious brats...*

"Dietrich," I called out to him.

"Y-Yes? What is it, Miss Astrid?" Dietrich recoiled as if I'd scared him.

I don't bite. I wish you'd act a little less scared of me.

"You get pretty good magic grades, don't you? And you can use blood magic already."

"That's right. I had a home tutor teach me."

Huh? That's odd. Didn't Adolf's tutor refuse to teach blood magic because he thought it was too soon? Was it not the same tutor?

"In that case, the girls must be all over you. I'll bet you've gotten love letters already." I tried sounding him out—very, very casually.

"I've received some, but I turned those people down."

"Oh? You did?" *Wow! He's already dead set on Iris! He's made up his mind already?*

"I hated to do it, but someone else has already won my heart."

Whoa. That's not a line you'd expect from an elementary schooler...

"S-So... What types of girls do you like?"

"This conversation is a little embarrassing..." Dietrich was starting to turn red.

"You know I'm not going to tell anyone else." I kept on the attack regardless.

"Someone older than me..."

"Hmm." *Yep, that's Iris.*

"I like girls who are r-really kind..."

"Right." *Yep, that's Iris.*

"Someone who shows concern for others..."

"Uh huh." *Yep, that's Iris.*

"And it'd be best if they have exceptional talent in magic..."

"I see." *Yep, that's Iris.*

"I like girls who are very accepting of other people."

"Oh...?"

Iris is cute, but is she "accepting"? I'd say she's the type that likes people to humor her rather than the type that humors others. At least, that's how I see her. That's odd...

"B-But what type of boys do you like, Miss Astrid?"

"Me? Well... I suppose I'd better answer too."

It wouldn't be very nice if I made Dietrich talk about his love life then I refused to do the same. I suppose I'll take the opportunity to make my preferences known.

"First of all, someone tall..."

"All right." Dietrich nodded his head.

"Who's quite forward and takes the lead..."

"Okay." Dietrich nodded his head.

"And acts manly without fretting over things..."

"Makes sense." Dietrich nodded his head.

"And is older than I am!"

"Huh?" Dietrich stared at me blankly.

Heh heh. I hope everyone at the Round Table got that! I like older males who are fairly forward! Doesn't sound much like Friedrich, does it? Are you all listening?

"D-Do they absolutely have to be older than you?"

"Well, I wouldn't say absolutely. If they have a certain sort of composure that I associate with older males, then someone my own age might do."

That still rules out Friedrich!

"I see..." For some reason, Dietrich looked depressed.

What's wrong?

"Ah!" Iris cried out. "Astrid, could you come here for a moment?"

"What is it?"

I felt bad about leaving Dietrich while he was looking depressed, but I was curious about what cute little Iris wanted. *Sorry, Dietrich.*

Iris led me out of the room and then looked me in the eye.

Iris is barely growing at all. Should I be worried?

"Astrid, it's not me who Lord Dietrich likes. I'm sure it's you."

"Huh?" Iris's words came as a shock. "No, he's... Dietrich dueled with Werner over you, remember?"

"Yes, but I think he's been enamored with you ever since. I heard you talking about what types of people you both prefer just now, and his reaction made me sure of it: it's you who he likes."

"What?"

I certainly am older than him...

"Then why would Dietrich be hanging around you?"

"I'm sure it's because he's too embarrassed to talk to you directly. Being close to me means being close to you. That's probably the reason."

Wh-What? You mean Iris hadn't made a reverse harem for herself after all? You mean a boy four years younger than me fell in love with me?

“You must have this all wrong...”

“No, I’m sure of it. I’ve come to understand these things since I began reading the novel that Lord Werner recommended to me.”

Werner... Could you not put weird ideas into Iris’s innocent little head? You’ll make me angry.

“Hmm. That’s a problem. If he tells me so himself, then I’ll turn him down, but I can’t reject him based on speculation.”

He’s four years younger than me, and he’s a noble’s son. Not to mention Dietrich has an awkward connection to the landmine named Adolf.

“I’m sure Dietrich will confess to you in time. He tends to take a manly approach to things.”

“He sounds like an unexploded bomb...”

I like older men, not tiny little elementary schoolers... Anyhow, kids are awfully fickle these days. I’m sure Dietrich will find some attractive girl besides me, and then he can tie the knot with her. He’s a gentlemanly magic genius after all.

“At least you can relax now, Iris. I know it must have been tough having two boys fight for your affection.”

“Yes. Lord Werner is quite enough for me.”

Does that mean all this stuff was going on behind the scenes in the game? I don’t know when exactly the game Astrid started acting like a villainess, but I can’t help but think she was once a sweet girl with a lot of admiration for Friedrich, Adolf, and Silvio. Then along comes this commoner Elsa who lures the three of them away. Astrid must have been livid.

When you put it that way, maybe she wasn’t such a bad person. She might have even been the good girl that my maid said I used to be.

If so, then it’s possible Dietrich fell for her. Though I’ve no way of knowing how she turned away boys like Dietrich who weren’t her type... Game designers! Get out here and tell me!

In my mind, I tried calling out to the staff who’d made the game, but I got no response.

This is hopeless...

Chapter 11 — The Villainess Buys a Swimsuit

Finals were over, and summer vacation had finally arrived! But like every year, I wasn't all that happy about it.

The end-of-term ceremony had finished, and I was sitting with Iris at the Round Table wondering how I'd spend summer this year. Meanwhile, some of the older students were getting excited about something.

What's up with them?

"Everyone! We'll all go to the beach!" The announcement came from the Round Table's new chair, Waltrud Josephine zu Vito.

For some reason, it was almost always a female chair that was chosen each year. *Does that mean I could be the chair when I reach my second year of high school? I guess there's not much chance of that while Friedrich is around.*

Well, anyway, Waltrud was talking about going to the beach for some reason.

"Waltrud, is this yet another event to commemorate something?" asked a frowning first-year high schooler.

"What's the problem?" Waltrud replied, undaunted. "Let's head to the beach as the Round Table and strengthen our ties!"

It was typical Waltrud. Unlike all the other chairs I'd known, Waltrud wanted to start making arrangements the minute she came up with an idea. She'd taken us to the theater a while back saying it was a music appreciation event, and then there was a trip to a restaurant to enjoy gourmet food, even though it was right before the tests. Sometimes we only got three days' notice before an event was arranged. It was hard to keep up.

As usual, the current suggestion of a trip to the beach had come out of nowhere.

"What do you think, Astrid? Does the beach sound good?" Waltrud asked me.

"Y-Yes, it does sound good. It's just a little sudden."

"I wanted to surprise you all."

It was well-known that Waltrud's family, whose head was Marquis Vito, was a line of affluent nobles, and Waltrud was always willing to pay for the events she'd arranged. For that reason, we couldn't complain too much.

"Heh heh. The truth is, I've bought a swimsuit! A new swimsuit! A cute one! So let's all go to the beach! I'll prepare new swimsuits for everyone else too!"

This girl's a real free spirit. Who picked her as chair?

"What a good idea," Friedrich chimed in. "Let's go to the beach as the Round Table. We'll be visiting the beach as part of our first year of high school, so this should be a good rehearsal."

"Exactly! Exactly! It'll be good memories and good experience! You understand correctly, Your Highness!"

Is Waltrud the free spirit in league with Friedrich or something? Friedrich goes along with everything every time, so there's never anyone around to put the brakes on these events.

"Which beach did you have in mind?" Friedrich asked Waltrud.

"How about Grossenvogel? The Schleswigs—that's the family Vallia married into—have a villa on an island just off the coast. The family spends the summer there, so wouldn't it be wonderful to go there and see Vallia again?"

Oh? So it's a chance to see Vallia? But can we really go to see a member of a Duke's household without an appointment? I doubt Waltrud even thought about that problem.

"Indeed. I'll send a letter to Vallia and the Schleswig family. We certainly shouldn't waste the opportunity to pay a visit to a former member and make sure she's doing well."

Once again, Friedrich makes the idea a reality... The Round Table's gonna be a real headache this year.

I do want to know how well Vallia's getting along with Eugen, though. I want the Schleswigs as allies, so I'll just have to go along with it.

"Now, for the schedule..."

"That day isn't possible for me."

Once the discussion gained momentum among the Round Table members, everything was decided: the day when the girls would go to buy swimsuits, the preparations that were required, and the day when we'd actually visit the beach. Waltrud more or less forced all of this through with little room for disagreement.

"Can you swim, Iris?"

"I can't..."

All right. Your big sis is gonna teach you how.

"I'll need to buy a swimsuit," I told her. "I can't fit into the one I wore last year."

"You're growing so fast," Iris replied. "I haven't gotten taller at all..."

Seems like I only grow upward; I'm already 165 cm tall. Meanwhile, my breasts never get any bigger... Mother's quite modest in that department too, so maybe I can't expect much given my lineage. Well, whatever! There's more to a woman than her breasts!

Though I will cry if Iris's grow bigger than mine...

"Astrid, let's choose swimsuits together."

"Good idea. That way I can pick out a cute swimsuit for you too."

And that's how we decided to head to the commercial district to pick out swimsuits.

....

Once we'd arrived in the commercial district, I couldn't stop looking around me. The heroine, Elsa, had to be somewhere nearby.

I still hadn't decided whether the best way to avoid triggering my destruction was to avoid contact with her or to go talk to her myself. It was obviously best to avoid the three love interests, but I had a hard time deciding how to deal with Elsa. Even if I didn't bully her, the academy was swarming with nobles—people who Mr. Bernhard had described as being puffed up with pride—and at least one of them was bound to bother her.

I couldn't ignore the possibility that everything would come back around to me somehow. Minne and Lotte were nice girls, but they were still nobles. If they did bully Elsa, I feared that I might be considered responsible for overseeing it all.

It made me think that it would be better to make contact quickly, protect her, and then ensure she had a good impression of me. But becoming her defender would be a double-edged sword—scoring affection points from Elsa could also mean drawing the ire of other nobles.

Uh... What am I supposed to do?

"Astrid, are you all right?" Iris was looking up at me with concern because of my strange behavior.

"I-I'm fine, Iris. Let's go pick out those swimsuits!"

"All right, Astrid!"

Waltrud lived up to her reputation by taking us straight to the clothing store that she'd recommended. According to her, the store had an impressive array of clothes, and it was easy to find something in the right size. Waltrud had bought her own swimsuit from the same place.

"Come on, let's head in. I know the owner of this place!"

It was important for me to be friends with Waltrud. The Vito family was rich, and in this world, money could buy soldiers. With money, it would be possible to lead the mercenaries who'd overthrow the imperial household as they tried to ruin the Oldenburgs!

"Welcome, ladies."

Wow. The owner, who was apparently an acquaintance of Waltrud's, welcomed us inside. She was a young woman wearing an elegant dress that looked like something a fashion designer would create.

"Hello, Daniela! These girls are my friends from school. Perhaps you could show them the swimsuit I bought here recently?"

"Of course. I'll just go prepare it. Please wait one moment."

What kind of swimsuit is she going to bring out? This is a sword and sorcery

fantasy world, so you never know what it might be...

A one-piece swimsuit with a skirt might suit Iris. They're maybe a little childish, but I'm sure one would look great on an ephemeral beauty like Iris!

The store owner, Daniela, came back holding the swimsuit. "This is the swimsuit that Miss Waltrud purchased."

"Huh? A bikini?"

It was unmistakably a two-piece bikini. And a triangle bikini at that.

"Bikini? This is a type of swimsuit known as a rearl. It was designed in the country neighboring ours, the Franck Kingdom."

"I-I see..." *Whatever name you give it, that's a bikini. A really tiny one at that.*

"A-Astrid, isn't that indecent...?"

"Y-Yes. We don't have to wear one..."

Iris and I were both aghast.

"What?! But I think something like this would look great on Astrid and little Iris!"

"I'd rather wear something a little less revealing..." Iris said.

I think I'll avoid wearing anything as extreme as a triangle bikini too. No way will it suit someone with my body. And making Iris wear one is probably illegal.

"We do have less-revealing swimsuits. How about something like this?" The swimsuit Daniela produced was a two-piece with a tube top.

Looks like the rubber needed to make tube tops is widespread in this world. I guess it's no trouble to make it using elemental magic.

"I'll go with this!"

"But why?" Waltrud hadn't given up. "This one would suit you much better."

Nope. No way is a triangle bikini going to look right on my scrawny body!

"Do you have any one-piece swimsuits? Something with a skirt, maybe."

"Hmm. Yes, we do. We have them in white, black, and red." Daniela brought out the exact type of skirted one-piece swimsuit I'd been thinking of.

That's the one! That'll look good on Iris!

"Iris, this should suit you. If you're uncomfortable, you can also wear something around your waist. It's known as a pareo!"

Waltrud was still trying to recommend the triangle bikini to Iris. *Give it up already. What you're doing is almost criminal. No, it is criminal! A cute girl like Iris ought to be wearing a one-piece swimsuit like this one!*

"I-I like the swimsuit that Astrid chose for me..."

"Ugh... What a shame..."

With that, the swimsuit selection was over.

Mine was a navy-colored tube-top bikini. Iris's swimsuit was a black one-piece with a skirt. The older students had gone all-out with some rather daring bikinis.

They've sure got some confidence...

Chapter 12 — The Villainess Heads for the Beach

Led by Waltrud, who was essentially just following her whims, the Round Table's members had arrived at the seaside resort known as Grossenvogel. And we had the beach reserved for ourselves too. That's nobles for you.

We also had a lineup of servants with us to prepare our food and drink, so this was shaping up to be a beach trip better than any other.

We changed into our swimsuits once we'd arrived at the resort. My bikini included a tube top, but I still felt a little embarrassed wearing it. It did little to hide how flat my chest was.

Iris, meanwhile, looked adorable in her swimsuit, despite being just as flat as me. The black one-piece really suited her. *That's my little sister for you. I'm proud to be her big sister.*

"Is everyone ready?" Waltrud asked. She was wearing a red and white triangle bikini.

Must be nice having that much confidence in your own body...

"I'm all set!"

"I'm ready too."

Everyone was set to have some fun at the resort.

"Now let's go show those boys our swimsuits!" Waltrud was following her impulses as usual. "I bet you're looking forward to showing Prince Friedrich your swimsuit, Astrid."

"No. Not at all."

Who'd want to show off a swimsuit in front of Friedrich? I'll pass, thanks.

"There you go again. I'm not trying to get between you two, so if you both enjoy the water together, it'll be a great opportunity for you to get to know him better. And I'm sure that swimsuit will be popular with the boys."

Why does she want to push me onto a landmine so bad? Give me a break.

"First, let's just get on the beach," I urged. "The beach!"

"Let's go, Astrid!" Iris replied.

I put Waltrud's horrible suggestions out of my mind as we set off toward the shore.

"Hmm." I admired the beach that lay before us. "This is really spacious. It feels like we're out in nature here."

The beach genuinely was spacious, and the faint silhouette of the island owned by the Schleswigs was visible in the distance. *Vallia must be in the villa on that island. I can't wait to see her again.*

A spray of sea water leaped up at Iris, catching her by surprise as she was splashing around at the water's edge. "Astrid! This water tastes salty!"

"Oh? You've never been to the beach before?"

"It's my first time! I didn't know the sea was so big!"

Oh, really? Well, I'm glad it's making her happy.

"Now, why don't you let me show you how to swim?"

"Please do, Astrid!"

And so, I began teaching Iris how to swim. We started with the front crawl and then moved on to the breaststroke, though we didn't do much more than splash around in the shallows because Iris didn't want to go into the deeper water.

"Astrid."

Why's Friedrich have to interrupt me when I'm busy trying to burn Iris's swimsuit into my retinas?

"Astrid, that swimsuit suits you awfully well. Though I might say it's a little bold."

"Well, this is the type that Vallia recommends..."

Don't pretend my swimsuit is worth complimenting. We both know I'm flat. Or

was he being sarcastic? Is that it? I can't stand this guy!

"Adolf and Silvio have both commented on the bold swimsuits the other ladies here are wearing, but I suppose that's just the fashion. Though I worry that His Imperial Majesty might declare that they're eroding our moral values."

Adolf and Silvio are looking at other girls? I can't let them get away with that. As for the emperor, he'd look a little silly if he tried to crack down on bikinis for the sake of moral values.

"Do you think that swimsuits erode our moral values, Your Highness?"

"No. I think freedom is important."

You say that, but I'll bet your head's full of dirty thoughts while you're looking at them. This pervert's not fooling me.

"Friedrich!" Adolf was calling to him. "There's a spot here where we can dive in!"

"Very well! See you, Astrid. I look forward to us having a meal together once you're done enjoying the water."

"Y-Yes."

Eating a meal with you will be hell...

"Astrid, that's the island with the Schleswigs' villa, isn't it?" Iris asked.

"That's right," I replied. "I wonder how we'll get there. There's no bridge..."

A boat, I guess?

"Miss Iris!"

Just as our thoughts were turning toward the island across the sea, Werner appeared. Dietrich was following along behind him.

"That swimsuit suits you," Werner told Iris.

"Th-Thank you..." Iris positioned herself behind my back as though she felt embarrassed when the boys looked at her.

"Your swimsuit also suits you well, Miss Astrid," Dietrich said.

"You think so?"

Dietrich had chosen to compliment my swimsuit. He was probably just being polite because there was definitely nothing sexy about a flat girl's swimsuit. Thankfully, these younger boys didn't come across as sarcastic at all, unlike Friedrich.

"Miss Iris, there's a beautiful cave over there," Werner said. "Perhaps you'd like to go look at it with me?"

"O-Only if Astrid comes too."

Iris, I think Werner wants some time alone with you. If I go, I'll just ruin the mood. You've got to give at least a little consideration to the way boys' minds work...

"Then perhaps you'll come too, Miss Astrid?" Werner said.

"Are you sure?"

Sorry, Werner. I hate to be a third wheel.

"Miss Iris, Miss Astrid, let's head there now."

When Werner took Iris's hand, Dietrich protested: "Hold on. Miss Iris was spending time with me."

Uh oh. It's the outbreak of the Second Iris War.

"Wait a minute," I pleaded. "All four of us can go. Right?"

Sorry, Werner. I don't want to have to judge another duel.

"All four of us? I don't see why not," Werner said while keeping a tight grip on Iris's hand.

You're pretty forward with her. Are you really a first-year elementary schooler?

"In that case, shall we go together, Dietrich?" I asked him.

"Y-Yes..."

What's up, kid? Where'd all that energy of yours just disappear to? It's like you're suddenly in a different mood.

"So where's this cave, Werner?" I asked.

“It’s over there. At the foot of that hill.”

A cave on the beach... We’re not going to find a magic beast lurking in there, are we? The Adventurer’s Guild actually did their job and cleared this place out, right? I’ve got a bad feeling...

“W-Wait a moment!” I told the others. “I need to go grab something!”

I used blood magic to sprint back to the cottage where I’d left my things.

“All right,” I told myself. “I’ve got to be ready for anything, at all times.”

I took my shotgun from my locked trunk, loaded a few slugs, and then put it on my back in its sling.

Now for the cave!

I rejoined Werner and the others on the beach. “Sorry to make you wait! I’m all set!”

“Miss Astrid, what is...?” Werner was eyeing the shotgun on my back suspiciously.

“Oh!” Iris cried happily. “It’s the thing you used to kill the kelpie!”

Iris, it was never my intention to turn you into someone who gets worryingly excited at the sight of a shotgun...

“It’s just that you never know what’ll be lurking around there,” I explained. “It’s a tool for self-protection.”

“I can’t imagine us running into trouble given that the Adventurer’s Guild has cleared all magic beasts from this beach...” Werner replied.

You’ve got to stop counting on the Adventurer’s Guild! They missed a griffin on the hunting grounds and then a cockatrice on the orientation site! Get a guild manager out here! I demand an explanation!

“If anything did happen, I’m here to protect Miss Astrid and Miss Iris,” Dietrich reassured us.

“Thanks, Dietrich!”

The drop in the average age of people near me used to bother me, but now I actually feel relaxed with all these elementary schoolers around. It’s an easy life

with no landmines to worry about. Doesn't change the fact that I prefer older men though.

That thought made me look across the beach to see what Waltrud and the others were doing.

"Take that!"

"Not bad! But how about this?!"

Ohh... A water fight, but with water elemental magic instead of water pistols. Drench your opponent's body! How exciting! She shouldn't move around like that in her bikini though... Does she realize that all of the high schoolers are staring right at her? If she does, then that makes Waltrud quite the seductress...

"What's wrong, Miss Astrid?" Dietrich asked me.

"Nothing. I'm just surprised she can move around so much in that swimsuit." I pointed over at Waltrud.

"Y-Yes, quite disgraceful," Dietrich replied while turning red and averting his gaze. "Swimsuits like that will erode the moral values of the empire."

Oh? What a cute reaction. He's a cute kid. I really do prefer it when kids act like kids, instead of trying to be adults.

"Miss Iris, were you practicing swimming with Miss Astrid just now?"

"Y-Yes. Because I can't swim..."

Nice. It's slow progress, but Iris is steadily getting better at talking to Werner. She's doing great. I'm glad they're getting along, given that they'll be married someday. I want a happy family life for Iris!

Dietrich doesn't seem at all jealous about how Werner and Iris are getting along really well... Could it really be me he's interested in? No, that can't be it. I can see why boys would like someone as attractive as Iris, but who'd be into a magic maniac like me? If a little healing blood magic were enough to make someone fall in love, I'd have myself a reverse harem by now.

"Look, over there." Werner pointed to the cave.

"Wow!"

We'd finally reached the cave that Werner had discovered. At the bottom of a sheer cliff, there was a gaping opening in the rock face. Its otherworldly interior was filled with water, and the overall appearance scared me a little.

"It looks magical from here," Werner said. "Look at how the seawater sparkles in the sunlight, and the way it loses its shine as it flows into the darkness."

"Yes," Iris agreed. "It's like a place from a novel."

Werner was right; the way the water sparkled and then faded into the darkness looked pretty nice.

"What do you think the inside is like?" Iris asked him.

"Inside...?" Werner seemed unsure what to say.

"We could ask my fairy to take a look," I suggested.

"Oh, you made a contract with a fairy, didn't you, Miss Astrid?"

Right. When the Round Table's desserts disappear, it's always my greedy fairy's doing. Sorry about that.

"Blau, come on out."

"Yes, master!" Blau came floating in from somewhere or other when I called to her.

"Blau, could you take a look inside that cave?"

"Me...? But I'm scared of the dark..." The look on Blau's face made it clear that she hated the idea.

"I'll give you desserts later. How's that sound?"

"Uh... All right..."

As always, my fairy couldn't say no to desserts.

"I'll leave the aerial reconnaissance to you!" I said with a salute.

"I'll be right back..." Blau went floating off into the cave.

"When did you make a contract with your fairy, Miss Astrid?"

"It was while I was out hunting with my father. I bumped into her by chance. Then I tamed her with some candy."

I couldn't tell him that I'd befriended her after killing a griffin with a shotgun.

"I'm so jealous, Astrid," Iris said. "I wish I could make a contract with a fairy."

"I'm sure you'll meet a nice fairy someday too," I reassured her.

Iris is always looking at Blau with longing in her eyes. If she makes a contract with a fairy, they'd look great together. An ephemeral beauty and a fantasy-world fairy should be a powerful combination.

"M-Master!" While we were talking, Blau had come hurrying out of the cave.

"Blau, what's wrong? Was something in there?"

"It's mermen! A mermen nest! The mermen were chasing me! Oh! Here they come!"

I've heard of mermen. Fish people, basically. Looks like I made the right choice by bringing my shotgun for security.

"How are there so many?!" I counted more than ten mermen emerging from the cave.

"Iris, Werner, Dietrich! Get yourselves to safety! I'll hold them back!"

"You can't handle them all by yourself!" Dietrich protested.

He's right. I don't have enough ammo. I've only got five slugs loaded.

"Werner, Iris, go let the others know what's happening! Dietrich, go fetch my locked trunk from the cottage! And hurry!"

"Understood!" As Iris fretted, Werner grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the older students.

"Dietrich! I need that trunk now!"

"But you can't hold back all of these mermen by yourself! I'll help!"

