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Villainess: Reloaded!

BLOWING AWAY

BAD **ENDS** with

Modern
Weapons

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INFORMATION
BATTALION**

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Chapter 1 — They Called Her Villainess

Homes burned. Streets burned. The palace burned.

The once great city was now engulfed in flames and choked by black smoke. It had been hailed as a center of culture; from literature to music and operas, the city had produced so much. Now it was being reduced to mere ruins.

I was moving through that crumbling city of culture.

With an oversized weapon—a 120 mm rifled gun—in my right hand, I advanced through the rubble of the city that my weapon had leveled. I mowed down anyone and anything that might have hindered my progress as I wordlessly forced my way toward the palace.

Soldiers that were somehow still alive made attempts to drive me back with bolts launched from their crossbows. I evaded their bolts with superhuman movements, as if I could somehow see the trajectory of each one.

My type-3 combat preparation measures were a great success: my strength was boosted, and my reflexes were greatly enhanced. It was as if the bolts fired by my foes were barely moving. Dodging them took no effort whatsoever, and sending back a token of my appreciation was similarly effortless.

How about an explosive shell to show my gratitude? Here you go!

“Blau, Gelb, Rot,” I called out to my fairies, “are there any survivors nearby?”

The three fairies that did my bidding each shared their vision with me. They were cute creatures in airy dresses whose heads comprised about a third of their height.

The images flowing into my optic nerve created displays like windows on a computer screen. The three fields of view visible to my three fairies all flowed into my eyes at once.

“The soldiers are constructing a barrier in front of the palace, Master.”

“No sign of enemies to the rear.”

“Surroundings clear!”

Only those with aptitude could perceive the fairies, making them perfect for use as reconnaissance drones. The fairies themselves weren’t particularly happy about it, but they’d soon get over it if I gave them candy afterward.

I advanced through what remained of the soldiers now that they’d lost all power to resist me. I was moving ever closer to the palace, and I felt as though I might even start to hum as I gleefully watched my weapon blast apart broken carriages and makeshift barricades.

The imperial guard was waiting before the palace. These soldiers had been dispatched into the most ferocious of battles during this war. Their military uniforms of indigo blue and white were familiar to me.

“Hah... It can’t be.” An old man among the imperial guard scowled and then let out a short, dry laugh. “I thought it was just another myth from the battlefields, but it was real? This monster actually exists? The Red Demon. The Dragon Slayer Witch. Plusen’s Punishment. How can such a monster exist? It shouldn’t be possible. A soldier, a single soldier, capable of assaulting our capital and turning it into a sea of flames... Such a thing cannot be. And yet, here you are...”

The old man from the imperial guard was looking at me as if something deep within him couldn’t comprehend it.

“Gentlemen, your failure lies in your narrow thinking.” I looked at the old man with a broad smile. “I’ve accomplished all of this with no more than commonly known magic. I may have some talent, but my ceaseless creativity and continued study of magic are what allow me to stand before you. What more explanation do you need?”

“Monster...”

“We can’t win...”

“Foul demon...”

The pitiful soldiers trembled in fear as they aimed their crossbows at me.

“I must ask you, Red Demon. Are you not still a child? How can you kill so

calmly? So many, with no hesitation? There were women and children in the buildings you've destroyed, and those soldiers had families waiting for them. How can you stay so *calm*?!"

The old man of the imperial guard was getting rather tiresome. "I'll tell you how. There are modules in the brain that make us hesitate to kill people. The thing we call a conscience is the main deterrent preventing us from killing, and there are several modules associated with it. But what if those modules could be forcibly shut down?" This was something I enjoyed bragging about.

"You can't be serious. You'd use blood magic to meddle with your own brain? You've stopped these m-modules you speak of? You've erased your own conscience?"

"Precisely. Right now, I have no conscience, no pity, no compassion, no sympathy. I'm simply a war machine designed to eliminate all foes. In the face of an enemy soldier, I can pull the trigger without mercy. Even if bystanders get caught up in my assault, I'll feel no compassion for them."

I'd succeeded. I'd shaped the human brain to be perfectly suited to combat.

"You truly are a monster. A killing machine with no conscience is no more than a monster. Even veteran soldiers hesitate before they kill their enemies."

"And that is a defect in those soldiers, Mister. Soldiers don't need a conscience. All men should march at the signal of the fife and drum corps without fear of death, and then they should fight until all enemies are annihilated. That is a true soldier. Don't you agree?"

What's this? This old man must be the type who romanticizes old wars. We couldn't have less in common. What I want is efficiency at every level. I can't stand the sight of ancient battlefields. There's nothing sadder than a soldier who hesitates to kill when killing is their very job.

"Do you not even have love for your own country?" the old man asked.

"Hmm. Guess not. My only concern right now is the total annihilation of my enemies. Though I would prefer it if the people of my homeland welcomed that."

Love for my country? Why would anyone love a country that banishes a duke's

family over nothing more than the heroine getting bullied a bit?

“It’s about time our little talk ended. It would be a shame if such a splendid, beautiful palace weren’t destroyed, so until I’ve reduced it to bare earth, I’ve still got work to do. I did enjoy talking to you, but I can’t let you get between me and my work.”

With that, I casually pointed the muzzle of my gun toward the imperial guard.
Ammunition: high-explosive shells. Continuous fire.

“Demon! You’ll burn in hell, mark my words!”

“Why do you people always call me demon? My parents already gave me a fine name.”

Flames erupted from the gun just as the man began to scream. The shell’s impact created an inferno that blew away the soldiers along with their barricade and the old man who’d just been talking to me. He joined the ranks of mute corpses filling the streets.

An automatic reloading mechanism—similar to a revolver’s—loaded the next shell, and my gun roared once more as I fired it into the surviving members of the imperial guard.

“Blau. Was that every enemy?” I asked with the hot muzzle of my gun pointed toward the sky.

“There are no more, Master,” my fairy Blau replied. “But are you sure about this? You didn’t have to go this far...”

“It’s necessary, Blau. The enemy takes me too lightly. I have to make them all experience true fear. And I want to collect field data.” *Gotta admit, my real motivation for all this is that field data though. Tee hee.*

Next, I pointed my muzzle toward the palace. “Whoops. I almost forgot to say: my name is Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg. I’m a tireless researcher of magic and also a walking arsenal. I also happen to be the villainess. Nice to meet you, everyone. And farewell.”

After that quick self-introduction, I smiled and set to the task of turning the palace to rubble. Smashing a splendid palace into tiny little pieces was about

the coolest thing I could think of. When the thing you're destroying is beautiful, that's what really makes it worthwhile. I was about to get my fill of destruction in its purest form. Opportunities as good as this didn't come often.

Now, you're probably wondering how it came to this. Let's back up a little, shall we?

....

It all started back when I, Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg, was just four years old.

I was a girl with a stupidly long name, and my most charming feature was my bright red hair. I always felt proud when admiring my red hair and the way it reached down to my waist.

One day I'd just heard that my younger cousin Iris had come to visit, and I was racing down the stairs to see her. I fell from the fifth stair and landed flat on my face. That was the day that I remembered it all.

I've got memories from my past life!

Please don't write me off as a delusional kid just yet. Please.

The past-life me had just reached adulthood and was in her first year of college. I was studying the humanities, by the way. I'd turned into a bit of a military geek, and I was just getting into the otaku lifestyle. As for my favorite warship, tank, and fighter jet—well, if I talk about those I'll get way off topic...

Let's get back to the main point. I'd gotten into the college I'd been aiming for, and I should have been spending my freshman year enjoying the freedom of having my own place and living out my otaku lifestyle without restraint. And yet, before I knew it, I'd turned into a four-year-old girl. I had absolutely no idea how it all happened. Not in the slightest.

The one thing I did know was the name Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg. There was an otome game called *Wish Upon a Shooting Star* that an otaku friend of mine had more or less forced me to play, and one of the characters in the game had that exact same name.

After realizing that, it didn't take me long to remember the rest. I was in a

country known as the Plusen Empire. The name of the emperor ruling the Plusen Empire was Wilhelm III. The name of the school I'd be attending was the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery. And the name of the first imperial prince was Friedrich. It all matched the scenario of *Wish Upon a Shooting Star*.

Having cleared every route in the game, I understood what I was up against.

First off, I wasn't this game's main heroine. I was what you might call the villainess. My role was to make trouble for the heroine. While the heroine would get one of the many happy ends available to her, I had the exclusive privilege of having every single route end with me being exiled from the country while my family's domain was seized. Most people would think *I'm screwed!* But that wasn't my style. Facing every situation with optimism was a rule I lived by.

Based on what I'd remembered, my character had a level of magical potential that rivaled the heroine's. That's right, magic exists in this world! People here live their lives in comfort thanks to magic. It was what you might call a sword-and-sorcery fantasy world.

Which means... All I have to do is hone my talent for magic like crazy so I can strike back against my fated bad end!

My past-life knowledge was going to help. I'd turned into a bit of a military geek; I more or less understood the workings of armor-piercing shells capable of destroying an enemy's armored tanks, the principles that kept fighter jets up in the air, and the mechanisms behind guided missiles that would never miss a target.

As far as I knew, no such magic or weapons had been invented in this world yet. This was a sword-and-sorcery fantasy world, after all.

Which means... I'll develop my magical talents rapidly and fuse this world's half-baked magic with modern weapon technology! I'll burn through so much ammo—uh, I mean, I'm gonna burn through all my enemies! Then I can just smash my way through whatever bad end is waiting for me!

All right! This feels like an awesome plan! Everyone in agreement, please raise your hand!

"I agree!" "Agreed!" "Agreed!"

The motion has passed with unanimous approval from the council of Astrid's brain.

And that's how I set my life goals at the age of four. First, I'd train tirelessly to develop my magical talents. Second, I'd find a way to fuse this world's magic with modern weapon technology. Third, I'd avoid doing anything that might lead to a bad end. And fourth, I'd acquire and accumulate enough skills to ensure that I'd be fine even if my family's domain were seized.

If I can just manage those things, I'll be just fine, without a doubt!

On the day I had these thoughts, I began to burn with a hunger for knowledge, so much so that I made myself ill. My parents panicked and called for a healer who tried to cure me, but there was no erasing the memories that had suddenly returned to my tiny brain.

My fever persisted for seven days...but then I awoke filled with new determination!

No matter what happens, I'm not accepting the bad end fate has in store for me! I'll use all the firepower at my disposal to smash my way through any bad end that could be waiting for me! I am not the pitiful Astrid from the game! This is no time for sleep, Gadermann! Your magic training starts today!

What? My magic training doesn't start until I enter the academy? I can't wait that long! Father!

Chapter 2 — Lady Villainess Gets a Home Tutor

I, Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg, was just four years old. However, my level of determination wasn't your average four-year-old's.

I wanna learn magic no matter what! I wanna train! I wanna fight my destruction!

"Father. Father." I knocked on the door to father's study.

"What is it, Astrid?"

"Father! I have a request!" I showed father my most angelic smile. I'd planned to get my way using my innocent charm.

That's right, a cute smile from his adorable four-year-old daughter was enough to knock my father down with a single blow. I gave father my most angelic-looking demonic smile while making sure not to give away any hint of my devious thoughts.

My father's name was Paul Hans von Oldenburg. He was a noble among nobles; in addition to being the duke of Oldenburg, he was also serving as the current Minister of Posts. Being his daughter made me rather proud too.

And to think the country would be willing to drive out this great man because the heroine got bullied a teensy bit! If they weren't careful, my father could command his soldiers to rise up and start a civil war; father had many friends among the powerful nobles, and the country was still reliant on the forces commanded by various lords even now. But questioning the game's plot would get me nowhere!

"Father, I'd like more than anything to start studying and training in magic!"

"Astrid... We've talked about this. Both your study and training can wait until you've enrolled at the academy. Until then, you can focus on learning proper etiquette."

Ugh. My angelic smile didn't work.

Father was insistent that I'd start learning magic at the academy. Reading between the lines, he was telling me that I needed to learn proper etiquette before starting at the academy so that I wouldn't embarrass myself as a noble. But I wasn't about to give up that easily.

"Father, there are three good reasons to have me study magic."

"And they are?"

"Firstly," I held up three fingers and spoke as though I were selling a cellphone contract, "it is true that I should diligently study etiquette to avoid embarrassing myself at the academy, but would it not be embarrassing if my grades were poor despite my good manners? It is important for me to start studying now to avoid embarrassment at the academy. This is one reason."

"Well...that *is* true," father agreed.

"If I had more knowledge of magic than my classmates before starting my education, my grades would almost certainly be excellent. I'd gain the respect of the children of other nobles, and then rumors of me would spread to their parents, which would increase your standing with the palace, father. That's another reason."

"I see. It sounds as though you want to study magic for my sake. Astrid, I'm happy that you're so thoughtful."

Heh heh. That's me, a master of the art of persuasion. One more push should do it.

"And I have one more reason. I'm sure you realize that I have potential as a mage."

"Yes, we did gauge your mana at birth."

It was customary in this world to measure the mana of newborn babies the moment they stopped crying. I had an unprecedented level of mana, and my parents agreed that their daughter had a bright future ahead of her.

"If I start honing this magical potential now, I wouldn't just become a court mage; I could become a grand mage. I could become powerful enough to save the whole country in times of crisis. I could recreate flechettes and tear our

enemies to... I mean, if a member of the imperial family fell ill or was wounded, I might be the one to heal them, and then your family's renown would reach new heights."

"I thought I heard you say something rather disturbing just now."

"Just your imagination."

Whoops, almost spilled the beans on my real goals.

"In any case, these are the three advantages to having me learn magic. What do you say?" I asked father with the same angelic smile.

"Very well. However, your studies in magic can wait until your specialist teacher arrives. You'll be patient until then. You possess an incredibly high amount of mana. If you're not supervised you might injure yourself, or worse."

"Yes, father! Very well, father! I love you!"

Phew. That's one obstacle overcome.

Father promised that he'd find me a teacher right away, and I could hardly wait.

....

"My name is Wolff von Wrangel, and I've been appointed as your magic tutor. It's an honor to meet you, Lady Astrid."

"The honor is all mine."

The teacher who finally arrived was a young man who'd completed his doctoral studies at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery and was now earning a living working as a home tutor when he wasn't too busy with his research. His young age made me worry a little, but I knew that anyone hired by my father would be capable enough, and there was also the fact that he'd already had experience working as a home tutor. My next task would be to squeeze as much knowledge out of him as I could.

"Lady Astrid, do you know what the two types of magic are?"

Two varieties of magic existed in this world. "Elemental magic and blood magic?"

“That’s right. Elemental magic is performed by drawing upon the powers of spirits belonging to the elements of fire, earth, wind, and water. For example, water elemental magic allows one to produce water freely, like so.”

I watched as Dr. Wolff began to create water until he’d filled an empty teacup.

Lame... That’s about as lame as it gets.

“Can water spirits create anything besides water?” I asked him.

“Water is the most fundamental, but they can create most types of liquid. Besides wine, cocoa, and so on, I’ve also heard that a fellow researcher was able to produce a flammable black liquid.”

“Flammable black liquid...!”

That sounds like petroleum. I’d like to get my hands on that, if I can.

“Now back to what I was saying,” he continued. “Elemental magic works through the spirits and exercises their power. However, blood magic has no need for spirits. That’s because it is, in a sense, a form of curse.”

Blood magic... The name alone was enough to make me feel uneasy.

“Blood magic affects the human body directly. It can be a power that heals or harms. It can even drive a person mad.”

“If it can manipulate someone’s mind, does that mean it can interfere with the brain?” I asked excitedly.

“Hm? Why would that be?” Dr. Wolff pointed to his chest. “The human mind resides here.”

Oh, that’s right. People in this world don’t know that the mind’s a product of chemical reactions happening in the brain. But still, I can use this. I could heal myself, I could call on the superhuman strength that people supposedly have when they’re in danger, or I could enhance my reflexes by modifying my brain.

“Dr. Wolff, can blood magic make someone stronger?”

“Indeed, it’s possible. It’s known that members of certain orders of knights use blood magic to increase their strength. Adventurers and bands of

mercenaries also tend to start their training by learning blood magic to enhance their strength.”

Right. I guess everyone else had the same idea.

“There’s still much that isn’t understood about blood magic. But the workings of elemental magic are known, and that is where we’ll begin your lessons.”

What? Just when he got me interested in blood magic. I wanna boost my strength and turn into a superhuman.

“Is something wrong?” Dr. Wolff asked.

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking about something.”

Well, whatever. Let’s learn elemental magic first. Elemental magic could be useful for recreating modern weaponry after all. And besides, modifying my body in ways I don’t understand might not be the best idea. This was how I used to think back when I was young and innocent.

“We had best conduct your training in elemental magic outdoors. There’s a risk of causing damage if we continue indoors.”

“You’re right.” If we start making fire and water indoors, it’ll be hard to clean up.

With that, Dr. Wolff led me outside.

“Now, let’s begin by calling upon a water spirit. Hold the image of water clearly in your mind. Just ordinary water that you’d use to clean yourself, drinking water, the water of a lake. Hold the image of such water in your mind. Do you understand?”

“Um. I suppose so...” Magic’s awfully roundabout.

I imagined nothing but water. *Water, drinking water, cold water, H₂O, a swimming pool...*



I was fully absorbed in my task until Dr. Wolff called out to me, almost yelling, “That’s enough! That’s quite enough, Lady Astrid!”

When I came to my senses, there was a three-meter wide mass of water before my eyes!

“Oh no, oh no no no... Wh-What should I do now, Dr. Wolff?!”

I was panicking a little as I tried to figure out how to deal with the ghastly water blob I’d made, but Dr. Wolff gave me quick instructions. “Please make it disappear! Stop imagining water and imagine nothingness instead!”

Naught. Nothingness. A sense of pure emptiness.

“Well done, Lady Astrid.”

By the time I’d heard Dr. Wolff’s relieved voice, the monstrous water blob had already vanished.

“Wow. So this is what it’s like to use magic!”

“It would normally take quite some time before you were actually able to produce water, but it seems you have quite the talent for magic, and you’re also a fast learner. Lady Astrid, such talent must be a source of pride for Duke Oldenburg.”

Really? You think this is worth praise? Huge blobs of water are hardly going to be useful for making modern weapons.

“Now let’s try calling upon a fire spirit. Please imagine fire in just the same way as before. The flames of a hearth, the flames of a kiln. Please imagine a hot fire.”

“Okay!”

Flames. Flames. The flames that erupt from the impact of a tank’s high-explosive shell. The ocean of flames that springs from a thermobaric shell. I love the smell of napalm in the morning...

“Whoa! This is dangerous, Lady Astrid! That’s enough!”

“Wow! What is this?!”

A magnificent ball of fire, far bigger than the water blob I’d just made, had

formed in front of me. The sensation of the searing heat made it feel all the more real. *I'll set the manor on fire if I'm not careful with this thing!*

I pushed all unnecessary thoughts from my mind and imagined nothingness. *Nothing. Nothing. Pure nothingness.*

That was enough to erase the fireball threatening to burn down the whole manor. The only traces it left were a burnt patch of lawn and a slightly charred roof on one of the manor's walkways.

I really shouldn't burn the walkway roof... I hope father won't be mad.

"I never imagined that you'd be able to create so much fire on your first day of learning magic. Even battle mages need years of training before they can produce fireballs of that size."

I was smart enough to realize that it'd probably had something to do with the things I'd imagined. Dr. Wolff's examples had been flames in a hearth or a kiln. Meanwhile, I'd been imagining flames from high explosives, thermobaric shells, and napalm. It was a different level of firepower.

"Should I not have imagined it like that?"

"Lady Astrid, could it be that you've actually witnessed such giant fireballs for yourself?"

Sure I have! I've seen tons online and on DVDs! "I had a dream about one once."

"I see. You're able to recreate what you saw in dreams. That's a new discovery."

Sorry, Dr. Wolff. I'd give you a better explanation, but you probably wouldn't believe me.

"For a change of pace, we'll try wind spirits next. Please imagine wind. A spring breeze, the raging winds that accompany downpours of rain."

This teacher's surprisingly brave. Personally, I'd want to call it a day after seeing a student make that monstrous fireball. But I've got to admire his courage. This means I'll be able to train real hard in magic!

I imagined wind. *The wind of a fan. Airflow from an air conditioner. The*

downwash from a helicopter. The exhaust stream emitted by a jet...

A moment later, a pleasant, gentle breeze picked up around us.

“Well done, Lady Astrid. You’ve now mastered three types of spirits. It’s hard to believe that it’s your first day of studying magic.”

“B-But why wasn’t it super powerful like it was before?”

I was imagining winds powerful enough to enable flight...

“While it’s possible to create strong winds by imagining a storm, I think this is enough for now. The way you control your magic all depends on what mental images you use and how much mana you have. We’ll go over these methods of control in more detail tomorrow.”

Really? I don’t think a storm is enough to keep a missile or a jet plane in the air. I’ll have to come up with my own solution.

“Now then, let’s finish by calling upon an earth spirit. I don’t suppose simply creating dirt would be much of a challenge for you, Lady Astrid, so please try forming it in a particular shape. How does that sound? Do you think you can?”

“I’ll try it!”

Dirt just made me think of the soil on the ground. But there was something else I wanted to try. I figured that if water spirits could make petroleum, then earth spirits should be able to make steel.

I began to imagine. The diagrams I’ve studied over and over. My memories of firing countless rounds on shooting ranges in Guam. The interior of the parade rifle that my uncle showed me.

“This isn’t...” The result seemed to confuse Dr. Wolff.

“Whoa! I did it! A pump-action shotgun!”

My experiment worked great! Just using my memories, I’ve made a shotgun that can handle everything from riot control to breaking padlocks! This is a huge success! My ambitions are another step closer to becoming reality!

“You there. Young lady.” My innocent joy was interrupted by the voice of an old man coming from somewhere near my feet.

“Huh? Who said that?”

“What do you mean ‘who’? I’m the earth-spirit gnome who just helped you make that thing.”

The creature that appeared was a little man with a pointed hat and a bushy beard.

“Oh my!” Dr. Wolff cried. “The forms of the spirits are rarely seen, and they almost never show themselves willingly. Could you be here because of the thing that Lady Astrid just made?”