I appreciate the enthusiasm, but sad to say, you're no use to me in battle, Dietrich.

"No. Listen, you need to fetch that trunk. Then I'll win. You're the only one I can ask to do this because you can use blood magic."

"Mm! All right!"

All right. That's Dietrich gone.

Although the mermen were numerous, they couldn't move quickly along the ground. I decided to approach until they were within range of my slugs, and then attack using hit-and-run tactics.

I unleashed my blood magic to the maximum as I charged into the herd of mermen. They were armed with wooden spears, but my slugs had a whole lot more range than any of their crude weapons.

I sent a slug into the head of one of the spear-bearing mermen. The bullet bored into its fish-like head, sending fragments of its brain flying. Then I put some distance between me and the herd once more while I pumped the fore-end to load the next round.

I repeated the cycle of charging in, firing, and retreating. It made me wish I'd brought some shotshells, but it was a little late for regrets. I had to do what I could with what I had.

Once I'd repeated my hit-and-run attack pattern four times, I had just one shell left.

Where are you Dietrich? Hurry!

"Miss Astrid! I've brought the trunk!"

"All right! Thanks, Dietrich!"

As Dietrich came running over with the locked trunk in his hand, I rushed toward him.

"Here it is!" he cried.

"Got it!"

I took the trunk from Dietrich and used my key to open it. The thing I needed was inside.

"Heh heh heh. It's time for your first outing, little machine gun."

It was the machine gun. The weapon I'd worked so hard to make with Mister Gnome was stored in the trunk along with two hundred rounds.

"Dietrich, make sure you stay behind me because this is dangerous. Got

that?”

“Y-Yes!”

Now that I’d given the necessary warning to Dietrich, it was ready to open fire.

The mermen were approaching us at a slow but steady pace. I rested the bipod of the machine gun against the ground before taking aim at the enemy through the optical sight.



“Let’s rock!” I pulled the trigger.

There was a deafening sound of gunfire as the mermen were showered with bullets. Blau would normally have muffled the sound, but she’d run off somewhere after being scared by the mermen.

As the mermen were mowed down by machine gun fire, they began to fear me, and then turned to run away. But I wasn’t about to let them.

I continued firing, keeping the mermen pinned down with my overwhelming firepower. This romantic-looking spot on the beach was now strewn with the bodies of dead mermen and covered by a sea of blood.

“Some of them escaped into the cave,” I told Dietrich.

“Y-Yeah, but, you can’t be...” he stuttered.

“I’m going in pursuit so I can eliminate every last one.” I picked up the machine gun and sprinted toward the cave.

I continued to shower mermen with bullets as they tried to escape into the cave, and when I peered inside, I could see several mermen about to disappear into its depths.

I fired bullets into their turned backs without mercy until I’d eliminated every last one.

“Clear!”

I went some way into the cave just to be sure, but there was no sign of any surviving mermen.

“Yup! Flawless victory!”

Feels good to know that my machine gun works well in the field. Though I’d sleep a lot easier if the Adventurer’s Guild would do its job properly.

Anyhow, I hummed merrily to myself as I returned to Dietrich, and there I found that the other students had come running over to us. Friedrich and his hangers-on were there too.

Oh, crap! I gotta hide the machine gun! I quickly threw the machine gun into the trunk and erased the empty shells it’d left behind.

“Astrid! Are you all right?!” Waltrud asked anxiously.

“I’m fine, Waltrud,” I responded with a smile. “The mermen are all gone.”

“There were mermen nesting here? How strange. The Adventurer’s Guild should have cleared them out...”

“You really can’t rely on the Adventurer’s Guild,” I told her.

The Adventurer’s Guild is as useless as an intelligence department in a movie.

“I have to wonder how you handled so many of them...”

“I just did my best.”

“Huh?”

“I did my best.” I told them I’d defeated the mermen by doing my best.

“Miss Astrid had a strange machine tha—”

“Don’t worry about that! I did my best!”

Dietrich! Shush! Shush!

“I see.” Waltrud said. “Well, we had better call it a day. If there are mermen here, I feel like we’ll see a kraken next.”

“That’s a worrying premonition...” I replied.

Our fun in the water was over now that we knew more mermen might appear along the coastline. Instead, we headed to the cottage for a meal.

Well, at least I had fun blowing them away with my machine gun. That was awesome! It’s a little worrying that Dietrich witnessed the whole thing, though.

Chapter 13 — The Villainess Visits a Former Schoolmate

After spending a day in the cottage on the coast, we headed for the Schleswig family villa. We were planning to meet up with Vallia, a former Round Table member.

As I'd expected, we were heading there by boat. We boarded a boat that Waltrud had prepared especially for the occasion, and then we set sail for the island that the villa was situated on.

"I wonder if we'll see a kraken," Waltrud mused.

"I really hope we don't..." I replied.

Waltrud seemed to find enjoyment in her every passing fancy. She'd been looking out to sea for some time, as though she expected a kraken to pop up now that we'd seen mermen. Fortunately, the sea was perfectly calm.

"Why would you want to see a kraken?"

"The truth about krakens..." For a moment, Waltrud's expression turned uncharacteristically serious. "Is that they're delicious!"

"What?"

I get that krakens are basically massive squid, but can you really eat them?

"Kraken is all the rage among gourmets right now. They make a beautiful dish whether fried, boiled, or roasted. The meat has just a little firmness—an exquisite texture, as though it's rich with fat—and a delicious taste!" Waltrud was really trying to sell the idea of eating kraken.

"Sadly, very few of them are ever caught, so even at home, I've only ever eaten kraken once. How I'd love to experience the taste once more. Perhaps we will see a kraken. We might catch it and eat it ourselves!"

"First, someone would have to kill it. How did you plan to handle that?"

"Couldn't we kill a kraken?"

Waltrud was expecting a little much. We'd have some chance of winning in a fair fight against a kraken at the surface of the water, but a kraken would definitely submerge itself. Without any torpedoes, I had no way of attacking an underwater creature, yet Waltrud was talking about killing one.

"It was just a joke. Kraken cuisine may be delicious, but the work that goes into preparing them would be too much for us. Though those kraken fritters really were delicious..."

She'd called them "delicious" so many times that now I was curious. I wondered whether it was worth asking father to let me try kraken. But if someone as rich as Marquis Vito could rarely feed it to his family, then I might never get a chance to try it.

"Maybe we will see a kraken." In the end, I'd given in to Waltrud's way of thinking.

"I do hope so," she replied.

"Oh, look. I can see the island. We'll be able to see Vallia at last."

Waltrud must have been in her first or second year of middle school back when Vallia was the Round Table's chair. I'll bet she acted on her whims even back then... I can't be sure because I only started talking to her after she'd entered high school, though.

"There's a wharf. Let's dock our boat there and head straight into the Schleswig villa!"

Waltrud really does just do whatever she feels like.

"We'd best pay our respects to His Grace first."

"All right."

Waltrud had finally begun sounding sensible once more as we disembarked from the boat and headed toward the Schleswig villa as one large group.

"Oh. So this is the Schleswig villa." I said to myself.

The building itself was about the same size as my family's villa. The difference was that theirs was on a hill overlooking the sea, which gave it a rather stylish appearance.

Must be nice. I like having a villa by a lake, but I wish we had one by the sea too.

But I have to make do. Losing our domain would mean losing our villas too. If it ever looks like I'm about to trigger my destruction, I'll have to convince father to sell off everything we own so that we can store the money in an overseas account.

"Let's all keep moving along," Waltrud urged. "Prince Friedrich went to the trouble of writing them a letter, so now we have an appointment to keep."

"Understood."

We let Waltrud guide us toward the Schleswig villa on the hilltop. We slowly trudged our way uphill, and there we found an impressive entrance gate waiting for us.

"Do you have an appointment?" the guard asked us.

It was Waltrud who responded. "We're the Round Table of Spirits. Vallia is a former member, and we're here to visit her."

"Ah. We've been expecting you. Please, follow me." The guard seemed to know who we were as he guided us toward the front entrance of the villa.

"Please allow the maids here to guide you the rest of the way," the guard said before leaving us.

"Thank you." We allowed the maids who'd been waiting at the front entrance to lead us into the villa.

Spending all your time in these properties belonging to high-ranking nobles must really distort your perspective. This villa's bigger than an ordinary noble's primary residence. What could they possibly do that needs all this space?

"Welcome, members of the Round Table." A dapper-looking gentleman in his middle age greeted us. This man appeared to be the head of the Schleswig family, Duke Ekkehard himself.

"We're most grateful for the warm welcome, Your Grace."

Waltrud raised her skirt very slightly to give the man a curtsy, and I imitated the gesture. Now I was sure that the man before us was Duke Ekkehard.

“You needn’t trouble yourself with such formality,” Duke Ekkehard said with a smile. “You are Vallia’s school friends after all.” He rang a bell after he’d spoken.

A butler promptly appeared. “You called, Your Grace?”

“Inform Eugen and Vallia that her school friends have arrived,” Duke Ekkehard told him.

“As you wish.”

“And then serve our guests some tea.”

There was a large table in the villa. It was probably made for banquets, but today the Round Table’s members were all sitting around it. Its size was surprising.

“Oh my! Welcome, everyone!” Vallia had appeared to find us waiting while drinking tea. Her husband, Eugen, was also with her.

“Vallia, it’s been so long!”

Vallia couldn’t help but smile at my energetic and not particularly ladylike greeting.

“It has indeed, Astrid. I’m so pleased to see you again.”

“And Waltrud, long time no see. I imagine this current outing was your idea?”

“That’s right, Vallia,” Waltrud replied with a broad smile. “I had the wonderful idea of enjoying the beach and then seeing a former Round Table member.”

“In that case, I’m guessing it was all announced rather suddenly as always.”

“N-Not at all.”

Well, that confirms that Waltrud has always been a bit of a free spirit.

“I hope you don’t cause trouble for the other students. It’s important to give three months’ notice before making arrangements. Everyone has their own schedule to keep.”

“Y-Yes, I understand...”

I wonder whether Waltrud really does understand. I get the feeling she does, but she isn’t going to change her habits regardless...

“In any case, sea bathing must have been delightful. Did everyone enjoy themselves?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Until we saw the mermen...”

“Oh dear! Mermen? Has the Adventurer’s Guild been commissioned to deal with them?”

“There won’t be any need. Astrid took care of them all herself. Didn’t you?”

This was an awkward topic that I’d hoped to avoid. I couldn’t deny that I’d been the one who defeated them, but I couldn’t explain how if I was asked. I had to keep the details of my weapon technology secret, or I’d be breaking my promise to Mister Gnome.

“Did you use magic, Astrid?” Vallia asked.

“Yes. I defeated them with magic.”

It’s not a lie. I defeated the mermen using the machine gun I made with elemental magic, and with bullets made from explosion talismans.

“You must have used some awfully powerful magic.” Vallia was glaring right at me.

“Eh heh heh. That’s right.”

She hasn’t figured out my secret, has she?

“I’ve just realized that you haven’t met our new members, Werner and Dietrich here,” I said. “As someone wiser than us, what do you make of them?”

“Let’s see. They look like fine individuals, and I’m sure the empire will someday be safe in their hands. Although...” Vallia lowered her voice and spoke directly into my ear. “That Dietrich boy appears to be in love with you, Astrid.”

“Huh?!” I found it hard to believe when Iris said it, but it was a lot harder to dismiss the idea when it came from Vallia.

“H-How are you getting along with Lord Eugen?”

“We’re finally beginning to understand each other’s tastes. That man enjoys his hunting and fishing, meanwhile I’m fond of books. It means that I read while he’s out hunting, and then once the game he catches is prepared, we enjoy

eating it together.”

“We don’t try to force our own interests on each other,” Eugen added. “That’s the key, I think.”

Interesting. Not forcing your interests on people? Sounds like good advice. If I ever do get married, I’ll have to try not to talk about magic and the military too much.

“That reminds me. I had something I wanted to announce to you all. I’m with child.”

“Wha?!”

A child?! She was a high schooler a minute ago, and now she’s having a baby?!

“I wonder whether it’ll be a boy or a girl,” Vallia said happily. “I can’t wait to find out.”

“It’s my job to make sure Vallia eats well and gives birth to a healthy baby.” Eugen sounded equally happy.

She got married and then made a baby? Vallia’s a real family woman now. Right now, I can’t even imagine doing any of that stuff.

“My wish is that every Round Table member is just as happy during their time at the academy.”

“Of course!”

Our trip to visit a former member ended without incident. We headed back to the mainland carrying the good news from Vallia with us.

On the way back, Waltrud and I kept a look out for any krakens out in the sea once again, but alas, we saw none.

Chapter 14 — The Villainess Wants to Accelerate

Summer was over, and the new semester had begun. The content of our classes was steadily getting more difficult, and lately I had often been asking for help with the sciences from the older students at the Round Table.

Around the same time, I was eager to try something: acceleration.

By acceleration, I didn't mean enhancing my physical abilities to make myself run faster. The thing I wanted to accelerate was my reflexes. Accelerating my nervous system had already improved my reflexes somewhat, but it wasn't enough. I needed greater speed. To dodge arrows, swords, and magic, I'd need to be much faster.

I'd come up with a method for actually achieving this acceleration, but I was too afraid to test it on myself right away. It involved messing with my internal organs a little, and I didn't want to do anything hasty that I might come to regret.

The answer was to start with experiments on animals using the methods I'd learned in Professor Wolff's lab.

"Might I ask what you're working on, Lady Astrid?" Minne looked very interested in what I was doing.

"It's a little experiment. ♪" I told her. "The principles are similar to the love potion. Now, let's see how this goes..."

I opened a cage containing guinea pigs and removed one of the creatures from inside.

"Hold it down!"

"Yes, Lady Astrid!"

We got the guinea pig tied down on a work surface that I'd prepared. I did feel sorry for the guinea pig, but don't worry, I wasn't going to kill it.

"Now, let's begin the experiment."

I made my mana flow through the guinea pig's body so I could monitor its internal condition. I paid particular attention to monitoring its heart.

"All right!"

I set to work on a very specific region within the guinea pig.

I'd been grappling with medical textbooks lately for the sake of getting this blood magic right. As my spell flowed into the guinea pig's body, I waited to see the effects.

I soon noticed that the guinea pig's heart rate was rapidly increasing. It squealed restlessly and began to thrash around. I continued to work my blood magic on the creature, increasing its heart rate as far as it would go, hoping to establish what the limit was.

And then I stopped. The guinea pig slumped down as though exhausted, and its struggles became much weaker.

"Lady Astrid, what did you...?"

"I forcibly induced the secretion of adrenaline. Adrenaline is a substance that makes humans excited and accelerates their heart rate. It's secreted from the adrenal medulla. The blood magic I just used has a similar effect to a love potion."

This was how I intended to achieve my acceleration: forcibly induced adrenaline secretion.

"I-Is the love potion going to be this dangerous?"

"No, no. The finished love potion will be mild by comparison."

If we make someone this excited, they'll be in no state to wonder whether they've fallen in love.

The love potion would cause a small amount of adrenaline secretion to make people just a little excited. The idea was that they'd think it was the person they

were looking at who got them excited, and then they'd fall in love. We wouldn't need such a high level of excitement for that.

"Now, let's try it on our monkey."

It worked safely on a guinea pig, but a monkey might react differently.

A monkey's metabolism was closer to that of a human, so if it all went well on a monkey, the next step would be a human experiment that I'd perform on myself. *Now for the monkey I bought recently! Your day has come!*

We got the monkey bound down on the work surface so that it couldn't bite us, and then I used the same blood magic spell on it as before.

The monkey instantly became agitated and began to struggle against the restraints. Its heart rate was steadily increasing. *Not bad. Not bad at all.*

I continued monitoring its heart rate while trying to raise it to the absolute limit.

"Kiiih!"

"Ah!" The monkey's screeching gave Minne and the others quite a shock.

I suppose I'd better stop. The monkey's heart rate returned to normal once I stopped channeling the spell into it. It was clear that the monkey became calm again from the way that its restraints stopped rattling and from the way it took deep breaths while looking at me.

We're all done now. I released the restraints holding the monkey and returned it to its cage.

"Lady Astrid, the purpose of this experiment..."

"I was accelerating its reflexes. Let's go try this outside."

I invited everyone to join me as I headed for an open area outside the club room.

"Now, grab hold of a ball, everyone." I gave Minne and the others some balls of various sizes that I'd borrowed from several sports clubs.

"What are we to do with these?"

"Throw them all at me at once. I'll try to move fast with blood magic."

“Wha?!” Minne and the others were taken aback.

“It’s fine; it’s fine. If my hypothesis is right, none of them will hit me. Even if they do, I won’t mind.”

“But...” My reassurances weren’t putting the girls at ease.

“There’s no way they’ll hit me. I can guarantee it. Just try throwing them. And no holding back.”

This was the only method I had for trying it out. A moment earlier, I’d applied the blood magic to myself, causing my heart rate to increase and my brain to run hot. It felt as though my field of vision narrowed slightly when I did it.

“Well, here we go!” Minne and the others all threw the balls at once.

I used more blood magic to induce further adrenaline secretion. I was ready for anything. It felt as if time was moving in slow motion around me, and I could see the balls that the girls had thrown moving sluggishly toward me.

This was the method of performance enhancement I’d been looking for. The release of adrenaline had the effect of raising the heart rate and causing time perception to slow down, which I could use to create a slo-mo effect.

Naturally, this made my heart pound, and the excited state reduced my ability to think clearly. However, daily training and physical endurance were enough to compensate for these issues. I was enhancing my physical endurance as my heart rate climbed.

“Haah?!”

It meant that dodging every ball the girls had thrown was a breeze!

Minne and the others had all aimed for my trunk, but with a quick spinning kick, I was able to send a volleyball-sized ball back to the ground at Minne’s feet while I used both hands to catch the baseball-sized balls thrown by Lotte and Brigitte. Finally, a small jump allowed me to dodge the golf ball-sized ball thrown by Sandra.

“What’d ya think?! See that?! It’s my reflex-enhancing magic!”

“It’s incredible! It’s astonishing!”

Heh heh ♪. My successful experiment left me feeling proud of myself.

“But is this safe? There won’t be side effects?”

“I think it’s fine. I’ve stopped the adrenaline release now, and it’ll be broken down inside my body as normal. The way existing love potions work also shows that forced adrenaline release isn’t likely to cause any physical problems.”

My heart rate was already under control. My narrow vision had returned to normal, and I didn’t feel at all tense.

“You truly are a talented mage, Lady Astrid...”

“It’s not talent. It’s knowledge.”

That’s right. I might have massive amounts of mana, but it takes knowledge to know how to use it. That knowledge comes from what the academy’s teachers teach us, the findings of researchers who came before me, and the teachings of Professor Wolff.

“Now that we know it’s safe, we can start making our love potion!”

“L-Let’s wait. We should give it some more thought...”

Huh? Minne and Lotte seem to have lost their enthusiasm.

“Well, all right. Now how about we try a few more things with these balls? Or if that’s not enough, we could go borrow a bow from the archery club.”

“Please don’t try it with a bow!”

My friends prevented me from finding out whether I could move faster than an arrow. However, I did try watching the club’s archery practice with my reflex enhancements active, and it looked as though the arrows were slowing to a stop in mid-air. The problem was that my heart pounded wildly, and I came close to blacking out.

This needs a little more work before I try using it in the field...

I’d read in a book that this sort of reflex enhancement might be controllable after repeated practice. In other words, I could practice the process over and over, and then let my body do its own thing rather than consciously thinking about it. It made sense, but this was a fantasy world of swords and sorcery, so I

wanted to think up another method.

What am I going to do?

I couldn't carelessly meddle with my brain. I might turn myself into an idiot. But I had to solve the problem somehow.

Maybe I can fine-tune the amount of adrenaline released? That seems plausible...

I'd read in military magazines that controlling adrenaline on Earth's battlefields was something still in the early research phase. I had the ability to control the secretion with sub-nanogram precision, so the approach wasn't completely beyond my reach. I had to suppress the "fight or flight" response that adrenaline release triggered and keep my adrenaline levels within a range that wouldn't have a serious impact on my body's functioning.

Then, I'd start enhancing my nervous system at the same time. I could carefully evaluate the state of a battlefield while using adrenaline to slow things down, and then I could enhance my nervous system while taking action. I called this my "combat preparation measures."

All I needed was to turn my combat preparation measures into a more precise process. And then...I'd need to somehow suppress the nagging voice known as the conscience.

Chapter 15 — The Villainess Wants to Start Saving

The realization had hit me suddenly while I was traveling to the academy by air for the seventh time.

“What is it now?” Mr. Bernhard asked while he was slacking off as usual. “If you think you can still surprise me by flying here, you’re wrong.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do! I’ve got no money!”

“What...?”

Mr. Bernhard’s steadily developing that moody attitude. He sure doesn’t talk to me like I’m a duke’s daughter anymore. I suppose I ought to expect that sort of reaction after flying to school seven times.

“No money? Weren’t you a duke’s daughter? Don’t tell me your allowance was cut because of your odd behavior?”

“No... Well, there’s that too.”

“Seriously?”

That’s right. Father had somehow found out what I was doing at the real magic research club, and then he got mad because, apparently, bizarre experiments and odd behavior aren’t appropriate for a duke’s daughter.

I’m working hard on experiments that might just change the nature of war, but everyone keeps calling it odd behavior! Though it might be true that I went too far by bursting in on the archery club’s practice session and catching all of their arrows mid-flight!

“It’s going to have a serious impact on our club. Our monkey, Pink, was very expensive, so that put our club expenses way up.”

“The club in the next room complained about all the screeching from your monkey.”

The next room? What club’s that? The chess club, wasn’t it...?

“Anyway, that problem will fix itself once I put father in a good mood. I’ve promised to go hunting with him sometime soon to butter him up. That’ll get me back into his good graces with minimal effort. The real problem...”

“Real problem?” Mr. Bernhard sounded disinterested, despite the deadly serious look on my face.

“I completely forgot about my plan to save up some money in a foreign country to prepare for my family losing everything!”

“What...?”

That’s twice you’ve given me that reaction. Thank you.

“I can’t imagine the Oldenburg family suffering a sudden downfall...unless you’re all part of some criminal plot?”

“No,” I explained. “We’re squeaky clean. It’s just that there’s a chance of my family being deprived of its domain over some groundless accusations in the future.”

Mr. Bernhard just looked at me as though I was talking nonsense.

There’s still a possibility of my family’s domain being seized. Elsa will appear once I start high school, and then I can’t guess what the landmines—Friedrich, Adolf, and Silvio—might do. They might do something ridiculous that ends with me being the one punished.

I figured I’d prepare for that by saving money and storing it where the Plusen Empire can’t get its hands on it. That way we can always make a fresh start, even if they seize my family’s domain.

Gah! I was enjoying my noble life so much that I used up all my savings! This causes so many problems. I need a job or something so that I can save money. And fast.

“Mr. Bernhard, do you know of any part time jobs that I’d be good at?”

“Well, there’s an opening for an assistant teacher in the elementary school.”

“Tell me more!”

I guess it’s like when college students become teaching assistants. This sounds

promising, given how good I am at teaching.

“It’s actually similar to how you helped me with my work in the past. You’d prepare tests, make printouts, set up experiments, and grade assignments. There won’t be too much expected of you.”

“Oh ho! I’d love to try that!”

Sounds like the perfect job for me. I can’t miss this chance.

“The downside is the pay. A mere eight hundred marks for a day of work.”

“In that case, no thank you.”

Just eight hundred marks...? Even Elsa makes more than that in the bakery.

“What type of jobs did you have while you were studying at university?”

“Me? I was an assistant mage for the Adventurer’s Guild.”

Assistant mage?

“What’s an assistant mage?”

“Mages who aren’t formally registered with the Adventurer’s Guild can temporarily join a party and, like the job title suggests, assist them. The academy forbids students from registering with the guild, so becoming an assistant mage is the only option.”

I see. Everyone knows the academy has skilled mages, so a party’s bound to accept me. This sounds promising.

“So roughly how much does the job pay?”

“When I was a student, working after classes and on weekends, I made fifty thousand marks most months. It hardly compares to the salary I’m making as an academy teacher, but it was a good sum for a student. I couldn’t tell you whether it pays the same today.”

“Ohh! Fifty thousand marks!”

Considering that the average monthly salary for this world’s working class is about eighty thousand marks a month, assistant mages get paid pretty well.

If I can be really thrifty with my allowance at the same time, I could save a

good amount. I'll just have to work like a mule between now and my third year of high school!

"Please tell me you're not actually considering becoming an assistant mage."

"I sure am! I need the money!"

I need money! No matter what! I've seen my downfall coming!

"Listen here... Only the poorest of students become assistant mages for the Adventurer's Guild. It's not a fitting job for a duke's daughter. If His Grace finds out, he'll cut your allowance even further."

"As long as you keep quiet about it, he'll never know. ♪"

"I really should inform him..."

"Please don't."

Don't do it. Don't crush my hopes of a good job.

"Fine. I won't try to stop you. Just try to be careful. If we do receive any complaints from His Grace, I'm going to deny all knowledge."

"Thank you!"

This is it! I've found a job with good pay!

"I'll head straight to the guild after classes today!"

"But your club activities..."

Yay! Now I'll have savings even after I meet my downfall!

....

I had arrived: I was at the Adventurer's Guild!

Places like this are always going to exist in a sword and sorcery world. It's a fantasy staple. Not that I'd know much about that.

Looks like it's a hangout for scary looking dudes... I see a few women too, but they're all big burly types, and they're much older than me. I must look so out of place...

Anyhow! Not going to let it bother me! Think positive! I stand out! That's a selling point!

I walked right on up to the Adventurer's Guild reception desk. "Excuse me, I'd like to work as an assistant mage!"

"Oh? Ah. I see you're an academy student. Welcome to the Adventurer's Guild."

That's a surprisingly promising reaction from the girl on reception. Maybe they get a lot of students here?

"But you look like you're a middle schooler." The receptionist looked at me with concern. "I'm guessing you can only use very basic blood magic. I doubt many parties will be willing to hire you."

"Don't worry about that," I told her while clenching both raised fists. "I'm self-taught, but I've got a good grasp of physical ability boosts, and I can use healing magic too. As for elemental magic, I've totally mastered it."

"In that case, I'll need your name and address so I can issue a guild identification card."

"Huh? Do I really need one?"

"I'm afraid you can't work as an assistant mage without an identification card."

Uh oh. Time to make a choice!

- (1) Write down my real name.
- (2) Play it safe by writing down a fake name.
- (3) Give up.

Well (3) is out of the question. I'm not giving up after coming this far. But they'll know I'm an Oldenburg if I go with (1). On the other hand, (2) means using a fake name, which could make everyone too suspicious to hire me if I get found out. I went to the trouble of putting my hair in a ponytail and wearing fake glasses, but now my disguise will all be for nothing...

Well, whatever! Let's just do it! I'm going with (1)! I'll write my real name!

"Here you are!"

"Okay. Hmm. Oh? Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg, is it? Could you be a member

of Duke Oldenburg's family?"

"Y-Yes..."

I was found out in an instant. Woe is me.

"Is this all you need to give me my assistant mage card?"

"Would it be all right for me to contact the Oldenburg household first, just in case?"

"Anything but that! I'm here in secret!"

If she does that, father'll find out instantly! I convinced Mr. Bernhard to keep quiet! Don't ruin it now!

"I see. Well, can I at least see your student identification in that case?"

"Sure!"

There's no problem with them checking my student ID. It's got my name, photograph, and address right on there. I've no idea what magic they use to make photographs, but it's on there anyhow. Come to think of it...how do they do that?

"Very well. Now that I've confirmed your identity, I can issue you your guild card. Should I use your full name?"

"No. Please, put just my first name on there."

If I ever have to show anyone my guild card, they'll instantly know I'm an Oldenburg, and rumors will spread. I just know it'd reach father's ears in no time, and then my allowance might get hit with even harsher economic sanctions...

"That's everything, Miss Astrid. Welcome to the Adventurer's Guild. Would you like me to explain what it means to be an assistant mage?"

"Please do."

It could be totally different from when Mr. Bernhard was doing it.

"Assistant mages are only temporary Adventurer's Guild members. However, they can participate in quests when hired by regular guild members. The rewards that you receive can be negotiated with the party that hires you."

“Does the guild itself manage the payment?”

“Yes. To avoid any disputes, the party informs the guild of the assistant mage’s reward allocation in advance, and then the guild pays everyone appropriately when the reward for the quest is being paid out.”

Sounds good. That means anyone who’d try to take advantage of a little girl can’t cheat me out of my pay. As long as I know I’ll get my money, it’s all good. The problem is that everyone’s going to doubt that I’m any use, so they’ll try to shortchange me at the negotiation stage. I want to get proper pay. I think I’ve got the skills to deserve it.

“First I need to find a party that’ll hire me.”

I took a good look around the Adventurer’s Guild. None of this’ll matter if no one hires me in the first place. The men and women filling this place aren’t exactly what I’d call approachable. I need to find a party here that looks like it’s lacking a mage.

I noticed a party over in a corner of the guild made up of entirely female members who appeared to be complaining about something. They were older than me, obviously, but some of them could still be described as young. None of their members looked like a mage.

“Excuse me!” I called out to the party in a friendly tone of voice. “Are you in need of a mage?”

A woman with short, chestnut hair replied, “Mm? You’re a mage?”

A small-framed woman with a scar on her cheek spoke next. “Yeah, you know. One of those assistant mages. She’s an academy student.”

The woman with the chestnut hair was wearing chain mail and had a short sword hanging from her waist. The woman with the scar was wearing leather armor that looked easier to move around in than her partner’s chain mail, and she was carrying a bow on her back.

“An assistant mage?” a brawny woman in full plate mail said. “We could probably use one.”

This third woman was carrying a large claymore on her back.

“I’m Gertrud, the party leader,” she explained. “My position’s up front, as you can probably guess. Ernesta here also fights up front, and Petra here brings up the rear.”

Mm. So this brawny, armored woman is Gertrud, the one with chestnut hair is Ernesta, and the one with the scar is Petra.

“That’s us. Your turn.”

“I’m Astrid. I’m an assistant mage!”

A lively self-introduction should give them a good first impression!

“Well, Astrid, as you can see, we haven’t got a mage. We’re trying to find one that’ll join our party officially, but it’s hard to find any to our liking. The Adventurer’s Guild is always short on mages...”

“In that case, I’m here to help!”

Sounds like the Adventurer’s Guild is a seller’s market for mages. Heh heh, that’s just what I wanted to hear.

“But you look like you’re a middle schooler. You haven’t learned blood magic yet, have you? I don’t know much about the academy, but they say it’s normally high schoolers who become assistant mages.”

“There’s no need for concern. I’ve learned to boost my physical performance, and I can use healing magic too. Allow me to demonstrate.” I took the knife hanging at my waist and put it against my own hand.

“W-Wait! You’ll hurt yourself!”

“Don’t worry!” I shut off my sense of pain and cut into my own palm.

Shutting off my sense of pain was magic I’d learned recently. I’d learned by pricking my palm repeatedly while monitoring my nerve signals: I could make my sense of pain disappear by shutting down the nerves that had activated when I pricked myself. To be more precise, however, it was my general sense of touch that got shut off, rather than just the feeling of pain.

“Ah! That cut’s going real deep!”

“Hold up... That has to hurt...”

Ernesta and Petra were both looking at me in surprise, but the real surprise was still to come.

“Now! Healing magic!” I traced a finger along the open wound.

The blood magic enhanced my natural healing abilities, and in an instant, the wound closed up without a trace. There wasn’t even so much as a mark where the cut had been. All that remained was the blood that had escaped from the wound.

“Ohh, so you really can use healing magic! Do you wanna join our party as our assistant mage, in that case?”

“Would you like to see my physical performance boosts too?”

“No. I can see how good your healing magic is. I’ll assume your physical boosts are on the same level.”

Aw... I was hoping I could ask for more money after showing them what I’m capable of.

“So, what type of quests does your party accept?” I asked.

“Well, we haven’t been taking on anything too high-level. That said, we didn’t have a mage to heal us in a pinch until now. We avoid taking risks because I don’t want to lose anyone.”

Oh, nice. A leader who cares about her party. She doesn’t seem so bad.

“But now that we’ve got ourselves a mage we can rely on, I think it’s time to try something a little more daring.”

“Like what?”

I wonder. Dragon slaying, maybe?

“Medicinal plant gathering.”

“Medicinal plant gathering...?”

Huh? Wouldn’t that be the kind of quest you’d do during the tutorial?

“Th-That’s a difficult quest?”

“Yeah. What we’re after are pseudo-mandrakes. If there are pseudo-

mandrakes growing somewhere, then it's a safe bet that you'll find powerful magic beasts living there too. Griffins, cockatrices, wyverns, et cetera, et cetera."

Oh? I've killed a griffin and a cockatrice already!

"That makes it a dangerous quest. But no one's forcing you. Feel free to bow out. What do you say?"

"I'm all for it!"

It'll take more than griffins and cockatrices to scare me off! We'll be coming home with a stack of those pseudo-mandrake things!

Come to think, we've only learned the very basics of herbology at the academy. I'm learning new things, even here. Now I know that powerful magic beasts are often found living near pseudo-mandrakes. I'm sure knowledge like that'll be useful at some point.

"Glad to hear it. We'll count on you in that case. Now, let's talk about your share of the reward."

"All right."

Now the problem is how the money gets distributed. I want to earn as much as Mr. Bernhard did.

"How about a twenty percent share of the total?" Gertrud suggested while showing me the quest announcement sheet. "It's a dangerous quest, so the reward is high too. Not a bad percentage, right?"

Hmm. A reward of sixty thousand marks for a bundle of thirty mandrakes? That means I'd get twelve thousand marks. If Mr. Bernhard made fifty thousand by working evenings and weekends, then this must be a pretty good amount.

"I'm quite happy with that!"

"Then it's settled. I'll go handle the paperwork." Gertrud showed me a warm smile before heading off toward the counter with the quest announcement sheet in her hand.

"Phew. Hey, if you're an academy student, doesn't that make you a noble?" Petra asked while Gertrud was gone. "What're you doing working as an

assistant mage? Going to have some fun with the money?"

"No," I told her with a serious look on my face. "I'm saving for the sake of my future. There may be bad times ahead for me."

I've gotta save money to prepare for my future destruction.

My plan included three stages. First, I had to avoid doing anything that might trigger my destruction. If I could live out an uneventful life at the academy without doing anything to get my family's territory seized, that would be ideal.

Next were the actions I'd take if my destruction ever were triggered. I'd use modern weapons to wipe out the Empire's armies while father joined forces with the local rulers I'd befriended to start an armed revolt. Once we'd overthrown the imperials and the local rulers loyal to them, we'd declare the founding of a new empire.

If all of that failed, we'd flee to a foreign nation where the Plusen Empire couldn't reach us. There we'd start a new life with the money I'd saved. I'd never see Iris again, but it was better than dying.

This was my three-point plan for avoiding my destruction. I was hoping it wouldn't go beyond the first stage. If things went badly, I wanted it to stop with stage two. The third stage was equivalent to declaring my surrender. I couldn't stand losing to someone like Friedrich. I intended to show him the fortitude of House Oldenburg.

"Sounds like nobles have it tough too," Ernesta said coolly. "I'll bet your world's like nothing we can imagine."

"It's nothing special," I replied. "I just research magic every day."

"Listen, school girl, you stick close to me out there. If you wander off by yourself, you'll get hurt."

"I understand. I'll trust in you."

I'll bet Petra has actual combat experience. She's giving the orders already. I'd better do what I'm told.

"I just wish we could get a mage to join our party for real. We're not such a bad team in terms of skill."

“There just aren’t enough mages,” Ernesta said. “It’s only a few penniless nobles who become adventurers after graduating from the academy. And you never know what to expect from mages trained anywhere else, so scouting them is tough.”

Ah. Sounds like the nobility’s monopoly on mage training institutions is what caused the Adventurer’s Guild to be short on mages.

I’ve mentioned this already, but nobles learned magic at the academy while commoners learned from retired mages, such as former court mages. While the academy would produce capable mages who’d studied a set curriculum, the rest learned in various different ways with varying results.

“Just gotta suck it up,” Ernesta said. “We’ll get by if we stick by the bigger parties.”

“And we’ve got an assistant mage now,” Petra added.

Gertrud returned to us from the counter, and it was finally time to begin the quest.

Chapter 16 — The Villainess Goes Gathering Medicinal Plants

And so, we'd set out from the imperial capital by carriage and arrived at the site where we'd gather the plants. To be more accurate, we'd stopped before getting to the site. The plants grew in a forest, and our job was to collect them while being wary of the magic beasts that lived there.

"Let's do this like always. I'll take point; Petra, you're in the center, and Ernesta, you're at the rear."

"Stick with me, school girl."

I see. The two up-front members secure the forward and rear positions while Petra watches both flanks. That means that this party could use another member. Petra has her work cut out for her trying to watch both sides. If two duos combined to make a four-person formation, they'd be able to keep watch in every direction while on the move.

Anyhow, it's not my place to complain about our member count or strategies. I'll leave that Gertrud since she's the leader.

"Are the pseudo-mandrakes up ahead?"

"Yeah. At least, that's what I'm told. It's not like anyone could pull up a whole crop of pseudo-mandrakes overnight, so don't worry."

"Couldn't other adventurers have gotten here before us and taken them all?"

"That's against regulations. You don't pick a whole crop of medicinal plants unless it's some sort of emergency. There's one of those unwritten rules. You leave crops intact for the next adventurers, and for your future self."

Mmm... I thought adventurers might be violent thugs, but it turns out they're environmentalists with a strong sense of camaraderie. When I'm always running into magic beasts in places that the Adventurer's Guild has supposedly taken care of, I hope it's not because they hate to eradicate things. It's nice to let the medicinal plants multiply, but it'll be dangerous if they do the same for magic beasts.

“We’re almost at the crop,” Petra warned me. “Don’t go wetting yourself if something jumps out.”

I gave her a nod and checked the machine gun that I was holding. The high-caliber ammunition it used was capable of handling most enemies. I’d prepared six hundred rounds that were in my knapsack, and I’d also brought my shotgun just in case. In so many words, I’d come heavily armed. My blood magic was reinforcing the muscles that would otherwise have given way under the weight of my luggage. I’d been doing that a lot lately, and I’d been shocked to realize my body was becoming quite muscular.

“Get down. Something’s there,” Gertrud warned us.

We all crouched down in the undergrowth.

“Over there...wyverns?”

Gertrud was looking at six magic beasts covered in blue scales. They were your typical fantasy-world wyverns. All six of them happened to be in the crop of pseudo-mandrakes. Not only were they in the crop, they appeared to be making their nest there.

“Wyverns with younglings,” Petra sighed. “They’re trouble.”

“The ones with younglings are worse?” I asked.

“They’re more vicious than an ordinary wyvern because they’re protecting their young. And then the kids’ll come at you just as hard. Once they’ve gotten to that size, they can kill a human easily. You see why they’re a pain?”

“Yeah, they do look like a pain.”

Two of the wyverns were about the size of a mini truck, and the remaining four were as big as cars. Each of those wyverns was big enough to kill a human.

“So what do we do now?” I asked Petra.

“What do you say, Gertrud?” Petra passed my question along to Gertrud.

“We can take them. We’ve got a mage today, and we’d have to go pretty far from the capital to find another crop. I don’t want to waste more money traveling.” Gertrud removed the claymore from her back. “I’ll go on ahead with Ernesta to keep them pinned down. Petra and Astrid, you both attack from

behind. If you can roast them or something, that'll help."

"Leave it to me."

Looks like you're up, machine gun.

"What's that tool you've brought?"

"It's a weapon that uses magic."

The details are secret.

"All right, let's go!"

Gertrud and Ernesta jumped out of the undergrowth, and then Petra and I followed.

"Ohraaah!" The parent wyvern howled, causing the child wyverns to emit their own high-pitched cries.

"Ernesta! Hold back the parents!"

"Got it, Gertrud!"

Gertrud and Ernesta raised their swords and charged at the wyverns. Blood spilled from the two parents. It wasn't all that much blood, but it was enough to make the creatures focus their attention on Gertrud and Ernesta.

"Now get to work, schoolgirl!" Petra said. "We'll take out the little ones. You ready?!"

"I'm ready when you are!"

I lay flat on the ground, rested my machine gun on its bipod, and then aimed it at a car-sized wyvern. All I had to do was pull the trigger.

At the same time, I'd engaged my combat preparation measures. The release of adrenaline increased my heart rate while also accelerating my nervous system, allowing me to rapidly understand and assess the battlefield. There was no way I could miss while in this state.

"Let's start the attack!" Petra cried before unleashing two arrows from her bow. Both arrows pierced the skull of a child wyvern, causing it to shriek and collapse.

I pulled the trigger at the same time. Blau suppressed the deafening sound of gunfire, allowing me to quietly spray the young wyverns with bullets as though I were using a suppressor. A sweep with the machine gun mowed down three of the baby wyverns, and all three fell to the ground.

“Wow... What is that thing? Magic?”

“More or less.”

Our next task was to provide backup to Gertrud and Ernesta. Using blood magic, I hurried to a position where the wyvern’s flank would be open to me. I’d come without changing out of my school uniform, but I’d worn boots just in case, which turned out to be fortunate.

Sometimes running and sometimes leaping, I made my way across the uneven ground to place myself at the wyvern’s side. That put me in a position where I wouldn’t accidentally fire on any friendlies. Unless Gertrud or Ernesta made any sudden and unexpected changes in their positions, I’d have no problems.

“Gertrud! I’m here to back you up!” I yelled before firing the machine gun at the side of the parent wyvern.



There was a muffled sound of gunfire as bullets in the machine gun's magazine were sent to the chamber one after another. From there, they were each ejected in turn after being imbued with mana. A pleasant stream of spent cartridges spilled from the gun as I fired every bullet into the wyvern.

"Oraah..."

It was incredibly effective. My attack had caused fatal damage to one of the parent wyverns, causing it to fall to the ground in a pool of bright red blood. That was five wyverns down. We just had to take out one more, and the crop would be clear.

"Raaah!"

But it seemed things wouldn't be so easy, because the remaining parent wyvern—I don't know whether this one was the mom or the dad—had turned its back on Gertrud and Ernesta, choosing to charge at me instead.

"Ugh... I'm not positioned right to shoot the damn thing now that it's turned around..."

The wyvern was on the same line of fire as Gertrud and Ernesta. If I fired on it now, I might hit them both.

"Time to reposition..." I picked up the machine gun and was about to move, but then...

"Uhrah!"

"Grah!"

Gertrud and Ernesta both struck at the wyvern while its back was turned. They thrust their swords into the wyvern's flanks—which was where its scales were thinnest, according to the encyclopedia—and they gouged the creature with their blades.

They'd shown the wyvern that turning to charge at me had been a poor decision. Blood sprayed from its body as it fell to the ground convulsing, and then the convulsions stopped.

"They're amazing..."

Although they couldn't boost their physical abilities with blood magic the way I did, Gertrud and Ernesta acted with precision while attacking their targets. It was a reminder that combat demanded not just assistance from magic but also daily training. It made me realize that magic had made me complacent.

"Phew! Is that all of the wyverns?" Gertrud asked.

"I'll go take a look around. You can start harvesting while I'm gone." With light, nimble movement, Petra set off to scout out our surroundings.

"Got to say, you're really something, Astrid," Gertrud told me. "You took out three young wyverns and one adult. Is that metal thing some kind of weapon?"

"Something like that. It's basically a device for launching projectiles with high accuracy."

What made my machine gun and other weapons superior to the magic of this world was their accuracy and the fact that they used only a little mana. During the academy's elemental magic classes, I'd seen the way that this world's battle mages fought: it mostly involved throwing massive fireballs, and those were generally off-target. Existing magic was based on the power of imagination, which was poorly suited for aiming at a target.

My weapons, on the other hand, featured optical sights that made it possible to fire with precision. Given a choice between hitting the target directly with enough firepower to kill a human or raining down a much greater amount of firepower in the area around the target, it was obvious which approach was more efficient.

"The academy's students have come a long way," Ernesta said, sounding impressed. "I'm surprised."

"It's not all the academy's students." I bashfully scratched my head. "It's just me."

"All right. Thanks to Astrid, we were able to handle the wyverns with no injuries. Now to gather up these pseudo-mandrakes and take them home."

"Roger that!"

I followed Gertrud's orders and began collecting pseudo-mandrakes. It turned

out to be menial work. Gertrud told me what pseudo-mandrakes looked like, and then I started collecting them. Apparently, this type of medicinal plant was in high demand because it was a great pain killer that also lowered fevers. And no, they didn't scream when I pulled them from the ground. They were only *pseudo-mandrakes*.

"That's thirty bundles!"

"That means we're finished, doesn't it?" *Yay! My first quest to gather medicinal plants was a success!*

"Hey!" Petra said as she returned. "I took a look around, and I didn't see any more wyverns. Have you gathered up the pseudo-mandrakes?"

"Yep. They're all gathered. Now let's head back."

And so, we returned to the Adventurer's Guild with our quest complete. Gertrud and the others turned in the pseudo-mandrakes, and then they received a quest completion notice once a guild official had appraised the plants and given the okay. My reward was twelve thousand marks!

"Having you with us made things real easy, Astrid. Join us again some time." Petra was in a good mood.

"If the opportunity arises, I'd be happy to," I told her with a smile.

"Make sure you do," Gertrud agreed. "Having you in the party made life easy."

"All right. Same goes for you too, Gertrud! I look forward to working with you again!"

And that ended my first assignment as an assistant mage. I hurried back home and hid the twelve thousand marks in an empty box that I put under my bed. Once this box was full, I planned to seek out a reliable bank in a foreign country.

Wow. I can't wait to see what we'll do next! It feels like I'm a secret agent.

Chapter 17 — Something's Up with the Villainess's Cousin

I was visiting the Round Table for the first time in a while. Well, it had only been three days or so since my last visit, but still.

My head had been full of thoughts about testing my combat preparation measures, and my time after school was spent working as an assistant mage, so I hadn't been able to visit the Round Table.

I couldn't stop showing my face here entirely, however. I'd actually been encouraged to visit by Friedrich. I hated to follow orders from someone like that, but I resigned myself to doing what he said because I feared that making him mad might trigger my destruction.

I'm such a coward...

"Astrid!"

"Iris! How've you been?"

I hadn't even seen my cousin in three days. Iris gave me an angelic smile as she looked up from a novel for girls that she was reading.

"Astrid, you've been gone for a while, so I wondered if something had happened. Have you been busy?"

"Things have been a little hectic lately. I've got a ton of things to do with the real magic research club, and then there's this and that to do after school. It's definitely not that I didn't want to visit."

I had to keep my assistant mage job secret, even from Iris. It was something no one could know about. I didn't mean to suspect Iris of being loose-lipped, but it was hard to predict how leaks might occur.

"Huh? Is it just me, or are you a little run down, Iris?"

"I'm...a little tired..."

I realized that something about Iris wasn't right. She'd given me a warm smile a moment ago, but now she looked a little unwell.

“Oh? Are you worried about your studies? Something else maybe?”

“It’s...something else.”

I wonder what? Did Werner and Dietrich have another fight over Iris while I wasn’t around?

“Ah. Astrid, I’m glad you came.”

Gah. Friedrich... My cousin’s dealing with her own troubles, and now you’re making trouble for me.

“Could I speak with you?” Friedrich asked.

“Yes. I’ll be back in a moment, Iris.”

Friedrich wants something from me... I can only expect the worst...

“I’d like to talk to you about your cousin, Miss Iris.”

“Oh? Is something up with Iris?”

What? Why would Friedrich want to talk about Iris?

“According to Werner, Miss Iris may be being bullied by her classmates...”

“Wha?!”

No way! Who’d bully a beautiful, soothing angel like Iris?!

“Wh-Who would do such a thing?”

“That’s a question I can answer. But before I tell you, I’ll need you to promise that you won’t resort to violence.”

Just listen to this idealist little prince! This clearly calls for full-scale retaliation that’ll etch a feeling of terror deep into their hearts and minds! Anything less and our enemy will underestimate us and keep on causing damage!