What the?! Don’t tell me he saw through my plan to recreate modern weaponry?! Is this little man going to erase me from existence for the sake of maintaining world order?!

“I can see what this tool does from looking at its structure,” the little man told me. “We spirits know a lot that humans don’t. And it was me who had to make something from that half-baked idea of yours. I got that one working just right for you. And you should be grateful.”

“I see. So my mental image was incomplete...” I should have guessed that I couldn’t perfectly recreate things from memory alone. What a shame.

“So if I started churning out things like this, do you think you could redline... I mean, adjust my designs for me?” I asked him.

“Churn them out...? Are you preparing for war?” The little man looked at me with his eyes wide.

“You’re not too far off.” Fighting against fate is a form of war! It’s a war I absolutely refuse to lose!

“Might I ask what sort of tool this is, Lady Astrid?” Dr. Wolff inquired.

“It’s a tool for opening doors and scaring off bad people!” It’s not exactly a lie—though I’m not going to stop at slugs and rubber bullets.

And that was where Dr. Wolff ended our first lesson. My teacher had given me a book to read about the fundamentals of magic, so I did nothing but study even after he left. My constant efforts were sure to pay off in my future. That’s right, the future where I crush fate’s plans for the villainess!

In the meantime, I was able to go to sleep with my arms around my shotgun—the first modern weapon I'd ever created. After my father saw me sleeping like that, Dr. Wolff probably got a long lecture about not giving weird things to his daughter.

Sorry, Dr. Wolff...

Chapter 3 — The Villainess Learns Much about Magic

I learned a lot from the book about magic that Dr. Wolff gave me. Firstly, magic was the power of imagination. You could even create gold, so long as you could imagine it. That probably explained why gold was worthless in this world and why orichalcum, a mineral that was impossible to create using magic, was used as currency. In this world, 4.8 grams of orichalcum had a value of one “mark.” That amount weighed about the same as a hundred yen coin.

Anyway, that’s enough trivia. Let’s go over what I learned.

Someone wanting to carefully light a fire could imagine the sparks made by flint and steel—although imagining the flame of a match would probably be an improvement.

Someone wanting to create a little water could imagine liquid being poured from a pitcher, and apparently the temperature of the water could be controlled at will. I couldn’t think of any water-powered weapons, though I did know a few weapons that might benefit from a little bit of temperature regulation.

The heat of a flame could also be adjusted using imagination. Ultra-high-temperature flames could be created just by imagining that sort of flame. But I couldn’t find any mention of how to create adhesive flames in the book Dr. Wolff had given me; creating flamethrowers and napalm bombs wasn’t going to be quite so simple.

Lastly, I learned that using too much mana could put your life in danger. Once your mana ran out, you’d be drained of physical strength, and in the worst-case scenario it could even be fatal.

On this point, there was something very important to understand. Although I had an incredibly vast amount of mana at my disposal, it wasn’t limitless. If I took on the Plusen Empire someday, I’d probably have to fight against countless

soldiers. I'd have to manage my mana the whole time.

People could see how much mana they had remaining by wearing a birthstone. A birthstone loses its shine as the wearer's mana is depleted, and it cracks when the wearer's mana reaches zero. But I didn't plan on testing that out.

All right! That's my self-study finished! Time for today's lesson with Dr. Wolff.

"Y-You read the whole thing already?" Dr. Wolff's eyes were wide with astonishment as I handed back the book.

"Yes! The fundamentals were all explained so clearly that I breezed through the whole thing!"

Dr. Wolff had chosen a book intended to make everything easy to understand for beginners like me. It went over everything I'd already learned in my first lesson and also helped me deepen my knowledge of magic. Dr. Wolff hadn't let me down. I'd expected no less from someone who held a doctorate; his choice of book had been perfect.

"Hmm. You're rather intelligent, Lady Astrid. And also a very enthusiastic student. Perhaps someday you'll be able to obtain a doctorate from the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery just like I did."

Dr. Wolff sounded quite pleased. He must have liked the idea of me becoming a fellow researcher.

"Well then, Lady Astrid. Let's begin today's lesson. Did you read about talismans in the book I gave you?"

"Yes. They're tools that let you use magic without having to constantly imagine everything."

In this world, mages fought. What's more, they fought while arrows were flying, rocks were being catapulted, and sword-wielding soldiers were charging toward them. If they were carefully imagining little details in the middle of all that, they'd die from being hit by the arrows, they'd be squashed flat under the rocks launched by the catapults, or they'd be sliced into pieces by the swords. That's why someone had created a way for every battle mage to use their magic on a chaotic battlefield without having to imagine lots of little details; that's

what talismans were.

“Talismans allow you to use magic that you’ve stored inside them without having to imagine anything. Unfortunately, each talisman can only be used once before it burns up. However, you can prepare a large number of them in order to use magic continuously without having to imagine anything.”

Right. Talismans are good for one use only.

Naturally, this meant that every battle mage had to set to work laboriously preparing all of their talismans before any fighting started. It sounded like a chore, but if it meant being able to react fast enough to win against arrows and swords, then it was worth learning.

“Now, let’s try actually making a talisman.”

“Okay!”

Dr. Wolff led me outside once again. Now that he’d learned just how incredibly powerful my magic was, he decided that we’d train in an empty field on the ranch a short distance away rather than in the manor’s courtyard.

“Now, to start, I’ll teach you how talismans are made. The raw ingredients are paper combined with a maiden’s hair. This forms the material we use to make a talisman.”

The technology for making paper already existed in this world, which was fortunate because it meant the books were made from easy-to-read paper.

“I have some of the material here. Please take one sheet.”

“Thank you.”

Dr. Wolff had kindly prepared some paper sheets for making talismans during my lesson, and I was sure they hadn’t been free. I couldn’t have been more grateful.

“Now, try using magic while holding the paper. Water, fire, wind, earth. Any kind of elemental magic you like.”

“Fire in that case.”

Unsurprisingly, I was drawn to the power of fire.

I imagined fire. Nothing too flashy. Just the flames you'd see in a fireplace. Then actual flames began to rise before my eyes. They had just the right level of intensity.

"Now look into the talisman."

"Umm..." When I looked at the talisman, runes had appeared on its previously blank surface.

"Is it finished now?"

"Yes. It's finished. Next we'll try using it."

That was super easy. I thought there'd be a bit more of a ritual to it.

"Hold the talisman and channel mana into it. Can you do that?"

"Channel mana?"

How do I channel mana? That wasn't even in the book.

"You only need to give it a little power from your mind. There's no need to exert yourself. Hold the talisman and imagine liquid pouring into it from your mind."

"Liquid pouring from my mind..."

I tried to picture the mana flowing into the talisman just as Dr. Wolff had told me. Then the talisman burned up and the same flames as before burned before my eyes. *So this is a talisman! How handy!*

"It's also possible to activate a talisman without holding it in your hand. Try making another and placing it some distance away."

At Dr. Wolff's request, I made another talisman by imagining flames, and then I left it somewhere about a kilometer away.

"Now channel mana into it just as you did before. But this time imagine your mana being channeled across the distance."

Using the same technique, I imagined my mana being channeled into the distant talisman, far, far away. I imagined the feeling of mana flowing into the talisman a kilometer away... Then I heard the sound of flames burning in the distance. I looked ahead and saw that the talisman had burned up as the flames

I'd previously imagined appeared.

"Whoa! I did it!"

"Indeed. Well done. If you can just learn to channel your mana more rapidly, it'll be perfect. I couldn't be more surprised at how fast you're learning all of this. Of all the students I've taught, I've never encountered a child with such potential."

Yay! I got real praise! Go me!

On a side note, the book had said that activating someone else's talisman was impossible. If it had been possible, talismans would've needed to have been handled more carefully.

"By the way, Dr. Wolff, I wanted to try something. Would that be all right?"

"Of course. Today's lesson was to be about making talismans, but we finished that surprisingly quickly."

All right. If the teacher says it's okay, then let's try it.

I started to imagine. I imagined the explosion when the gunpowder packed into a round of an automatic rifle was ignited. My mental image was of a powerful explosion happening on a small scale. I remembered the day I'd fired rounds on the shooting range in Guam.

Then there was a sound like a loud pop, and a small-scale explosion happened in front of me.

"Impressive. You're able to use explosion magic through the fire spirits. That was a small explosion, but you had the mental image of an explosion just right. Explosions aren't something most people see every day."

"Ummm. I saw one in a dream!" *I wonder how far I'll get with this "I saw it in a dream" tactic.*

"There's something else I'd like to try. Could I please borrow another talisman?"

"By all means. I brought these for the sake of the lesson, after all."

Dr. Wolff's a nice guy. He's a great teacher. "Okay, here goes."

I put the mental image of an explosion into the talisman and left it to the side for the moment. Then I tried sending the mental image of something made from lead and plastic to the earth spirits, counting on them to correct the minor details. Then it appeared. The thing I'd created was...

"What might this be?"

"It's a 12-gauge slug. It's something you use when hunting." *And they work fairly well on humans too.*

Although shotguns were normally associated with firing shot pellets, a shotgun could also be loaded with slugs so that they'd fire a single bullet at a time. The military used these for breaking door locks before storming into places.

"Now if I put the talisman I just made inside this slug cartridge..." I set to it with growing excitement. "It's finished!"

It was probably the first time a round had ever been created in this world.

"And...what does it do?"

"You use it like this."

To answer Dr. Wolff's question and clear away his confusion, I loaded the round into the shotgun I'd been carrying on my back the whole time. With the round loaded, the real fun could start. I aimed at a wooden board that looked like a good target and pulled the trigger while channeling mana into the talisman.

The slug fired from the shotgun with an explosion that rattled my eardrums. The wooden board shook from the impact of the 12-gauge lead bullet, and a large hole appeared in it. As for me, I was almost sent head over heels because the recoil of the shotgun was more than I could handle.

"Ohh... That's new..." Dr. Wolff admired the wooden board I'd just shot.

"Ugh. My arm and shoulder felt that..."

The force of firing a shotgun that clearly wasn't designed to be used by a little four-year-old had left me with a stinging pain in my shoulder.

"Anyhow, I did it! It worked!"

With just a little mana, I'd created a technique that was more efficient than simply firing out raw magic. Efficiency was always a good thing. Making something like a giant fireball would normally involve making a complex talisman, and fireballs were difficult to control. A shotgun was far superior in that regard; all I needed was a round to put in it and a talisman to generate some force.

"And this is how you use this thing you call a shotgun?"

"Yes. But it's hard for me to..." *Wait a minute. There is one way for a four-year-old to use a shotgun more easily.*

"Dr. Wolff! Please teach me how to use blood magic!" *That's it! If I can boost my strength with blood magic, I'll be able to control the recoil!*

"Blood magic... That is my specialty, but you do realize that using blood magic carries some risk?"

"Of course!" *Who cares about that? This is going to let me fire guns whenever I like.*

Huh...? Didn't I have some other goal besides shooting things?

"Well then, let me teach you about blood magic." Dr. Wolff said, looking more serious than I'd ever seen him.

"We'll start with a simple strength enhancement." He picked up a pebble from the ground. "First, the fundamentals are the same as elemental magic. However, we must limit ourselves to sensible mental images. Careless use of magic on the body can have some adverse effects."

I get it. Keep the mental images sensible.

"If you want to strengthen your hand, imagine power filling it and then hold a mental image of your mana circulating through your body. The knack of it is very similar to using a talisman, but instead of making mana flow into a talisman, you're making it flow through your own body."

Dr. Wolff clenched his fist.

"Ohh!" The pebble that Dr. Wolff was holding had shattered into pieces.

"Would you like to try it?"

“Of course!”

All right. From today on, I’m a superhuman.

“Now, why don’t you try the same thing but on your legs, Lady Astrid? If you’re able to run faster, then you’ll feel the effects of blood magic for yourself.”

“Okay!”

I’d rather strengthen my upper body, but beginners shouldn’t argue with the pros. All right, let’s do this!

I imagined power filling my legs. *Muscles like a horse. The bulging leg muscles of an athlete. Dashing like the wind.*

Then I channeled my mana to my legs. I already knew how to manipulate mana after getting the hang of using talismans, so this part was easy. I made my mana circulate through my lower body and felt myself fill with it.

“Are you ready?”

“Good to go!” *I’m ready to hop, step, Carl Lewis!*

“Now, how about you try running to the fence over there? Try running as you normally would so you can get a sense of how much your physical strength has increased. You did keep your mental images sensible, didn’t you?”

“I only imagined things that are humanly possible!”

Let’s dash, let’s dash. Let’s see what the power of this blood magic thing can do.

“Now, please try running.”

“Okay!”

I ran. My body was light, like I was floating in space. I could feel my feet hit the ground with incredible power. Before I knew it, I’d reached the far-off fence. I’d run with unbelievable speed.

“Dr. Wolff! Did I do it right?!” I asked cheerfully.

“A-Are you all right?” Dr. Wolff looked alarmed. “You don’t feel strange at all?”

“I feel fine. It doesn’t hurt anywhere.”

“Just in case, I’d like to inspect you using my blood magic,” Dr. Wolff said with a pale face as he reached for my hand. “I had no idea you’d show such power on your first attempt at this. Though after everything I’ve seen from you, I should have guessed this was possible. I was careless.”

Huh? Did I overdo it?

“There are no abnormalities on the surface of your muscles, and mana is being expelled from your body as normal. Phew... I’m relieved nothing’s wrong. But please be careful. Blood magic can be a cure, but it can also be a poison.”

“I’m sorry...” I hadn’t meant to make Dr. Wolff so worried. I felt guilty.

“Dr. Wolff, can I try it on my upper—”

“Let’s practice blood magic after you’ve learned mana control. Until then, we’ll focus on studying elemental magic.”

Gah. No more blood magic? Now I can’t fire the shotgun I made!

“Can’t I at least try it?” I begged.

“Please don’t. Did you know that poor mana control can tear your muscles apart?”

Uh! That’s a scary thought.

“Once you’ve learned to control your mana by using elemental magic, then you can try blood magic again. We have plenty of time. Let’s go at a steady pace.”

“Yes, Dr. Wolff.”

He’s right. I shouldn’t throw myself into the deep end.

“Well then, we’ll have a lesson on mana control tomorrow. If you’re interested in blood magic, you might want to read this book. It describes how to get started. It’s a little difficult, but I suspect you’ll be able to understand it.”

“I’ll do my best to read it.”

And that was the end of the day’s lesson. I’d been able to test fire my first weapon and I learned about blood magic, so it had been a productive lesson.

Now I really wanted to learn blood magic so I could fire my shotgun with just one hand.

Chapter 4 — The Villainess Wants Freedom to Use Magic

I learned about mana control during my third lesson with Dr. Wolff. With the amount of mana I had, there were all sorts of dangers that could arise if I didn't learn how to control it. After making a monstrous water blob and a fireball big enough to scorch the roof of a walkway, that became abundantly clear.

On top of that, there was something known as mana runaway where all the mana in the body would rush out, sending parts of the mage's body flying in all directions. Yikes. I had to study mana control diligently to make sure that didn't happen to me.

I practiced filling tiny cups with water and creating flames that could only burn through a single sheet of paper. A mage could vary the intensity of their magic by using different mental images, but I learned to use proper mana control to unleash small amounts of power even when my mental images were extreme.

Once I could regulate my mana, we began a new test to determine just how much mana I could use. There was no way we could have guessed how that would turn out.

To evaluate my mana, we traveled some distance to the ranch that was our usual proving ground—uh, our usual practice area, I mean. I was unlikely to cause any damage there.

"I'm ready to monitor each region within your body," Dr. Wolff told me. "Please call upon a water spirit and create the largest water blob that you can. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Here I go."

I began to picture all sorts of water in my head. *An extra-large water blob. Water as vast as the ocean. The widest expanse of water. The biggest water blob imaginable.*

“I think you can make it bigger. Please keep going,” Dr. Wolff requested.

I responded by piling on more mental images. *Water reservoirs, rivers, ponds, lakes, the sea.*

I channeled as much mana as I could into it. I channeled all the mana that was in my body.

“Unbelievable,” Dr. Wolff said in surprise. “You’re not at your limit yet?”

I opened my eyes. What I saw made the monstrous water blob from before seem tiny. I’d created a mass of water big enough to cover the entire surface of the field we were standing in and then some. This was no mere blob; it was a Titan blob, a menacing monster that was growing right before us.

“D-Dr. Wolff. Should I keep going?” I asked.

“I wanted you to use as much mana as possible, but anything bigger than this could cause damage to the area,” Dr. Wolff replied with a hint of admiration in his voice. “Let’s not go any further.”

“All right, I’ll erase it.”

The moment I imagined nothingness, the Titan water blob vanished.

“What do you think, Dr. Wolff? How much mana can I safely use?”

“Unfortunately, I still don’t know. I’ve never known anyone who can use so much mana. I’m sorry I can’t be of more use to you.”

Sorry, Dr. Wolff. My abilities are always causing trouble.

“At the very least, you can safely use the same amount of mana you channeled into your magic in today’s test. So you can use a rather large amount of mana, but even so...” Dr. Wolff still looked a little unsure.

“Don’t worry! I’ll always use sensible amounts! So, does this mean I’ve mastered control of my mana?”

“Not quite. Mana control is something that becomes second nature after prolonged training. It’s also possible to lose the ability if you don’t keep yourself in practice. Even I still practice mana control whenever my schedule allows.”

Hmm. So mastering magic isn’t that simple...

“By the way, Dr. Wolff. Where can I buy my own talismans?”

“You’ll find them in almost any magic item store.”

Magic item store? I guess I’ll find one in town.

“Lady Astrid, hasn’t Duke Oldenburg warned you that you’re only permitted to use magic under my supervision? Didn’t you promise never to use magic by yourself?”

Guh... Dr. Wolff’s sharp. It’s like he guessed I was going to use talismans to have some fun with the new pistol I made. It was a small, 9 mm caliber gun that would be easy for a little girl to handle, but I’d only been able to fire it once.

I want to fire more guns! I want to shoot stuff! I want to feel a gun’s recoil!

“I suppose there shouldn’t be any harm in you using basic magic now that you’ve shown you can control your mana, Lady Astrid. I’ll say as much to Duke Oldenburg.”

“Thank you, Dr. Wolff! I love you!”

I’ve done it! Now I’m free to use my pistol every day. Or so I’d thought.

....

“Absolutely not,” said father when I asked if I could use magic at home.

“But why not?! Dr. Wolff gave his approval!”

“Wolff is too soft. I won’t have you using magic without specialist supervision when you’ve not even studied it for a whole week. I hope you realize that I’m saying this because I care about you.”

Ugh... I know magic can be dangerous. I know I’ll make a mess if I’m not supervised. But I’m still not giving up!

“Father, this is another thing I need to do to avoid embarrassing myself at school and to boost your reputation so that you’ll have stronger ties with the palace!” I lost all sense of shame and threw myself down on the ground before him. “Please! Please let me use magic! Please!”

“I said no, and I won’t...”

“Darling, what are you doing to Astrid?” A goddess had descended to offer

me salvation. It was my mother.

Mother's name was Louise Elizabeth von Oldenburg. She was an attractive woman whose most charming feature was her warm smile.

"Mother! Father says I can't use magic in the house! But my home tutor Dr. Wolff said I can use magic by myself already!"

"Oh my." After hearing me out, mother's gaze shifted toward father. "Is that so?"

"W-Well...it's just... Magic is dangerous. It's hardly something for a child to be using unattended. I'm saying so because it's in Astrid's best interests."

"But she did already get permission from her home tutor Dr. Wolff. It should be all right. If we have a servant attend to her, then I don't see there being much danger. If you'd like to act in Astrid's best interests, then that also means giving her space to grow up."

I can always count on mother. Thanks for the backup.

"You're not worried about her? If anything were to happen to Astrid..."

"I'll be all right! I'm only going to use very basic magic!"

Yeah, I'm only putting explosion magic into talismans so I can make ammo for target practice.

"Even so..."

"I have to practice my mana control every day so I can make it second nature! Please let me practice magic! I promise I won't do anything dangerous! I promise!"

I kept my head bowed while father looked at me sternly.

I'm begging here. Please say yes.

"Very well, I'll allow it. However, you mustn't neglect your other studies. I know you've been too busy with your magic training to study anything else lately. Even your other tutors worry that you only ever think about magic."

"I will! I'll try really hard at my ordinary studies!"

This is it! Now I can mess around with modern weapons.

“Start by reminding yourself how important your ordinary studies and proper etiquette are. And know that if anything in the house gets broken, then you’ll stop practicing magic at home. Likewise, if you get into danger because of your magic, then you’ll stop. Do you understand?”

“Understood!”

Being able to shoot a gun makes me happy to be alive. I can even read boring classics and put up with strict etiquette lessons if that’s what it takes.

Wait a minute. Didn’t I have another goal in life besides shooting stuff with a pistol?

Now I remember! My goal was to tear a hole through fate to prevent my downfall! I’m going to need to train with more weapons than a pistol and a shotgun for that. I guess the first thing I want is an anti-tank rocket launcher? Or maybe a more lightweight grenade launcher?

Now that I’ve even got father’s permission, I can start putting everything into the recreation of modern weapons! Heh heh heh. Just you wait, fate. I’m gonna smash you into tiny pieces.

Chapter 5 — I'm the Villainess, and I Can Never Get Enough of Firing Guns

I began once I'd prepared a straw figure to use as a target.

I drew my 9 mm caliber automatic pistol and took aim at the straw figure. The automatic pistol I was using couldn't hold many rounds, but even a four-year-old could wield it with ease. Naturally, I'd learned to handle the recoil already. I'd test-fired it once already, so I'd already learned how powerful the recoil was.

I aimed at the straw figure's chest and pulled the trigger.

The method where I'd channel my mana at the same time as pulling the trigger was already obsolete. Putting my mana into the firing pin in advance made it so mana would flow into the round when the hammer struck it, and then the talisman would automatically activate.

This new method of transferring mana was in a book that Dr. Wolff had lent me. Mana could be channeled into any material (besides orichalcum) in the same way that it could be circulated through the body during blood magic and in the same way that it could be channeled into a talisman. The mana would then stay within the item it had been channeled into, though given enough time it would very gradually dissolve into the air and eventually disappear completely.