“As you wish. I promise. I won’t resort to violence.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Now let me explain.”

I won’t resort to violence. I’m totally serious. (Monotone voice.)

“It appears that there are some who don’t look kindly upon Miss Iris’s engagement to Werner. She was already envied just for being the daughter of

Duke Braunschweig, and now her engagement to a Württemberg is turning that envy into anger.”

What? They’re bullying her because they’re jealous? How pathetic.

I’d experienced the barrier between myself and others created by the fact that I was Duke Oldenburg’s daughter, but I was enough of a people-person to avoid getting bullied. Iris, on the other hand, was both a duke’s daughter and an intensely shy girl, making her a potential target for bullies.

To some, Iris’s shy behavior might have made her seem too stuck up to make friends with anyone of lesser status. “I’m n-not good at talking to people” could be interpreted as “I’d really prefer not to be spoken to by an individual of your low standing.”

Could that be the image of Iris the bullies have in their minds? But Iris would never say anything like that! Those idiots!

“So who’s the main culprit behind this bullying?”

“Werner tells me she’s a third-year elementary schooler by the name of Werra von Westarp. She’s the second daughter of Count Westarp. I’m told that she’s at the center of the bullying, and she’s doing various things to make life difficult for Miss Iris.”

Westarp? Let’s add that name to my mental list of “people I’ll beat to death someday.” Friedrich’s name might make it onto that list too!

“Very well. I’ll go to speak with her immediately. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“Astrid, please wait. I’ll go with you. That would be wise, I think.”

Why? It’s got nothing to do with you, Friedrich.

“I think it would be best if you don’t accompany me, Your Highness. If this bullying of Iris stems from differences in status, then it might actually intensify when the imperial prince takes her side. For that reason, I’d prefer to go alone.”

I don’t need you, Friedrich!

“But if you go alone...”

“What if I go?” Adolf interrupted while Friedrich was still trying to talk me out

of it.

Why'd you have to show up?! It makes no sense!

"Lord Adolf, you would also—"

"My father's the captain of an order of knights, that's all. I've no higher status than you. You can't have a problem with me being there."

Gah. Looks like he really wants to come along. He's right that the Wallenstein family are about level with a duke's family. But why aren't you spending time with your beloved Minne? This is no time to be cheating.

"I-In that case, I'd appreciate your help."

"Sure. I'll do what I can."

What exactly does he think he can do?

"Astrid, please wait!" Now Iris had come running after us.

"Astrid, did Prince Friedrich tell you about my situation? And now you intend to do something about it?"

"That's right," I replied with a defiant nod. "If someone's bullying my cute little cousin, I'm not standing for that."

"Then please allow me to come with you! This all started because of the misunderstandings my behavior caused. If I can't put those misunderstandings right myself, the same thing will just happen again!"

Iris... She's such a brave girl. But this isn't her fault. The Westarp family are in the wrong here.

"All right. But let me have a word with her first."

"Okay."

Now to deal with this Westarp girl. She'll pay for her misdeeds in hell.

....

Iris and I, along with Adolf, were headed for the elementary school building.

"So, Miss Astrid, Dietrich isn't causing you trouble, is he?" Adolf asked me as I was seething with silent rage.

“Not at all. He has done no such thing. He appears to have been raised well.”

I just wish he wouldn't fight with Werner over Iris.

“Really? Raised well...?”

Adolf, did you only come along so you could ask me about that? We need to be prepared to kill. If you're not serious, you'd best make a U-turn and go back to the Round Table.

“People have always told me that he's a good boy. My parents and the knights say the same thing. Honestly, I'm starting to think it'll be him, not me, who becomes the next head of the order. He can use blood magic already. Me, on the other hand...”

Oh? What's all this about? Is he feeling inferior to his little brother now?

“Lord Adolf, we've only started learning the very basics of blood magic now that we're in middle school. And I think there are ways in which you far outshine Dietrich.”

“Me, outshine him?” Adolf looked back at me doubtfully.

“The way you treat girls, for one. I'm sure Minne discusses things with you often. The fact that you have someone willing to discuss problems with you is one thing you have that he doesn't.”

That's right. Dietrich, meanwhile, got blown off by Iris.

“Hah. Well, I'll take your word for it. Looks like we're nearly there.” Adolf smiled a little as we looked around the elementary school building.

We arrived in front of the classroom where we'd find Werra—the girl causing all the problems.

“Oh! Hello there!” One of the boys from the elementary school gave us an energetic welcome as we strode toward him.

“Hey, you. Do you know a girl named Werra von Westarp?”

“O-Oh? Y-Yes, I know her...”

The boy looks kinda scared. Maybe Iris isn't the only one she's bullying.

“Where is she?” I asked the boy with a smile.

“She’s... She’s over there. That’s her seat...” The boy pointed to a desk in the classroom and then left us.

Hm. Werra must be the girl with the drill curls sitting over there. She has three cronies with her too. She really looks like a noble. Actually, this is how I imagine villainesses look.

That’s right! Anyone who’d bully Iris just because they’re jealous of her relationship with Werner would have to be a real villainess! You should be the one facing destruction instead of me! How is it fair that I’m the only one having that problem?!

Ugh. This injustice is getting me even angrier.

“Werra von Westarp?” I called out to her as I barged into the classroom.

“Yes? Can I help you?” Werra looked at me with a blank expression.

“I have a cousin by the name of Iris. I assume you know her?”

“Y-Yes. I know her. Though I’ve never really spoken with her.”

What’s this? You think you can talk your way out of it?

“That’s odd. Judging from what Werner tells me, you’ve been bullying her. Isn’t that right, Lord Adolf?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard it too. You’re sure you never talk to her?”

All right. Now me and Adolf have got Werra cornered.

“I would never! Th-This is a misunderstanding! I have no recollection of such a thing. What proof do you have?”

We might not have physical evidence, but that nervous reaction of yours is all the proof we need.

“Oh, really? Blood magic happens to be my specialty. I can do this.”

I took a knife from my pocket and cut my palm deeply, making sure Werra had a good view, just like I’d done for the members of the Adventurer’s Guild. I made sure to cut off my sense of pain first.

Werra’s face went pale when I showed her the blood dripping from my palm.

Then, with some healing magic, I closed up the wound without a trace.

“Now let me ask again. Are you sure you have no idea what I’m talking about? Maybe I could test the same thing on *your* palm next?”

“H-Hey. You promised Friedrich you wouldn’t use violence...”

“I’m just trying to scare her a little.”

I’m not seriously going to cut Werra. I just need her to think there’s a chance that I might. Which means I’m not actually using violence, doesn’t it?

“This is beginning to annoy me,” I said coldly. “Can I show you how much pain I feel when you refuse to speak honestly?”

“I admit it! You’re right! B-But it was her fault! That girl spends all of her time with the important nobles at the Round Table and refuses to talk to us! If she hadn’t been so cold toward us in the first place, we’d have never...”

Yep. I knew it.

“There you have it, Iris.” I looked back at Iris, who was hiding behind me. “Do you want to say anything?”

“Astrid, you’ve gone too far. You’re scaring me.” Iris was trembling.

“I’m d-doing all of this for you!” I quickly put the knife away.

“Um, Werra?” Iris said.

“Wh-What is it?” Werra replied nervously.

“I’m sorry. I felt as though you’d never accept me. That’s why I hid away at the Round Table... But the truth is that I really wanted to talk to you all.”

“Uh... B-But you’re a duke’s daughter, and...”

I guess sometimes your family’s status is useful, and other times not so much.

“Why don’t we all forget about who’s a duke and who isn’t and just talk to one another? If you’d be all right with that, then I would be too.”

“D-Does that mean you’ll forgive us for bullying you?”

“I’ve already forgotten about it,” Iris said, smiling. “I think we both made mistakes.” Iris took hold of Werra’s hand. “Do you think we could be friends?”

“O-Of course!” Seeing Iris smile was making Werra turn red.

Why’s that something to blush over?

“I think I’ll sometimes spend some time here in the classroom from now on. I’d be glad to have an opportunity to talk to everyone. I hope we become good friends.”

“Y-Yes, I’d also like for us to be friends!”

With a final nod from Iris, the incident had ended, and things were peaceful once again.

Will things stay fine, though? I can’t help but think Werra was just too scared of me to argue. I’ll have to ask Blau to keep a close eye on her. I’ll ask Werner and Dietrich to check in on things once in a while too. That way I can keep everything under surveillance.

I have my own future to worry about, but I still want to protect my cute cousin. I’ll have to thank Werner and Friedrich for letting me know what was going on.

But I do worry about the recent “knife woman” horror story that elementary schoolers are all telling each other... They’re not talking about me, are they?

Chapter 18 — The Villainess's Likes and Dislikes Test “Hey!” I gave our club's experimental monkey, Pink, a quick slap across the head.

“Kiiih!” The monkey cried out, but I kept on hitting it.

“Hey!” Smack, smack. “Hmm. This isn't working.”

“L-Lady Astrid? Might I ask what you're doing?” The sight of me whacking our monkey across the head with a ruler was making Minne worry. The way she looked at me seemed sort of similar to how she might look at someone who'd lost their mind.

“Well... I was wondering whether it's possible to control emotions.”

“How does controlling emotions relate to hitting a monkey on the head?”

Oh. Unless I explain it from the start, it won't make sense.

“The ultimate goal of these experiments is to control the conscience. I'm currently monitoring my own mind. If I have a conscience, then it should activate when I hit the poor little monkey's head. Then I should be able to shut off my conscience as soon as I've memorized which regions become active!”

Essentially, humans feel a powerful aversion toward killing members of their species. It was unclear whether this is a matter of nature or nurture, but either way, when one human kills another, they feel stress that they want to escape from. That was a bad thing.

It was preordained that someday I'd have to fight against masses of people trying to destroy me. When the time came, I'd have to kill in large numbers. If stress built up with each enemy soldier I killed, I'd end up like a Vietnam War veteran.

To alleviate the stress killing people caused, I had to find my conscience, which was likely the main cause of such stress, and banish it from my brain. With my conscience gone, I'd probably be able to kill thousands of people

without any stress at all.

If it'd been an option, it might have been better to kill an actual person in order to identify the type of stress caused and the specific brain regions that activated; that would help me disable that type of brain activity specifically. However, killing people was illegal everywhere in recent times, and I also wasn't quite that heartless. That's why I was aiming to prevent my conscience from working instead.

The problem was that hitting Pink the monkey across the head didn't trigger my conscience at all. Probably because Pink was a bit of an ugly creature.

"I'll never finish the spell at this rate." I sighed with boredom while continuing to slap Pink across the head.

"I know it's a test-subject animal you're hitting, but I do pity it."

With a gasp, I looked over at Minne. "What did you just say?!"

"I d-d-d-didn't say anything!"

"No, you said you feel pity for it! That's it!"

Minne looked a little afraid, perhaps because I was moving toward her so quickly.

"Minne! Slap the monkey's head and let me monitor your mind! Keep going until you feel sorry for it!"

"Wh-What?"

I thought it was a great idea, but Minne looked extremely unwilling.

"Ugh... What am I to do? Isn't there anyone who'll help with my experiments?"

I'd just begun thinking about using recruitment posters to find test subjects when Minne spoke to me again.

"Lady Astrid? Would it be all right of me to ask you a question?"

"What is it, Minne?"

"Well... You spoke of controlling emotions...and I was wondering whether it would be possible to make someone think more fondly of someone else...?"

“Oh ho? Someone like Lord Adolf, perhaps?”

“N-No. I was just curious...”

Minne and Adolf get along real well. They're at that “more than just friends, but not quite lovers” stage, and now I guess Minne wants them to be lovers officially.

All right. I owe it to Minne for joining my club and defusing a landmine for me.

“There’s a small problem with that.”

“Which is?”

“There are subtle differences between the ways male and female minds work. Even if I monitor your lovey-dovey feelings toward Lord Adolf, I can’t just make a blood magic spell that recreates those same feelings in someone else.”

“L-Lovey-dovey feelings...?” The words had made Minne turn red.

“In other words, I need a boy as a test subject. Ideally, we’ll need to know who they like. Then I can talk to them about that person while monitoring how their emotions change, which should give me something to use as the basis of a blood magic spell. We should gather as many test subjects as possible.”

Perhaps I should have explained this sooner, but spells were sort of like the blood magic equivalent of a talisman. The difference was that the magic was stored within the brain, or in blood, instead of within paper. As long as it was remembered, it could be used later and could be taught to other people too. Explanation over.

“Unfortunately, there are very few gentlemen I could call friends... And of the few I have, I don’t know if they admire anyone in particular.”

“Hmm. We’re stuck.”

If I mess up while manipulating Adolf’s brain, it could turn him into a half-wit, which would be a problem. We need to do this carefully...

“All right. I’ll handle this,” I said with a clap of my hands.

Minne looked at me in surprise. “You will, Lady Astrid?”

“I’ll monitor some boys from the Round Table. I can directly monitor Lord

Adolf too.”

“What?!”

Yeah, I figured you'd be shocked.

“I-I'm not sure that you should...”

“Do you want me to recruit test subjects instead? Just so you know, I'll be obligated to explain the experiment to them and inform them of what we're researching.”

“But you wouldn't have to explain it to Round Table members...?”

“Nah. They're friends, so it's fine.”

Though I have some enemies there too...

“I'm interested in the experiment myself,” I continued. “This might be a good method for figuring out who likes who. Do you think we could make it into a spell and sell it to people who like gossip?”

“U-Um...”

Minne... The real magic research club's budget already looks grim because of my overspending. I'll need subjects for my experiments into conscience and ethics at some point, and people aren't going to cooperate for free. This club needs money.

“Just remember that we could profit from this if we're successful.”

“V-Very well.”

And that's how we decided to monitor the minds of Adolf and a few others.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained! Let's go!

....

And so, I was visiting the Round Table. I wanted to start with someone who'd made it obvious who they liked.

“Hey, Werner, have you got a moment?”

“How can I be of assistance, Miss Astrid?”

I'm pretty sure that Werner likes Iris. I'll talk to him about Iris and monitor the

emotions it stirs, and then I'll try talking about unrelated topics. Hopefully that'll help me pinpoint the emotions he feels toward the person he likes!

"It's a little blood magic experiment. Would you mind helping me out?"

"I don't mind at all."

Here goes. I took hold of Werner's hand and then channeled mana into him while monitoring the firing of his neurons. At that moment, there was only one type of reaction being stimulated. That was probably his feeling of suspicion toward the experiment.

"How much do you like Iris?"

"I-Is that related to the experiment?"

"Of course."

Oh. Now I'm seeing several reactions. I'm guessing these include feelings of surprise and embarrassment, so I can't say which ones are related to love just yet.

"Let me think. I love her a lot. I can't wait to marry her. I'm sure that Miss Iris will be a fine companion to have in my life."

"I see."

Some of the reactions have faded. The remaining ones must be his feelings of love.

"Now, here's another question. I actually have a scorpion in my hand."

"What?! Wh-Why would you?!"

Wow! Now I'm seeing the same reaction I saw when I asked the first question. That must be his surprise. Good, good.

"Just a joke. Now, tell me, is there anything you're embarrassed about?"

"Embarrassed? What kind of embarrassment do you mean?"

"Anything that makes you blush."

Ah... I have to consider the different types of embarrassment. There's everything from types that cause anger to types that cause fear. This keeps

getting more complicated...

“And I absolutely must answer this question?”

“Yes. Please.”

Oh? Here's a new reaction. I saw something similar when I asked the very first question. This has to be his feeling of shame.

“Well... Something embarrassing that makes me blush... I actually have a fear of spiders. They're the one thing I absolutely can't stand.”

“Okay! Thanks! I've learned a lot!”

“Oh? What was the meaning of this experiment?”

Thanks, Werner. I got some valuable data. Now who's next?

“Lord Adolf, do you have a moment?”

“Sure. What is it?”

Adolf had been in the middle of reading a book. Unsurprisingly, it was a book on blood magic. I'd heard from Minne that Adolf already knew plenty about blood magic, and he just struggled to put it into practice. It was doubtful whether reading would help him at all.

“Would you be willing to assist in a blood magic experiment? You'll merely need to answer a few questions.”

“Blood magic? It's nothing weird, is it?”

“Not to worry,” I told him. “It won't affect your body in any way.”

Adolf reluctantly took my hand.

“What are your thoughts regarding Minne?”

“Ah. She's all right. She helps me with my studies and gives me good advice. She's not a bad person.”

Oho! That got just one reaction. It's weak, but this is similar to Werner's reaction when I asked about Iris. I see. This must be the brain's reaction when someone likes someone else.

“Now, might I ask whether any girl has won your affection?”

“N-No. It’s a little early for that.”

Oh? The previous reaction intensified, and I’m also getting the shame reaction here. There’s no mistaking it.

“And now, for my final question: what are your feelings toward Prince Friedrich?”

“He’s not bad. He’ll be a good emperor someday, won’t he?”

All right. Now I’m sure that his first reaction was different from how he feels toward friends of the same sex.

“Thank you very much, Lord Adolf. I appreciate your cooperation.”

“You don’t have to thank me. It was nothing.”

Okay! Just wait for me, Minne! I’ll brew up a custom-made love potion for you! But first things first; there’s a little something I want to try. Something that’s making me curious.

“Dietrich, have you got a moment?”

“What is it, Miss Astrid?”

Time to see if it isn’t Iris who won Dietrich’s affection after all. I think he has to like Iris, even though Iris and Vallia both said that it’s me he likes. The thing is, I’m not the type who younger boys tend to go for, and I’m not into younger boys myself either.

“Dietrich, do you like Iris?”

“Yes. I admire her.”

Huh? I’m not seeing the reaction I saw from the other two boys.

“Oh? I thought maybe you liked me. Just kidding.”

“Um. Well, I...”

Huh? Now I’m seeing the reaction I saw from the other boys.

“Th-Thank you, Dietrich! I got some good data! See you later!”

“Um, Miss Astrid?”

N-Now what? If that’s a genuine reaction of affection, it means that a boy four

years younger than me likes me. When I'm in my third year of high school, he'll still be in his second year of middle school... And besides, I worry about Adolf and his apparent complex about his little brother.

Hmm. I'll think about this later. I don't know how to handle it right now. I suppose I'll try one last test while I'm at it.

"Mr. Bernhard!"

"What is it, Miss Astrid? I see you didn't fly into school today."

Yep! I was going to find out whether Mr. Bernhard liked me!

"Mr. Bernhard, would you help me with a blood magic experiment? It'll only take a moment."

"All right. I don't mind. It's nothing dangerous, is it?"

"No need to worry. It's merely some monitoring."

With his consent, I took Mr. Bernhard's hand. *Here goes...*

"Mr. Bernhard, what do you really think of me?"

"You're a problem child. I'm already worrying about how I'll deal with you as a high schooler."

Okay. Thank you. No reaction. I sighed.

"What are you sighing about?"

It seems my romantic life is off to a slow start... Well, at least I got lots of data. I'll have to analyze it with Minne later. I can't shake the feeling of disappointment, though...

Chapter 19 — The Villainess and Green Demons

I was at the Adventurer's Guild once again!

Let's keep making money! I'm oozing with avarice from every pore today!

"Oh, hey Astrid. Long time no see."

"Ah! Petra! Nice to see you again!"

I heard the familiar voice of Petra right after I arrived in the adventurer's guild. Since our first quest, we'd developed a strong relationship by completing several more quests together, including medicinal plant gatherings and beast exterminations. Incidentally, the range of quests that Petra's party was able to accept had increased as a result.

"I haven't seen any of you around recently. Were you all off somewhere?" I asked.

"We went on a little expedition. It was a magic beast survey in the Garm mountain range."

Oh? They do expeditions too? I'd love to go on one. Traveling the roads in a swaying carriage, venturing where there are no paths, pitching a tent, making soup with dried meat and enjoying it with pieces of hard bread... I'd spend the night peering out into the darkness beneath a starry sky, alert for any monsters that might attack...

Yeah! The blood of an outdoor activities club member still runs in my veins! But I'm just a student, and I have to do all this assistant mage stuff without father knowing, meaning I can only do quests that are over in one day... It's a shame.

"So, did you find anything in the Garm mountains?"

"The opposite: it was gone. We ought to have found a fire dragon, but its nest was empty."

That's scary...

“What do you think happened?”

“I can’t say for sure, but my guess is that it left the nest to mate. When it’s the season for it, dragons go traveling for the sake of mating. It’s gonna be a pain. Sometimes they’ll even fly to the edge of the imperial capital.”

Whoa! That could cause havoc. But wait... If I defeat one of those dragons, maybe I’ll earn myself the title of dragon slayer? My focus has always been taking on the empire in a war someday, but fighting a dragon might not be a bad idea.

“There’s no telling where it disappeared to,” Petra said with a slight smile.

“Oh, if it isn’t Astrid. Long time no see.”

“Nice to see you again, Gertrud.”

Gertrud and Ernesta had appeared while I was chatting with Petra.

“Gertrud, are you taking on any quests today?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. There’s a mountain owned by some noble where suspicious, human-looking figures were sighted. Someone’s gotta investigate.”

“Human-looking figures...?”

N-Not ghosts I hope? I hate ghosts. They’re one thing bullets don’t work against!

“I’m thinking they’re goblins,” Gertrud said.

“We can’t rule out bandits either,” Ernesta added.

Ah. No chance of them being ghosts in that case. That’s a relief.

“How about it, Astrid?” Gertrud asked. “Want to be our assistant mage again for this quest? The client’s a noble, so there’s a nice reward, as you’d expect.”

“I’d love to!”

I joined their party, and we were heading out for another quest.

“Oh? You’re heading off with Gertrud’s party, Astrid?”

“Yes. They’ve invited me to join them today.”

I was well known as the middle schooler who had the benefits of both

powerful blood magic and guns. It made me quite popular at the Adventurer's Guild. People from several different parties always said hello when they saw me.

Despite the fact that I was a little girl, parties would give me something close to an equal share of the reward, which showed just how badly the Adventurer's Guild needed mages. I couldn't have been more grateful. I also suspected that Gertrud and the others had told everyone about me. I owed them a favor for that.

"Gertrud, can your party handle a quest like that?"

"Yeah. We'll figure it out somehow, whether it ends up being goblins or bandits. And we've got Astrid today too."

I love knowing that you've got trust in me, Gertrud.

The reward for this quest was a whole hundred thousand marks. As usual, I'd get a twenty percent share, which meant twenty thousand marks for me.

Nice! I'm raking it in. I'm already making more than the fifty thousand marks per month that Mr. Bernhard earned in his student days. I'll take along my usual firearms and give it my all!

....

We arrived at the mountain owned by the noble.

Hmm. I guess it's similar to the hunting grounds that father owns. No signs of animal life here, though: no footfall of deer, no sounds of squirrels moving in the trees, nothing but the occasional bird call. It feels a little ominous.

"The client wants us to determine what the creatures are and then eliminate them if they prove to be a danger. Goblins are easy to handle, but bandits could give us some trouble."

"Yeah. Goblins don't use bows; bandits do."

I only know what I've read in my encyclopedia about goblins, but apparently, they're about as tall as an elementary schooler, they've got green skin, and they're intelligent enough to fight with spears made from branches. That makes them smarter than a monkey. With a bit of luck, I'll capture one and use it for

my experiments...

“All right, same formation as always.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gertrud’s party still lacked a fourth official member, so it was up to me and Petra to protect the flanks. I felt that their chances of survival would be reduced unless they found more official members soon.

“Gertrud, have you considered finding a fourth person to join your party?”

“Well, I’m leaving the fourth position open for a mage, but I get what you’re trying to say. You think it’s dangerous to just have Petra watching the flanks, don’t you?”

Oh. Looks like Gertrud was already aware of the problem.

“All three of us came from the same orphanage. We worked our way up from the bottom ranks of the Adventurer’s Guild. That’s why there’s such a strong bond between us. We’re not about to let just anyone join us now.”

“I had no idea...”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. To us, you’re still an important party member. You’re an irreplaceable ally.”

For a moment, I worried that the appearance of an outsider like me might have made them uncomfortable, but Gertrud’s kind words put me at ease.

“She’s right. Don’t you worry about it,” Ernesta said.