According to the book I'd read, mana was conducted when it came into contact with other items. Just like electricity, mana could flow from iron to iron and from water to water. It meant that I could channel mana into the gun's firing pin and have it flow into the rounds when I pulled the trigger, but it was really hard to get it to work in practice.

The mana channeled into the firing pin would diffuse through the whole gun, often causing rounds in contact with the gun to spontaneously fire. I had to limit the amount of mana that I channeled into the weapon or each round would fire spontaneously.

Given all the trouble this causes, some people might think it'd be better to get rid of the trigger and firing pin completely and just channel mana directly into the gun. But that takes the excitement out of it! The trigger felt so good against my finger that there was no way I could get rid of it!

As far as problems go, a pressing one was accidentally channeling mana into the whole gun instead of the firing pin, which could cause every round in the magazine to explode. That's why I had to very, very carefully use just the right amount of mana while trying to keep it all concentrated in the firing pin. That took a ton of effort.

But all that effort was about to pay off!

The bullet fired the moment I pulled the trigger and blew the head off the straw figure. The spent cartridge ejected, another round loaded, and I pulled the trigger once more. This time I aimed for the chest and hit my target beautifully. A hole appeared in the straw figure's chest where the bullet had hit.



Firing guns is so good! I can't get enough!

I fired the bullets I'd been diligently making at night into the pitiful straw figure one after another, and before I knew it I'd run out. It was then that I realized that I should have made a lot more bullets. It was a big regret.

I wanted to try firing the shotgun too, but it was too big for a four-year-old to handle. Once Dr. Wolff trained me properly in blood magic, I'd be able to boost my physical strength and use the shotgun whenever I liked.

What should I make next? I've got a pistol as my sidearm, but I still need a main weapon.

Gotta be an automatic rifle. Automatic rifles are vital equipment for infantry on the battlefield, and having one of my own could really boost my combat potential. Ahh... Automatic rifle has such a nice ring to it. If I can make one I'll be able to shoot things with it, and that'll be awesome!

Father never would have guessed that his four-year-old daughter was making guns and firing them. If I were in his shoes I'd have put a stop to it immediately; a four-year-old and a firearm were a dangerous combination.

As far as father knew, I was just using basic magic. And in truth, I really was using basic magic. I hadn't lied to him. Everything I'd told him was true.

All right. No time like the present.

I imagined the mechanism of an automatic rifle. I imagined the interior of a rifle I'd seen dismantled in Guam. I imagined videos I'd watched of rifles being dismantled. I also imagined automatic rifles being put to actual use. Then I called upon the earth spirits, and an automatic rifle appeared from the ground. It was shaped like something used by the United States Army.

I did it! My firepower's growing with no end in sight!

"Hey, you."

While I was congratulating myself on completing the automatic rifle, a gravelly voice coming from the ground brought me back to my senses.

"Oh, Mister Gnome. Did you fix it up for me?"

“Yes, indeed I did. It should work.”

Mister Gnome’s so kind. And he’s such a cute little person.

“But what are you going to do with a weapon like that?” Mister Gnome asked me. “Do you want to start a war? I’m surprised that someone as young as you would have this much knowledge. What are you planning inside that innocent little mind of yours?”

“I suppose you could call it a war, but we’re not talking about a clash between two countries. This is a personal vendetta. I’m preparing for a showdown between me and the fate that’s waiting for me.”

“What do you mean? What’s all this about fate?” Even though I’d tried to explain, Mister Gnome just continued to look me right in the eye with the same puzzled expression.

“When I say fate, I mean fate, Mister Gnome. I need to arm myself so I can defend against the destruction that’s waiting for me.”

Destruction was the fate awaiting the villainess, but I was going to crush fate before that happened. If that meant making an enemy of this country, then I would crush it too.

“Hm? I don’t understand you.”

“This whole thing is pretty hard for me to understand too.”

I’d become the villainess before I knew it. It was an inexplicable situation beyond all prediction.

“I don’t mind making machines like this one,” Mister Gnome said while looking awfully serious, “but if it’s used to kill people, that’s another story. You keep your weapons to yourself. I don’t want you lending this to anyone who might figure out how it works.”

Mister Gnome continued: “The world progresses at a gradual pace. The balance of power between nations is the only thing stopping rulers from starting fresh wars; if you were to give a king something like what you’ve just made, they’d have a lot of power in their hands. That wouldn’t do.”

He’s right. Mister Gnome must have really thought about this.

As important as it was for me to avoid my destruction as the villainess, I also had to avoid ending what peace existed in the world. All my efforts spent avoiding my fate as the villainess would go to waste if I triggered a war.

“I promise you. I’ll keep all of this technology to myself. I’ll even keep it a secret from father and Dr. Wolff. I don’t want there to be a war either.”

“That’s a relief to hear. I hope all goes well in the fight against this ‘fate’ thing that you say’s waiting for you.”

It’s all going well already. I’ll triumph over fate. Even if the prince breaks off our fated engagement, I’ll find some way to prevent my exile and stop my family’s domain from being seized. I’ll use the technology of modern weapons to give fate the beating of a lifetime!

“Goodbye, girl who makes strange machines.”

“It’s Astrid. My name is Astrid. I look forward to working with you again.”

With that, Mister Gnome and I parted ways.

All I cared about was getting fully equipped with modern weapons. But I would have to remember that leaking out the technology could upset the current balance of power and start a war.

Good thing all the blueprints are inside my head; no one can steal those from me. But I’d better keep my weapons somewhere very secure... Maybe I’ll ask for a lockable closet and put a heavy chain and a padlock on everything inside.

I’m lucky Mister Gnome warned me. I probably would have triggered a war otherwise.

I need to think more about other people. Maintaining the balance of power is important, but I also have to worry about someone stealing my hard-won advantage. This has to be my secret, no matter what happens.

....

In today’s lesson, I was relearning how to boost my strength using blood magic.

“Very well done, Lady Astrid. The way things are going, I don’t think there should be any issue with allowing you to practice blood magic by yourself.”

“Yay!”

As far as moving around was concerned, I’d earned a passing grade in blood magic.

“But Dr. Wolff, blood magic has more uses than this, doesn’t it? Healing your injuries, improving your reflexes, changing your mental state...”

I knew blood magic could do a lot more than just make my arms and legs move faster. I knew it had to be possible to do things like manipulate someone’s mind, enhance my reflexes, and heal my wounds.

The things I most wanted to master were reflex enhancements and magic that could prevent PTSD.

It went without saying that I’d need good reflexes; better reflexes would further strengthen my chances of winning in battle. No matter how superior my firepower became, I’d be no better off unless I could actually hit my targets.

Furthermore, I’d need magic to prevent PTSD. I’d have to find some way to change my brain so that I’d remain calm even when killing enemy soldiers. I’d read in military novels that it was possible to make the brain more suited to the battlefield. Given certain adjustments, even a child soldier would be able to kill.

“Such effects are certainly possible...but the use of blood magic for anything besides increasing your strength is something you’d normally learn about after starting high school at the academy.”

“Please! I want to start learning now!”

I wanted to stylishly dodge through the enemy’s bullets as they tore through the air, just like in movies. If I somehow got injured on the battlefield, I wanted to be able to heal myself.

“Very well. I’ll start by teaching you blood magic for tracking your own physical state. Learning this will make it easy for you to understand what effects the magic is having on your body.”

Sounds good. A monitoring system, so to speak. This world’s more advanced than I thought.

“First, take deep breaths and relax. Then allow your mana to spread through

your entire body. Can you do that?”

“Yes. I’ve done that.”

I’m really getting the hang of manipulating my mana.

“Now, please check that there are no abnormalities in the flow of your mana.”

“Umm. Nothing looks strange to me.”

Everything seemed to be A-okay. No abnormalities.

“Now keep your mana flowing and try focusing your attention on individual parts of your body. Your limbs, your intestines, your brain. Can you tell whether each area is functioning normally?”

“Yeah! I can see it! Now I can know for sure what’s happening inside my own body.”

I could see it. The mana flow gave me a perfect grasp of the activity in my intestines, in my stomach, in my heart, and I could even observe the firing of synapses in my brain.

“That’s good to hear. Now I’ll teach you how to sharpen your reflexes. You should see something that’s constantly running through your entire body within the flow of your mana. Concentrate on that and try to speed it up.”

In other words, accelerate the signal transmissions in my nerves; I can see how that would improve my reflexes. I know something else I could do to improve my reflexes, but I shouldn’t try that just yet. I’ve no idea what might happen, and my technique might be better left until I’ve really perfected my mana control. Trying it here would be a little risky.

“Dr. Wolff, is it hard to manipulate the brain?”

“It’s very hard indeed. There’s much about the brain we don’t understand, and the consequences are difficult to imagine.”

And that’s the expert talking. I need to modify my brain, but I’ve got no way to do it.

“Dr. Wolff. Could you bring me another book next time so I can learn more

about blood magic? I want to learn more!”

“Very well. Next time, I’ll bring a book that describes some slightly more difficult techniques.”

Dr. Wolff’s a good teacher. He does everything I ask.

“Now, you have my permission to use blood magic for strengthening your limbs while you’re at home. But please promise you won’t try anything else, all right?”

“Yes, Dr. Wolff!”

Well, at least this’ll let me fire my shotgun. And I can’t wait to fire my automatic rifle. I’m gonna spend the whole night on target practice!

Firing guns is awesome!

Chapter 6 — The Villainess Is about to Be Kidnapped

I went to the ranch to test fire my weapons. It took a fair amount of effort, but I made myself three straw figures and set them up standing in a row. This time I planned to test-fire the shotgun and my automatic rifle.

For shotgun ammo I'd prepared slugs, shotshells, and nonlethal rounds. I needed to make sure that the rubber bullets really were nonlethal.

"Okay, let's start today's test-firing!"

I channeled mana into just the firing pin, just as I'd done for the automatic pistol, and I got ready to fire.

"Lady Astrid, is this really safe?" my maid asked, sounding quite worried. My maid had helped me make the straw figures, and now she had the job of keeping watch over me.

"It's safe, so long as I don't point this muzzle toward myself or my allies."

It's not like guns are inherently unsafe. It all depends on who's holding the weapon.

"Guns don't kill people. People kill people." I like that line.

"Well, let's get started."

I applied blood magic to myself to boost my physical abilities before aiming the muzzle of the automatic rifle—loaded with a thirty-round magazine—at a straw figure. I wasn't worried about my maid moving in front of the gun because she knew it was dangerous.

The next thing was to fire on it with the 5.56×45 mm NATO rounds I was using. These 5.56 mm rounds were a popular type of ammunition used across the world back on Earth. The cartridge diameter was relatively small, which meant that the recoil would be easy to handle... I hoped.

I fixed my aim on one of the straw figures. I'd even been able to create a basic optical sight for myself, so my aim was perfect.

I pulled the trigger. There was a pleasant sound from the gun, and the straw figure shook from the impact. My first test fire had been a complete success: the gun hadn't fired spontaneously, and the magazine hadn't exploded. Perfect.

I used blood magic once more to increase my physical abilities further, and then I switched the firing mode to full auto.

The automatic rifle that Mister Gnome had helped me make could switch between single shot and full auto modes. The simple explanation for people who don't know what that means is that a single bullet is fired with each pull of the trigger in single shot mode, while in full auto mode bullets fire constantly for as long as the trigger is held, like a machine gun.

Unlike single shot mode, full auto caused enough recoil to make the gun's barrel rise upward, making it a poor choice when precise aim was needed. When a four-year-old like me was holding the weapon, it was likely to send bullets flying in all directions, which was why I needed that strength boost.

How long can a four-year-old like me control an automatic rifle firing in full auto mode? Let's find out!

I braced myself and pulled the trigger, sending bullets flying out one after another.

"Eeek!"

The maid watching over me shrieked as I emptied the entire magazine into the straw figure.

This feels amazing! It doesn't get better than this!

Incredibly, my strength was enough to keep a reasonable level of control over a gun that tended to kick like a mule even in the hands of a trained soldier. Out of the twenty-nine rounds I'd fired at the chest of the straw figure, twenty had hit the target. That was incredible firing accuracy.

It'd be better if there were a gunpowder smell, but otherwise it's perfect!

"Phew. The magazine didn't explode like I'd feared, and my blood magic kept the recoil under control. Nothing to complain about. Now I want a good collection of accessories... It should be possible to attach an under-barrel

grenade launcher.”

Although my automatic rifle was made to unique specifications, I’d given it mounting platforms to allow various attachments. The optical sight I’d been using could also be replaced with something much more advanced later, and a grenade launcher could be attached beneath the barrel.

Ahh... My dreams are right in front of me. Wonderful dreams all within my grasp.

On second thought, keeping my mana under control could be a real problem if I attach an under-barrel grenade launcher. One slip up and my mana will flow to the wrong place and cause an explosion... Yeah... I need to do more research first.

The amount of mana I was currently putting into the firing pin was enough for one magazine. Adding any more would’ve caused it to flow elsewhere, possibly causing the magazine to explode. I wished I had some better way of controlling the flow of mana.

“L-Lady Astrid! Are you injured?!”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Everything’s all right.”

My automatic rifle’s full auto fire must have given her a real shock. *I was shocked when I saw full auto fire on a shooting range for the first time too. I know just how you feel.*

“Next up, the shotgun.”

But that’s not going to stop me from shooting. I’ve gone through so much strict etiquette training and studied so many boring regular subjects for the sake of this. As long as I’m in this world, firing guns is my reason to go on living!

Wait! No! I’m developing technology for the sake of blowing away the villainess’s fate and creating a future for myself! I’m not just playing around! I can’t forget about that!

But still, if something’s fun I’ll enjoy it...

“Lady Astrid, are you not finished yet?”

“We can go home after this. Just stick with me a little while longer.”

The maid seemed eager to take me home before I hurt myself, but I wasn't about to let anyone end my fun that easily. I wanted to try firing rubber bullets from my shotgun next. It would be getting dark after that, so I'd have to go home.

It was just after I'd loaded six nonlethal rounds into my shotgun that they appeared. We heard whinnying as a band of five men on horseback approached along a road at the edge of the ranch.

"Oh? Would ya look at that!"

"Some noble's daughter?"

I don't see why that needed a question mark. I'm clearly the duke's daughter.

"Lady Astrid! These men are cattle rustlers! They've caused trouble all across Duke Oldenburg's ranch! They're dangerous! Let's get away!"

What? There's someone causing trouble on my family's ranch? "Cattle rustler" sounds like some dumb bad guy from a western.

"Don't worry. I'll handle this."

I gripped the shotgun tight and stood between the cattle rustlers and my maid as they climbed down from their horses.

"What? Brave little lady, are we? Have you got some fancy noble's toy?"

"I'd like you to stop stealing cattle from my family. Those cattle are my family's property."

They were the cows, pigs, and horses that I fed and took care of whenever I returned home from testing my weapons. I wasn't about to stand for it if someone was stealing the cattle I'd helped raise.

"Oh ho. You're feisty. If it's your family, that makes you the duke's daughter."

"That's right. I'm the daughter of Duke Oldenburg. And right now, I'm defending our cattle."

As the cattle rustlers approached laughing, I stood my ground with my head held high.

"Kidnapping a duke's daughter should make us more money than stealing

cattle. Why don't you come with us? Come quietly and we won't hurt you."

The cattle rustler reached for the short sword at his waist.

"You're one who's about to get hurt." I aimed the muzzle of my shotgun at the man's abdomen. "You'd better back off right now."

In reality, even nonlethal rubber bullets could kill someone if they hit the wrong spot. I didn't really know where to aim. The head seemed like a bad idea, and I didn't want to risk breaking a rib in case it pierced his lung. The abdomen seemed like the safest choice. The leg was another option, but I really wasn't sure whether that would be enough to incapacitate him.

"Gah. Disrespectful little brat! We'll squeeze a nice fat ransom out of the duke after we kidnap you. Now shut up and come here!"

I pulled the trigger just as the man reached out to grab me.

"Ugh!"

I fired the nonlethal rubber bullets and hit Cattle Rustler A right in the gut.

"Learned your lesson?" I asked with an evil smile. "Or do you want more?"



“Boss!”

“Brat! What’d you do to the boss?!”

The first man must have been the leader. The rest of the cattle rustlers were so enraged that they drew their short swords and charged at me all at once.

I remembered to keep my cool as I accelerated my reflexes just like Dr. Wolff had taught me. The chemical reactions in my nerves accelerated, causing the speed of my movements to increase several fold.

“Target number two!”

Using my accelerated reflexes and the boost in strength caused by blood magic, I turned to face an approaching cattle rustler. I gracefully dodged the downward slash of Cattle Rustler B’s short sword, allowing me to get behind him; then I fired rubber bullets into his back.

“Agh!”

Cattle Rustler B defeated!

“Brat! Now you’ve done it! Die!”

Hold up. You can’t kill me if you’re kidnapping me for money.

When Cattle Rustler C came charging with his sword held at his waist, I knocked him back with more rubber bullets.

“Hngh!”

Direct hit to his side with rubber bullets. Cattle Rustler C defeated!

“W-Wait. What’s going on? There’s no way...”

Cattle Rustler D and Cattle Rustler E were still able to fight, but they were looking at me like I was a monster.

“Want more? Or are you ready to let me take you in?”

“D-Don’t make me laugh! You’re nothing but a little brat!”

Cattle Rustler D came charging at me with a large throbbing vein visible on his forehead. I let him get close and then fired rubber bullets at his abdomen at the last possible moment. To be more accurate, I fired it at his groin.

“Yeeow!”

I hope Cattle Rustler D didn't just lose his manhood... Anyhow, Cattle Rustler D defeated!

“I-It's no use! She's a monster! We don't stand a chance against her!”

Cattle Rustler E turned to run.

“Hey! Where do you think you're going? You're just abandoning your allies?”

I moved to stand in his path.

“Bam!”

My rubber bullets fired into Cattle Rustler E's abdomen.

“Uoohh!”

Cattle Rustler E defeated! Astrid has defeated the band of cattle rustlers! Did I level up?

“Let's put these men on the carriage and take them back to the manor,” I told the maid. “Call over a knight when we get there. I'll keep watch over the cart.”

“H-Huh? Y-Yes, Lady Astrid...”

My maid looked as though she still didn't understand what was happening. I created zip ties by imagining them so we could bind the men hand and foot before putting them on our horse-drawn carriage, and we set off back to the manor.

“Lady Astrid captured the cattle rustlers?!”

As soon as we arrived back at the manor, a knight came dashing over.

His name was Erhard von Eschenbach. He'd served our family for a little over 20 years and was looking rather handsome in his middle age. He hurried over to look into the carriage that I was guarding with my shotgun, and then his eyes went wide with surprise.

“L-Lady Astrid, you couldn't have...” Erhard said in disbelief.

“What?” I replied with a mischievous smile. “You think a friendly knight stopped by to drop them off?”

I briefly checked their vital signs using blood magic and found that they hadn't received any life-threatening injuries. *My rubber bullets worked just great as nonlethal rounds. Now if anyone steps out of line, they'll get a shot to the... Okay, that's a little much. Let's not get carried away.*

"Lady Astrid, how you've grown," Erhard said. "I assumed you were merely training in elementary magic, but you were able to take down five armed men. It makes me wonder if there might be more to magic than I realized."

"My magic's a bit of a special case."

I swelled with pride when Erhard gave me praise, but my high spirits were soon crushed by the sound of a fearsome voice.

"Astrid..."

"F-Father? Why are you looking at me as if I'm up to no good?"

"You know why! It's because you were fighting with these cattle rustlers! I was already worried that you'd been returning home too late. I knew something like this would happen! I'm putting you under a strict curfew from now on!"

"B-But..."

My carefree days of shooting...

"Weren't you afraid, Astrid? Those men are twice your size and they were all armed, yet you still fought against them. Were you not at all scared?"

"Well...I was so focused on fighting that I forgot to be afraid."

I'd been so focused on fighting during my first battle that I'd completely forgotten all fear. I should have been crying uncontrollably, but I'd handled the situation calmly.

"I see. I admire your bravery, but I do worry for whichever man takes you as his wife..."

I couldn't help but notice how father's gaze became distant as he spoke.

Chapter 7 — The Villainess Reads a Research Paper

Dr. Wolff's lessons had covered all the basics of elemental magic, and now I'd begun learning uses for blood magic. This type of magic could heal injuries or make them worse.

Should he even be teaching me magic that can make injuries worse...?

There was still something else that I really wanted to know. I was eager to try out some blood magic techniques that might modify the brain, but before that I had a more fundamental question.

"Dr. Wolff! Dr. Wolff!"

"What is it, Lady Astrid?"

"Is there a way to control mana once it flows into a material?"

What I really wanted to know was how to control the flow of mana. I could put mana into the firing pins of my first few weapons without causing a misfire, but getting the amount just right was difficult and kinda risky. I wanted a way to restrict the flow of mana so that it couldn't spread through the gun or flow from the firing pin to the gun's rounds.

"Hmm. It's not impossible. After all, we can direct mana flow within the body using blood magic. It should be possible to control the flow of mana through other materials in the same way, in theory."

"In theory?" Dr. Wolff's choice of words had caught my attention. "You mean no one's ever pulled it off?"

"Well, a group published a research paper on this topic a few years ago, and the finding was that people can continue to control a certain portion of their mana even after channeling it into a substance."

"Oh wow! That's really interesting!"

So there is a way to control the mana after all.

"However, the difference between how much mana the person wields and

how much they can control becomes a limiting factor that makes it far from useful.”

“Huh? Is the difference really that much?”

Figures. If it was useful, Dr. Wolff would have already told me how to do it.

“One part in five hundred. For example, the conclusion suggests that someone with 100 units of mana could control just 0.2 units. By the way, we measure quantities of mana by defining ten units of mana as the amount needed to light a fire with the same intensity as a fire started with flint and steel.”

“That doesn’t sound very useful...”

Oh well. There goes that idea.

“Could I read this paper you mentioned?”

“You can certainly try to read it,” Dr. Wolff replied, sounding bemused, “but I suspect much of it will be beyond your understanding, Lady Astrid.”

“Could I please? I really want to control mana inside materials!”

“Very well. If you insist, I can bring it along to our next lesson.”

Yay! I love Dr. Wolff!