“In fact, we’re kinda hoping you’ll become an official member once you graduate from the academy,” Petra added.

Oh! They’re both so kind! Maybe I’ll become an adventurer if my family’s domain gets seized? Oh, but I’d never see them again because I’d get exiled at the same time... That’s one more reason to avoid anything that might cause my destruction.

“I’ll do what I can!”

“Shush. Keep your voice down.”

“S-Sorry.” I tried to show a bit of enthusiasm but got scolded for it.

“Petra, any signs of anything?”

“I’ve seen a few tracks, but they weren’t made by goblins. They weren’t made by bandits either.”

Petra was skilled at enemy detection. Even in the low light of dusk, she could reliably spot enemy tracks. Meanwhile, I was struggling just to remain aware of my surroundings. But this was going to help me grow used to combat, and in the future, I’d be able to fight with a similar level of skill to Gertrud and the others. Thinking of it that way made me feel sure that assistant mage was a great job choice. I could earn money while also training through actual combat.

“Don’t tell me it’s orcs?”

“Could be. Or maybe ogres.”

Orcs are another one that I only know from the encyclopedia. They’re ravenous creatures that eat people. They’ve got green skin and can use weapons stolen from humans. If I get the chance, I’ll catch one to use in my experiments.

Up until this point, I’d fought against griffins once, cockatrices four times, and wyverns three times. Those types of monsters appeared to be common.

We’ve never encountered goblins or orcs before. Aren’t those supposed to be the usual suspects? What’s up with that? Ah, but I guess I’ve mostly been an assistant mage for high-level parties. Maybe high-level adventurers don’t spend much time fighting goblins or orcs.

“Orcs are a rare sight. I used to think they were wiped out.”

“Yeah. They’re rare. Almost as rare as goblins.”

Huh? Wiped out?

“Are orcs and goblins on the brink of being wiped out?” I asked.

“Yeah. A previous emperor, Wilhelm II, ordered the empire’s knights and adventurers to completely eradicate orcs and goblins. It happened because there were too many of them, and they’d gotten smart. They’d learned to make tools by copying humans, and it wasn’t rare for them to attack newbie adventurers and local villagers.”

Wow. A magic beast genocide? Back on Earth, there'd probably be protesters trying to save intelligent creatures like orcs and goblins. I'm glad this world isn't like that.

"But knights and adventurers couldn't kill every last one. Some ran off to Osterreich where there were no orders to eradicate them, and some hid in the mountains, like the ones here. They're still lurking here and there."

The genocide was a failure?

"The people of Osterreich thought they could tame the orcs and goblins and turn them into an army. Like that would ever work."

"Oh? An army of orcs and goblins..."

I suppose you could strap mines to their backs and make them run at enemy tanks.

"At any rate, we'll get an extra reward for eliminating a herd of orcs. The extermination order from Wilhelm II is still in effect. If we get reward money from the noble client plus something from the government, that'll be quite a sum."

"Oh? What kind of reward comes with orc extermination?"

"It's eighty thousand marks for destroying a herd."

A whole eighty thousand marks! That's amazing! It's on the same level as what we're getting paid for the quest.

"But we'll have to eliminate all of them if we want to claim it," Petra warned.

"Right. That could be a real pain." Ernesta didn't sound enthusiastic either.

"But our quest was to eliminate them if they're harmful, wasn't it?" I replied. "Won't we be exterminating them as part of the job?"

"Yeah. Looks like we're doing it."

All right! Now I'll get a bigger reward.

"Yep, so let's keep moving," Gertrud said. "Petra, follow their tracks."

"Got it."

Petra did as Gertrud instructed while the rest of us followed behind her.

“We’re almost there. I can smell that filthy creature smell.” Petra’s warning made us come to a stop.

“Petra, can you scout up ahead?” Gertrud asked.

“Got it.”

Petra followed the instruction by moving ahead alone with her body low to the ground. The rest of us formed a circular formation and kept watch over our surroundings.

At times like this, I wish I had anti-personnel claymores...

Petra returned before long. “I’ve spotted them.”

“What’d you see?” Gertrud asked.

“There’s an orc herd about fifty meters up ahead,” Petra answered. “There are roughly twenty of them, but they’re not well armed. Looks like a newly formed herd to me.”

“All right,” Gertrud said. “In that case, we’ll take them on. We can deal with twenty or so.”

“Yeah,” Ernesta agreed. “And if we can earn some extra cash from orc extermination, we’ll be able to have ourselves a feast for the first time in a while.”

I was also ready with a good supply of bullets, so we weren’t likely to have trouble.

“Astrid, I’ve no idea how that weapon of yours works, but I’ve gathered it’s some sort of quick-firing crossbow. Can you and Petra attack from the side while Ernesta and I lure out the herd?”

“Yes, ma’am. Leave it to me.”

Gertrud already knew the best method of fighting while I was in the party. I felt grateful to be able to fight. When I was with other parties, it felt like they weren’t letting me play to my strengths.

“Now, let’s do this. How long will it take you to move around to the side?”

“Three minutes ought to be enough,” Petra said.

When it comes to moving across uneven terrain, I’m just as capable as Petra! Though I couldn’t do it without blood magic...

“All right. Commence operation.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Petra and I broke away from Gertrud and Ernesta so that we could move to the side of the orc herd. At this point I still didn’t know what orcs actually looked like. I had no way of knowing because my encyclopedia didn’t include pictures.

“Look, there’s the herd.”

“Where? Oh, they really do look like orcs...”

They had pig-like faces with sharp tusks protruding from their mouths. Each was about two meters tall, and they were armed with weapons that they’d probably stolen from humans, just like my book had said. At a glance, they didn’t look particularly intelligent, but they were at least intelligent enough to steal and use tools.

Hmm. They look like perfect test subjects.

“Petra, do you think we could capture one?”

“What? You want an orc as a pet? If we don’t wipe them out, we won’t get any reward from the government.”

“Oh... I guess you’re right...”

Another issue was that orcs were too big to store in the club room.

“But I guess I could probably keep a goblin somewhere.”

“No. As long as there’s an extermination order, you have to eradicate them when you find them. But why would you even want a goblin? You know they’re dangerous, right?”

I can’t keep a goblin either? It’s a tough life.

“Gertrud and Ernesta must be about to move. Be ready.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I was already lying on the ground with my machine gun resting on its bipod, in position to open fire. From the hilltop where I was waiting with Petra, I’d be able to rain bullets down on the orc herd.

“Ah, Gertrud and Ernesta are moving already,” Petra told me.

“Oh. They’re rushing them.”

From our vantage point, we saw Gertrud and Ernesta leap out from the undergrowth where they’d been hiding and boldly charge at the herd.

The surprise attack made the orcs panic, and there was no organization behind their attempts at defense.

“Let’s go, Astrid.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

While Gertrud and Ernesta were drawing out the enemy, Petra and I began our own assault. Petra nocked and then shot two arrows, and I pulled the machine gun’s trigger at the same time.

Thanks to Blau, the machine gun was silent. From my pillbox on Omaha Beach, I mowed down the herd of pitiful pigs—or orcs, rather—as they tried to run every which way with no idea where the attack was coming from.

“That thing’s really something. Where do you buy them?”

“You can’t, and there are no plans to sell them as of now.”

If I start selling machine guns in a world that doesn’t even have tanks, the death count will be unbelievable. Just take a look at the start of the First World War if you want to see how that goes. I have to keep my machine gun to myself for now in order to preserve the balance of power. Besides, this sort of firepower isn’t an advantage I’d want to share with anyone before my day of destruction comes around!

“We’ll have this orc herd wiped out pretty soon, won’t we?” I asked.

“Yeah. Then it’s just up to Gertrud and Ernesta to pick off what’s left.”

Then, while Petra and I were talking, I felt something approach from above. I

felt a great gust of air, as if something massive was falling toward us.

“M-Master! We’re in trouble! That’s—”

“A dragon?!”

The thing approaching us from above was unmistakably a dragon.

“Damn! Don’t move, Astrid!” Petra warned. “Unless you wanna be dragon food.”

“U-Understood.” This was a bigger opponent than I could handle.

Gertrud and Ernesta had made it away from the orc hideout in time before a monster the size of a small passenger jet and covered in bright-red scales descended on it. The creature then began to feed ravenously on the strewn bodies of orcs.



“Damn. We can’t expect any reward from the government now.”

Petra sounded surprisingly relaxed about what was happening. Meanwhile, I felt I was looking upon the embodiment of fear itself.

But this thing can’t be impossible to take down. It’s a living creature, after all. My 120 mm rifled gun might kill it.

I shall slay this beast! The title of dragon slayer shall be mine!

“Petra, maybe this is a dumb question, but dragon-slaying quests exist, don’t they?”

“Yeah, they exist... Don’t tell me you want to take part in one?”

“That’s the plan.”

I’ll kill this thing! A dragon should make a great target if I want some real-life firing practice before taking on the empire that’s trying to destroy me.

“You’re real hot-blooded, aren’t you? That said, this party’s qualified to take on dragons, so we’ll let you know if we decide to take part. That’ll be a big reward to split between us.”

“Sounds good! Sounds good!”

Hoorah! I get some real combat experience and I get paid for it! Is this heaven?

“Looks like our guest’s leaving,” Petra said.

Once it was finished feeding on the bodies of the orcs on the ground, the dragon began to beat its wings once more, and then there was a great gust of air as it took flight.

“Eek! Master!” Blau yelled at me. “You can’t be thinking of fighting a dragon! No matter how much luck you might have, it’ll run out against a dragon! They have the blessings of the spirits and can use elemental magic!”

“Can dragons use magic too?” I asked Petra doubtfully.

“Yeah. The magic they use depends on what class of dragon they are. That one was a fire dragon, so it can use fire and wind. Earth dragons use earth magic, and water dragons use water and wind magic.”

“I feel sorry for earth dragons when they’re the only type with just one element on their side.”

Those little earth dragons must be a dull bunch...

“Let’s head down and meet up with Gertrud and Ernesta. Our work is done.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Our quest was now complete. We couldn’t claim any reward for orc extermination because the dragon had destroyed their remains, but we would get a little extra for reporting a fire dragon sighting.

Several days later, this same fire dragon was seen by nobles living on a mountain close to the imperial capital. Rumors began to spread, and word had it that the government would soon ask the Adventurer’s Guild to slay the dragon.

Dear God, please let the quest to slay the fire dragon happen on a weekend when I have time off!

Chapter 20 — The Villainess Grapples with Rebellious Behavior

I began training for the fire dragon subjugation quest I was anticipating. The first thing I'd need for defeating the dragon was firepower; however, I worried that my 120 mm caliber rifled gun might not have enough power, so...

"Fire!"

I heard several weapons fire simultaneously as I channeled mana into them.

"Wh-What just happened, Lady Astrid? Did you do something?"

"Nothing much. Just testing out my disposable artillery pieces."

The thunderous sounds of cannon fire I was making outside caused Minne and the others to worry. Blau hadn't canceled out the noise because she was on strike in protest against the dragon subjugation quest. I would have to win her over later with some of the Round Table's desserts.

The cannon fire everyone had just heard came from my disposable 155 mm caliber howitzers. They were deployed around me, loaded with just one shell each. Talismans acting as gunpowder charges would explode and make the howitzers fire when I channeled mana into them. However, each one could only be fired once, making them far from economical.

That said, I wanted a boost in firepower. My 120 mm rifled gun could only fire five shots in succession, and I'd be left vulnerable during its lengthy reloading process. These disposable 155 mm howitzers would compensate for that.

Howitzers of this caliber were generally designed for high-angle fire; however, these ones could only be fired once, so I couldn't correct the angle after firing. For that reason, I found it was better to aim directly.

My strategy was as follows: First, the adventurers would pin down the dragon. I'd then take the opportunity to set up my disposable cannons around it. Once my howitzers were set up, I'd join the battle by using my 120 mm rifled gun to pound the dragon with shells. After running out of ammunition, I would hold it back by shelling it with my disposable cannons, giving me time to create

new ammunition and reload. Not unlike my own strategy, the adventurers were unlikely to attempt a close-range attack on such a large opponent; what would be more likely is they would coordinate a long-ranged assault to overwhelm the fire dragon.

“Lady Astrid, did you create this device for some sort of battle?”

“It’s a secret. ♪”

Naturally, I couldn’t tell Minne and the others that I was going to help slay a dragon. Even the fact that I was working as an assistant mage was a secret.

“Now, if only I could adjust the aim after setting these things up.”

My concern was that the dragon would move around, which would render my disposable cannons useless, considering they could only fire on one location.

“I’ll just have to shell the whole area. I’ll win through superior resources.”

If I aimed at every spot where the fire dragon could possibly be and fired countless shells on the whole area, the poor little dragon would have nowhere to run. I’d use all the resources at my disposal to overcome the dragon.

“Lady Astrid, I do hope you won’t be involved in anything too dangerous.”

“I hear you. I won’t do anything dangerous.” That was the promise I made to Minne.

“Uh... Uhh...” Lotte emerged from the club building with tears in her eyes.

“Lotte?! What’s wrong?!” I asked her. “Did Pink the monkey bite you? I can heal you if it did!”

“It’s not that, Lady Astrid. Lord Silvio seems to hate me now.”

What’s this?! It sounded like everything was going great from what you’ve been telling me!

“Wh-Why would you think that Lord Silvio hates you?”

“Lord Silvio looks so unhappy lately, but when I try talking to him, he just tells me to leave him alone. I’ve offered to discuss his problems with him, but he says nothing will come of talking to me.”

Whoa... Silvio’s starting his little rebellious phase.

“Hmm. Should I try sounding him out at the Round Table?”

“I-I couldn’t possibly ask you to trouble yourself in such a way!”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. We’re friends, aren’t we? If a friend’s in trouble, helping them out is the natural thing to do.”

Damn it, Silvio! She’s a good girl, and you’ve made her cry! You’re not getting away with this! I’ll bring swift justice down on you!

Okay, not really. I’ll hear what his problems are, and then I’ll give Lotte a plan for sorting them out. Obviously, I’ve got to tread lightly around Silvio, or else I might trigger my destruction.

....

And so, I was at the Round Table.

I took a look around and immediately spotted Silvio. As always, he was part of a trio with Friedrich and Adolf, and the three were sitting around the same table. But Silvio was silent; Adolf and Friedrich were simply talking to each other.

Looks like he’s reached the point where he doesn’t even talk to his friends. Anyhow, I get what the issue is. He had an argument with his dad, Chancellor Stefan, and now he’s plunging into his rebellious phase. At least, that’s how it went in the game. If it turns out he’s just in a bad mood because someone ate his pudding, I think I’ll cry.

“Lord Silvio.”

“Whoa?!”

I used blood magic to very quickly place myself in front of Silvio. The element of surprise is key to victory against an enemy; he’d made me mad by making Lotte cry, and I wasn’t going to let that pass without scaring him a little.

“Wh-What is it, Miss Astrid?” Silvio asked. “You suddenly leaped toward me, and—”

“I’d like to talk, Lord Silvio,” I told him. “Lord Silvio, I hear that you’ve been rather cold toward Lotte as of late. Might I ask the reason?”

“That’s nothing to do with you.”

There it is. His rebellious attitude.

“It has everything to do with me. Lotte is my friend. If something is bothering my friend, of course I’ll be worried. If Lord Adolf or Prince Friedrich were in need, would you not want to help them?”

“Th-That may be true, but...”

Heh heh. If I put it that way, he has no choice but to talk it out.

“There’s something bothering you, I take it?”

“I can’t deny that...”

Silvio was still trying to avoid explaining. But I wasn’t going to let up.

“Could your concerns perhaps be about your relationship with the chancellor?”

“It’s difficult to hide anything from you, isn’t it?”

Yeah, because I’ve played the game.

“If you have such worries, then why not discuss them with Lotte?”

“It’s my problem. Talking to people about it is a waste of time.”

And this is why his rebellious phase is hard to deal with...

“Lord Silvio, does His Majesty the Emperor not discuss his troubles with others?”

“His Majesty has the chancellor. Though the balance between them is all wrong at the moment.”

Exactly.

“Then why shouldn’t the chancellor have someone to talk with?”

“He does. He has staff, and there are various ministers too. I’m sure he talks to them. It’s just...” Silvio paused as if thinking about something deeply.

“Lord Silvio, don’t you intend to be chancellor yourself someday? If so, I think you need to learn to discuss things with those around you. Do you disagree?”

“But this is a personal matter.”

Come on, Silvio! Just agree to talk to Lotte about it!

“Lord Silvio, Lotte is an excellent listener. As a close friend of hers, I can assure you of that. So instead of keeping your worries to yourself, why not talk them over with her?”

“No, it’s definitely not something I can discuss.”

This idiot! How is it not getting through to him?!

“Please listen. I’m not suggesting this simply for your benefit. This is for Lotte’s sake too. She’s worried that you’re pushing her away, and it troubles her deeply.”

“B-But I wasn’t—”

“Haven’t you realized? If you become chancellor, you’ll be responsible for the empire’s citizens. If you can’t even keep one woman happy, then I fear you’re not made for such responsibility.” That was a little harsh, but I’d gotten quite annoyed by this point.

“Oh! You’re right... I haven’t shown Miss Lotte the respect she deserves. For that, I apologize. If it’s not too late, I’ll try discussing my problems with her. If she’s willing to forgive me, that is.”

“I’m certain that she’ll forgive you. She’s that sort of person.”

That’s right. Lotte’s a good girl.

“Thank you for reminding me of something important, Miss Astrid. I fear these worries of mine won’t be cleared away quite so easily, though.”

That’s true. Silvio’s worries won’t go away until the age of iron and fire arrives. His disagreements with his dad will just get worse, and his rebellious phase will keep on going.

What a pain in the butt he is. I’m starting to feel guilty for making Lotte get stuck with him. But then again, Lotte herself has taken a liking to Silvio, so maybe it’s not a problem? I’d like to think so. I’m sure it’ll work out.

“You’re so kind, Astrid. If I ever have worries of my own, I’d like to discuss

them with you.” Friedrich had been silently listening to our conversation up until that point.

“Y-Yes... And if I have worries, I’d like to discuss them with you, Your Highness. Let’s both be there for each other.”

Who’d ever want to talk things over with you?! Go tell your problems to Elsa, the heroine!

“Now I must excuse myself. Oh ho ho...”

Later, I told Lotte that Silvio had misgivings about the way the Chancellor Stefan and His Majesty were united in their desire for military expansion, and I told her that she should convince him to put his energy into studying for his future while he was still a student. His rebellious phase was only going to continue, so all we could do right then was ease the symptoms.

As for what happened next, Lotte later told me that she’d started getting on well with Silvio again, and they were talking things over in addition to frequently having lighthearted conversations.

Seeing Lotte look happy about everything makes me think all my effort to get through this minefield is paying off. I’m really playing Cupid here. Though I’m making no progress at all with the bigger problem of my own love life...

Chapter 21 — The Villainess and a Dragon

Around this time, I was regularly paying visits to the Adventurer's Guild. I was going there for the sake of the fire dragon subjugation quest.

When the quest was issued, I'd planned to fight the dragon as part of Gertrud's party. I was hoping the quest would come on a weekend when I had the most free time. With that wish in mind, I would impatiently look for the fire dragon quest on the bulletin board, but it was never there. No matter how long I waited, there was no sign of it.

I sighed to myself.

Petra was standing beside me. "It's not up there today, is it? The dragon subjugation quest."

"What's going on? Does this country think it can just let a fire dragon roam freely?"

"Maybe it does. If the dragon's not harming anyone, then it makes sense to wait and see where it goes. Once a quest is posted, the government is on the hook for the reward. They don't want to take on debt or encourage people to get in harm's way if it can be avoided."

Gah. In Japan, they'd send the Self-Defense Forces out to eliminate a monster the minute it was discovered. The people of this world are too easygoing. You can't sit back and wait until someone gets killed or injured!

"There's trouble! The fire dragon finally attacked a village!" a man informed us.

"What?! Seriously?!"

Oh? That sounds like a conversation I can't ignore.

"Yeah. I heard it destroyed Roma village."

"What about casualties?! Were there any casualties?!" I frantically asked the man who'd brought us the news.

"Y-Yes. Five villagers and three knights were killed. All of their cattle were

eaten too.”

I know I really shouldn't celebrate this, but this means the quest will finally be posted!

Those idiots in government! The poor people of Roma could have been saved if they'd just posted it sooner!

I felt both joy and anger as I exchanged glances with Petra and the others.

“It’s finally time,” Petra said.

“We’ll invite you to join our party when it happens,” Gertrud said. “I hope we’ll have you with us.”

“I’m itching to put my skills to use!” I replied.

All right, fire dragon. Your day of reckoning is nigh! It will be I, Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg, who casts you into hell! All that’s left is to make a ton of explosion talismans in preparation for the fateful day.

Heh heh heh. There’ll be a nice fat reward, and I can get some great firing practice. This fire dragon has to go down for the sake of me avoiding my destruction. I just can’t wait.

But if the quest isn’t posted on a weekend, I won’t be able to travel anywhere...

....

The weekend came, and the dragon subjugation quest was finally posted by the state.

The Adventurer’s Guild was bustling with activity as the adventurers headed to register for the quest, as if this was what everyone had been waiting for. Every one of them looked well equipped and well trained, making it clear that they were ready to fight a dangerous fire dragon.

“All right. Should we go for it?”

“Yes, let’s do it!” I agreed.

I’ve gotta thank both the dragon and the state for making it so the quest is on a weekend when I can travel! Everyone thinks that I’m spending time at Minne’s

place, so I've got the whole weekend free to deal with this dragon! Let's go, let's go!

Gertrud's party—with me included—accepted the quest and headed by carriage to the place where the dragon had been sighted. We were told that the fire dragon was active in a place known as the Aegir basin. I figured a fire dragon would live on a volcano, but apparently not.

"Hmm. This is the map of the Aegir basin, isn't it?" I asked.

"Right. The sighting was made near the center."

Wow! Everyone's after this fire dragon and it's not even trying to hide! It's either courageous or just dumb.

"This basin isn't all that big," Petra told me. "If all the party members here keep the dragon surrounded, we can handle it. We ought to be able to bring it down before it can run off."

"I think so too," I agreed. "Since it's in a basin, we can rain down attacks from above, and we won't lose sight of the target."

"Will it really go that smoothly though?" Ernesta was less reassuring. "We know how massive the dragon is because we saw it in the forest. It has to be a hundred years old. What if it doesn't go down so easily?"

"Based on the data from the guild, the dragon that flew here from the Garm mountains was thirty years old at most. Could someone have gotten the details wrong?"

Huh? This is all starting to feel a little ominous...

"We'll be fine," Petra said. "If things take a turn for the worse, we'll just run and not look back. There's no penalty for failing a quest like this. We don't need to put our lives on the line for this."

Petra sounds optimistic. It'd be a shame to lose out on the reward, but it's better than losing our lives. Not that I think there's any chance of me losing against an oversized lizard...

"We should arrive soon. Is everyone ready?" Gertrud asked.

"I'm good to go anytime," Petra replied.

“I’m all set too,” Ernesta agreed.

“I’m ready too!” I said. “Let’s head out and blow this dragon to pieces!”

Heh heh. Wait for me, dragon. You’ll be live target practice, and you’ll earn me some savings for the future.

The carriage then came to a halt. From here, we’d go on foot. It was a one-hour walk to the Aegir basin. Although I was carrying heavy luggage, I could have walked for hours thanks to my blood magic. *I sure owe a lot to blood magic.*

I tried offering to use blood magic on Gertrud and the rest of the party too, but they turned me down because the idea scared them. *Ah. Most people must be afraid of blood magic. It can be used for both healing and harm, but ordinary people are probably more familiar with the way it’s used to kill people. I shouldn’t force anyone to accept my blood magic if they don’t want it. I’d better stick to using it on myself.*

We continued walking for about an hour, and then we finally came upon the fire dragon.

....

“That’s the fire dragon?” Petra said when she spotted the creature.

“It’s certainly impressive,” I said.

For some reason, it was smaller than the dragon we’d seen in the forest. Even so, it was a sight to behold.

It’s terrifying to think that I’m living in a world where these things are swaggering around. Come to think of it, why does an otome game world need dragons in the first place?

Well, whatever. It makes good target practice anyhow.

“I just need to make a few preparations,” I told Gertrud.

“Preparations?”

Rather than explaining things to Gertrud, I quickly set up my disposable 155 mm howitzers around the basin’s perimeter. I had twelve of them in all, and I

arranged them like numbers on a clock face. With this level of firepower, I wasn't expecting any problems.

"And I've also got my all-powerful 120 mm rifled gun!"

"Whoa?!"

I pulled out the gun, which was loaded with five anti-tank shells. Each shell was structured like a high-explosive anti-tank round, or HEAT round for short. The weapon elicited astonished gasps from Gertrud and many of the other adventurers here for the quest.

"Astrid... What...?"

"It's a weapon made using magic. Make sure you don't stand behind it because it's dangerous."

Anyone standing behind could get a blast of the gases that would erupt from the charge inside.

"Understood. You're really something. I've never seen such a big weapon..." Gertrud sounded as though she was stunned, or perhaps just highly impressed.

"We need to head to the strategy meeting, Gertrud. Let's get going."

"Sure."

The plan would involve multiple parties, with the most accomplished party taking command. Their leader was a middle-aged man with a stern face. He'd be our commanding officer for the duration of the quest.

"The strategy is simple," he told everyone. "Mages and archers will be our primary means of offense. That's a given because anyone attempting a close-range attack against a fire dragon is gonna find themselves turned to ash."

How many mages are there in these parties besides me? I could easily run into another noble mage who might recognize me around here. Though I doubt any noble big enough to be friends with a duke would be working as an adventurer.

"Knights capable of close-range combat should support the mages and archers. If a mage or archer is somehow placed in danger, knights should risk their lives to defend them. Got that?"

Wow. Sounds like a tough job. The mages and archers are going to enrage the dragon, and then those knights will have to hold it off with nothing but a sword and shield. What'll they do if it hits them with its fire breath?

"Now, I'd like to know: who set up all of these weird tubes?" the stern-faced commander asked suspiciously.

"Oh! Me!" I said while jumping up and raising my hand. "That was me!"

"You're an awfully young mage. What are these ridiculously big tubes you've brought? And what's that thing you're holding? Some sort of telescope?"

"No, it's not. They're all weapons. They're very loud, so it's better not to get too close. If you do go near them, I'd recommend covering your ears and opening your mouth first."

"Wh-What...?"

Howitzers were powerful, but the downside was the noise they made. They were loud enough to have harmful effects on the human body.

"Anyway, you can count on me for firepower. I plan on earning my share of the reward."

"Is that right? You're quite spirited for someone so young. It's good to see." Our stern-looking commander nodded at me with approval. "Now, listen up, everyone! Get in position! Don't stick too close to your party members, otherwise you'll all get caught up in its fire breath!"

"Yes, Sir!"

Wow. Everyone's acting as one unit. It's amazing how parties that have never met before today can work together so effectively. These adventurers probably don't even need my help.

"Now let's do this!" I said.

I'm not about to lose here. Compared to avoiding my destruction, slaying a dragon is nothing.

The dragon subjugation quest then began. But something continued to bother me even then. Our target was a lot smaller than the fire dragon we'd seen in the forest. This dragon was about thirty years old, but Ernesta said that the one

we'd seen earlier had been a vintage dragon over one hundred years old.

Either way, the quest had already begun.

Chapter 22 — The Villainess Becomes a Dragon Slayer?

The fire dragon subjugation quest begins! The venue was the Aegir basin, where the dragon was sleeping beneath the undergrowth.

We silently returned to a spot where we could survey the basin once again, and then we prepared to fight the dragon. The plan was for us to all attack at once, the moment that the stern commander sent up a smoke signal to start the operation.

“I’d better get ready,” I said.

While using the full power of my blood magic, I channeled a small amount of mana through my 120 mm rifled gun to synchronize it with my body. This made the gun’s sight perfect. The shells would land exactly where I aimed.

“Petra, are you ready?” I asked.

“Yeah. I made exploding arrows to prepare for today. These should have at least some effect on that dragon.”

Petra had brought arrows that each had a gunpowder-filled tube at the tip. She judged the distance between herself and the dragon before setting the length of her fuses accordingly.

Hm. If gunpowder exists, then why aren’t there any primitive cannons or guns? Is their level of technology equivalent to the Mongol Empire?

“We’ll take position up front. We’ll do whatever it takes to protect you both.”

“Leave it to us. We’ll make sure Petra and little Astrid stay safe.”

Oh, Gertrud and Ernesta sure are dependable. Especially Gertrud; I’d have just fallen in love if she were a man. I sighed. *She’s older, and she’s a great leader. If only she were a man...*

“Oh,” Petra said. “There’s the smoke signal.”

“That means we should start the operation, right?”

“Yeah. Time to start.”

Petra and I both took aim at the dragon.

“Go!”

Flames erupted from my 120 mm rifled gun. As I used blood magic to strengthen my muscles and pull the trigger, Blau canceled out the noise, and the gases vented from the shell. The shell I fired was sent hurtling toward the fire dragon.

“Graaw!” The dragon roared as the shell scored a perfect hit on its abdomen.

Despite being known as high-explosive *anti-tank* rounds, these shells couldn’t actually destroy tanks. However, they were enough to cause massive damage to a dragon. The Munroe/Neumann effect created a metal jet that flowed into the dragon’s body, burning its internal organs and leaving it writhing in pain.

But a fire dragon couldn’t be finished off in a single blow. Even after sustaining a hit from a HEAT warhead, it burned with rage and began to beat its wings in an attempt to take to the sky.

“Damn! Give me a break!” Petra’s bow was now useless because her arrows would be caught up in the strong gusts created by the dragon’s wind elemental magic.

Magic attacks, however, were still effective.

“Flames!”

There were six mages in the party. All six used explosion magic in an attempt to knock the dragon back down to the ground. The dragon looked like it might fall back to the ground, but it was able to ignore the explosion magic as it turned within the basin and unleashed a jet of flames at the ground.

“Ah! Help!” The adventurers on the front line screamed as they were burned by the flames.

“Gertrud! It’s coming at us!”

“Not if I’ve got anything to say about it!”

The dragon came charging toward us. Its sharp claws were aimed at Gertrud,

but she was carrying a sword and shield today. She was able to block and parry its attack.

Wow! She's so handsome!

"Mages! Cease attacking! Heal them! Don't let anyone die!"

The stern instructor had the mages stop their attacks while we tried to rescue our allies. He was a good person. I was still focused on taking down the dragon, however; the damage caused would be much greater and far more widespread otherwise.

"It's a moving target, but...!" My mental FCS tracked the dragon's movement as I fired the shells.

"Graaaw!"

All right! It fell back into the basin!

"Now let's charbroil this lizard!"

I fired every shell I had at the fallen dragon. *One! Two! Three shells!*

Not even a dragon could withstand five HEAT shells. It fell to the ground lifelessly, and then it became a mute corpse that lay in the basin emitting black smoke.

"That thing's got some real power. It took down a fire dragon in no time." The surprise was clear on Gertrud's face.

"It's a weapon I'm proud of," I replied with a smug grin.

"Master! We're in trouble! I feel a creature with powerful wind magic approaching! It feels like a dragon!"

"What?!"

No one warned me about a replacement dragon!

"Everyone! Another dragon's coming! Don't let your guard down!"

"Wha—!" My warning had left the adventurer's guild members astonished.

"It's here!"

It appeared in the sky above: a jumbo-jet-sized dragon, just as big as the one

we'd seen in the forest. The new dragon surveyed its surroundings and then slowly descended after spotting its fallen comrade.

"It must have been the mate the dragon we saw in the Garm mountains had been looking for. I'll bet it's livid. This is a little much for us. If we take it on, we'll have to be prepared to lose some people."

"I'm not letting that happen," I replied. "We'll all win this together, and we'll claim the reward together."

As I spoke, I took out ten talismans and then used earth elemental magic to create new shells. Once I'd loaded these into the revolving cylinder, I'd be ready to go.

"Flames!" At that moment, the mages were all keeping the dragon pinned down on the ground. It wouldn't be enough. But to compensate for what they lacked...

"Howitzers, fire!"

Flames erupted from all of my disposable 155 mm cannons simultaneously, leaving the basin coated with explosive flames and debris. Howitzers of this caliber were capable of holding the dragon down even if they didn't hit directly. If the other mages were suppressing it with additional firepower at the same time, I'd have enough time to reload.

I erased my spent cartridges, loaded fresh rounds into the cylinder, and readied my 120 mm rifled gun to fire. Now I had to finish off the dragon before it could take flight.

"Gertrud! I'm going for a little run!"

"What?"

Gertrud just looked confused, but I more or less ignored her as I ran around the circumference of the basin to erase my disposable howitzers and create replacements using talismans.

But of course, I didn't forget to fire at the enemy with my 120 mm rifled gun while I was creating the new howitzers. The dust was making it hard to see, but the target was almost too big to miss.

One, two, three, four shells!

I fired HEAT shells one after another, but the dragon still showed no sign of admitting defeat.

“Astrid! Get back! It’s too dangerous!”

“She’s right! It’s not safe!”

Ignoring Gertrud and Ernesta’s demands for me to stop, I aimed and then fired the 120 mm rifled gun at the dragon’s abdomen where it was easiest to hit.

“Damn it! We need to get out of here!” Petra shouted in disbelief while continuing to aim her explosive arrows at the dragon’s head.

When an arrow exploded in the dragon’s face and blinded it, I saw an opening.

“I’m out of ammo! Another volley from the disposable howitzers!”

I used the time Petra had bought me to set off the twelve disposable howitzers I’d set up, causing shells to rain down on the dragon. The dragon’s screeches rang out as it used its wings and wind magic to take to the air and start circling the area around us.

Its fire breath—a form of fire elemental magic—was unleashed at the ground, causing adventurers to collapse one after the other. The mages then began using healing magic. This world’s healing magic was surprisingly effective, so long as no one died an instant death.

“Everyone, run!” the commander yelled. “This party can’t handle a fire dragon that’s more than a hundred years old!”

What’s this old guy talking about? This party’s just getting started.

I swiftly loaded some fresh shells and took aim at the circling dragon. The shots hit the exact spot I’d been aiming for superbly. *I just have to keep this up!*

“The dragon’s coming! Take cover! Take cover!”

The adventurers had all started to retreat after being overwhelmed by the dragon. Half of the participating parties were already wounded, and the

surviving mages had their hands full healing the injured. Petra couldn't do much either because her arrows were affected by the raging winds.

"Damn it... All we can do is run."

"Yeah. This is a bad situation."

Huh? Petra and Gertrud are thinking of retreating?

"Come on, let's run. It's not safe here." Ernesta said to me.

"No. Now that I've come this far, I'm doing this even if it means doing it alone." I wasn't backing down.

I ran across the mountains surrounding the basin once more to set up my disposable howitzers again. This time I put twenty-four of them in place. I intended to deal a decisive blow.

I aimed my 120 mm rifled gun at the impudent lizard that was acting as if it ruled the sky. My aim was centered on the base of its wings. If I could destroy that point, it would fall to the ground, making it a sitting duck.

My aim was true. The shot destroyed the base of its wings just as I'd intended.

No matter what kind of wind magic it used to help itself fly, without wings to provide lift, it would just fall back down. *Welcome to the ground, little lizard!*

"All right! Time to finish this!"

Flames erupted from my disposable howitzers as I fired another volley, pinning the new, bigger dragon down on the ground.

Now...

"This'll end it! Eat this, you filthy lizard!"



I took aim and fired every remaining shell into the head of the dragon.

It didn't even have time to cry out. Half of its head was blown away, leaving it twitching and leaking cerebral fluids. Its great body then collapsed and ceased to move.

"I did it! I defeated the dragon!" I cried out while jumping up and down in excitement.

"D-Did you just defeat a hundred-year-old fire dragon virtually single-handedly?"

"Unbelievable. I have to be dreaming."

My achievement had left the adventurers stunned.

"Gertrud, Ernesta, Petra, I beat it!"

"Yeah. That was amazing. We ended up facing tougher opposition than we'd anticipated, yet you beat that second dragon more or less single-handedly. Are you really just an assistant mage?"

"That's right. I'm a lowly student."

I was getting a kick out of being able to surprise them all so much. I felt like my head might start swelling.

"Young lady, did they teach you that magic at the academy?" the commander asked.

"No. I developed it myself. I did take a lot of inspiration from other people though."

Right. My weapons wouldn't be possible if I hadn't combined the lessons from Professor Wolff and the academy teachers with knowledge from weapon developers and military magazines in the real world. I could never have done all this by myself.

"Looks like we'll have to give you the full reward for taking down that massive dragon, little miss. The rest of us weren't much use."

"That's not true. We all won this one together. Why don't we split the reward evenly?"

If I want to keep working as an assistant mage, I need to keep on good terms with all of the parties. If things keep going well, I'll make a lot more money than I'd get from the dragon subjugation reward!

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Not exactly greedy, are you? I feel a little guilty."

Oh, I'm plenty greedy. I want all the money I can get. It's just that I already promised to split the reward with Petra.

"All right, let's all head back. Someone ought to grab some fangs as proof that the dragons were slain."

Thus the quest to slay the fire dragon concluded. My reward was a whole six hundred thousand marks! I made a killing!

But from that day on, I became known as the Dragon Slayer Witch. It sounded a little thuggish to my ears, and I couldn't help but wish they'd call me something more cutesy.

Oh well. I can't complain too much about having a badass nickname!

Chapter 23 — The Villainess Wants to be Escorted

Time passed quickly, and the day of our yearly get-together was on the horizon again.

The get-together... Who am I going to ask to escort me this year?

I'd made a ton of money and won the approval of all of the adventurers after slaying a dragon a while back, but it hadn't done anything for my love life.

"Iris, is your dad going to be escorting you again this year?"

"No, Lord Werner has kindly offered to escort me."

Huh? Iris is going to the get-together with her fiancé? I've been outdone?

"Oh, r-really? How nice."

"Yes. I'm looking forward to having Lord Werner escort me."

Ugh. I should be happy for my little sister, but seeing Iris gain a fiancé and turn all lovey-dovey just makes me feel...empty.

"Astrid, are you having trouble finding a partner for the get-together?" Friedrich asked.

Gah. Why's Friedrich here?

"A little. I'm having just a little trouble."

"Then perhaps I could take you as my partner?"

That sounds like a terrible idea.

"N-No, that's quite all right. I wouldn't dream of making such a request. And I'm sure you'll be partnered with Waltrud, our chair."

"I don't have to be partnered with Miss Waltrud. I'm able to decline her offer, so I see no problem with me being your escort instead."

You should see the problem! Of course you're going there with Waltrud. If the prince just partners with someone at random, it'll confuse the guests.

“No, no. I couldn’t possibly...”

“I see. That’s a shame.”

Just give me a break already. If Friedrich gets too close to me, it’ll trigger my destruction. But maybe if I back off the moment Elsa appears, I can minimize the damage?

Probably not. I hate Friedrich on a personal level, and rumors will spread if people see a duke’s daughter together with a prince. Minne and everyone else would turn the situation into something I couldn’t escape from, and my destruction would be set in motion before I knew it. If he was a man with some guts like his dad, Wilhelm III, I might have been tempted, but I’ll never be into a pacifist weakling with a rose-tinted worldview.

Well, I’ve turned Friedrich down, so who’s going to escort me now?

As a middle schooler, I was a little old to ask my father—all the more so when Iris had found Werner as an escort while still in elementary school. She’d be disillusioned if she saw her big sis being escorted by her dad.

I couldn’t pick Adolf or Silvio because that would be disrespectful to Minne and Lotte. Things were going well with Adolf lately, so he’d been secretly meeting with Minne more and more often.

Hmm. I can’t think of anyone in my year. Maybe I should try asking someone older? But last time I tried that, it just resulted in a flood of rejections...

Gah. Everyone’s been treating me like a princess over at the Adventurer’s Guild lately, but not so much here at the Round Table.

I heaved a great sigh.

“Astrid, it would be better not to sigh so much,” Iris chided me. “They say that sighing too often will release all of your happiness.”

“I didn’t have any happiness in the first place...”

Sigh... I’m surrounded by the causes of my destruction, and there’s no love in my life. All I can do is sigh.

“I wish I had a fiancé of my own.”

“I’m sure you’ll find yourself a fine gentleman.”

If I’ll never be able to choose someone for myself, then I wish father would just hurry up and pick a fiancé for me now. If they’re older and they come on strong, I’d even accept someone twenty years older than me. But I want someone good-looking, if possible.

“Miss Astrid.” Dietrich had come to speak with me while I was falling into depression.

“Huh? What is it, Dietrich? Do you have a partner for the get-together? Or are you a loner like me?”

“I d-don’t know about being a loner, but no, I don’t have a partner.”

Oh, I’ve found a fellow loner. Yay!

“If you’d like...maybe, the two of us could...” Dietrich said.

“Huh?! Are you saying you’ll escort me?!”

Wow! What a surprise! The other elementary school girls might not be on Iris’s level, but there are plenty of cute ones. I can’t believe he’d choose a crude magic maniac like me when he always has all those pretty girls around him.

“Are you sure? I’m good enough for you?”

“Y-Yes. I’d be delighted to escort you.”

Hm... There was the blood magic experiment, and then there are the things Iris and Vallia said, but could Dietrich really have fallen for me?

Dietrich might be a cute kid, but he’s four years younger than me. That’s not exactly my type, not to mention that I’ll be old by the time he grows up. But if he’s bold enough to make the offer, maybe I should just accept. That’s one thing I do like about him!

Friedrich doesn’t count, though. Accepting his invitation would have been like making a deal with the devil.

“Very well. I’ll take you up on that. Are you sure you want me as a partner? You didn’t agree to go with any of the elementary school girls yet?”

“Of course. I’d be honored to escort you, Miss Astrid.”

Cute and bold in a single package.

“All right. I’ll see you on the day of the get-together.”

“Yes! You can count on me!” Dietrich was smiling happily to himself as he left.

“Astrid, it seems that Lord Dietrich really has fallen for you,” Iris said.

“D-Do you think so?”

“I heard that Lord Dietrich was asking Prince Friedrich how he might gain an air of mature confidence. It seems he wants to become more your type, don’t you think?”

“Oh... I’m not sure...”

I did say to Dietrich that someone younger might be okay if they’ve got the confidence and forward attitude of someone older, but I didn’t think I’d be sending him down that path...

“This isn’t fair on Dietrich. He’s a cute boy and a talented mage. I’m really not a good match for him.”

“You think far too little of yourself, Astrid. You’re very charming. If nothing else, you’re the girl I look up to. I wish that I could be more like you.”

Hm? Do I think little of myself? I feel like I’m always getting full of myself. I know I really got carried away recently after slaying that fire dragon. Are being full of yourself and not valuing yourself two separate things?

“Miss Astrid.” Adolf had suddenly shown up in front of me while I was thinking. “Have you chosen a partner for the get-together?”

“Yes. I’ll be escorted there by Dietrich.”

You took good care of me last time, Adolf, but I’ll be borrowing your little brother this time.

“With Dietrich?”

“That’s correct. I hope it won’t cause a problem.”

“No, not at all. I hope you don’t have trouble taking care of my foolish brother.”

Foolish? I guess he's just being polite. And he's probably right that it'll be me taking care of Dietrich.

"Lord Adolf, you never seem to speak with Lord Dietrich..."

"Right. We sort of avoid each other. Maybe you could say we don't get along."

Hmm. I don't get it. Neither Iris, Dietrich, nor Werner appeared in the game, so I don't know what sort of relationships they had with the main characters. But I'd better not pry; getting too involved with Adolf could lead to my destruction. If there are invisible landmines around, that'll mean more trouble for me.

Game creators! Tell me! I yelled at them within my mind but got no response. *Heartless...*

However, I was steadily gaining the firepower that I'd need to blow away my terrible fate. I'd also gained some combat experience after defeating the dragon recently, and the amount of money I had ready to store in a foreign country kept on increasing.

Even if I do trigger my destruction, it doesn't scare me one bit!

That was a lie. I was scared. I wanted to avoid it if I could.

Ugh... I live life with such a pure heart. Why'd I get cast as the villainess?

"Astrid, is something on your mind?" Iris asked.

"I'm fine. It's no big deal."

Maybe I should be glad to be the villainess since it means I get to be a bigger sister to cute little Iris. Though I can't say the pros are balancing out the cons here...

Chapter 24 — The Villainess Is Escorted by a Younger Boy

The day of the get-together had arrived. The venue was Grand Hotel Havel, as always. Even Waltrud, with her reputation for acting on her every whim, couldn't change this arrangement.

However, Waltrud was still Waltrud. For better or worse, she was likely to have some sort of surprise in store. Sometimes the things she did went beyond a joke, so I knew better than to let my guard down.

"Astrid?" The way I kept looking around was making Iris concerned.

"It's nothing. I'm just trying to be careful."

As for my outfit that day, I was wearing a red dress that matched the one Iris was wearing. Hers was a concealing dress made for children, while mine was just a little more mature. Mother had picked it out and told me I should wear it because I was in middle school now.

This is a tough dress for a flat girl to wear...

"We shouldn't keep Dietrich and Werner waiting," I told Iris. "Shall we get going?"

"Yes!" she replied.

We entered Grand Hotel Havel together.

"Ah. I see you've arrived, Miss Iris."

"Miss Astrid, let's enjoy the evening together."

We found Werner and Dietrich waiting once we'd entered the hotel.

These two were always at each other's throats, but I see them together a lot lately. Maybe they've started getting along?

"Miss Iris, your dress suits you."

"Th-Thank you, Lord Werner."

Oho, these aren't lines you'd expect from elementary schoolers.

“Your dress suits you too, Miss Astrid.”

“Thank you, Dietrich. You look great in your tuxedo.”

Dietrich looked so good in a tuxedo that it was hard to believe he was an elementary schooler. *Kids his age would normally dress up for a Shichi-Go-San festival and nothing else.*

“Let’s head in. If I may take your hand, Miss Iris.”

“Y-Yes.”

When Werner held out his hand, Iris nervously placed her own hand in his. *How innocent.*

“M-Miss Astrid, if I may take your hand.”

“Take good care of me!”

Dietrich was blushing slightly as I placed my hand in his.

Now that we were holding hands, we could enter the hotel’s reception room. As always, the room was alive with activity. In addition to current Round Table members, former members were also in attendance, so the room was packed.

“So, this is how the get-togethers are.”

“Yeah. It’s your first time, isn’t it, Dietrich? There’s not really that much history behind it since it’s an event started by our former chair. Prince Friedrich attends, so as you can see, it draws a lot of people.”

It’s like everyone wants a connection to the imperial family. I feel like the number of attendees goes up each year.

“Is that so?” Dietrich sounded impressed. “I had no idea that so many people would be gathered here.”

“In a sense, it’s a little like a gathering of friends. Let’s relax and enjoy it!”

“A-All right!”

I led the way as we searched for former members.

I’ve gotta let Iris and Werner have some time alone together. I want them to be getting along well by the time they marry. Though I doubt I need to worry

since Werner's someone that even an intensely shy girl like Iris can like.

"Oh! Laura!" I spotted Laura among the crowd of people.

Laura was always eating all the desserts she liked, and yet she still hasn't put on any weight. She must just have a good metabolism. I never gain any weight either because of all the exercise I get, though.

"Oh, my dear Astrid! It's been so long!"

Beside Laura was a man who looked a little younger than her.

"Perhaps you could introduce me?" I asked.

"This is my husband, Michael. We're finally married. We had to wait almost a full year."

I see. So Laura's finally married. She must have had to quit her degree course halfway through. She seems really happy, though; they feel like a happy couple of newlyweds.

I'm actually jealous. I feel like the future only holds misery for me. Boo hoo hoo...

"My name is Michael. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Astrid."

"The pleasure is all mine, Lord Michael."

Yep. He seems like a nice guy. Laura's another one who got herself a good catch.

"Now, perhaps you'd introduce us to this boy?" Laura was looking at Dietrich with great interest.

"This is Dietrich of House Wallenstein," I told her. "He's my escort for today."