However, my good mood was short-lived because Dr. Wolff then brought up the topic I was trying to avoid.

“By the way, I heard something about you catching cattle rustlers.”

“Uh... It just sort of happened...”

“Duke Oldenburg asked me whether you might have used some magic I taught you, but such feats are impossible with the basic things I’ve been teaching. Could you tell me what actually happened?”

Not happening. I have to keep my weapons a secret. My maid might believe they’re just machines that make loud noises, but Dr. Wolff might realize how valuable they are, and then I’d be breaking my promise to Mister Gnome.

“I just b-b-boosted my strength with blood magic and somehow everything worked out. That’s about it!”

“You defeated five armed men with nothing but the blood magic I’ve taught you? I find that hard to believe.”

Gah! I’m so busted! He’ll figure it all out!

“Uh... I think I used elemental magic too! I told the earth spirit to make some big rocks and then I threw them at the armed men! It was a miracle it worked!” I came up with excuses as fast as I could, hoping he’d drop the subject.

“I see. I’ve seen you talking with an earth spirit before, so I’ll accept what you’re telling me. Though perhaps you’ll tell me the whole truth someday. I’d even be willing to help you turn it into a publication.”

“B-But I already told you everything...”

Good thing Dr. Wolff’s not the persistent type.

“I’ll bring that paper on mana control in materials when we have our next lesson. Is there anything else you’d like?”

“Let’s see... Could you please bring me another book on blood magic? I’ve finished reading the introductory books and can’t learn much more from them. I’d like to learn some practical applications to reinforce my understanding.”

Without blood magic, I can make modern weapons, but I can’t use them. I could just work out every day and get ripped, but they say building your muscles too much at a young age makes you stop growing.

I do need a little strength so I’m not totally reliant on blood magic, though. Maybe I’ll ask Erhard to teach me some fighting techniques when I see him.

“That look tells me there’s something on your mind,” Dr. Wolff said with a knowing smile.

I laughed coyly in return. “Eh heh. Just thinking about my future.”

What type of girl was the original Astrid? She’s already in high school when the game starts, so I really have no idea what sort of child she was. She’s all high and mighty in the game, but still, she could have been a good little girl once.

I guess everyone saw her talent for magic, they gave her a ton of attention, and then her personality made her get full of herself. I can see that happening. I’ve got an amazing amount of mana. People are going to value that, and I could

easily turn arrogant.

That means I need to always acknowledge my own ignorance and accept my limitations no matter what happens! I did get a little full of myself after getting rid of those cattle rustlers, but I have to remember that I couldn't have done it without Dr. Wolff and Mister Gnome.

Don't get full of yourself. Don't get arrogant. Humility is one of life's virtues, after all.

....

"Uh... This is complicated..."

I got the research paper from Dr. Wolff the next day, and it turned out to be horribly complex.

I'm a humanities student! These weird equations, graphs, and symbols are like a shot to the head! How do I make sense of this?

I read the paper again and again, determined to decipher it. *Maybe it's just me, but I feel like this thing gets more nonsensical every time I read it. I'm just imagining that, right?*

Since Dr. Wolff had explained the gist of the research paper, I could at least get an idea of what the paper was talking about. I would only be able to control one five-hundredth of the mana I imbued in a substance; it wasn't quite enough to be useful.

I tried my best to understand the research paper and find a way around that limitation, but it was research co-authored by three doctorates from the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery, after all. Disproving their conclusion would be no simple matter.

Wait. Let's consider the fact that mana can't flow through orichalcum at all.

Orichalcum could be used as an impermeable barrier to mana, and orichalcum couldn't be created using magic, nor could magic change its shape.

Considering orichalcum made me realize that the amount of mana that would flow and could be controlled probably varied a little depending on the substance. The research paper used water, but channeling magic through steel

and other metals was easier, so it was possible that there was a material that made control easier.

This is amazing. I'm about to make the discovery of the century here...

My amateurish research efforts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Lady Astrid, you're still awake?" asked the maid in surprise.

"Yes. I want to read this research paper a little more before I sleep," I replied, giving her a lackluster wave.

"Would you like some tea, perhaps?"

"Yes! Thanks!"

Our maid's so kind, and so is everyone around here. If they weren't, they wouldn't come with me for my shooting practice, after all. I know it's boring for everyone but me.

"Here you go, Lady Astrid. It's herbal tea with lemongrass to help you sleep."

"Thank you! If there are any cookies..."

"You'll grow fat if you eat before going to bed."

As kind and considerate as my maid was, she was also quite strict.

"You've changed so much lately, Lady Astrid. Your mother and father both worry that you're not the good little girl you used to be."

"Huh? Really?"

Hold up. I'm trying to be a better Astrid than the original from the game. Don't tell me I'm even worse!

"Yes, indeed. You used to listen to everything your father said and never caused any trouble. But then you suddenly started asking to learn magic, and now you can even capture cattle rustlers."

My maid put her hand to her eye as though wiping away a tear.

I thought I was turning into a much more splendid lady than the Astrid in the original game... Is this how things really are?

At this rate, I'll reach a bad end by failing to be a proper noble lady before I

even get a bad end by becoming a villainous lady! I can't let myself get thrown out of my home right now! Things'll get real dicey real fast if that happens.

"Is there s-something I could do to return to mother and father's good graces?"

"Yes, there is. You can start by not staying up so late each night; they say late nights are bad for your health. And then you can show your mother and father some respect instead of being constantly engrossed in magic. They both want to create some memories with their daughter while she's at her cutest."

Makes sense. I can't even argue. Lately, I've been going to my room to read Dr. Wolff's books the moment I finish breakfast, and then I sit in the entrance hall waiting for Dr. Wolff the moment I finish lunch. I have my lessons with Dr. Wolff in the afternoons, I spend my evenings on shooting practice, and then I go back to reading the moment I'm done eating dinner...

I can barely remember talking to my parents!

This is bad. A total disaster.

Could this tear our family apart? If I were a parent and my daughter ignored me, I'd cry. I'd be on an internet message board posting something like, "My four-year-old daughter keeps ignoring me. What should I do?"

If I ruin my relationship with father, I won't just lose my lessons with Dr. Wolff, I won't even get into the academy! I've got no money!

"I have to do something, or else I'm in trouble."

"Yes, trouble indeed," my maid agreed.

"All right. Starting from tomorrow, I'll be a whole new Astrid, and I'll find a way to make mother and father happy!"

"That's the spirit, Lady Astrid. But don't wait until tomorrow. Start today. The new day is already here."

I've been staying up too late...

Chapter 8 — The Villainess Wants to Make Her Parents Happy

“Father.”

It was the morning of the day that I became an all-new me. Breakfast time.

“What is it, Astrid?” father replied. “I don’t want to hear more demands regarding magic.”

Gah. I’m being treated like a naughty child. Well it’s my own fault, so no use complaining.

“No, this isn’t anything about magic. I have something to say to both of you, mother and father.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

Father looks like he’s interested. That’s a good sign. As for mother...she’s wearing the same unreadable smile as always. Honestly, I can’t guess what mother’s thinking about most of the time. She scares me a little.

“I’ve been so focused on magic lately that I forgot about something very important, father. It’s you who pays Dr. Wolff to teach me, and you who’ll pay my tuition at the academy some day. And it’s you and mother who make it possible for me to live such a carefree life.”

I put on a remorseful face and then put my palm to my forehead.

“And how do I repay you? I barely speak with my father, and I never speak with my mother. I spend every moment on my magic. I need to make amends.”

“Indeed, indeed. Though I’m pleased just knowing that you’ve realized.”

Father’s a real pushover. Not so sure about mother...

“Maybe you could spend your next day off with me so we can make up for lost time?” I suggested. “I’d love to spend more time with my mother and father!”

“My next day off? I’d arranged to go hunting with the other ministers on my next day off...”

Hunting?! Really?!

“I’d be delighted to go with you! I’d love to try hunting!”

“A-Are you really that interested? We’ll spend half the time talking. You won’t get bored?”

Hunting! I can shoot a living target!

Naturally, I did feel some compassion for animals. I gained a lot of survival skills during my outdoor activities as a high schooler, so I knew how to prepare rabbits and chickens, and I always made sure to eat my kills and pay them proper respects.

“If it means spending time with father, then of course!”

“I-I see. What do you say, Louise? Will you join us?”

Can’t forget, I’m doing this to make mother and father happy.

“Yes. I’ll accompany you. I’ll look forward to enjoying tea with the wives of the other ministers.”

Yay, mother’s coming too!

“Then we’d better prepare a horse for Astrid. A small one that you’ll find easy to ride would be best. Do you want to choose it?”

Here’s another chance to charm him with the adorable daughter stuff. “I’d like it if we could choose one together.”

“That settles it. We’ll choose one for you this afternoon. We’ll look for one on the ranch, and we’ll find a fine horse, I’m sure. Look forward to it.”

“Yes! I will.”

I’d prefer going out in a Komatsu LAV or a Humvee. An all-terrain vehicle would also be nice, not that we’ve got one.

And so I’d arranged to go hunting with father.

I gave up my evening shooting practice so we could head out to find a horse.

The horse I chose was a tiny pony, since even a four-year-old like me could ride a horse that size. I tried riding it right away, but...

“Father! Father! This one’s really doing its best to throw me off!”

“Don’t give up! Once you’ve ridden it once, it’ll obey you!”

How’d I end up with this bronco of a horse?

“This calls for blood magic!”

I boosted my physical abilities with blood magic and used force to suppress the struggling pony, but that just made it struggle harder. It continued to buck and thrash about.

“Father! Don’t tell me horses are sensitive to blood magic?!”

“Magic will spook horses if they’re unfamiliar with it!”

Eek! You could’ve told me that sooner!

“Struggle all you like; my blood magic’s going to win out!”

I unleashed the full power of my blood magic and used force to keep the pony under control. Eventually it realized that it couldn’t throw me off no matter what it did, and the power behind its struggling gradually faded.

Heh heh. I knew I could do it. There’s nothing quite like using violence to crush violence.

Hang on... I’m not supposed to get arrogant...

“This makes it your horse,” father told me. “You should give it a name.”

“Horso it is.”

“H-Horso?”

I rode my trusty horse Horso two laps around the ranch.

“Not bad. Riding horses isn’t bad at all. They must be great for getting around on uneven terrain, like the mountains of Afghanistan. I’ve also read about U.S. Special Forces units that use horses in special operations.” I felt like I was a Special Forces unit out on horseback.

“That should do it. Let’s go back before you bump into more cattle rustlers.”

We were fairly safe because knights had started patrols around the ranch since that day, and the people tending to the area had become more vigilant. Still, father was always cautious.

“Father, I can’t wait to go hunting.”

“Indeed. It’ll be a great opportunity for me to show off my daughter to the other ministers.”

Looks like I’m really gaining some affection points from father with this! If I can keep this up, I won’t get thrown out of the family.

....

The long-awaited day of the hunt was finally here.

I put my shotgun on my back and checked that I had my slugs and rubber bullets before leaving via the entrance hall.

“Oh, there you are. You kept me waiting.”

“Sorry for making you wait. It took me some time to get ready.”

Father had been waiting for me on horseback outside. Mother was heading out to the hunting grounds in a carriage with her servants.

“Is it far to the hunting grounds?”

“It’ll take about three hours. It’s not so far. You can sit in the carriage, or you can ride there on your horse if you prefer.”

What to do? I’ve heard that sitting on a horse for too long results in a sore butt. Maybe I should go with the carriage? But I wouldn’t mind traveling on my trusty horse Horso now that I’ve learned how to ride him.

“I think I’ll go half the way on horseback, and half in the carriage.”

“Good idea. It’s best that you get somewhat used to sitting on a horse. You need to learn to ride in preparation for your future. You’re a duke’s daughter, after all.”

Father thinks it’s too soon for me to learn magic, but horse riding’s all right? I don’t see how he figures that.

“Let’s head to the hunting ground, father.”

“Yes. Off we go.”

With that, we headed off to the hunting ground. Problems began about thirty minutes later.

“My butt hurts...”

I’d ridden my horse for about ten minutes on the ranch, but this time I’d gone thirty minutes.

My butt’s stinging. Actually, I think I read that even Special Forces members complain of their butt hurting. Well anyhow, mine hurts. I give up already.

“F-Father. Could I move to the carriage?”

“Yes. That’s fine. Riding a horse is tiring if you’re new to it. You should be proud to have lasted thirty minutes. Well done, Astrid.”

Huh? Did I just score more affection points from father without even realizing? Go me!

At any rate, I moved to the carriage after that. It was a grand carriage fit to transport a duke’s family during faraway travels. It had a sophisticated interior with soft seats. It felt like just what my butt needed after being mistreated by the horse.

“Astrid, what made you ask to go hunting with Paul?” Mother asked me suddenly without pausing her knitting.

“Well... I haven’t spoken to you or father much lately, and I didn’t think that was right. I tend to get engrossed in one thing, so I think it’s important for me to make time for things like this.”

Mother gave me her usual enigmatic smile, so I had no idea what she was thinking.

“You’re a considerate girl, Astrid. Normally it would be us as parents who’d say something, so I’m surprised you spoke up yourself. I’m relieved to know you won’t be a handful in the future.”

“He he he...”

Was that the right reaction? I do need to win some affection points from

mother too.

“But you’re really here to try out that thing on your back, aren’t you?” she added.

“Ngh?!” I made a noise before I could stop myself.

“The servants tell me it’s nothing but a magic item for making loud noises, but I know you were carrying that thing when you were out catching those cattle rustlers. You used it, didn’t you? Am I wrong?”

“U-Umm. No, it’s really just a magic item for making loud noises.”

“Is it really? The servants tell me you’ve been very clear to them that it’s dangerous to stand in front of it. Don’t things come flying out of that round hole?”

Damn. Mother’s had her eyes on me the whole time.

“I made a promise to Mister Gnome that I wouldn’t tell anyone, not even you, mother! I’m sorry!” With no other options left, I admitted that there was more I couldn’t tell her.

“It must be quite dangerous if a spirit warned you about it.” Mother continued her knitting while wearing that same mysterious smile.

“I’ve been using it very carefully ever since. I know I won’t be able to study magic if anyone gets hurt.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

Mother sees through everything. She’s scaring me a little.

“Be sure to let your father have his moment during the hunt. I’m sure he wants to look good in front of his daughter. If you flatter him like a good little girl, that’ll be enough to make him happy. He’s very proud of his hunting skills.”

“I see.”

So a few flattering words about father’s skills will gain me more affection points? I’ll make a mental note.

“And remember that no matter how strangely you behave, and no matter how distracted your magic studies make you, you should never worry that we’ll

stop loving you. That's just the way parents are."

"O-Oh. Thank you..."

*She even knew that I was worried that they might kick me out of the family?!
Mother, are you some kind of mind reader?!*

I-I'm scared. That smile is scaring me.

"Astrid... I might not have your talent for magic, but I do have more life experience. Don't act so shocked."

Now you're making it impossible not to be shocked.

"When I've got life experience, will I be more like you?"

"Only if you actually experience things. Life passes us by before we know it. There's nothing wrong with devoting yourself to learning magic, but there's much to learn from your relationships with other people. Wouldn't it be a waste to spend your whole life on nothing but magic?"

She's right. Learning magic is only a means to an end. But learning about human relationships? That sounds like a whole different challenge.

"There's no need to rush. You'll find other children with similar interests when you enter the academy. You can get to know those children. You're a good girl, Astrid, so I know you'll make good friends."

"You're right. My world will get a lot bigger when I enter the academy."

I'll find some friends who like magic at the academy. Then we'll research magic together!

Hmm... Somehow, I brought it back around to magic research again...

"You're just like Paul," mother laughed. "Your thoughts are written all over your face."

"R-Really?"

I never could keep a straight face. Did I get reincarnated with the same problem? I'm hopeless.

"It's nothing to worry over. It's actually quite charming."

Mother's smile didn't budge an inch. *I'd love to become that sort of woman someday.*

I let my mind wander as I gazed out the carriage window and watched the fields and hills go by.

We're almost there.

Chapter 9 — The Villainess Goes Hunting

“Paul! This is a fine day for a hunt!”

“That it is,” father replied. “I’ve got a hunch we’ll catch something big.”

The country’s ministers had gathered on hunting grounds in the domain of one of father’s friends, the minister of military affairs. Those present included my father, who was minister of posts; a thin, aging man who was minister of finance; a nervous-looking middle-aged man who was minister of home affairs; and the energetic gentleman who was the minister of military affairs.

And I can’t forget about Count Fidelio von Fraunhofer, the chief court mage. He could play an important role in my future. In more ways than one... Many, many more ways.

“And I see you’ve brought your family today,” the minister of home affairs noted.

“Yes,” father replied. “My daughter Astrid insisted that I let her come hunting.”

I walked over to father’s side and gave the minister of home affairs a very noble-like curtsy.

“Look how Paul’s daughter’s grown,” the minister of military affairs said. “She used to fit in the palm of my hand.”

“I don’t think she was ever that small. She’s no kitten.”

The minister of military affairs laughed loudly, causing father to laugh with him.

There’d be something wrong if I could fit on your palm. I’d have to have been born a slight bit premature.

“Miss Astrid’s going to hunt with us?” the minister of home affairs asked with enthusiasm.

“Indeed,” father said with another laugh. “I’ll keep a close eye on her so she’s

safe from harm, but please be careful. Who knows what direction her bolts might fly in?"

I'm pleased by your enthusiasm, father, but I'm not that much of a bad shot!

"It is good to have the young ones join us," remarked the minister of finance, who was the eldest of the group. "It gets so dull with only old men here. But all my daughter cares for is choosing dresses. She does her best to avoid these things."

"Yes, indeed," sighed Count Fraunhofer. "I did try inviting my son, but he told me he's too busy studying for his exams."

Are all households like that? Or are they just making small talk? I really need to learn to read minds like mother.

"I've heard that little Astrid has already started studying magic," Count Fraunhofer said, sounding quite interested. "Is that true, Paul?"

"Yes," father replied. "She was very insistent. I've hired Wolff."

"Wolff? Wolff von Wrangel? He's just the man. Before we know it, she'll have passed her exams and gone on to become a court mage, or perhaps she'll find work at the university. You picked a fine home tutor. Tell me, little Astrid, do you want to be a court mage some day?"

"Oh, no. I'll never be such a great mage."

I'm being humble, but I just might. I'd have a good future as a court mage, and I'd be able to study magic all I like. It's pretty much my dream job.

"Don't be ridiculous, Fidelio," father told him. "How could she hope to get married if she became a court mage or some such? She needs a position with a little more sophistication to it. Though I suppose I'll need to find her a suitor before she gets to that stage."

Father, don't you think it's a bit early to think about marriage? I'm four...

"Don't be so hasty, Paul. Let her enter the academy and have a real go at learning magic first. If she does turn out to be exceptional, I'd welcome her as a court mage."

Yeah, exactly! Too hasty. No rush.

“So how much magic have you learned, Astrid?”

“Umm. I’ve learned mana control, and I’ve learned how to control four types of elemental magic. As for blood magic, I’ve learned some physical control techniques as well as some simple healing magic. Lately I’ve been working with Dr. Wolff to find a material that lets me control the flow of mana inside it.”

That’s about as far as I’ve gotten.

Count Fraunhofer’s expression became a contorted smile as he looked at me in disbelief. “A-All of that? He taught you all that? That’s beyond the level of the academy’s high school. It sounds like you’ve begun your bachelor studies already.”

“My daughter has a lot of mana,” father told him.

“That hardly explains it, Paul. Mana control is something students master gradually, starting in elementary school and continuing all the way through high school. Harnessing the powers of all four types of elemental magic spirits takes four years. And students are forbidden to learn blood magic until they reach middle school. And this talk of materials that allow for mana control within a substance, that’s a bachelor—no, that’s beyond even a doctoral dissertation.”

Huh? I’ve progressed that far? I guess Dr. Wolff’s just a really good teacher...

“Little Astrid’s a genius the likes of which is only seen once every fifty years,” Count Fraunhofer continued. “She absolutely must become a court mage.”

“Court mage is out of the question, Fidelio.”

Uh... Father’s got that serious look in his eyes!

“Father, about what you just said. No one knows what might happen...”

“Whatever might happen, you’re not becoming a court mage.”

If he’s so set against it, that’s going to be a problem...

“Is a court mage not a good job?”

“That’s not it. Court mages are the people who keep the Plusen Empire going. After all, it’s the court mages who develop all kinds of magic, for everything from improving quality of life to giving us the defenses that form our nation’s

bedrock.”

Hm. So they're like a research institute? Seems like working at a research institute would make you a high earner back on Earth. So what's father's problem with it?

“However, it attracts nothing but the lowest of nobles. I'd like to see my daughter wed into a fine family. You are a duke's daughter; you should marry into the family of another duke.”

Oh. Father's thinking about our family's status. Anyone can become a court mage and have a bright future as long as they have the magical talent, so I guess it's perfect for any low-level noble looking to jump up the ranks. He's not going to let me take a job that doesn't suit a duke's daughter...

“That reminds me, isn't His Imperial Highness Prince Friedrich going to be enrolling at the academy?” father asked.

“Yes,” answered Count Fraunhofer. “His Highness should be in the same year as Astrid. They're awfully busy making preparations for his arrival. I hear all of the teaching staff have to be re-evaluated so that he won't be exposed to any dangerous ideas. I imagine that's the responsibility of the minister of home affairs?”

Gah. Friedrich. A member of the group that brings on my destruction is in my year. That sucks. It suuucks.

“Count Fraunhofer. I have a question!”

“Yes, Astrid?”

I decided I'd take a shot at avoiding a fate that would lead to my destruction.

“Is it possible to skip a year at the academy? I'm sure I'd still get good grades in magic.”

If they force us to be together, I'll just find a way to escape. See ya, Friedrich! All the best to you and your heroine! Just keep me out of it!

“No, skipping a year isn't permitted. That could injure the pride of the other nobles.”

“Gah...”

Damn it, Friedrich. Am I totally stuck with you?

“Astrid, being in the same year presents an opportunity,” father said. “Why not do your best to get to know His Highness?”

“Hah?”

Worst idea I’ve ever heard.

“A m-magic maniac like me associating with a prince is clearly above my station. I’ll have to decline!”