"Nice to meet you, Dietrich. You must be in your first year of elementary school." Laura had guessed Dietrich's age precisely.

"That's right." Dietrich responded by bowing his head and greeting her with one smooth movement. "I'm a first-year elementary school student. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Laura."

"You've certainly found a nice boy for yourself, Astrid," Laura said to me quietly.

“Oh?” I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“I preferred older men,” Laura explained, “but after dating Michael, I realized that younger boys are better. Their reactions are innocent, and it’s cute to watch them trying their best to take the lead. I assume you’ve begun dating Dietrich?”

“N-No. Dietrich kindly offered to escort me because he hated to see me left by myself.”

First everyone thinks I’m with Friedrich, now they think I’m with Dietrich. Everyone gets one wrong idea about me after another!

“So you’ve chosen Prince Friedrich after all?”

“That’s certainly not the case.”

Laura! Haven’t I told you how much I hate that guy?!

“Hm. Then you’re still looking for love?”

“That’s about right.”

My love life hasn’t gotten beyond the starting line.

“Enjoy your youth while you can. You’ll only be free to love who you choose for as long as you’re a student. If you don’t find a partner for yourself during that time, then you’d best hold on to what you’ve got.”

With a slight smile, Laura waved goodbye and then left us.

“Miss Astrid, what did Miss Laura mean?” Dietrich asked.

“She s-said I should do my best in romance,” I replied hastily. “But it’s a little soon, isn’t it?”

“You’re correct. I’ll be a mere middle schooler when you reach graduation, but if you could wait four years...” Dietrich’s face turned bright red as he spoke. “N-Never mind. Please forget that I said anything.”

Wh-What? This kid sounds pretty serious. Laura was explaining the appeal of younger boys, but I still want an older man who’s self-confident and can take the lead. On the other hand, if Dietrich is really that serious...

No, no. It’s too soon. I need to think about these things more carefully. He

might like me right now, but Dietrich will be able to take his pick. When someone more attractive than me shows up, he'll be drawn to them. He's only in his first year of elementary school, so he'll meet many more people as time goes on. Besides, I really would prefer someone older.

"Astrid?" A voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Oh! Vallia!"

"I haven't seen you since summer vacation. How have you been?"

Vallia's stomach had grown in size. *That's right. She said she was with child. I wonder how many months pregnant she is.*

"Is the baby in your stomach doing well?"

"Yes. The doctor said there are no problems with its development. Isn't that right, Eugen?"

Vallia looked over at Lord Eugen, who was standing beside her. He looked happy.

"Oh, and it looks like I was right, wasn't I?" Vallia said.

"About what exactly?"

Ugh... Vallia could tell at a glance that Dietrich is interested in me. What's her trick? Is she a mind reader? Or is it some sort of blood magic?

"I wish you both the same happiness that I've found. And Astrid, remember that you have to be the one to take things forward yourself sometimes."

"A-All right..."

Bleh. I'd rather have a boy who's ready to take the lead than settle for one I have to reel in myself. I don't know how to act in a relationship yet.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dietrich," I apologized. "We've only been talking to people you don't know."

"No, it's quite all right. I'd like to grow more accustomed to these social situations."

You can be a little more demanding while you're a kid, you know?

“Attention, all attendees!” Waltrud’s voice suddenly rang throughout the reception room.

Oh no... She’s up on a platform. What’s she planning now?

“I’m most grateful to have had this opportunity to see so many new and familiar faces. In celebration of this wonderful day, I’ve had a main dish prepared! I insist you all try it for yourselves!”

What in the world is she going to bring out? Sometimes Waltrud’s behavior makes me worry.

The thing brought out on Waltrud’s instructions was...

“Wow! It’s kraken!”

It’s actually kraken cuisine!

“There’s grilled kraken, deep-fried kraken, kraken soup, et cetera, et cetera. These dishes were all prepared especially for today. I believe you’ll find them quite satisfying.”

Problems with freshness meant that it couldn’t be served raw in the form of sashimi, but they’d served up a grand array of kraken dishes regardless.

Waltrud, I’m sorry for ever suspecting that you might do something weird...

“Let’s go, Dietrich. Kraken is an extremely rare delicacy.”

“Yes, Miss Astrid.”

The get-together was a standing buffet, so it was first come, first served. Dietrich and I were almost running as we hurried to try the kraken before it was gone.

This is no good. I’m making myself look greedy. That’s not ladylike at all. I should slow down a bit.

“Look, Astrid! It’s kraken! The wonder food that’s great stewed, roasted, and deep-fried!” Waltrud was promoting it like she was some kind of undercover kraken salesman.

“Y-You’re in a good mood, Waltrud.”

“I’ll try the deep-fried kraken,” Dietrich decided.

“I’ll try the grilled type.”

We both chose our dishes and chowed down.

“I-It’s delicious!” I cried.

“Isn’t it just?” Dietrich replied.

It felt thick when chewed, yet it had a juicy texture like melting fat; it felt like nothing else. The taste was simple, but it was perfectly complementary to the texture. This was why Waltrud recommended it so highly.

“Isn’t it amazing, Dietrich?”

“Yes. Very much so. It seems krakens aren’t just disgusting monsters; they’re also excellent for cooking.”

A small spot of fried kraken sauce on Dietrich’s cheek betrayed his inability to resist his appetite.

“You’ve got a little sauce here.”

I used my handkerchief to wipe Dietrich’s cheek clean. He had the smooth skin of a young child.

“S-Sorry, Miss Astrid. I’ll wash your handkerchief and return it...”

“No, no. Don’t worry about it. Now, let’s try some more dishes!”

I was pleased to have seen a little more of Dietrich’s childlike side.

That’s right. He’s still in first grade. And I’m only in my first year of middle school. There’s no need for us to get flustered over anything.

That thought made it easier for me to relax while talking to Dietrich.

Finally, we tried some round pieces of “krakenyaki,” which were a lot like takoyaki, and by then our stomachs were full. *Kraken really is good food. If my family’s domain gets seized, maybe I’ll get a job as a kraken fisherman.*

Before long, the get-together reached its conclusion without incident.

“Wasn’t that fun, Dietrich?”

“Yes. I had a great time.”

We went home together with Iris and Werner. The feeling of satisfaction and

fullness was enough to make me fall asleep in the carriage as we headed back.

Chapter 25 — The Villainess Takes Interest in Forgotten Magic

I was at the Adventurer's Guild once again, but Petra and the others were away on an expedition that day.

"Oh! Well, if it isn't the Dragon Slayer Witch herself!" an old adventurer called out to me. "Did you come looking for new prey today?"

"P-Please stop calling me the Dragon Slayer Witch."

It's a cool name, but when people say it to me out loud, it's just embarrassing...

"Ah. I just remembered that there were some people asking around for you. They're sitting at that table. Friends of yours?"

"Huh?"

Who would come to the Adventurer's Guild looking for me? D-Don't tell me father found out and sent someone to check? This is trouble... I'd better pretend I didn't see them.

"Hey! The Dragon Slayer Witch you were looking for is here!"

Wah! Stop, old man!

"We've been waiting for you. Please come join us."

The people waiting for me were three girls. One of them was as large as Gertrud, and she was wearing a black robe. Another was one or two years older than me, and she was wearing a black robe. The third was a girl in glasses, and she was wearing a black robe.

Wh-What's with all these black robes? They look suspicious...

"Um... Do you have business with me?"

"Astrid, I hear you're capable of some highly unusual magic," the girl in glasses said. "Is this true?"

"Well, it's a little unusual, but when you get down to it, it's just elemental

magic and blood magic. It's not a mystery or anything."

"Is that correct?" she replied. "Wouldn't your capabilities be more limited in that case?"

What is this? It feels like an interrogation. Are they here to investigate me?

"No, it's really just elemental magic and blood magic."

"You mean to say that you slayed a fire dragon over a century old using nothing but rudimentary magic?"

"Yes, that's right."

Ugh. This is worrying. What are they up to?

"Then would you have no interest in learning unusual magic? Magic that has been forgotten, for example."

"Forgotten magic...?"

What's that? As far as I know, elemental and blood magic are the only types that exist.

"Relax," the slightly older-looking girl said. "Outsiders can't hear our conversation. Though if you'd rather talk somewhere safer, we can take you somewhere."

"It seems you all know about me already. Could you tell me your names?" I asked the three suspicious women.

"I'm Camilla."

"My name is Valentine."

"I'm Serafine."

The woman in glasses who'd done most of the talking was Camilla. The large person was Valentine. And the one who looked slightly older than me was Serafine.



“Are you some sort of club?”

The Black Robe Appreciation Society, maybe?

“We’re witches from the Witches Association,” Serafine answered. “Though I doubt you’ve any clue what that means.”

“I’m afraid not,” I replied. “What’s the Witches Association?”

“We’re a group dedicated to the study of magic, unimpeded by ethics or conscience,” Camilla explained. “Our society currently has around fifty members, and our goal is to revive forms of magic that people were forced to forget due to ethical concerns.”

Studying magic without being impeded by ethics or conscience? Sounds worrying, but also very appealing.

“We can’t give you the specifics here,” Valentine told me. “That would be reckless of us.”

“Yes, indeed,” Camilla agreed. “But perhaps you’d be willing to hear more at the association’s headquarters?”

“Well? Are you coming or not?” Serafine’s invitation sounded like a challenge.

“Y-Yes!” I accepted without a second thought.

“Then I suggest we go now,” Camilla said while rising to her feet. “To our headquarters.”

I followed after Camilla and exited the Adventurer’s Guild.

“Oh? You’re joining their party today?” The old adventurer asked me.

“Y-Yes, that’s right,” I replied with a forced smile on my face.

Camilla and the others led me through the commercial district where the Adventurer’s Guild was situated. After about ten minutes, we stepped into a deserted back alley. It was unusual to find anywhere this empty, given how lively this region tended to be.

Camilla stopped in the alleyway and made a gesture with her hand. “Door, I bid you to open.”

The moment Camilla spoke the words...

“Huh?”

The space within the alleyway was torn apart, creating a pitch black opening.

“Now let’s head inside,” Camilla said while putting one foot into the opening.

“Is it really safe to step into this?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s quite safe,” Camilla assured me. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“If this is enough to scare you, you’re not worthy of our knowledge,” Serafine added.

After hearing her say that, turning back was no longer an option. I couldn’t bear the thought of walking away with them laughing at me. I put one foot forward and stepped into the black opening.

“Ohh?!”

What had appeared to be black nothingness was actually a sprawling space that looked a lot like the academy library, but this place far exceeded it in scale. It was filled with shelves lined with books, and there were also spiral staircases. I felt a sense of the building’s age in the decayed sheen of the floor.

“This is the Witch Association headquarters? Where in the world are we?”

“This is a rift in space. A territory forgotten by all. We are everywhere, and we are nowhere.”

Sounds like they made it by creating some sort of abnormality in space itself. I’ve never heard of any elemental or blood magic capable of anything like it. It’s completely unknown magic—assuming it’s not just an illusion created with blood magic.

“It’s not a mere blood magic illusion,” Serafine said with a slight smile. “If it were, we’d have come up with a far more interesting illusion than this.”

“This is forgotten magic,” Camilla explained. “Lost magic.”

“Lost magic...?”

I’ve never even heard of it. Can I really believe them?

“Now, perhaps we can talk?” Camilla said. “Dragon Slayer Witch, your talent has drawn our attention. We hear that you make strange devices using earth magic, and that those give incredible power to your elemental magic.”

“Oh, it’s really not as impressive as it sounds.”

I’m done for if they learn exactly how my magic works!

“There’s no need for modesty. You must accept the reality. You single-handedly defeated a fire dragon that was over a century old. This is a feat to be celebrated, and one that will draw great attention.”

Camilla walked deeper into the great library as she spoke.

“Welcome to the Witch Association headquarters. Allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Camilla, the head of the association. I strive to pass on forgotten magic to future generations. I aim to ensure that such magic won’t be completely forgotten should there ever come a time when it’s needed.”

Huh? So she’s the big shot here? Then how come Serafine’s the one with the big mouth?! The most humble member of this bunch is the boss?!

“I’m sure that even students of the academy know nothing of lost magic’s history. This world once possessed more than just blood and elemental magic. There were forms of magic that opened up greater possibilities.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of that. That type of magic isn’t mentioned anywhere.”

Professor Wolff and the academy teachers never mentioned it once, and it’s not in any of the books in the library either.

“Lost magic—originally known as natural magic—creates many unexplored possibilities. But when those possibilities gave rise to harm, people came to fear lost magic; they despised it, so the powers that be ensured that it was eradicated. Those events are now two-thousand-year-old history.”

“Two thousand years?!”

Well, sure. Two thousand years is plenty of time for people to forget about something.

“Lost magic is the magic of possibilities. Allowing it to be forgotten so easily

would be to lose the possibilities open to humanity. It is this thought that gave rise to the Witches Association. To this day, we preserve lost magic so that those possibilities might still be explored.”

Hm. Sounds like a grand cause, but I don't get why they need me here.

“And what’s my role in this?”

“You have found new possibilities in preexisting magic. We believe you could find new possibilities in lost magic as well. This is why we have summoned you here. Our wish is that you’ll discover possibilities unknown to us.”

“Uh. Sounds like a lot of responsibility...”

I don't know the first thing about lost magic, and yet I'm supposed to be creating new possibilities with it?

“But of course, we won’t demand immediate results from you. We might not ask for anything at all. We merely wish to gather individuals who have potential. I sow the seeds of possibility and pray that they someday bear fruit.”

I get it... But isn't it risky to teach forgotten magic to a bunch of different people?

“Do not fear. We only select those we trust. We seek those who would rather see a world where the possibilities of our magic are explored than a world where our magic is eradicated. You don’t seem like the sort who’d allow lost magic to die.”

Can she read my mind?! I-Is she from the same race of people as mother and Vallia? Or maybe mind reading is a type of lost magic?

“Allow me to answer your question. The reason that I know what you’re thinking is that your thoughts show clearly on your face.”

“Ah...”

I've always been bad at keeping a poker face, but I didn't know I was that bad...

“Now that you understand our ideals, I’d like to welcome you as a member. What do you say? If you’d like to turn back, now is the time.”

What to do? Seems like it'd be a good idea to join them because I could gain some new powers that'll be useful in my showdown with fate. But there's also a chance that I'll be punished if anyone finds out that I'm using lost magic.

"You have some time to consider. Please think carefully. You are free to read any of the books here in the meantime. Don't worry, if you decide to leave the association, your memories can be erased right here."

Oh? Guess I'll take a look around in that case.

"This really is a big library."

"We've got books here documenting magic from all times and places," Serafine told me as I looked around the library. "We've saved a lot of books from nations that would've burned them. The magic preserving the books is also lost magic."

"This author...Elias von Engelhardt? The first person to ever assassinate someone with blood magic wrote this book?"

"That's right," Serafine confirmed. "If a blood magic spell has been completely forgotten, we treat that as lost magic here too. I'm an expert in blood magic. I even know the terrible curse that Engelhardt used."

Whoa. I've walked into the middle of somewhere really dangerous here. But it's exciting! The magic I'm looking for could be here too.

"All right! I've decided! I'll become a member!"

"We welcome you with open arms, Astrid. Welcome to the Witches Association." Camilla's words raised my spirits even higher.

Nice! Now I'll find new possibilities that'll blow my fate apart. You know, being famous might not be all that bad!

Chapter 26 — The Villainess Reforms Her Weapon

I'd become an official member of the Witches Association—a group that inherited lost magic.

Now, what to learn first?

“What kind of magic are you interested in? Valentine's the one to ask about spatial distortion, or me if it's blood magic. Well? Tell me where you're going to start.”

Serafine, you've got some attitude for someone who can't be more than a couple years older than me. She's still my senior though, so I'd better show her some respect.

“Hmm. I'm quite interested in spatial distortion.”

“Then go ask Valentine. Come to me if you're ever interested in forgotten blood magic. I know some interesting things—like magic that lets you see through a fairy's eyes, for example.”

“Wha?! That magic exists?!”

Whoa! Now I'm really interested! But I'll start with spatial distortion. I've already thought of something I'd like to try using it for.

“Valentine! Please teach me spatial distortion!”

“Oh? Spatial distortion?” Valentine replied listlessly. “If you know nothing but conventional magic, then we'll have to go over everything from the very beginning. I'll have to show you what it can do first.”

Valentine took a small ball from her pocket.

“First, we open up a rift in space. Doing so allows you to create a region only you can access. Once the rift is opened up, you can enter or leave it as you please. It's also possible to create separate rifts, but first let's start by making just one.”

I see. Sounds like a certain robotic cat's pocket.

“There are several rules surrounding the opening of a rift. Firstly, you cannot split open the body of any soul-bearing creature in the process. This means we can’t use space-opening techniques to tear people apart. It won’t even work on your own body.”

“Understood.”

All right. None of that conflicts with what I had in mind.

“Next, opening a rift requires a sufficient amount of mana. If you leave it open, your mana will drain away until you die. Take care.”

“Whoa... Sounds risky.”

The idea of dying from mana depletion is terrifying. I’ve got my birthstone on me to let me know how much mana I have left, but if it ever cracks, I’m dead.

“You also need to be aware that time within the rift passes at the same rate as outside. Being inside a rift may make it feel as though time has stopped, but it’s actually passing as normal. This necessitates caution. Some have been reduced to mummies after spending too long within a rift.”

Time passes as normal. Sounds like common sense.

“Lastly, this space-opening technique allows you to freely pull items out of the rift and store items in it. Later, I’ll teach you another possible use for this magic; basic spatial distortion techniques can also be used to move matter, albeit only a little.”

“Oh? Could you teach me the specifics?”

That’s the very thing I was after.

“You need to learn spatial distortion first. Now, there’s a special trick that you’ll need before you can use spatial distortion. I’ll show you how it’s done, so just watch and try to remember it. First, we choose something that we’ll use as our spatial distortion key. Perhaps your right or left hand. You can also use an object, but a hand is safer.”

“I’ll go with my left hand!”

“Your left. Not a bad choice. Same as me.” Valentine nodded in approval.
“Now let me show you. Channel mana into me and try to watch what’s

happening. But be warned: blink and you'll miss it."

"I'm ready." I took hold of Valentine's right arm and channeled mana into her just as she'd asked.

"Here goes."

Just when Valentine spoke, I felt something from the mana I'd channeled into her.

It's true. This feels nothing like the elemental or blood magic I've been taught...

What is this? It feels like a massive amount of mana's flowing into an area of nothingness and then wrenching it open. This isn't everyday stuff.

It's not like elemental magic; there are no spirits being called upon here. It doesn't work by channeling mana into the blood like blood magic either. This is just channeling mana into a space.

Then came the result.

"Oh? It's open now?"

"Yes. This is my spatial rift. Many things are hidden in here. My favorite books on magic, and some things I'd never reveal to anyone."

Valentine had created a black fissure in the air while she was speaking, just as she'd done when we'd entered the headquarters. Then she thrust her hand into it and pulled out a book.

"Can I give it a try?" I asked.

"Sure. Try it."

Now that I know how it works, I'm ready to try my hand at spatial distortion right away!

"So I channel mana into the space, then wrench it open..."

I imitated Valentine by channeling mana into a space that would form my rift, and then I did something that felt like wrenching it open.

"It opened!" I'd succeeded in creating a rift large enough for a person to pass through!

“Oh, you learn fast. I expected you’d struggle at first.”

“Eh heh heh.” I was blushing.

“Now, shall we move on?”

“Yes!” I was ready for the next step.

“Next is the technique for moving matter. You can use mana to move light objects, as if you had an extra hand. Channel mana into me and watch, just like you did before.”

“Yes, ma’am!” I channeled mana into Valentine once again.

“Here I go,” Valentine said before channeling mana toward a space once again.

Her mana began to move slowly, and eventually it came into contact with the book she’d been holding. With a thud, the book fell to the floor.

“And that’s about it,” Valentine said with a smile. “It’s not particularly useful magic. You can’t knock arrows off-course with it unless you’ve got incredible concentration, and moving things takes a huge amount of mana. It’s hard to find any use for this sort of magic.”

“Well, maybe I’ll have a good use for it,” I replied with a smirk.

Now to try it out.

“First, I’ll take this talisman...”

It was one of the talismans I needed for creating shells for my 120 mm rifled gun—the ones that had been so useful when slaying the dragon. I used it to create a new shell.

“Next...”

“Hm?” Valentine looked somewhat surprised when I created my 120 mm rifled gun itself.

Yeah, I can see why it’s surprising. Even people back on Earth would be surprised to see this thing.

“Next, I’ll store this shell inside a spatial rift.”

I opened the rift just a little and pushed the shell into it. However, I made sure that the tip of the shell would be facing outward when I next opened the rift. At this point, it should be clear what I was trying to do.

“Now let’s give it a try!”

I pointed the barrel of my 120 mm rifled gun downward. Next, I opened the rift inside the gun’s cylinder and used matter moving magic to push the shell out, thus loading it. For now, I had to very carefully regulate the amount of mana I used so that the talisman acting as the gunpowder charge wouldn’t explode. If the gun spontaneously fired here, it wouldn’t be a pretty sight.

“And finished!” I declared victory after demonstrating that I could reload my reformed 07-type 120 mm rifled gun without needing to detach the cylinder.

“Ah. That sort of use. But even without magic, you could just put a shelf in the rift that holds those things at an angle. That way, they’ll slide out by themselves when the rift opens, right?”

“Now that you mention it...there’s a chance that I’ll accidentally set them off while moving them with mana too. I guess I’ll try making those shelves.”

This matter-moving magic really is useless.

“So, did you use that huge thing to take down the fire dragon?”

“That’s right, although I used a few other tools too.”

From now on, I’ll be able to use just the 120 mm rifled gun without needing to put a bunch of howitzers down. And I’m glad too; those things were really tiring to use.

My disposable howitzers won’t be disposable anymore if I use spatial rifts, though... If I can control the rifts precisely enough, it wouldn’t be too difficult to load one shell after another into the howitzer as I’m firing it. Maybe I don’t even need a revolving mechanism in my 120 mm rifled gun either...

No, wait, I don’t want to scrap something I’ve put so much thought into. And the revolver should give me a faster rate of fire than what I’d get from loading each round with rifts anyhow. I’m sure of it.

“All right. You’ll still be of use to me yet, rifled gun.” I petted my beloved 120

mm rifled gun.

“That’s almost all there is to spatial distortion. The only other thing is maintaining multiple rifts at once. We can go over that later. If we try to cover too much right now, it’ll be hard to remember it all.”

“Thanks a lot!”

These people seem like they’d go to extremes to develop their magic further, but they’re kind enough, and this feels like a safe place.

“It’s also worth knowing that you can use spatial distortion magic to create a prison. In fact, that was its main usage in the past. Some people used it to store animals and humans for use in experiments. The captive might try to run, but rift spaces created using spatial distortion can only ever be opened by their creator and last forever, so escape would simply mean dying of starvation.”

Uh... On second thought, these people are dangerous.

In any case, no force in this world can stop me now that I’m armed with a new weapon I can smoothly feed fresh ammunition to!

Now that I’ve come this far, maybe it’s time to attempt something special. The power will be amazing, and it shouldn’t even be difficult to create. But the targeting is going to be tricky because math isn’t exactly my strong point...

Heh heh heh. Just you wait, fate! The day that I rip you to shreds draws nearer!

Chapter 27 — The Villainess and Two Brothers

I now had a good relationship with the Witches Association. To make contact, I'd visit a general store in a corner of the commercial district. Camilla would be there, acting like the store owner, but that was just a front. Whenever I visited the store, she could warp me to the Witches Association headquarters.

Naturally, I had to keep this a secret. I didn't know what might happen if anyone found out that I was involved with that shady organization.

The world had seen lost magic as a threat and attempted to consign it to oblivion. As someone who'd chosen to inherit such magic, I knew that I might be hunted down. If I wasn't careful, I'd draw unwanted attention from national authorities.

"Astrid?" There was concern in Iris's voice as she awoke me from my reverie.

"I'm fine. It's nothing." I couldn't even share this secret with Iris.

"Astrid, have you realized that Lord Dietrich hasn't been here lately?"

"Oh. Now that you mention it..."

"Do you suppose something happened to him?" Iris asked.

"Hm, I wonder. Maybe he has a good reason. Or maybe it's just a coincidence."

Dietrich would normally show up at the Round Table without fail, but for the past few days he was nowhere to be seen. I wouldn't have thought anything of him being gone for one or two days, but he hadn't been seen in about four days now.

"Should we try asking Werner?" I suggested.

"Yes."

Werner might know something, since he's in the same year. Anyway, to Werner we go!

"Dietrich?" Werner said.

Today, Werner wasn't at Iris's side for once. Instead, he was at a table with

some older students. Finals were approaching, so he was probably getting the less-busy students to help him study.

“Hm. Nothing particularly unusual’s happened in the classroom, but I did hear something that made me worry. Though it’s just a rumor, gossip essentially, so I’m a little reluctant to share it...”

“Could you tell us? We’re worried.”

What’s this? A rumor that’s essentially just gossip? I wouldn’t have thought there’d be any rumors of that sort about someone as dependable as Dietrich.

“I’ve heard that there was some sort of disagreement between Dietrich and his older brother, Lord Adolf. I’m told they were arguing over who would become the next captain of the order. Dietrich insists that he’s better suited to the role.”

“Huh? They’re arguing over that?”

Wasn’t Adolf already chosen as the next captain? It was a given in the game. I thought the pressure of becoming the next captain was a key feature of his character. How could Dietrich steal the role from him?

“Hmm. That’s odd... Dietrich never struck me as the type of boy to be demanding. Did something happen to him?”

“I know no more than you. He never said anything about becoming captain in the past.”

What’s going on here?

“Astrid, could I speak with you for a moment?” Iris said quietly while tugging slightly on my uniform.

“Oh? What’s up, Iris?”

I let Iris lead me out of the room.

“Wh-What is it, Iris?”

“I think Lord Dietrich must have started talking about becoming the captain of the order to make you notice him. You do prefer older boys with a mature air of confidence. The other thing is that becoming the next captain would give him a

status equal to yours.”

Wha?! You mean it's all my fault?! Is the game scenario shifting now that I'm not following a proper villainess path?

“Y-You don't really think so, do you? If that were true, wouldn't he come here to see me?”

That's right, Iris! If it were me he was after, then he'd start by coming here to see me!

“That's because Lord Adolf is here at the Round Table. I'm sure Lord Dietrich wants to avoid him since they're in the middle of an argument. I don't have any sisters, and I've never fallen out with you, but I'm sure it's that sort of disagreement.”

“When did you get so clued in about human relations, Iris?”

“Lord Werner has been lending various different novels to me.”

Werner... Please don't give Iris weird ideas...

“Well, why don't we try asking Lord Adolf?” I suggested. “That should clear things up.”

“Th-That's an awfully direct approach...”

This whole thing's a pain. Let's just ask Adolf and be done with it. Iris might not like the idea, but I don't know what'll happen if I make the game's scenario change. This could be what brings on my destruction! If that's the case, I've got to disarm the situation right now!

“I'll go ask him, Iris! Make sure I get a proper burial!”

“Burial...?”

This is a suicide attack! If I really can't avoid setting my destruction in motion, then I have to risk everything to stop it in its tracks! Here goes!

....

“Lord Adolf, could you spare a moment?”

“What do you want?”

He sounds grumpy right from the get-go. It must be true that they had an argument.

“Did something happen between you and Dietrich? I haven’t seen Dietrich around lately, and it’s making me worry.”

“Dietrich?” Adolf sighed and then looked down at the ground. “We’re not getting along well lately. That’s all. There’s not much to it.”

All right. They’re not getting along. That’s just as Iris said.

“Is there no way you two can make amends?”

“It’s a family problem that we’ll settle ourselves. You needn’t worry.”

No, he can’t handle this.

“Is there nothing I can do to help?”

“Like I said, it’s a family problem, and we’ll sort it out ourselves.”

And I’m saying I’m gonna help because you can’t handle it alone!

“I see. Then I’ll be praying that the two of you can settle your differences.”

I give up. It’s a full-blown argument. They’re not being mature at all. If there’s a dispute over the position of captain, it’ll mean he can’t even let his guard down around his own family. After all, he’s struggling with practical blood magic even now. He finally got his mana to circulate through his body, but he still hasn’t gone beyond that.

The Order of the Golden Griffin—the order that Adolf is supposed to take charge of someday—is the type that uses blood magic for everything. His brother Dietrich must seem like a real threat since he learned blood magic first. And if Dietrich really does claim Adolf’s place as captain, that’s going to throw the game’s scenario off-course, and then who knows what’ll happen. If things take a weird turn, it could set off a chain of events leading to my destruction!

That’s right! If I really am the cause behind Dietrich wanting to be the next captain, that’s going to turn Adolf against me! That’s a problem! If my family’s domain gets seized over something as dumb as that, it’ll be beyond a joke!

“Astrid? Did you find out what happened?” Iris asked.

“Yes. I’m in trouble.”

“What? Why would it be you in trouble...?” Iris looked confused.

It’s all beyond Iris’s understanding right now. But regardless, this is trouble for me.

“Talking to Lord Adolf didn’t help anything! I’ll go talk to Dietrich!”

“P-Please wait, Astrid!” Iris hurried after me as I ran out of the Round Table’s room.

I can’t use blood magic to speed up as long as Iris is with me... There’s no getting around that. I’ll just have to run normally.

“Dietrich!” I called out.

“M-Miss Astrid?!” Dietrich was stunned when I came charging into his elementary school classroom.

“I want to ask something. Have you got a minute?”

“Y-Yes. Now is fine. But could we go somewhere else?”

“Sure!”

It wasn’t something he wanted to discuss with other people around, which meant that we had to go around to the rear of the school building before we could talk.

“Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?” Dietrich asked.

“Well,” I replied, “we’re worried because you haven’t been showing up at the Round Table lately. Could we ask why not?”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I had a little falling out with my brother,” Dietrich said, looking troubled.

“What made the two of you fall out?” I replied, looking equally troubled. “Is it something you’d like to talk about?”

“It’s just a little argument, so...”

“No, no. You know that you can always come talk to your big sis Astrid when something’s troubling you, right?”

Hmm. I wonder if he's another one who likes being coddled?

"Very well. The truth is, I told my brother he wasn't cut out to be the next captain of the order, and that turned into an argument. I think that I'd make a more suitable captain. My brother is in middle school already, and he still hasn't learned to use blood magic."

"I see, I see."

As I thought, it's over who becomes the next captain.

"Do you think that being able to use blood magic makes you worthy of becoming the captain of the order?"

"Yes. My abilities are already on par with those of middle schoolers!"

He's sure trying hard. It's not like he's trying to escape some problem that could cause his destruction, unlike me.

"You're wrong, Dietrich. Yes, a captain might need some skill with blood magic, but there's a lot more to it than that."

"Huh? What else would I need? If you mean swordsmanship, I'm every bit as capable as my brother!"

You're naive, Dietrich.

"As the captain, you'd be the commanding officer. People would live and die according to your decisions. You need to be the type of person who people will obey, even when it means risking their life. Do you really think you can be that sort of person?"

"That's..."

"Yes, you need blood magic and swordsmanship, but that's not everything. You'd need enough charisma to entice people and enough confidence to inspire morale in your subordinates. Right now, I don't see that kind of confidence in you."

I was mostly just repeating stuff I'd read in military books.

"Then, what would you have me do? I'm... I..."

As Dietrich struggled to put his thoughts into words, I started talking as if I

was giving a lecture. “Relax, relax. You’re still a six-year-old in the first year of elementary school, aren’t you? The road to becoming a captain is long. You have time to learn the qualities that a commanding officer needs, and then, once you have those qualities, that would be the time to openly contest with Lord Adolf if you still believe he’s not fit for the role. That’s all.”

That’s right. You’re still a six-year-old boy. There’s a long road to becoming a captain. At the very least, don’t cause problems while I’m still here at the academy.

“I understand. I’m sorry. You’re right, I’m just a child.”

“Everyone was a child once. You just need to grow stronger from your failures!”

Yes. We’re still kids with a lot of room for growth. Even the current captain, your dad, was a child once.

“You’re right! I’ll do my best!” Dietrich said with a broad smile before leaving.

“Well, that should clear up the problems on Dietrich’s side, shouldn’t it?”

“Astrid, I think Lord Dietrich has just well and truly fallen in love with you,” Iris replied.

“Oh, Iris. Don’t try to scare me like that.”

The last thing I want is another landmine to worry about.

It was the annoying Friedrich who told me how things went after that. Apparently, Dietrich apologized and announced that Adolf could be next in line for captain, “for now.”

Dietrich then began appearing at the Round Table once more, and things eventually came to a peaceful conclusion. At least, that’s what I wanted to believe.

I can’t help but think that there’ll be more trouble between these two brothers in the future. Oh well. Minne needs to hurry up and make Adolf hers. Preferably while the damage to me is still minor.

Chapter 28 — The Villainess and Her Maid

Back home, I had a maid. Dukes are awfully important, so their families have dozens of servants. Amazing, right? Though it's my father you should be impressed by, not me!

Among them, there was a maid whose job it was to take care of me, and her name was Delia von Drais. Although I just referred to her as a maid, in a household as grand as a duke's, it wasn't unusual to be served by second daughters of barons and whatnot; indeed, Delia was one such second daughter of a baron. Much like the maid who'd taken care of me up until I entered the academy, she would leave us once I'd gotten married.

Life is so easy when you have a maid to do everything for you, right? Wrong. Please get that idea out of your head.

My maid was a bully!

"Lady Astrid, I see you've been affixing strange things to your uniform again."

"It's not strange! It's the emblem of the British Special Air Service! What's wrong with putting something this cool on my uniform?"

Having learned nothing since the last emblem-removal incident, I was still trying to decorate my uniform and bag with things made during embroidery sessions with Minne. But Delia discovered them all in no time at all.

"It won't do. Altering your uniform without permission is against academy rules. Your father will scold you if you keep doing these things. I'll be removing them later."

"You're so mean!"

I was to be mercilessly stripped of the patch that I'd made. By this point, I'd learned that complaining to father about the way I was treated just got me in trouble, so I couldn't go to him for help. *Father's always taking Delia's side! I wish he'd listen to his own daughter for once!*

"What about this?! I can put this on there, right?!"

"What is it?"

“A real magic research club badge! I designed it myself!”

I certainly did. To mark the founding of the real magic research club, I’d made a badge with an ultra-stylish design. Naturally, it was me, the club president, who’d come up with the design. It featured a black cat flying through the night sky on a broomstick, making it just perfect for a club like the real magic research club that explored magic’s mysteries. For some reason, this world had no legends about witches—even though actual witches existed—so Minne’s reaction had simply been “Why would you fly on a broomstick?” Still, I thought the design was perfect for the real magic research club.

Broomstick! Black cat! Night sky! They all feel magical. Broomsticks are the classic witch symbol, and everyone knows witches keep black cats as familiars. Then when you have the two flying through the night sky together, it’s reminiscent of all of the legends about witches. Every aspect of this design is beautiful, if I do say so myself. Even someone like Delia shouldn’t be able to reject an emblem like this.

“It won’t do. You cannot alter your uniform.” Delia plucked the real magic research club badge from my hand.

“Ah! Wait! Wait! How about my bag?! I can put it on my bag, right?!”

“Not even on your bag. Didn’t I tell you this before?”

Damn. I went to all that trouble designing and embroidering that thing, and then she just takes it away. Delia must be some kind of monster.

“You’re a bully, Delia! You monster! Demon!”

“If you say so, Lady Astrid. Please be ready to head to the dining room for dinner in a short while.”

Is Delia really a maid? It feels like she’s talking down to me even though I’m her employer’s daughter. Is that my imagination? Is it somehow my fault?

“Well, there goes the badge I made...”

After sulking in my bed for a bit, hunger made me head down to the dining room.

“Astrid, are you behaving well at the academy?”

“Yes, father. There are no problems there.”

Father worried a lot, so he was always asking.

“By the way, father, since I’ve been so well-behaved at the academy lately, I believe my allowance—”

“No. You haven’t shown any remorse at all. Barging in on another club’s activities and then causing a scene is most unbecoming behavior for a member of a duke’s household. Your allowance will stay reduced until you’ve learned your lesson. Think about what you’ve done.”

Grr. He’s still mad about me rushing in on the archery club and snatching up all their arrows out of the air. Part of me does think that maybe it was going a little far even for me, but it’s not worth being this angry over! No one died or even got hurt!

I’m headed for financial ruin because of the economic sanctions father’s imposing on me! There’s the money from my regular work with the Adventurer’s Guild, but once you deduct club expenses and money spent on social events, there’s nothing left to save in preparation for my destruction! And when I go down, you’ll be going down with me, father!

“Then perhaps you might increase your contributions toward my club activities’ expenses...?”

“Are you still involved in that weird club?”

Calling it weird is rather rude. It’s all for the noble cause of discovering new possibilities through magic.

“What is it that makes you call it weird, father? I’m conducting serious magic research.”

“And what sort of magic are you researching?”

“It’s... Well... You know...”

I can’t exactly tell him it’s research into combat techniques and love potions.

“I had a feeling you were up to no good. I won’t be providing more funding for your club. Make do with the amount you have. I don’t even know what you’re doing with all that money.”

"I-I'm using it all on my club activities!"

You've got no trust in me.

"Come to think of it, you often tell me that you're paying visits to Count Mohl's household lately. I suppose I should express my gratitude to the Mohl family. Given the way you are, I imagine you cause endless trouble for them."

"I-I've done nothing of the sort! I've caused no problems!"

C-Crap. I told father that I was visiting Minne when I was actually slaying the dragon, and now he's concerned about it! If he gets in touch with Minne's household, he'll find out that I was never there!

"Are you sure?" father said. "I feel like I'd better ask Count Mohl just in case."

"We were outside!" I shot back. "I was spending time outside with Minne! So I didn't cause any trouble for Count Mohl's family! I caused no problems at all!"

"Oh? In that case, I won't worry. You did get home quite late, however. If you're spending time outside, then I'd prefer you came home sooner."

"You are quite right, father."

Phew. I made it through somehow. Just barely.

"Darling, you shouldn't be so tough on Astrid. She's reached an age where she'll want to keep certain things secret."

"Even so..."

Mother! Thanks for the backup!

She's right, father. You shouldn't pry into the affairs of a fair and innocent maiden like me. Ladies like to keep certain things to themselves. Things like wyvern slaying, orc slaying, and dragon slaying... What even is a maiden, anyhow?

"Well, just as long as you won't be causing trouble for everyone around you. As a duke's daughter, you should behave in a way that won't bring shame to our family. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, father."

I'll do the best that I possibly can.

....

After dinner, I lazed around in my room reading a novel. It was a historical novel. History was an interest of mine, and it doubled as study for upcoming tests, so it was a good thing to read while lying on my bed and eating snacks. The cookies I had were delicious, just like you'd expect from a chef under a duke's employ.

"Lady Astrid." There was a knock at the door to my room, and then Delia appeared.

"What is it?"

"Honestly. It's ill-mannered to read in bed while eating snacks. I'm taking the snacks away. And it's unhealthy to eat sweet food at night."

"Hey! No way!"

I knew Delia was a monster! She wants to take away all my evening fun!

"You're mean!" I protested. "What's the problem?! I get enough exercise!"

"It won't do. Your father was telling you at dinner that you should behave in a way that befits a duke's daughter. I doubt that lazily eating snacks in bed while reading was what he had in mind. If you want to read, then at least sit at your desk."

She's being so rational that I can't even argue...

"Don't you have a heart, Delia? Is it fun to bully innocent little girls like me?"

This calls for an appeal to emotion.

"I think you're already quite grown up, Lady Astrid. You have as much common sense as any adult. And many adult friends also."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

Don't tell me she found out about Gertrud and her party?

"You were out in town recently with what appeared to be a group of adventurers. I assume they were friends of yours. If you're able to associate with people like that, then it's proof that you have as much common sense as an adult."

I was seen?! But I was in disguise!

“A-Are you sure it wasn’t someone else? Couldn’t it have been another girl who looks exactly like me?”

“No. It was you, Lady Astrid. Why in the world were you with adventurers?”

Grr. How’d it come to this?

“That’s what you’d call a maiden’s secret, Delia. Did you not hear mother say that it’s wrong to pry into a young lady’s affairs?”

“Oh, really? You’re not getting involved in anything criminal, are you?”

“No. It’s nothing like that.”

The only thing I’m involved in is being an assistant mage.

“Well, I certainly hope not. Oh, and, this is for you.”

“Huh? My badge?”

Delia had given back the badge she’d removed from my uniform that evening.

“I’ve reinforced the fabric so that you can attach it using a strap. Why don’t you hang it from your bag? Putting it on your bag directly would be an alteration, but I don’t believe there are any rules against this type of accessory.”

“Oh! Thanks, Delia!”

My maid is kindhearted after all!

“If I let you do that, would you please stop trying to modify your bag and uniform?”

“All right!”

I happily attached my real magic research club badge to my bag.

Heh heh. I can show it off to Minne and everyone tomorrow. Then I can make matching badges for everyone. That’ll be fun.

Or so I thought... The next day, I showed it to Minne.

“What exactly is this?”

“Did you forget, Minne?! It’s the real magic research club badge!”

“Oh,” Minne said with a clap of her hands. “It’s the one you were embroidering.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten all about that.”

“Yes, me too.”

The badge had barely stuck in the minds of Minne and the others. *What’s wrong with these girls?*

“Let’s all put one on our bags!”

“O-Oh. I’m not so sure that’s...”

Minne, Lotte, Brigitte, and Sandra all looked reluctant.

Well, my maid might be kindhearted, but my friends are callous.

I went to sulk on the rooftop for a while. *I’m not standing for it! Gah!*

Thirty minutes went by.

“Lady Astrid! I’ve put it on my bag! The badge!”

“Please cheer up!”

Minne and the others had hurried over to give me the news.

You think that’s enough to cheer me up?

“Lady Astrid, you’re number one because you founded the club. We’ve all given ourselves numbers two and onward! You’re number one, Lady Astrid!”

“R-Really? Well, all right!”

I’m a pushover as always. But who cares, as long as I’m number one!

Number one, by the way, is a slang term that means “first lieutenant” in the navy.

I think I might have preferred having everyone call me captain... Captain Astrid. Is the ship she sails destined to sink? All right! All crew to your stations! The real magic research club is setting sail!

The only real difference this makes is that I’ll be defusing naval mines instead of landmines, though...

Epilogue

Since I'd started middle school, the situation had been developing at a dizzying pace.

Friedrich continued to be a landmine, Silvio's rebellious phase was getting worse and worse, and Adolf's troubled relationship with Dietrich had created a new landmine that I couldn't even see.

Some would expect that such problems would be trivial for someone who'd slain a fire dragon, but there was no correlation between combat potential and the ability to manage human relationships. That should go without saying really.

Elsa would be making her appearance in a little under three years' time. I'd have to go on treading cautiously through the minefield up until she got here. Then, once Elsa was attending the academy, I'd have to deal with some even harsher minesweeping that involved Minne and several others.

I'm not sure I can avoid all these mines! I preferred the fire dragon. I knew my enemy, and all I had to do was fire bullets at it. When I'm minesweeping, I don't know who or where my enemies are, and there's always a chance I'll take fatal damage without even realizing.

It scares me! Minefields scare me! Having nowhere to run makes it even scarier! And how am I supposed to find love while spending every day and night in a minefield?

Things are even harder when Dietrich, a boy four years younger than me, tries to demonstrate how forward he can be all the time. If I keep heading down the Dietrich route, the original story's going to get twisted into something unrecognizable. Though I doubt there could be anything worse than an ending that results in my destruction!

In any case, I can't deny my feelings of love toward Mr. Bernhard. But right now, he sees me as nothing more than a problem child. I can't feel even the slightest hint of romance blossoming. Maybe I should just give up and accept the Dietrich route. Not many other people seem to like me. But even if Dietrich is a gentleman, he's in the first year of elementary school. I'd definitely be branded

a pedo...

I suppose I'll forget about romance for the time being. I can think about that later. What I need to work on right now is my plan for halting my destruction after it's set in motion!

First, I'll continue to gain more combat experience in preparation for a civil war within the empire. If it comes to it, I'll need to have enough war potential to make Friedrich's head roll. I've finished reinforcing my reflexes, so the next problem is alleviating the stress caused by killing people. I've got to do whatever it takes to stop myself from ending up like a Vietnam War veteran after the civil war is over.

The next thing is to maintain strong bonds with powerful local rulers of the empire. I need to proactively deepen my ties with Iris and the Braunschweig family, Vallia and the Schleswig family that she married into, and Waltrud and the Vito family. That'll ensure that they're on my side when a civil war does break out.

And I can't forget about the savings for use after my destruction takes place. I've got to keep working hard as an assistant mage so that my savings keep growing. Sooner or later, I'll have to find a foreign bank where I can hide my assets. Keeping my savings under my bed isn't exactly what you'd call "asset management." Waltrud might know a thing or two about that.

Then there's my dealings with the Witches Association. It smells like a dangerous organization, but it could be what I need to safeguard my future. I want to be on good terms with them for as long as possible while I absorb all the power from them I can.

Today, once again, I was visiting the Witches Association because Gertrud and the others weren't at the Adventurer's Guild.

I wonder what they'll teach me today?

"Astrid." Serafine greeted me when I arrived at the Witches Association headquarters.

"What is it? Are you going to teach me something?"

"That's right. It's high time someone taught you."

Serafine was only a little older than me, but she always spoke down to me.

“What is it? What is it?”

*I’m really interested. What’ll it be today? Engelhardt’s fearsome curse?
Actually, I’m a little too scared to learn that one...*

“What you need,” Serafine said, “is a familiar.”

Afterword

Volume 2 of *Villainess: Reloaded! Blowing Away Bad Ends with Modern Weapons* has finally been published! Thank you for your purchase!

The adventures of Astrid and others are starting to feature greater and greater firepower, and it'll be interesting to see where it goes from here. I think so, even as the author.

As the fateful day inches closer, to what extent will Astrid be able to oppose it? Will she actually crush fate? Or will she face a bad ending? And will there be romance waiting for Astrid in the future?

Look forward to the next volume!

Once again, I'd like to express my sincerest gratitude toward my editor, to Wuhuo-sama for providing the wonderful illustrations, and to everyone who chose to read this book. I appreciate your continued support!

To everyone, I wish you all the best!

616th Special Information Battalion

“A love potion?!”

***“You can really
make one? Really?”***

***I got a bite! Now to
reel these ladies in.***

***“Yeah, I can make
one. But you’ll have
to agree to join
my club first.”***





Lady of Viscount Stockmar's Family
Sandra
von
Stockmar

Lady of Viscount Bernstorff's Family
Brigitte
von
Bernstorff

Second Daughter of Count Lambsdorff
Lotte
von
Lambsdorff

Second Daughter of Count Mohl
Minne
von
Mohl

First Daughter of Duke Oldenburg
Astrid
Sophie von
Oldenburg

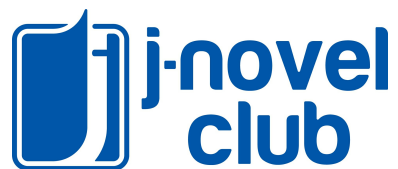
First Daughter of Duke Braunschweig
Iris
Maria von
Braunschweig

An anime-style illustration of two young women playing in the ocean. The woman on the left has long, flowing red hair and is wearing a dark blue one-piece swimsuit with a ruffled waist. She is leaning forward, splashing water with her right foot. The woman on the right has long, straight blonde hair and is wearing a black one-piece swimsuit with a white bow at the neck and a ruffled waist. She is standing in the water, looking up at the red-haired woman with a surprised expression. The background is a bright blue sky with fluffy white clouds. The water is depicted with dynamic splashes and white highlights.

“Astrid! This water tastes salty!”

“Oh? You’ve never been to the beach before?”

“It’s my first time! I didn’t know the sea was so big!”



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Villainess: Reloaded! Blowing Away Bad Ends with Modern Weapons Volume
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by 616th Special Information Battalion

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BATTALION**

Illustrator

WUHUO