“What? Your status isn’t a problem since you’re a duke’s daughter. As for your talent for magic, His Highness might even be impressed.”

Stop! Stop pushing me into my bad end!

“L-Let’s do some hunting!” I said, hoping to force a change in subject before father’s big mouth caused my bad end. “Let’s bring down a bear!”

“I don’t think we can handle a bear...”

....

“Oh. We’re using crossbows to hunt?”

Once I’d forced father to start the hunt, he placed an unfamiliar weapon in my hands.

A crossbow. A mechanical bow.

“You use it like this.”

Father demonstrated the use of the crossbow. There was a pulley that needed to be wound to draw in the bowstring. A bolt was then loaded and fired by pulling a lever. As simple as the whole thing was, it was time consuming and required a surprising amount of strength just to wind it up.

“This thing really needs some force.”

“It might be a little hard for a child.”

Father’s looking proud. I guess this is the time to flatter him?

“You’re amazing, father! It’s too hard for me!”

“That’s right. Give it to me and I’ll do it for you.”

Oh. That's a good reaction. Affection points gained.

"There are lots of deer in this forest. There are some big monster-like creatures too. We might even see some ducks if we head to the lake; this hunting ground is rich with the forest's bounty."

"But no need to worry about magic beasts. We have adventurers hunt for them regularly, so beasts won't approach this area. Unless it's a very dumb beast."

Sounds like we can hunt in safety. If it's not dangerous, then maybe I can sneak away from father and try shooting a living target with my shotgun! Heh heh.

Whoops, I'm sounding a little evil. But I really should test fire these rounds. I tried out my rubber bullets on those poor cattle rustlers, but I still haven't tried my slugs.

"All right, Astrid. When it comes to deer, you have to aim for the head or neck, so they're tricky. Ducks and rabbits are hard to hit at all because they're so small. Hunting's not easy. But don't worry, I'll guide you through it."

"That's g-great, father."

Ugh. I might not get a chance to run off...

"We use hunting dogs to locate game. Our own dog Kai is a fine hunting dog. He's a good boy, so he'll find us some game before long. It's also Kai's job to hold onto the game after we've shot it down."

"So that's why we brought Kai here with us."

We kept a large dog named Kai. I wasn't all that fond of dogs, so I'd been wary of him at first, but I'd grown attached to him because he was so friendly. They say big dogs bark less, but Kai's quietness was still surprising.

But still, I'd never have guessed he was a hunting dog...

"All right, let's find some game! I wonder how much we've been blessed with this season."

We moved slowly through the forest together with the hunting dogs that the ministers had brought.

“Aren’t you tired, Astrid?”

“I’m all right. I’m using blood magic to boost my strength.”

Ordinary four-year-olds wouldn’t be able to walk the mountain trail for several hours. I’d used blood magic to boost my strength in preparation for the mountain trail ahead, giving me the endurance I needed.

Hooray for blood magic! It’s so handy.

“Not many have a command of blood magic at that age...” Count Fraunhofer remarked. “You *are* monitoring your internal state, aren’t you?”

“Yes. That was one of the first things Dr. Wolff taught me.”

Count Fraunhofer’s getting more and more interested. Maybe he’ll fix it so they make an exception and let me skip a year? I can dream...

Just then, Kai looked over to the east and started to growl. *That was quick.*

“He found deer. A herd of them. This is a perfect opportunity.”

Father and the others kept low to the ground while approaching the herd, becoming ever so quiet to avoid startling their prey. They were approaching steadily, but the herd of deer hadn’t noticed them.

Likewise, I moved in on the deer with the crossbow in my hand. I’d been told that I needed to bring the deer down with one hit to a vital area. I didn’t know why, but there was probably a good reason, so I tried to identify their vital area as I moved closer.

What kind of range does this crossbow have? A bolt should travel about a hundred meters, maybe? Though it’s probably not accurate enough from that distance. I’m guessing I’ll need to get within forty meters or so. Crossbows aren’t modern weapons, so I don’t know what sort of accuracy to expect.

But wait. If I ever go to war against this country, they’re going to be wielding crossbows against me. I’m going to need to know what distance to keep to be out of harm’s way.

I decided I’d figure out what capabilities crossbows had while I was here with father’s friends.

“Here I go,” father said softly before pointing his crossbow at a deer.

“Now.” Father unleashed a bolt immediately.

I also pulled my lever and fired another bolt. The bolt hit...absolutely nothing.

I still didn't quite understand how to use a crossbow, so I'd sent my bolt flying in completely the wrong direction. Meanwhile, father and the others had brought down three deer.

“Nicely done, Paul,” the minister of military affairs said as the herd was running off. “Though I must say, I've done quite well myself.”

“Indeed,” father replied. “That's why you're the minister of military affairs.”

“You're amazing, father!”

“Oh, this is nothing.”

I'd learned that you had to be within a distance of forty meters to hit with a crossbow, and that they were too difficult for me to use presently. The crossbows had no sights at all, wind could easily blow the bolts off course, and I had no feel for the recoil because it was so different from a gun. As a beginner, I'd had no hope of hitting my targets.

I was impressed that father and the others could score direct hits.

A weapon with a range of forty meters was no match for me. My automatic rifle had a range of between three to four hundred meters. I'd be able to pick off my enemies while staying out of their range.

I've already won.

“Looks like you haven't gotten the hang of the crossbow yet, Astrid. Bringing down game isn't easy, is it? There's a knack to it. I'll teach you.”

“Please do, father!”

I'd never turn down a chance to use a weapon. Even if it is just a crossbow. I love anything that counts as a weapon. Though maybe not swords and spears. I lose all interest when things get that primitive.

And so I let father show me the best way to use a crossbow.

“Here I go!”

I kept my blood magic to a minimum. I had to bring down at least one target using the skills father taught me, or I'd fail to win any affection points from him. I tried to keep everything father had told me in mind as I aimed at a rabbit.

I hit it!

"Oh. Hitting a rabbit's impressive."

"Tee hee. It's only because you taught me how!"

All the praise goes to father. All the praise.

"Maybe we'll make rabbit stew. It's your kill. Go fetch it."

"Yes, father."

I'd be happy to bleed it, skin it, remove the bones, and stew it right here...but I guess that's not proper behavior for a duke's daughter. I'll have to make do with tying one of its feet to my belt with some string.

Meanwhile, our servants had gone to prepare the deer that father had just brought down.

"Oh. There's another herd of deer over there."

"Ooh. Those are some impressive antlers... I bet I'd impress a few guests if I had that one taxidermied. I must have it."

What's this? Father's distracted by some new prey. He's stopped paying any attention to me. This could be my chance.

I quietly sneaked away and searched the forest for prey of my own.

Chapter 10 — The Villainess Encounters a Fairy

Forest, forest, and more forest. Everything was forest.

I'd brought a compass so I wouldn't get lost. This was something else I'd made with magic. This world did have magnetic compasses, but apparently no one thought that a duke's daughter would ever need one. Since nobody was going to buy me one, I had to make my own.

I remembered the route I'd walked with father. This forest had all been mapped, so there was little chance of me getting stranded here: we'd entered the forest from the west side, so I'd find my way out sooner or later if I simply headed west.

"The only thing I can't find is game..."

Father had found the deer and the rabbit, but I couldn't find so much as a mouse. They said it was a bountiful forest, and yet I couldn't find any prey; I had nothing to shoot.

"Oh! What's that...?"

As I was using blood magic to dash through the forest, I came upon a shocking sight in a clearing. There was a monster with the wings and upper body of an eagle and the lower body of a carnivorous beast. It was twice the size of the horse that had drawn our carriage.

"A g-griffin?"

I had remembered seeing the name "griffin" written next to a similar looking creature in a picture book of magic beasts I'd once read to kill time. They were known for being ferocious and for regularly attacking and eating humans. It was said that their favorite food was horses.

What's a dangerous beast like this doing on the minister of military affairs's hunting grounds? Didn't the adventurers take care of these...?

"Eek! I taste awful! I taste awful! Blau doesn't taste good!"

When I looked closer, I saw something even stranger in front of the griffin. It was a little person whose head made up a third of her height. She was wearing a light blue apron dress that a child might wear, and she had light blue hair and light blue eyes. She was a fancy little creature, small enough to stand on my palm. The griffin was staring right at her.

“Isn’t that a fairy...?”

I’d never seen a fancy little person before, but I felt sure that this was one of the fairies that Dr. Wolff had told me about.

The fairy was about to be eaten by the griffin, which was licking its beak and drooling heavily. *I thought you griffins preferred horses! That little thing’s hardly going to fill up a big stomach like yours.*

As I was staring absentmindedly at the griffin and fairy, the fairy looked over at me and began waving frantically. “Ah! Miss Human! Save me! Save meeee!”

That made the griffin look over in my direction and growl at me as a warning.

“Wow, I can’t pass this up. What a great target!”

I applied my blood magic to the limit of what I could handle, boosting my physical abilities, and then I loaded five slugs into the shotgun I’d been carrying on my back.

Here goes! No one’s going to complain if I kill a magic beast that was trying to eat a poor little fairy. I’m eating fried chicken tonight.

“Kiiiiiii!” The griffin emitted a shrill cry as it charged at me.

“Come at me, future fried chicken!” I grinned as I fired my first slug at the griffin’s head.

“Kiii?!”

The slug hit the griffin’s stupidly big head beautifully, but it mustn’t have been a fatal blow; the griffin shrieked but didn’t stop charging at me.

“Let’s try from below.”

I pumped the shotgun’s fore-end to eject the spent cartridge and load a fresh round, then I charged at the advancing griffin.

It must have looked like a dumb thing to do, but the griffin was charging with its head lowered, so the thick top part of its skull was acting as a shield. Shooting straight at it wasn't going to work; I'd only run out of ammo.

Which means...!

I ignored the way my skirt was lifted up as I charged headlong at the griffin. I dodged at the last second with a slide across the ground that put me at the side of the creature's abdomen. I fired another shot.

"Kiiii!"

I hit beautifully, causing the slug to enter through the griffin's side, tear through its intestines, and come to a stop inside its body. I pumped the shotgun with a satisfying *kerchak*, and then I fired another slug.

"Kiii...."

I must have hit a major blood vessel in the griffin's chest; its legs went weak, and it collapsed to the ground with a loud thud.

"No way is it getting up after that! But maybe I shouldn't jinx myself."

I placed a foot on the fallen griffin's head and then fired another slug into its temple. This time the bullet pierced through relatively thin cartilage, spraying bits of brain onto the ground.

That'll do it.

"Are you all right?" I called out to the fancy fairy.

"Y-You saved me, Miss Human," the fairy replied with a deep sigh of relief.

With a flutter of the butterfly-like wings on her body, she came floating toward me.

"Can you really see me, Miss Human?" the fairy asked with a tilt of her head.

"I can see you just fine," I replied as if it was a stupid question. This tinily proportioned fairy with her fancy light blue dress was clearly visible right before me.

"Oh ho! That's great! You must have aptitude, Miss Human!"

"Apti-what?"

Dr. Wolff had only told me a little about fairies, so I had no idea what that meant.

“Only a few magic beasts and humans can see fairies. They’re said to have aptitude toward fairies. What’s your name, Miss Human?”

“Astrid. Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg. And yours?”

I had a lot I wanted to ask, but her name seemed like a good place to start.

“Blau’s name is Blau, Miss Astrid,” replied the fairy. “Thank you for saving me!”

“So why was that thing trying to eat you?” I asked the fairy. Uh... Blau, rather. “You’re not much of a meal for a magic beast of that size, are you?”

It didn’t make sense at all. A fairy was such a small meal for a griffin. It would be like a sumo wrestler eating half a cream puff.

“Fairies are full of mana. The magic beasts have realized they can eat us to gain power, and that’s why beasts who can see fairies hunt for us. I came very close to being eaten just now.”

Hmm. Eat fairies to gain more mana...

“M-Miss Astrid? The way you’re looking at me is reminding me of that griffin...”

“So how do fairies taste?”

“Eek!”

I didn’t actually want to eat the fairy. I had weird interests, but not that weird.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. So Blau, what can you do?”

“I’m a fairy, so I can do things that fairies can do...”

If I knew what that was, I wouldn’t be asking.

“There are lots of benefits to forming a contract with a fairy! You saved me, so I don’t mind forming a contract!”

“Hmm. I don’t know what that means.”

She’s just a fairy, but what if she steals my soul or something...?

“Can I at least go with you, Miss Astrid? You can form a contract with me after asking permission from an adult! Let’s do that!”

“That’s a good idea. I can’t decide by myself.”

This fairy’s a little hyper. I just know she’s up to something...

“Wh-Why are you looking at me as if I’m suspicious, Miss Astrid? Blau’s a good fairy.”

“I can’t be sure of that yet.”

Yeesh, I’ve gotta be wary of mysterious creatures.

It was then that I heard father’s yelling: “Astrid! Where are you?!”

“Gah! Father realized!”

I called out to him: “Father! I’m here!”

I used my blood magic to dash back all the way back to father. If I let him come to me, I’d need to explain away the dead griffin, which would’ve been a real pain.

“Astrid! What happened?! I was so surprised when you suddenly disappeared!”

“I found this f-fairy and...”

Father’s mad... There goes all the affection points I gained...

“Oh, she really does have a fairy with her,” Count Fraunhofer remarked. “A wind elemental, is it?”

“Yes!” Blau cried. “Blau’s element is wind!”

Huh? Count Fraunhofer can see them?

“There’s a fairy?” asked father. “I can’t see it.”

“It’s because you don’t have aptitude, Paul. It’s right there, sitting on Astrid’s shoulder. It must have really taken to her.”

“Yes, because Miss Astrid saved me from a griff-”

I quickly covered the fairy’s mouth before she could say anything better left unsaid.

“I saw her floating around in the forest, then I followed her and she turned out to be friendly. I think I did the right thing by giving her cookies.”

“But you didn’t give me any coo—”

Hey! Back me up you dumb fairy!

“This is really something! A fairy makes a great partner for a mage. This one’s rather friendly, so I assume you’ll form a contract?”

“Is it safe to form a contract with this creature, Count Fraunhofer? It won’t take my life? It won’t steal my life expectancy?”

“I’ve n-never heard of a fairy doing such things...”

All right. If Count Fraunhofer says so, then it must be safe.

“Blau, let’s form a contract.”

“Let’s do it!” Blau said eagerly, as if she’d been waiting for me to ask. She floated down and landed softly on my palm.

“All right, a contract. By this contract, I, Blau of Carpath Forest, shall bind my soul to thee, Astrid.”

Quit scaring me with the soul stuff.

“Kiss me if thou wouldst accept the contract. Close thine eyes if thou wouldst refuse.”

Count Fraunhofer says a fairy makes a good partner for a mage, so I suppose I’ll accept.

My lips softly touched Blau’s forehead.

“Our contract is thusly made. I hope we can get along just great, Master!”

“Likewise. Good to have you, Blau.”

If she turns out to be totally useless, I can just think of her as a cute mascot.

“A fairy... Now that’s a fine thing to catch on a hunt, Lady Astrid.”

“Can you still deny that your daughter’s going to be a court mage, Paul?”

The sun was beginning to set behind my father’s excited friends.

That day sent my affection rating with father shooting up! He even let me spend more time on my magic training!

I also got myself a fairy who didn't appear in the original game. My journey through the world of magic showed no sign of ending. Yeah!

Incidentally, someone must have found the griffin's body because there was a lot of fuss over it. I played dumb when father told me about the griffin, but mother was looking at me with her usual enigmatic smile.

Mother's too sharp...

Chapter 11 — The Villainess Flies through the Sky

“I see, so you went hunting and made a contract with a fairy?”

It had been two days since the hunt where I'd successfully scored affection points from father, and now Dr. Wolff was back at the manor to tutor me again. He was very interested in the fairy I'd picked up.

“Yes. It just sort of happened. Her name's Blau.”

Blau fluttered up from my shoulder and flew in front of Dr. Wolff to greet him. “I'm Blau! Nice to meet you!”

Blau normally followed me everywhere, never leaving my side. Well, not when I went to the toilet; I am a girl, after all. I even put her in the bath with me one time, but she almost drowned. It turns out that fairies are weak against water.

“Dr. Wolff, are fairies useful for something? I feel like this one never does anything...”

“How mean!”

Mean or not, it's true.

Blau did nothing besides flutter around people. She never did anything that felt particularly useful. I'd have accused her of being a freeloader, but she wasn't taking anything for free because fairies didn't have to eat. She really didn't do much of anything.

“Hm. This fairy's element is wind, isn't it? In that case, the amount of mana you'll need when using wind magic will be reduced. You may also be capable of more intricate wind magic. This is known as a fairy's blessing.”

According to Dr. Wolff, fairies were friendly with the spirits, which made it easier for humans to borrow a spirit's power when performing magic. People called this a fairy's blessing, and it was almost a given that every fully-fledged mage should have a contract with a fairy.

“Do you have a contract with a fairy, Dr. Wolff?”

“Yes. My fairy is named Lottie. Come on out, Lottie.”

Dr. Wolff tapped his breast pocket, and a sleepy-looking fairy slowly crawled out. This fairy had short golden hair and gold-colored eyes. She was wearing the same kind of fancy-looking dress as Blau, but she didn't look quite so energetic.

“That's one sleepy-looking fairy...”

“Lottie's nocturnal. The element she has command over is fire. Her fire powers make life a lot more convenient. I never forget to extinguish the lights when researching all night, and I have no trouble kindling a fire in my hearth during the cold winter days.”

Okay... Those uses sound a little lame. But I suppose it's convenient.

“Is it like having automatic magic?”

“Yes. I can ask my fairy to handle certain tasks for me. She also helps me control my own magic. Since we don't know to what extent you're able to use magic safely, it's a good thing that you have a fairy as a safety measure, Lady Astrid.”

When he puts it that way, it does sound convenient.

“Can Blau only control wind magic?”

“Yes. Fairies have compatibility with different spirits. In principle, they can only harness the power of a single element.”

Right. So mine's limited to wind only. What type of magic uses wind? Wind? Wind?

“Oh! I know!”

If I have fully automatic control over the magic, then there's something I can try.

“One more question, Dr. Wolff. Can I make contracts with more fairies?”

“That's going to be difficult, but not impossible. Fairies are quite shy creatures at heart, and they rarely show themselves before humans. They're also particular about who they make contracts with.”

“Blau wouldn’t make a contract with anyone besides Master!” Blau cried.

Got it. Fairies are socially inept shut-ins. What an awkward bunch.

“In that case, I’d like to continue nabbing fairies for myself. That aside, I want to show you something amazing that I’ve discovered, Dr. Wolff. Can I?”

“N-Nab...? Anyway, if you’ve discovered something amazing, then I’m guessing it’s a metal that lets you easily control your mana?”

“No, it’s something else. Can you have your blood magic ready just in case something happens? I might need some healing.”

All right, this is something I’ve been wanting to try for a long time. I’ve been constantly thinking about it, but controlling wind magic was so hard that I’d given up. It might actually be possible with Blau’s automatic control.

“Earth spirit, I’m counting on you!”

I imagined the photographs from the military magazines I’d read over and over, and also what I’d seen at military base open days. Then I held those images in my mind. Mister Earth Gnome Spirit adjusted my design to make it safe, and then the thing appeared right there in front of me.

“Finished!”

It was a machine with two engines plus a total of six wings: two main wings, two tail wings, and two vertical fins.

That’s right, aircraft parts!

It was much more compact than an actual airplane—there wasn’t much to it besides wings and the virtually hollow engines—which meant I could wear it on my back. I named it the Astrid-type Flight Unit. Another name for it was the 04-type Flight Unit.

“Lady Astrid, what does this device do?”

“You use it like this!”

I put the wind spirits to work. I rotated and compressed the air inside the engine on my back, and then compressed it some more. Then using the compressed air...

“Fire spirits! Ignition!”

Using the fire spirits, I rapidly increased the temperature of the compressed air as much as I could.

And here’s what happens then! High-temperature high-pressure gas gets emitted! That gas creates propulsion. And as for me...

“Ohh!” I cried.

“Ooh?!” cried Dr. Wolff, sounding just as surprised.

I’m floating in the air! I’m floating!

“I’ve recreated a jet engine using magic!” I cheered while floating in the air with my fists clenched tight.

The structure of a jet engine is simplistic in its own way. A compressor, which is like a fan on a monstrous scale, compresses air, and then that compressed air is heated by burning fuel. The high-pressure, high-temperature gas generated is then emitted as an exhaust stream that provides propulsion. It’s so simple that even an idiot like me had been able to learn it.

“Blau, did you remember how the engine worked just now?”

“I remember it! I can do the same thing!”

All right. Rotating the air to compress it and then keeping it under control isn’t easy. It’ll be a load off if I can leave it to someone else. Then with the processing capacity I save, I can focus on controlling the fuselage.

“All right, let’s go!”

I spun the magic engine at full power and made my body horizontal to the ground, causing me to blast off.

Ah. The wind against my body’s pretty strong—even though I’m using elemental magic to reduce it—but I’m flying! I really wanted to make a proper fighter jet, but mechanisms on that scale are beyond me. This is my limit.

In any case, being able to fly is going to give me a major advantage in the showdown with fate I’m anticipating. If I can rain down bullets, artillery shells, and aerial bombs from the sky, I’ll annihilate my enemies in no time!

I could fly through the sky as I pleased. Although I was a little limited because tight turns and extreme aerial maneuvers resulted in g-forces beyond what I could handle, I didn't have any difficulty breathing at the speed or altitude I was at, so flying itself wasn't any problem.

If I don't land soon, Dr. Wolff will start to worry.

I found a clear patch of ground that looked like a good place and made my landing preparations. I gradually reduced my altitude and dropped my speed, and then I extended the flaps to complete the landing preparations. All that remained was to brace my legs with blood magic while raising the nose—and by raising the nose, I mean I raised my head and upper body to increase air resistance.

And touchdown!

To lose all the speed I had, I ran across the grass field of the ranch so that I gradually slowed down. I came to a stop exactly at the landing point. *Perfect.*

"Did you see that, Dr. Wolff?! I flew!"

"Y-Yes. You flew. You flew quite some distance." Dr. Wolff was looking at me in complete astonishment. "Is that magic something you thought of yourself, Lady Astrid?"

"More or less."

Truth is, it's all thanks to an article in a military magazine titled "Jet Engines Explained for Idiots."

"Very impressive. If you simply explain this magic's mechanism in writing, the academy will award you a doctorate. Though it looks rather dangerous, so I'll have to ask you not to use it again. Wouldn't you be injured if you hit a bird while moving at that speed?"

"Ah. Bird strikes are something I should think about..."

He's right. If I collide with a bird at that speed, that'll be gruesome...

"And if you fell from such a height..."

"I need a parachute for that situation. Now how am I going to make a parachute...?"

“Wh-Who knows...”

I'll need at least one parachute in case I emergency eject, but parachutes are cloth. The spirits won't make cloth items, and I haven't a clue what shape to make it if I sew it together myself...

“Ah, I almost forgot to mention. There was a new development regarding control of mana within substances. Mana within any metal containing this mineral is comparatively easier to control.” Dr. Wolff produced a silver-colored metal, though it wasn't actually silver. “The pure water used in the research article allowed for control of one part in five hundred, but this metal appears to allow for one part in fifty.”

“Oh! That's what I need!” I cried. “Thank you, Dr. Wolff! I'll test it out!”

“That aside, why don't you explain this astonishing magic that makes flight possible?”

Hmm. If I tell Dr. Wolff I'll lose my advantage.

“You'll have to wait until I write my doctoral dissertation! ♪” I told him, hoping he'd forget about it for now.

“At it again, are you?” chided a familiar voice.

“Oh, Mister Gnome!”

Mister Gnome was looking at me with a rather cross expression. “I already understood what this thing was just based on your mental images, but actually seeing you use it... That was some impressive speed. It's like nothing else in this world.”

“Tee hee.”

“That wasn't a compliment.”

Huh? He wasn't complimenting me just now?

“That thing could—”

“Destroy the balance of power, right?”

The ability to fly could certainly change the nature of warfare, although it had to be used together with my guns since the wind would make it impossible to

hit anything with a crossbow.

If it was used for aerial reconnaissance or for spreading and igniting flammable oil rather than just aerial bombing, would that make my flight technology enough to destroy the balance of power...? It's a tough one to call.

I don't think it would change things all that much. Aircraft were used back in the first world war after all, and those weren't enough to change the state of the war. Not according to what I read on the internet, anyhow.

"What's that you're thinking now?"

"I'm just wondering whether my 04-type Flight Unit really could destroy the balance of power."

I'd made flight magic, but it had its limits. For a start, it wasn't possible for anyone lacking a contract with a fairy that could use wind elemental magic to fly properly.

"Maybe you don't know it, but seeing an enemy's combat potential from above can change a battle. Why, the outcome of the battle might be decided the moment you learn the enemy's positions."

"I see. Aerial reconnaissance could tell me my enemy's positions. I guess I could also find out whether the enemy has reserve troops hidden anywhere and adjust my plans based on that."

So having eyes in the sky is all it takes to change warfare? And here I was thinking fighter jets were mostly good for bombing runs and dogfights.

"Understood, Mister Gnome. But humans do need to make progress, so don't think you can hold them back forever. Still, luckily for you, I've got a score to settle with fate, so I'm not planning on sharing any of this with anyone."

"Why don't you humans try making these machines without a spirit's help? Then you can lecture me about progress."

Ugh. I don't have a comeback. I've been making all of these things with that spirit's help; I couldn't do any of it alone.

"Sorry. I'll keep everything secret," I promised Mister Gnome.

That said, even if I didn't hide it, no one but me understands how jet engines

work anyway. I'm the only one who knows how to compress the air and heat it up.

“Today’s test has concluded without incident! Dr. Wolff, is it really all right to borrow this metal?”

“Yes. It’s no problem. Just let me know if things go well.”

All right. If this lets me control mana within metal, I can improve my guns!

“My magical research is making progress. The day that I deliver the killing blow to fate draws nearer!”

“Killing blow to fate...?”

Dr. Wolff was becoming increasingly bewildered, but my determination only grew stronger.

Chapter 12 — The Villainess Finally Goes to the Academy

Time went by, and I, Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg, reached the age of six.

It had finally happened. The day had finally arrived.

“Astrid, have you put on your uniform yet?” Mother asked me. “You haven’t forgotten your bag?”

I simply hung my head and didn’t reply.

I was wearing the uniform. It was a cute black, white, and red uniform with a sailor-style top. I couldn’t complain about it. The bag stipulated by the academy was a randoseru-style backpack, and it looked just as cute.



I just don't wanna go to the academy!

I hadn't even attended the academy once, yet I already had a truancy problem. Once I went there, I'd have no chance of avoiding Friedrich and the other love interests. Then when I reached high school, I'd encounter the heroine too.

I had no intention of deliberately setting fate in motion, but fate could work in ways I didn't understand. The powers that guided fate might just force me back onto the path to destruction.

Then what'll I do? I still don't have enough power to strike back against fate... All I can do is fly around and spray bullets everywhere. That's hardly going to conquer fate... Am I really this powerless?

But it was too soon to succumb to despair. The heroine wouldn't appear until I reached high school, and my wretched fate wouldn't arrive until I graduated from high school; I had that much time to prepare.

That's four years of elementary school. Three years of middle school. Three years of high school. I've got a whole ten years to spare! Yay! This'll be a piece of cake!

Wait. That's exactly the kind of thinking that's going to cause fate to smack me in the face when I least expect it. I can't let my guard down. I'm walking through a minefield. Every step has to be taken with care, and I need every safety measure I can come up with.

"Lady Astrid, are you dressed yet? Your mother is waiting for you." The maid had come looking for me out of concern.

"I don't think I want to go to the academy..." I told her honestly.

"Lady Astrid," the maid said in surprise, "whatever has gotten into you? You've told us every day how much you want to learn more magic. When you enter the academy, you'll be able to learn all the magic you want. Isn't that everything you've wished for?"

"It's just..." I gave her an embarrassing excuse: "I'm shy, and the thought of going somewhere with a lot of people I don't know makes me nervous."

“Someone like you can’t call themselves shy. You took to Dr. Wrangel after not even a day, and you even get on well with your father’s friends.”

“I can’t be around people of the same age. It’s a special type of shyness.”

I don’t wanna go to the academy! I’m going to be with Friedrich and all the other love interests as soon as I start elementary school! Who knows what’ll happen if I approach them carelessly? Don’t you realize that my destruction means the Oldenburg family’s destruction?

“Well, I’ll just go and tell your mother and father. I hope you won’t blame me when they discipline you. And Dr. Wrangel won’t be visiting anymore, so you won’t be able to study magic at home any longer.”

“Ugh.”

She’s right. Father went and ended the contract with Dr. Wolff because I’m entering the academy. I had so much more to learn from Dr. Wolff too... Though if I just want to see him, he did say that I can still pay him a visit on the academy’s university campus. But he’s not my home tutor anymore, so I can’t expect him to keep teaching me magic. I guess I’ll just have to go to school.

“Fine! I’m going! That’s what you want, isn’t it? But don’t blame me if you regret sending me there later! It’s not my fault if our domain gets taken away!”

“Why would Lady Astrid going to school cause anyone’s domain to be taken away...?”

In the end, I had to arm myself to be ready to fend off my fate, and I had to head to the academy where the trigger to my fated destruction lay.

Am I working to avoid my destruction or walking right into it? I don’t even know anymore.

....

On my first day at the academy, there was an enrollment ceremony. Everywhere I looked, the parents in attendance were unmistakably noble ladies and gentlemen; even the children sitting in the same row of seats as me looked like little lords and ladies who’d enjoyed the best of upbringings.

Only nobles could enroll at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery’s

elementary school. The academy was built by nobles, for nobles.

What's with this class-based society? Proletarians, rise up!

The academy was supposedly open to all children with mana, but the children of commoners were generally taught magic by a retired court mage or some other such person in their local area. That said, it was possible for commoners to enroll later if they performed well enough and passed the entrance exams: the heroine had unmistakable talent for magic, so her results in the exams were outstanding, and she was able to join the academy at the high school level.

She must have won some amazing scholarship if they let her join without paying any tuition. But what about me?! My grades are gonna be amazing! I'm not losing to her!

Wait. If we battle it out as heroine and villainess, that can only go one way. I'm the villainess; whatever I do, so fate's not gonna let me win against the heroine. Sob, sob, sob...

“...and in this world where modern magic advances at an incredible pace, you have now joined this academy so that you might prepare yourselves, ready to uphold the future of the empire. Your predecessors who uphold the Plusen Empire at present are all outstanding individuals. Therefore, it is...”

Wow, the principal's speech is going on forever! You've been talking at us for thirty minutes already, grandpa!

Man, I'm bored. Maybe a little prank would liven things up. Ever since Dr. Wolff told me how to make people sneeze with blood magic, I've been looking for an excuse to try it.

Heh heh heh. Grandpa's in his element, repeating the same stuff over and over in his long-winded speech. Well, now it's time he learned the shame of unleashing a massive sneeze in front of everyone!

While this playful idea was going through my mind, I used the knife I carried to cut my fingertip. I silently used a spell to prepare the blood magic in my hand, and then I got ready to launch it at the old principal using wind magic.

A boy's voice made me stop. “Don't do that.”

Someone saw?! I anxiously looked around me.

Sitting in the row in front of me and to my left was a boy with fairly long silver hair—quite a rare color—who waved at me with a broad smile.

Damn, he's a cutie. I like the silver hair, but it's those pure marine blue eyes that really get me. Six-year-olds have no business looking that hot. Not only that, he saw right through my plan to use blood magic... He's something special.

Huh? Wait just a minute. A silver-haired student enrolling this year?

“Ahem. I’d now like to invite the First Imperial Prince of the Plusen Empire, His Imperial Highness Prince Friedrich, to say a few words on behalf of our new students.”

“Thank you.”

Now that the principal’s long-winded speech was over, someone chosen to represent the new students was going to speak.

He said Friedrich, so whoever stands up has to be...

“Thank you, everyone. We have many students with promising futures enrolling here at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery today, and it is heartening to see how the magic practices of our country are perpetually passed on, preserved, and also furthered.”

I knew it! That kid's Friedrich! No wonder he's so handsome! How'd I not realize it the moment I saw that silver hair? I almost threw myself right into the danger zone! What was I thinking?! How careless!

Friedrich was the First Imperial Prince of the Plusen Empire, and he was next in line to the imperial throne. He had exceptionally beautiful silver hair, which may have been a result of the blood magic his wet nurse used to save his life. He was one of the game’s love interests.

As nonchalant as he seemed, this character was a prince through and through, blessed with both literary and military talent. In truth, he worried over whether he was a worthy emperor in a time when the age of iron and fire was approaching. This character also worried about how his views were so different from those of his father, the “Soldier King” Wilhelm III.

This troubled prince would later be babied and then won over by the heroine.

Then they tie the knot! Meanwhile, my family's domain gets seized! What the heck?!

"It is common in recent years for magic to be employed as a weapon. However, magic is fundamentally a form of communication with the spirits. Communication between humans is also a possibility. Although the age of iron and fire draws ever nearer, it is my hope that we will find peace through communication."

Bleh. "Let's use magic to make peace"? Is he trying to pick a fight with me? That's the exact opposite of me fusing magic with modern weapons and tearing a hole through fate. I wish he'd just go off and find his heroine so he can tie the knot and live happily without ruining my life. Boo! Boo!

In my head, I was heckling Friedrich while he gave a speech like a model student. *Boo! Boo!*

"It is therefore my wish that each one of you is successful in your efforts to learn magic so that we might become capable of upholding the Plusen Empire." So ended Friedrich's speech.

If I were the Astrid from the game and this were the Friedrich route, it would be my job to butt in and say things like "How dare this ill-bred, arrogant commoner approach His Highness?! It is I who shall marry Prince Friedrich! Commoners should marry other commoners!" And yet...my actual affection score toward Friedrich just went below zero, down to something negative.

If you're born a prince, you've got to be a man and do your duty! Don't run crying to the heroine over a disagreement with daddy! Don't be a baby! And cut the crap about using magic to bring peace!

I'd only known him for a few minutes, but the sight of him already made my blood boil.

I wish this entrance ceremony would just end.

"We would like to draw the entrance ceremony to a close. Please head out to your classrooms, one class at a time."

Oh. It's over!

Chapter 13 — I, the Villainess, Have Entered Enemy Territory

Our long, depressing entrance ceremony had finished, and now the classes were headed to their own classrooms for orientation.

Friedrich...? Don't tell me you're in my class?

As I was choosing a seat in the classroom, Friedrich walked in with a big smile on his face.



“Hey. You must be Miss Astrid, the one everyone talks about. Your prank back there would have been funny, but you shouldn’t play around with blood magic like that. It can have different effects on different people.”

“You’ve heard of me, Your Highness?”

How’d he know my name? My plan was to keep a low profile at the academy so that no one’d even learn who I am. I could’ve sailed through without ever meeting my destruction as the villainess! Well, there goes that plan.

“Your father and Count Fraunhofer often talk about you in the imperial court. ‘Duke Oldenburg’s daughter has an unbelievable talent for magic,’ they say. I hear you’ve already learned everything they teach at elementary level.”

Father! Weren’t you against me learning magic the whole time?! And Count Fraunhofer shouldn’t be running his mouth off either!

“I’ve also heard you have more mana than anyone can measure. I’m glad that someone of such talent was born in this country. Together, we’ll make the Plusen Empire prosper, Miss Astrid.”

“You can just call me Astrid, Your Highness,” I said with a forced smile. “Yes, let’s make the Plusen Empire prosper together.”

Gah. Who’d want to help you improve this country? If I’m getting a bad end, I might have to fight a war with this country, and you want me to improve it? Don’t waste my time with that nonsense.

“Astrid, have I said something to offend you?”

“N-Not at all! Speaking with a prince just makes me a little nervous!”

Crap. Mother did warn me that all my thoughts tend to show on my face.

“Then I hope we can make the most of our time as classmates,” Friedrich said before walking off.

“Who were you talking to, Friedrich?”

“Miss Astrid. She’s that famous magical genius.”

The sound of my own name made me look over at Friedrich, and beside him I saw a handsome young boy with impressive blond hair and blue eyes. The way

he spoke to Friedrich was surprisingly casual. *That boy must be...*

“I’m relieved you’re in my class, Adolf.”

“Yep. Let’s make the best of our time as classmates.”

Adolf!

He had to be Adolf Franz von Wallenstein, the son of the captain of the country’s strongest knights, the Order of the Golden Griffin.

Adolf was another of the game’s love interests, and he was the cocky type. Although he talked big, being the captain’s son was a real burden on him because he worried about whether he’d ever become the next captain. Blood magic was essential for any order of knights, but that was something he struggled with, leaving him with an inferiority complex.

The heroine would baby Adolf as he fretted, winning him over as a result. Even if the heroine chose Adolf’s route in the game, Astrid would get between them to tell her that a commoner was an improper match for the next captain of an order of knights, making it harder for the heroine to finish his route.

Personally, I had no interest in cocky boys, so I’d be staying out of it.

It remains to be seen how much affection I’ll score with him, but I think I’ll just keep my distance. Discretion is the better part of valor.

“Your Highness, it is an honor to study at your side in this class.”

“Silvio! We’re in the same class, huh? But you’ll have to stop calling me ‘Your Highness.’ I’m just here as another student at the academy.”

This boy named Silvio had chestnut-colored hair worn in a short bob style.

Hm? Silvio? I searched through the encyclopedia of my brain. *Ahhh! He’s another love interest!*

Silvio Heinrich von Stein was the son of the Plusen Empire’s chancellor. He was an intelligent character who would often reveal a sharp eye for details. He also worried about his father; he felt that his father’s actions showed a lack of respect for the emperor, but kept those worries to himself as they ate away at him. His level of mana was nothing special, and he had a poor command of magic, both of which gradually made him develop a complex. The heroine

would baby the fretting Silvio and win him over.

The... The love interests are all gathered right here. This classroom's a deadly minefield! I'm gonna have to move like a minesweeper, never knowing when I might make a fatal misstep.

"Everyone, please take your seats."

I was still cautiously watching the gang of love interests when I heard the teacher's voice.

"This is Class 1-A, and I'm your homeroom teacher, Gregor von Gericke. I teach fire elemental magic and wind elemental magic. If anyone in the class has any issues, please speak with me."

The teacher was a man in his forties. As you'd expect from a teacher chosen as the precious prince's homeroom teacher, he had a certain air about him that made him seem elite.

But who's that following behind him?

"My apologies for being late. My name is Bernhard von Bronikowski, and I've been assigned to this class as a trainee teacher. I teach the same subjects as Mr. Gericke, fire and wind elemental magic. I hope I can be of assistance to you all."

An extremely young teacher who appeared to be in his late teens bowed his head as he introduced himself. His black hair was swept back into a topknot, which looked quite refined.

He looks a little sleepy, but still, that's a handsome face. I bet this one's going to be popular with the girls. Wait... Wah! Bernhard von Bronikowski?! He's another love interest!

Bernhard von Bronikowski was a teacher at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery, and he appeared in the game as the protagonist's homeroom teacher. He was a dependable nice guy with a laid-back personality, and in stark contrast with the spineless boys, he showed no signs of insecurity.

His lack of insecurities combined with the teacher-student relationship made him the most difficult character to win over in the game, and he really was a nice guy. Once he started dating the heroine, he became almost like a reliable

older brother who took the lead during their clandestine outings.

There's a bit of an age gap, but he's my favorite character from Wish Upon a Shooting Star. All the others need to grow a spine. They should sort out their own problems without needing to be babied.

Despite me wanting to get closer to this older boy, he was another potential love interest who might someday tie the knot with the heroine and who could trigger some convoluted sequence of events that would lead to my family's domain being seized. He wasn't someone I could approach carelessly.

This is one guy I don't want to leave for the heroine... She has her pick of boys already. Why shouldn't the villainess be able to find love? Though I guess that's what it means to be the villainess... Ahh... I wish I'd been born the heroine...

As I sat there pitying myself, a printout was passed to be me from the row in front.

What's this? A training camp in Tourberg Forest as part of new student orientation? They're putting a lot of effort into the orientation considering we're just elementary schoolers...

Come to think of it, this'll be the noble version of a camp. They'll probably all bring a bunch of servants and live like they always do. When I think of training camps, I imagine going to hot springs, comparing our bodies, and then talking about boys all night. I doubt we'll do any of that.

Man. What a pain. There are too many hazards in this class. I hate to do it, but I'd better pass up on the new student orientation.

....

"Absolutely not," said father when I asked if I could skip the new student orientation.

"You finally have a chance to get to know your classmates and their parents. Why would you want to miss it? If things go well, this could be a chance to make strong connections with the children of other nobles. It's a chance to establish yourself as a respected figure in high society."

"But...I'm worried about sleeping somewhere that's not my own home. I

don't think I can sleep in an unfamiliar bed."

"Haven't you stayed away from home before?"

"Not at all..."

I'd never actually slept away from home. My (super cute) cousin Iris had been over to stay, but I'd never stayed anywhere other than the Oldenburg manor.

"Wh-What if I can't get to sleep?"

"Don't whine before even giving it a try."

I knew it... Father isn't thinking of me as a girl. Sometimes, it's like he sees me as a boy. I wonder why.

"And isn't Prince Friedrich in your class? This is too good of an opportunity to miss. If you can get close to Prince Friedrich, you could even be an empress someday."

Once again, that's the worst idea I've ever heard, father. Friedrich isn't even my type, and he's a type of landmine known as a love interest. If I approach him carelessly, you'll be out on the streets too, father. Is that what you want?

"I don't think Prince Friedrich has even noticed me. Such a wise and peace-loving boy would never take interest in a magic maniac like me! It might be best to give up on Prince Friedrich. Yes, let's do that."

"If you've realized that you're a magic maniac, then work on bettering yourself."

No! I need to take my magic to extremes so I can tear fate a new one with the power of modern weapons!

Honestly, I can't stand Friedrich. I don't have a thing in common with him. What's to like about a dyed-in-the-wool pacifist with idealistic fantasies about using magic for the sake of peace?

"Father, if someone so ill-mannered as I were to approach Prince Friedrich, would you yourself not lose your standing in the imperial court?"

"Your manners are...good enough...I think. Don't worry."

He actually thinks I'm ill-mannered! I know I'm the one who said it, but I'm still

kinda shocked. I always show proper respect to my elders, and I always show proper courtesy to people based on their social status. I'm following all the teachings of Confucianism here!

"Father, I just can't. Let's give up on this. We know that no good will come of it."

"I won't hear you whining before you've even made an attempt. Approach His Highness with the same enthusiasm that you show for magic. You're a good girl, and I'm sure he'll be fond of you."

That's parents for you. I'm clearly anything but a good girl.

"Or perhaps you've found another target for your affections?"

Whoa! What a tactless question, father! Parents can't just question their kids about their love lives! Especially when it means asking a girl who she likes!

"Not Wolff, I hope?"

"No. I am quite fond of Dr. Wolff, but I do understand the age difference between us."

When I was four, Dr. Wolff was twenty-five, meaning the age gap is twenty-one years. That's a little much.

"But I don't think you've ever gotten to know anyone of the opposite sex besides Wolff..."

"No one has won my affection as of yet."

I still haven't tasted the bittersweet fruit that is love, father.

"Very well. But you will attend the student orientation. I'll hear no excuses. I can't force you to get to know Prince Friedrich, but I demand that you at least make friends with the daughters of other nobles."

"Yes, father..."

In the end, I was forced to attend the orientation, where I'd be surrounded by hazards at all sides. I prayed to God that nothing would happen.

Amen...

Chapter 14 — The Villainess Goes to New Student Orientation

The fateful day had come: the day of orientation for new students of the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery.

As I'd predicted, the little lords and ladies had come with a swarm of servants in tow. That said, I'd also brought my considerate, gentle, and strict maid, so I couldn't criticize the others too much.

I cast a glance over in Friedrich's direction. He was laughing with his friends Adolf and Silvio. They'd brought a great number of servants with them, as you might expect. Friedrich especially had many people with him, including knights acting as his guards.

Now that's what I call overprotected.

"Everyone, please gather into groups according to your class." It was the trainee teacher Mr. Bernhard who spoke to us, rather than our stern-looking elite teacher, Mr. Gericke.

Don't dump all your responsibilities on the trainee! The senior teacher should handle this. This academy's run by slave drivers! I wouldn't wanna work here.

As instructed, I gathered with the other members of Class 1-A. For some reason, Friedrich had positioned himself quite close to me. Adolf and Silvio trailed along behind him.

Why are you getting near me? Are you trying to set off some tragic event that makes my family lose our territory before the heroine can even appear?!

"Astrid, now that we're classmates, I hope we can become friends. I think this is a wonderful opportunity for the two of us to get better acquainted."

"Y-Yes. I think so too."

Damn. I have to watch what I say because he's a prince... But I didn't come here to get friendly with these losers. You boys are a bunch of babies who need

the good little heroine to show up and hold your hands!

“Please allow me to introduce my friends. This is Adolf, and this here is Silvio.”

“Like he said, I’m Adolf. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Silvio. I hear you’ve shown an incredible talent for magic despite your young age, Miss Astrid. Perhaps I might talk to you if I’m ever struggling with our classes?”

I knew who they were without the pointless introductions, but this was our first meeting according to the game’s story.

“I’d be honored. I wouldn’t describe myself as talented in magic, but I’d be delighted if I could be of assistance.”

Go get lost somewhere! Somewhere far away! Far, far away!

“It will someday be us who uphold the Plusen Empire,” Friedrich declared. “Let’s hone our skills as best we can and try to improve each other, Astrid.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “As rivals, friends, and as nobles of the Plusen Empire, let us never be negligent in our daily studies.”

Yuck. I think I’ll manage just fine by myself, thanks.

“Come along, everyone. The new student orientation will now begin.”

What? Friedrich and his friends are going to hang around me even after the orientation starts?! H-How can I concentrate on everything we’re being told when I’m in this minefield? It’s too much to bear.

I hope they get this over with quickly. This orientation is hell. I just want to go home and take my time designing my next weapon. Then maybe I can use my finished weapon to slaughter Friedrich, Adolf, and Silvio...

Mwah hah hah hah! Enjoy your carefree lives while you can. The day will come when I use all the power at my disposal to incinerate this dung pile known as fate!

....

The orientation had begun, and it was exactly what you’d expect. They explained to us what we’d learn at the elementary level and how we’d spend

our time at the academy. It was boring.

After that, the teachers put on a magic show for us. A young female teacher manipulated water to create a fountain in midair, Mr. Gericke made a fireball appear then had it explode in the sky, and a middle-aged male teacher created gold by manipulating earth.

Their magic might be fancy and well-polished, but it doesn't compare to my magic. My modern weapons can take out any mage. If fate forces me to fight against this country's mages, it'll be a breeze.

Just look at all these students watching the teachers' magic with their eyes glistening... I guess magic's surprising if you're a dumb kid who's never used it before.

Uh... I really need to get this type of arrogant thinking in check before it sends me to my destruction.

The teachers were trying to show the students the wonders of magic and show them what would be possible if they trained here at the academy.

Creating water fountains and fireballs at just the right size needs mana control. Every one of these teachers seems to have it mastered. I need to learn everything I can from them.

"Isn't it impressive, Astrid?"

"Indeed, Prince Friedrich. Such a level of control isn't easy. One mistake and they'll find themselves threatened by a monstrous water blob."

"Monstrous w-water blob...?"

Whoops. I'm not supposed to talk to Friedrich if I can help it. I never know when my fated destruction might come charging at me. The heroine's not here yet, but I can't be too careful. I have to tread carefully in this minefield, or otherwise I'll need a group of prisoners who'll clear it by walking in front of me.

"I was talking about myself," I replied. "I had a lot of difficulty learning mana control, so I understand how impressive these techniques really are."

"You think you can do what they're doing, Miss Astrid?" Adolf asked.

Huh? He's challenging me? I know being cocky is part of his character, but it's

just annoying because that's not my type.

"I can indeed. Observe."

I created a water fountain small enough to fit on my palm. I was erasing the flow of water by imagining nothingness while also creating new water. It just looked like a simple parlor trick, but it was actually a high-level technique.

"Wow, that's amazing!" Silvio said. "I'm surprised you can make a fountain so small. I've heard that mana control can be incredibly difficult for someone with as much mana as you, but your control is perfect."

"It's a bit dull though," Adolf added, sounding less than impressed.

Laugh at me while you still can. You're in for a real hard time when you try making water fountains yourself! You've got to call on the water spirits, control your mana and mental images, and then erase the water flow with pinpoint precision at the same time.

"You'll now have some free time." Mr. Bernhard had returned as the host to announce an intermission in the orientation. "We'll be holding a barbecue at six o'clock, so please gather back here before then."

How are things going to go from here on? Can I really fight against fate?

....

We'd finally gained a break from the new student orientation.

I can escape to my room!

We were assigned four students to a room during the orientation, which was partly to encourage us to work in groups. Like everyone else, I shared my room with three other classmates.

"Lady Astrid."

Just as I thought I could lie down and relax without Friedrich to bother me, a girl in another bed called my name.

I've never seen her before. Who even is she?

"I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Forgive my rudeness. My name is Minne von Mohl. I'm the second eldest

daughter of Count Mohl.”

The Mohl family? I think I’ve heard of them...maybe.

“I noticed that you were getting along rather well with Prince Friedrich. Are the two of you friends?” Minne asked.

“He’s a landmine...I mean, an acquaintance of mine,” I replied coolly.

It’s not like I can tell her that I hate his guts for being a landmine and for his personality too. I’d get a bad end through lèse-majesté if I let that slip! Bad ends terrify me.

“Is that so? You seem to get on so well. Have you not been promised to him?”

“There’s certainly no horri—incredible arrangement of that sort.”

This girl’s got some frightening ideas in her head! Being promised to a guy like that would be bad enough on its own, but for me, it’s an express ticket to a bad end! Please, keep that type of thought to yourself.

“Well, I personally think that you and Prince Friedrich would make a wonderful couple. I’ve heard that you have an incredible talent for magic, after all. I cannot think of another person who would be more worthy of being by Prince Friedrich’s side.”

“No, no, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong! Completely wrong.”

I get it. This Minne girl must be the one who put the ideas in Astrid’s head in the game. Why else would someone be into that weakling? I’ll pass, thanks.

“Then perhaps someone else has won your heart, Lady Astrid?”

“Well...I did like my home tutor.”

“Were the two of you dating?”

“He was twenty-one years older than me, so that wouldn’t have been a good idea.”

As much as I like Dr. Wolff, I don’t think of him as someone I’d want to marry.

“Then that means that no one else has won your heart. You absolutely must make Prince Friedrich your own! I think the two of you would be just wonderful as husband and wife.”

“I’d meet my destruction before we became husband and wife...”

Wow, Minne’s not letting up. Even if I were to get in a relationship with Friedrich, all I’d be doing is keeping him warm until the heroine can show up and snatch him away, and then my family’s domain would be seized. Who’d wish for a future like that?

“D-Do you admire anyone, Minne?”

“Huh?! M-Me? Perhaps it doesn’t befit a girl of my status, but I’m quite taken by Lord Adolf. We’re already acquainted because my older brother is a knight. He’s an awfully good-natured soul, and he’s sure to become head of the order of knights someday.”

Well, that was a very pure reaction, Minne. She could do a lot worse than Adolf; sorting out his problems isn’t that hard. If she could do that, everything would go just fine.

“I’ll do what I can to help love bloom between you.”

“Th-That’s too much! I’m not worthy of receiving aid from Lady Astrid...”

Huh? Is a duke’s daughter really held in such high regard?

“Well, since you were kind enough to talk to me, let’s be friends, Minne. Please feel free to call me Astrid.”

“I-I couldn’t possibly! I wouldn’t dream of it! Please, let me call you Lady Astrid! But if you’d truly have me as a friend, I’d be honored. I don’t think myself worthy, but I hope I can be a good companion to you.”

“Yes, let’s be good friends!”

You’d think I’d just asked you to marry me, Minne. I don’t bite! I’d rather you just treat me like you treat everyone else.

The two other girls in the room reacted as soon as Minne had agreed to be my friend.

“Minne!” exclaimed the first girl. “You’ve made friends with Lady Astrid?!”

“I’d I-love to get to know Lady Astrid better...” added the other girl.

“Of course, of course,” I told them. “Let’s all be friends! You can all just call

me Astrid.”

“I wouldn’t dream of being so ill-mannered!”

“Please allow me to call you Lady Astrid!”

Why’s everyone so uptight? Is every friend I make going to refuse to call me by my name?

My first day of new student orientation had given me something new to worry about.

Chapter 15 — The Villainess Loves Outdoor Activities

It was day two of new student orientation. Orientation would last just two days, making this the last day. *Phew.*

It felt so good to have dinner and then relax in the hot spring yesterday. It's still bothering me how stiff everyone acts around me, though... Everyone insists on calling me Lady Astrid rather than just Astrid. Having this wall between me and everyone else gets me down.

Despite that issue, there were now several people I could call friends. After meeting Minne, the girl with diabolical ideas about setting me up with Friedrich, I gained a few more friends among the noble girls. I've never had trouble making friends thanks to my outgoing nature.

I was getting along particularly well with Minne. However, some of the girls tended to avoid me as if they found my status as a duke's daughter too intimidating. Others went out of their way to say nice things to me, like "You're everything I'd expect a duke's daughter to be, Lady Astrid!"

I'd rather not use my family's status to get by in life. I want friends who like me for who I am. What I really need are friends who'll stick by me even if my family's domain is seized!

I am glad I have some friends for now at least. I've got ten years of academy life ahead of me, so there's no rush. We'll become real friends as soon as everyone realizes that dukes' daughters don't bite and that we're not scary.

But why does Friedrich, my archnemesis, have to be at the center of the class? He got Adolf and Silvio to talk to him without using any fancy titles, and our other classmates gather round him like moths to a flame too. You'd think his status as a prince would have everyone kneeling before him.

It's not fair! This is inequality! Now I hate him even more! I wish that dumbass would drop dead!

“Remind me what we’re doing for day two,” I asked Minne.

“We’re to take a walk to Tourberg Forest, Lady Astrid,” she replied.

“Oh, a forest walk? Sounds relaxing.”

I’d been in an outdoor activities club in high school, so I would’ve enjoyed pitching a tent in the forest, cooking with our own ingredients, and then chatting around a bonfire as we ate the food. But that was probably all too much for the pampered little lords and ladies of the academy.

“Actually, we’ll be left to our own devices, so we could enjoy a cup of tea here in the lodge instead,” Minne suggested.

“I wouldn’t mind exploring the forest,” I replied. “We might see some lost fairies.”

“L-Lost fairies?”

“Back when I was four, I went hunting with my father’s friends and saved a lost fairy. Blau, come on out.” I tapped my breast pocket and Blau wiggled her way out.

“Master, I was so worried that you’d forgotten all about Blau... I’ve been in your pocket the whole time...”

“Sorry, sorry. I just figured people would get mad at me for carrying a weird creature around.”

“W-Weird creature?” Blau replied, slumping her shoulders in dismay. “Do you think I’m weird...?”

“Can you see her? She’s right here.”

“I see her! You astound me, Lady Astrid! You’ve already made a contract with a fairy!” It turned out that Minne could see fairies.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if you found a fairy in the forest and made your own contract?”

“I’m afraid I lack any talent for magic. I’m not sure if I’d be capable of making a contract with a fairy.”

That’s what she’s worried about?

“Don’t worry about that. Fairies are surprisingly friendly. I had no trouble making a contract with Blau.”

“That’s right! Master killed a griffin that was trying to—”

I clamped a hand over Blau’s mouth before she could finish her story. *You don’t have to tell her everything, you dumb fairy!*

“Well, let’s walk through the forest anyway. We can bring down a deer if we get the chance.”

“Wh-What?”

I’d brought along my shotgun, slugs, and rubber bullets for just such an opportunity. *If there’s game in this forest, maybe I can get a kill and have our servants make it into stew.*

“First we need a map of the forest.” I’d never been here before, so I was looking at the area around me hoping to spot somewhere I could pick up a map. But I couldn’t see anyone giving them out.

“Lady Astrid,” said Minne with a look of disbelief. “Do you intend to enter the forest?”

“Huh?” I replied looking just as surprised. “You’re the one who mentioned a forest walk.”

“Entering the forest in your uniform would be dangerous. We’re only to take a short walk around the edge of the forest.”

“Oh, right...”

Well, we won’t have much chance of finding a second fairy that way...

“Let’s at least walk around the edge then,” I conceded.

“Astrid.” Just as Minne and I were about to set off, I heard the last voice I wanted to hear.

“P-Prince Friedrich? What brings you here?”

“I was thinking we could all enjoy our walk together.”

Yuck! I don’t think so! This landmine’s literally throwing itself under my feet!

“Would we be a bother?” Friedrich asked.

“N-Not at all. We were just thinking it would be lonely with just the two of us. Hah hah...”

Yes! You're a bother! Get lost!

“How about I invite one more person to join us?” I suggested.

Three boys and two girls is too unbalanced. There is that other girl who's now my friend...whether she likes it or not. If I remember right, she's a count's daughter just like Minne.

At my invitation she joined our group. “A-Are you both sure? Lady Astrid? Prince Friedrich?”

“We'd love to have you with us,” Friedrich reassured her.

The girl was Lotte von Lambsdorff. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, and you could tell she was a noble at a single glance. She was a little frightened of us, even though we weren't exactly going to bite her.

This'll lighten the load for me at least.

I wished I could have refused to go, but I knew that Minne liked Adolf, and I'd seen the way she blushed when Friedrich came toward us with Adolf following. I wanted to take good care of my friends.

I didn't know whether he was her type, but I'd assigned Lotte to Silvio. It was my job to take on the ringleader—Friedrich.

Bring it on, Friedrich! I can dodge any attempt you make at conversation.

“Astrid, is that a fairy?” Friedrich asked.

“Yes. Her name is Blau. Say hello, Blau.”

This prince doesn't miss much. I'm surprised he noticed my fairy.

“Hello, Mr. Human. I'm Blau. I made a contract with Master.”

“Wow. You already have a contract with a fairy, Astrid? That's just like you.”

You're the last person I want to impress.

“Why don't we begin our walk?” I suggested. “I think we can cover the whole

distance in about five minutes if we run at full speed.”

“That wouldn’t exactly be a walk...”

I could run around this whole forest in five minutes if I used blood magic. And why not? Running’s good for your health. It might make up for overeating at the barbecue yesterday.

“Hey, Friedrich. Wouldn’t it be better with just the three of us?” Adolf complained. “We can’t enter the forest with girls.”

“That wouldn’t do, Adolf. As gentlemen, escorting these ladies is our duty.”

Adolf, you were hoping to explore the forest too? That’s one thing we’ve got in common. I’d rather you stick with Minne though. And hopefully you’ll stay stuck with her; it’ll be one less landmine for me to worry about.

“Friedrich,” Silvio said. “Let’s set off soon. We must make sure we return before nightfall. And we can’t keep these ladies waiting. I hear there’s a wonderful field of flowers at the top of that hill, and I’d love to show it to them.”

That line was already enough to make Lotte, who I’d assigned to Silvio, blush.

Not exactly hard to get, are you?

“Well, I see no reason not to head straight for that field.” I agreed. “Let’s get going right away.”

“Yes, let’s start moving,” Friedrich replied.

I just want this hell to end as soon as possible.

“Lord Adolf,” Minne said. “Perhaps you remember me from the get-together held by your order of knights?”

“Yes, I remember. Your brother’s going to make a fine knight. He’s strong and skilled in blood magic, and that’s exactly the type of knight the Order of the Golden Griffin needs. I’ll be a knight myself too, as soon as I finish school.”

The conversation’s flowing well between Minne and Mr. Self-assured. Good, good. It’ll be a real shame for Minne if the heroine happens to pick Adolf, but...love is war, and war is always tragic for the fallen and the defeated.

Minne, you'd better arm yourself in preparation for what's coming. And defuse that landmine for me while you're at it.

"Lord Silvio, you're already learning the duties of the chancellor?!" Lotte asked.

"This is just my understanding of it. The duties of the chancellor aren't so difficult, but he bears great responsibility when making decisions. The chancellor serves to assist the emperor, after all: if the chancellor makes mistakes, then the emperor can't make the correct decisions either."

Lotte and Silvio are just great together. I don't know if he's her type, but with any luck, Lotte can defuse the landmine named Silvio for me.

"Astrid..."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, cutting Friedrich off. "What a wonderful day it is! It's the perfect day for a walk."

"Astrid..."

"There are beautiful flowers blooming over there! Maybe I'll pick some to take home for mother!"

"Astrid..."

"Oh, nature is so grand! As a trainee mage who uses nature's power, I can't help but feel energized!"

"Astrid..."

"There are so many people gathering on that hill! That must be where we'll find that field of flowers."

"Ast—"

"The food is delicious, the hot spring is good for my skin, and the air is fresh! I feel like I could attend an orientation like this every single day!"

See this, Friedrich? I call it a conversation-blocking preemptive strike! The trick to this high-level technique for avoiding conversations is to talk before the other person can say anything. This is how I'll avoid the landmine named Friedrich. You can latch on to the heroine in seven years from now; leave me out of it.

“Master. Do you hate that person, Master?” Blau asked.

“It’s more that he’s dangerous. If I’m not careful, he’ll ruin the Oldenburg family.”

I don’t want anything to do with Friedrich. I might have avoided trouble thus far, but if I get careless, there’s always a chance I’ll hit the trigger that causes my family’s domain to be seized. Avoiding my destruction isn’t just for me, it’s also for mother and father. And I don’t think I could bear living in this world if I weren’t a noble anymore.

It was then that it happened.

“Ast—”

“Everyone, get back!” I cut Friedrich off with a loud cry.

“Astrid, do you really want to avoid talking to me that much?”

“It’s not that! There’s a cockatrice ahead at two o’clock!”

I had to make Friedrich snap out of his usual ridiculously carefree state and wake him up to reality. A massive chicken with a snake for a tail had emerged from within the forest. I recognized it as a cockatrice—a creature capable of spraying deadly poison from its mouth. It must have been living in the forest, and our orientation must have drawn it out.

“Impossible! This is a safe forest!”

“Prince Friedrich, you and the others head back and call for the teachers!” I yelled at Friedrich, who was still stunned.

Poisonous purple fumes spewed from the cockatrice’s mouth as it began heading uphill toward the large group of students on the hilltop.

Damn! If it’s a fight you want, come to us! At least that way we can make Friedrich’s death look like an accident!

“We’ll head back, but what about you, Astrid?”

“I’m going to enjoy a spot of cockatrice hunting!”

While Friedrich instructed Adolf and Silvio to get Minne and Lotte away from the cockatrice, I ran after it with my shotgun in my hand. I used blood magic in

my legs to enhance my muscles and sharpen my reflexes as much as I could without burning out my nerves. I'd already had slugs loaded in the shotgun.

"If you're a chicken, then you shouldn't mind being fried chicken!"

I fired a slug at the cockatrice's back. At the same time, Blau manipulated the air just as I'd taught her, canceling out the sound of gunfire. Sound is no more than vibrations through the air; I didn't need a suppressor as long as I had a fairy like Blau around to reduce those vibrations by controlling the air and wind direction.

"Koh-keh!"

My first shot made the cockatrice stagger, but it wasn't dead.

"Now come at me, you dumb chicken! I'll blow that dumb face of yours clean off!"

With a grin, I pumped the fore-end to eject the spent cartridge and load a fresh one, then aimed at the cockatrice's head. The cockatrice swayed violently as it charged toward me, but I felt sure I could hit it.

You're putting up a good fight.



I pulled the trigger. In the same instant, a slug flew out and penetrated the skull of the cockatrice beautifully.

“Koh-keh...!”

However, wild creatures are stubborn. The cockatrice was still coming at me even as brain matter leaked from its head.

“Here’s the finisher.”

I fired another slug into the head of the cockatrice, causing it to collapse before it could cry out again.

“Threat neutralized. See ya, you dumb chicken!”

Even I’m not stupid enough to get up close to deal the final blow against an enemy that sprays poison from its mouth. I’ll let the teachers handle the cleanup. I assume they know the proper way to deal with a dead cockatrice.

But something’s not right here. Instead of fearing my enemies in battle, I’m getting excited! I’m a berserker. I’m supposed to be a well-bred lady of House Oldenburg...

“Nice work with the silencing, Blau. It wasn’t too loud for you?”

“It’s the same sound I heard when Master saved me. It doesn’t bother me!”

Good, good. Blau’s a good girl. Now to get back before anyone gets suspicious.

“Astrid, that device...”

Gah! You were supposed to run away, Friedrich! And why are Adolf and Minne still here? They’re meant to be calling the teachers.

“It’s a new type of crossbow, Your Highness. The intellectual property rights are exclusive to House Oldenburg, so I’m afraid I can’t tell you more. Forgive me.”

“A c-crossbow? I’m impressed, regardless. You brought down that cockatrice so quickly.”

Watch out Friedrich, or it’ll be aimed at you some day. You’d better not so much as think about ruining my family. Mwah hah hah!

In reality, I was in no position to get so full of myself. A single shotgun wasn't going to be quite enough firepower for taking on a whole empire.

"We've brought the teachers!"

While we'd been talking, Silvio and Lotte had been leading the teachers toward us. Mr. Gericke and Mr. Bernhard were among them.

"We came as fast as we could when we heard there was a cockatrice...though it seems it's already dead..." Mr. Gericke said, puzzled.

"I'm so glad none of the students were hurt." Mr. Bernhard sighed with relief.

"These wounds... What could have done this?"

"These wounds are too big to be caused by crossbow bolts. How did this happen?"

I made a swift escape while Mr. Gericke and the others were examining the dead cockatrice.

I'm glad I got a chance to use my shotgun, but I don't want anyone getting too interested in it!

In the end, the cockatrice's cause of death was declared a mystery. The appearance of a cockatrice in Tourberg Forest, supposedly a safe place for nobles, caused some panic among the students' guardians. Complaints were also made to the Adventurer's Guild, who had supposedly exterminated all magic beasts in this area.

Do your job next time, Adventurer's Guild. I can't bear having Friedrich and Adolf look at me like that...

Chapter 16 — The Villainess Studies Hard

The eventful orientation process was over, and ordinary academy life got underway.

The fundamentals of magic taught at elementary level were easy for me since I'd already learned it all from Dr. Wolff. It meant I could read books borrowed from the library rather than pay attention during classes.

The academy did teach ordinary subjects besides magic, but elementary school-level problems were hardly difficult for me. That said, as a humanities student who'd always struggled with math, I expected to have a hard time when I reached middle school-level coursework. I'd started to study the middle school content in advance to make sure my grades wouldn't embarrass mother and father.

I guess there's really nothing left to learn about the fundamentals of magic.

Presently I was supposed to be studying earth elemental magic, but the set task of making a clay figure with a specific size only took me a few seconds. I worked on making ammunition for the rest of class. I needed a good supply so I'd be ready to fight whenever the situation called for it.

After separating the cartridges from the projectiles, I'd made a device for putting the parts together. I could use that to pack explosive talismans—which I was always making whenever I had time—into the cartridges.

Now that Blau had learned to suppress sound, I could practice shooting whenever I liked. My current goal was to perfect my shooting stance based on the guides to holding guns I'd seen in military magazines and also my experience playing airsoft.

"Lady Astrid, might I ask what you're doing?" Minne must have finished making her clay figure because now she'd come to talk to me.

"See this, Minne? It's a tool for teaching naughty magic beasts and humans a lesson. But keep your hands off because it's dangerous. I'm also planning to

make a machine gun that takes 7.62×51 mm NATO rounds, I'm going to need a lot of rounds at the ready."

"O-Oh..."

That's the usual reaction I get from people with no interest in military technology...

"Astrid, what are you making?" Friedrich asked.

"It's a secret."

I can't let Friedrich know what I'm up to. I can't tell him anything.

"If you have time, why not help some of the students who are struggling to complete the task?" Friedrich suggested. "I think our classmates would be honored to be taught by a mage as skilled as you."

Wow. What a good little prince. Is he trying to stop me from making bullets? Wait! What if he really is trying to stop me from increasing my combat potential?! No, I'm overthinking. Friedrich doesn't even know what these tools do.

"Very well. I'll offer some assistance."

I went to help a student who hadn't finished the task, just as the good little prince suggested. It was better not to get into any disagreements with Friedrich. I would have loved to make him forget about me and leave me alone.

"Umm..."

Lotte's always helping me out, and now here she is struggling. I have to do something for her.

"Lotte, relax. Just imagine a clay figure."

"Oh! It's you, Lady Astrid!" Just the sight of me was enough to fluster poor Lotte. I could tell that her mana was disordered.

"Concentrate on your mental images. From the texture of the earth, to the completed clay figure, concentrate on imagining it all."

"Y-Yes, Lady Astrid!"

Lotte began to imagine her clay figure, and then it popped right up from the

ground.

It's just a little too small.

"Lotte, next imagine your mana flowing into it. You can just imagine mana flowing from your organs into the clay figure. Keep going until I say to stop. That's right, imagine that your mana is being scooped out of your body and poured into the clay doll."

My advice was vague. I couldn't remember ever struggling with this problem myself. I'd done whatever Dr. Wolff told me and everything always worked, which made it difficult to explain how I did it.

"I did it! Lady Astrid, I did it!"

But my vague advice was enough to help Lotte shape the earth into the perfect shape. It was the size we'd been told to make it. It left me thinking, *She probably would have gotten there without my help if that was all the advice she needed.*

"Thank you, Lady Astrid!"

"No problem. It's nothing. All I did was give a few random suggestions."

If that's all it takes to make Lotte thank me, she's too easily impressed.

Looking around, I saw several more of the girls I considered friends having trouble.

"These girls... I'd better help them."

I didn't mean to follow orders from my least favorite prince, but I couldn't ignore a friend in need.

"Can I help?"

"Huh?! L-Lady Astrid!" The girl cried out in surprise when I approached her from behind.

"Which part is giving you trouble?"

"I'm trying to imagine earth... I'm just not sure what earth is..."

Oh? She's stuck at that stage?

“Earth is the place where life begins. The dirt forms a hard surface on the ground, then becomes wet in the rain. The land is where trees spread their roots, flowers bloom, and grass flourishes. Dry sand, wet soil, imagine it all. I’m sure you can do it.”

“Y-Yes, Lady Astrid!”

When the girl tried imagining earth again just like I’d told her, a shape began to form, and then a small clay doll finally appeared.

“Well done. Now you just need to channel some mana into it.”

“Thank you, Lady Astrid!”

I can’t imagine your average noble’s daughter playing in the dirt. It must be hard for them to imagine it. It’s familiar stuff for me though; I’ve even practiced digging trenches just in case I need them.

Yeah... Father and the gardener weren’t exactly happy about my trench in the garden...

“What are you having trouble with?” I asked another girl.

“Ah! Lady Astrid! I’m having trouble controlling my mana. I keep creating figures that are too big...”

I went around helping my friends who were struggling with the task of making a clay figure. I’d rather have been making bullets, but after the prince had told me to help others, I’d found myself doing just what he said.

What?! The prince is just talking to Adolf! That slacker! Oh, wait. Adolf hasn’t finished the task either. He laughs at my fountain and then he can’t even make a clay figure? How pathetic. Well, it’s about time he learned how much effort goes into magic! Heh heh.

“Lady Astrid. Could you perhaps give me an example?”

“Hmm. Sure. First you imagine earth, then you imagine it forming into the shape of a figure. Then just channel in the mana that’s collecting up inside your organs.”

Ta-da! One completed clay figure.

“Ah! Master, you made Blau! I was your model?”

“Exactly. You’re my model, Blau.”

The model for my clay figure with miniature proportions was none other than Blau. It was quite a cute figure, if I do say so myself.

“You’re incredible, Lady Astrid! I need to try harder too!”

“Sure. Just let me know if you get stuck.”

What’s the teacher doing? Shouldn’t he be the one doing the teaching?

I looked around for him and spotted him lying in the shade beneath a tree.

The teacher’s slacking off...

In frustration, I took the shotgun from my back (yes, it’s always on my back), loaded some rubber bullets, and aimed it at the tree that the slacking teacher was resting against. Then I pulled the trigger.

Blau canceled out the sound of the gun firing, so all we heard was the dry sound of the rubber bullets hitting the tree followed by the shocked cries of the lazy teacher. The last step was to erase the rubber bullets, thus destroying all evidence.

“Sir, some students are struggling with the task. You should be helping them.”

“Oh? Sorry, sorry. The weather’s so nice that I couldn’t help nod—uh, what I mean to say is, I took a step back to teach the importance of persevering by oneself.”

I can do without the awful excuses.

“Lady Astrid! How did you make your clay figure so cute?”

“Lady Astrid! I couldn’t control my mana and made my figure too big. Now how do I erase it?”

Sigh. I don’t mind helping people, but this is a little much. Ask the teacher if you need help. He’s trained as a mage for longer than I have, so he’s bound to give better advice than an amateur like me.

“What have we here?” the teacher said to one of the students. “Let me take a look.”

“No thank you, sir. I want Lady Astrid to teach me.”

Hey. What's that about?

The dejected old man, who was supposedly teaching us earth elemental magic, went back to dozing in the shade of the tree.

“Astrid,” said Friedrich with a laid-back smile, “you’re awfully popular.”

“You’re also skilled in magic, Prince Friedrich. Why not help to teach others? I see some students among the boys who are having trouble.”

“My magic’s child’s play compared to yours, Astrid. Did you make that new crossbow of yours using magic?”

“I d-don’t know what you mean. This was produced through the hard work of skilled craftsmen.”

He's too sharp. All he knows is that it's a weird tool, yet he guessed that it was made with magic. Come to think of it, he knew when I was trying to play a prank on the principal too... Could he have some kind of special ability?

“Do you have the ability to trace the flow of mana, Your Highness?”

“Yes. It’s a trait that occasionally appears in imperial family members. We can follow the flow of mana and determine what sort of magic is being used. That said, your magic’s so complicated that I struggle to understand it, Astrid.”

Whoa. Fighting against him in the future could be tough. If he can learn what abilities I've got, he can come up with countermeasures. But he only understands the workings of magic itself; I should be safe as long as he doesn't understand how my weapons work.

“Th-That aside, why not teach some magic to your friends, Your Highness? Look, Adolf has failed again.”

“Oh, you’re right. Together, let’s do what we can to support our friends. Astrid, I feel the two of us will form a great team.”

More like we'll form some hellish situation where a single wrong move results in my destruction. No thanks!

“Lady Astrid!” A female student raised her hand. “Have you a moment?”

“Sure,” I said while walking over. “What is it?”

Our old earth elemental magic teacher had gone off to lie down in a foul mood.

Can't the academy cut his salary and give it to me instead?

“I knew it, Lady Astrid. You're promised to Prince Friedrich, aren't you?”

“Wh-What gave you that idea?”

Keep those horrible thoughts to yourself!

“You both seemed to get on awfully well during orientation, and just now you spoke on familiar terms. His Highness even calls you by your name, Lady Astrid. I can't help but suspect that there's something between you.”

“Wh-What? No, there isn't. Honestly, there isn't.”

If there's anything between him and me, it's completely one-sided! He's a huge nuisance!

“I see how it is. The arrangement is still secret. I understand. I don't suppose I'll be of much use, but I'll support you however I can.” The girl gave me a thumbs up.

Please! No! Please stop trying to curse me!

“Y-You should focus on making your clay figure. The lesson's almost over.”

“Oh! Y-You're right!”

Focus on your studies before focusing on gossip.

The lesson went on with me and Friedrich helping the students in place of the sulking teacher, and then we finished with me unveiling a huge statue of Blau. I made sure to erase my huge Blau statue afterward so it wouldn't cause any problems.

You know, teaching people is pretty educational in itself. Elementary school might not be as useless as I thought. But it's still not enough!

Chapter 17 — I'm the Villainess; Who's the Library Princess?

Whenever lessons ended, I'd use blood magic to sprint out of the classroom or outdoor practice ground, and then I'd hurry over to the library building. Look out for me when I do it, unless you want to be involved in a fatal collision.

The library was a space shared for students ranging from elementary schoolers to high schoolers.

Despite only being an elementary schooler, I've got access to all the high-level magic anyway! Awesome!

My subject of interest was the operation of the brain. Using blood magic, it was possible to manipulate the brain, which meant that it could be possible for magic to have the exact effect I was looking for. On the other hand, the brain's workings must have been incredibly complicated because I couldn't find any good books on the topic.

To start with, I took notes and wrote summaries of any eye-catching sections whenever I found a written account of blood magic being used to manipulate the brain. I hoped it would allow me to understand research articles written by people with bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees later. To decipher those articles, I'd need to learn some preliminary knowledge first.

As for the fundamentals, I'd already studied basic blood magic. Besides a few books Dr. Wolff had brought me at the age of four, my understanding of blood magic came almost entirely from practical experience. Now that I had regular access to published work, I wanted to use the opportunity to get a theoretical grasp of blood magic.

I didn't bother studying elemental magic here because that was something I could research freely during classes.

Blood magic...

In the past, it had literally been the magic of the blood—curses that worked

through the medium of blood. It was a despised art that could drive someone mad, destroy their body, or turn their surroundings into a bloodbath.

Eventually, there came those who used it as magic for healing or for enhancing their physical abilities, rather than for harmful curses. Blood magic then emerged from the dark corners of the world and took its place at the dazzling center stage.

Principle Number One: When using blood magic on yourself, your own blood is the medium. When using it on someone else, you need to touch them. That's why Dr. Wolff had always taken my hand when using blood magic on me.

Principle Number Two: Blood magic worked via mana circulating through the body—through the blood. I could also make my mana flow into my guns, but blood was a far more conductive medium. Only one five-hundredth of one's total mana could be controlled in water, but it could be controlled within the body with virtually no loss.

When I first realized this, I'd asked Mister Gnome to create a firing pin that contained blood, but he'd simply refused. "I'm not making that gruesome thing!" he said.

Principle Number Three: Blood magic can be blocked by blood magic. This was incredibly important.

There were blood magic techniques for creating a defensive wall within one's own body, which would block any physical changes caused by blood magic so long as the opponent wasn't using more advanced spells. As soon as I read this, I learned everything I could about it.

Modern weapons might give me unrivaled power, but that didn't mean I'd be able to withstand a direct attack on my body from a blood magic curse. That was a concern. If I could perfect my existing techniques, arrows and swords would be no threat to me, but I could still be defeated by an opponent lying in wait with blood magic at the ready.

That's why I'd decided to perfect my own version of a blood magic barrier.
Let's go!

In addition to that basic blood magic, I also included a spell that would

automatically reflect any blood magic an opponent tried to send into me by touch.

I guess this is what you'd call an offensive firewall? I do like cyberpunk.

I wanted to test it, but I lacked a good subject. The elementary-level students hadn't learned the first thing about blood magic, and I didn't want to bother Dr. Wolff.

Maybe I'll find a teacher with nothing better to do and get them to use some gentle blood magic on me.

"Hey, you," a voice called out to me as I was reading books and messing with blood magic spells. "Aren't you an elementary schooler? Can you even read that?"

I looked up to see three boys in high school uniforms.

"I understand some of it. Not all of it. I still have much to learn."

"R-Right..."

Don't act arrogant, Astrid. Be humble. Being full of yourself could be the trigger that gets your family's domain seized.

"Well then, let me ask you a quick question. Who was the first person to assassinate someone using blood magic?" one of the boys asked me.

Wow. Do these boys get their kicks bullying little elementary school girls?

"Elias von Engelhardt. He assassinated the 12th prince-electoral of Pflaz, Maximilian I, in the year 1012 of the continental calendar. The assassination was carried out under orders of Leopold I, then king of Plusen, who was aiming to unify the northern reich. The spell caused the blood within the victim's body to solidify, and it's now forbidden. Is this what you wanted to know?"

Heh heh. History falls under the humanities, so remembering this stuff is my specialty.

"Huh? It was Maximilian I who got assassinated? I wrote Otto II on the test..."

"That's a famous assassination, but it's not the first one using blood magic. The elementary school girl's right. The first blood magic assassination was

Maximilian I by Elias von Engelhardt.”

They were comparing test answers? That’s a shame for the boy who got it wrong.

“All right then. Who’s famous for creating the first blood magic healing spell and making blood magic widespread?” the boy asked me.

“Joseph Jünger. In continental year 1214, he successfully used blood magic to heal someone who’d lost a leg in battle. The spell became widespread afterward, and it became known that blood magic could also heal. Jünger of the Jünger Schleiden Research Institute was named after him.”

I wanted to learn healing magic myself. Dr. Wolff had taught me magic for healing small cuts, but I’d possibly need to deal with bigger injuries while fighting against fate.

“Amazing. That’s absolutely right. Are you really an elementary schooler?”

“Yes, I certainly am.”

Learning about history’s fun. It always makes me go off on tangents. What I really should’ve been focusing on was increasing the effects of my blood magic and recreating modern weapons using elemental magic.

“Oh, you’ve got red hair. Are you Duke Oldenburg’s daughter?”

“Yes. The name is Astrid. Nice to meet you all.”

They recognized me by my red hair? I suppose my red hair really is strikingly red. I must stand out.

“But of course. You’re the magical genius that everyone talks about from the Oldenburg family.”

Huh? When did that rumor start? I’ve never heard about that.

“This is great. Maybe you can help with this assignment? We’re struggling to figure it out.”

“I d-don’t mind. But maybe I could ask a favor in return?”

I didn’t think I’d be helping out the high schoolers too. But it’s a good opportunity. I can see what they study in high school. And another thing...

“Could you try using some gentle blood magic on me? Something with an obvious effect. Maybe sneezing or tears.”

“Huh?” At first, the high school students just stared at me vacantly in response. “I can make people sneeze, but...are you sure?”

“Yes. I want to test my barrier. But please be careful, it might reflect back onto you.”

All right. Time to give my barrier a real-life test.

“I’ll make it gentle.” The high schooler took my hand and made his blood magic flow into me.

Oh? I can feel someone else’s mana entering me. But what if I do this?

“Achoo!” The high schooler who’d tried to use blood magic on me let out a big sneeze. “Wh-What’s with this barrier? It bounced back?”

“It’s my special blood barrier. Now that you’ve helped me with my task, I’ll help you with yours. Where should we begin?”

My offensive firewall works! But I can’t let my guard down. It might have only worked because the blood magic was gentle. Some higher-level blood magic might break through my barrier. I need to practice this every day.

I thought about my new spell while the high schoolers showed me the task they were working on.

Hmm. Looks like we have to study history once we reach high school. That’s my specialty, so no worries there. But gauging potential mana levels and calculating mana output are definitely science. That’s gonna be tough.

Using everything Dr. Wolff had taught me and everything I’d taught myself, I helped the high schoolers finish up their task.

....

“Lady Astrid, Lady Astrid,” called Minne while running over to me as if she were my puppy dog.

We’d really started getting along, yet she still wouldn’t drop the “Lady.”

“What is it?”

“Have you heard the rumors about the Library Princess?”

Library Princess? I go to the library every day and I’ve never seen anyone like that. Wait! Don’t tell me...

“Minne, you know I don’t like ghost stories.”

“What? It’s n-not a ghost story!”

Huh? I thought she was about to start talking about weird things happening in the library late at night.

“It’s about a wise and beautiful girl who appears in the library. She’s so wise that even the undergraduates go to her for advice, and she’s so beautiful that everyone can’t help but call her Princess. I don’t really go to the library much, but that’s what I’ve heard.”

“Hmm. I go to the library every day and I’ve never seen this person once. Someone probably made it all up.”

If I knew anyone so wise and beautiful, I’d want them as a friend.

“Do you think so?” Minne asked. “I really wanted to see this person for myself.”

“Then why not come to the library with me? You’re not going to find her though.”

The library’s my territory. If there was a princess or whatever, I’d know instantly.

“Are you quite sure? I won’t be bothering you at all?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Don’t worry about that. The library has so many good books that you won’t get bored. There are elementary-level magic primers and novels. You should check it out once in a while, Minne. It’s a fun place.”

The library’s got way more books than you’d expect from a school library. There’s everything from picture books for the little elementary students to high-level stuff aimed at high schoolers hoping to get into university. But one thing it doesn’t have is a princess.

“Let’s go together next recess,” I suggested. “You have trouble with wind

elemental magic, right? I'll show you some good books that'll help you understand it better."

"Really?! Thank you!"

I'd borrowed so many books from Dr. Wolff back when he was teaching me magic that I'd read enough to be able to recommend things to others. I didn't mind reading books—as long as they weren't math textbooks, those scared me.

And so I went to the library with Minne, but of course, we didn't find any princesses. It was the same as always: I helped out a bunch of high schoolers, they shared some of what they'd been taught in return, and I studied a little blood magic.

Looks like that rumor really was false.

"See? She doesn't exist. There's no library princess."

"Y-Y-Y-Yes... Y-You're right..." For some reason Minne turned red when she looked at me.

Don't even think about cheating, Minne. Your target's Adolf. Read that book on elementary-level wind elemental magic and keep doing your best.

Chapter 18 — I'm a Villainess, but I Love Gym Class

Subjects in the humanities were my specialty; I struggled with subjects in the sciences. As for the lessons that involved moving around...I loved those!

During high school I'd joined the outdoor activities club at a time when there was a camping craze, and I'd really enjoyed it. We'd cycle to a campsite, then we'd camp there and chat. And that wasn't the only thing I enjoyed doing to keep active: my grades in gym class were second only to my grades in humanities.

Meanwhile, in the sciences, I always scraped by with a passing grade.

There were also gym classes here at the academy. I was full of excitement when the time came for those. As fond as I was of my usual sailor jacket uniform, I loved our gym clothes too.

"I wonder what we're going to do in gym class!"

"Y-You're in high spirits, Lady Astrid. I'm feeling nervous."

What've you got to worry about, Minne? All we have to do is run, skip, jump, and move around. I love exercise! It's great for clearing your mind and getting your thoughts in order.

In addition, I was getting some combat training from my family's knight Erhard to make sure my victory against fate was a certain thing. That said, I'd only trained during a short period spanning from age four to age six. I had a good idea of how to fight against someone with a sword, but I knew I lacked enough experience to fully understand it all.

I'll fill the gap with gym classes! I'll be the villainess who can shoot and run!

"Master. Do you like exercising, Master?" Blau floated around me as she spoke.

"Yep," I replied. "I love it. Moving around always leaves me feeling refreshed. I wonder what today's class will be. A short distance run? A long distance run?"

Or maybe a ball game?”

I headed over to where the teacher was waiting, full of excitement.

The gym teacher addressed the class: “All right, everyone. All of you should now have a basic understanding of elemental magic. As first graders, you should at least have surface knowledge of the earth and wind elements, and we need to deepen that understanding.”

Huh? Isn't this gym class? Why the talk about magic?

“Wherever you find yourselves in the future, you'll need magic for various tasks. This goes without saying for those of you aiming to become battle mages or knights; those professions require a combination of elemental and blood magic.”

Okay. Now I get what today's lesson is about.

“For today's class, we'll have a mock battle using elemental magic. Although I'm calling it a mock battle, it's merely a game. The winner is whichever team throws more earthen balls into the opposing team's base. You may use all of the elemental magic you've been taught.”

I get it. It's basically a snowball fight, but with mud balls. Sounds fun! I'm hyped!

“The boys and girls will stay together for this lesson. Now please divide yourselves into two teams.”

I sprinted away from Friedrich the moment the teacher finished talking.

Sprinting must have paid off because now Friedrich can't find me. Great!

“All right. It looks like you've got yourselves into teams already.”

My team was all girls. Friedrich's team was all boys. There wasn't much difference in strength between the girls and boys since we were elementary schoolers, and when it came to abilities in magic, we were evenly matched. Our team wasn't at a disadvantage.

“Now let me explain the rules in detail. First of all, the winner is the team that gets the most earthen balls, made using earth elemental magic, into the opposing team's base. You can throw them, or if you're confident in your wind

magic, you can use wind to launch them.”

Wind magic’s not going to do a whole lot by itself. Even my mental images of storms aren’t enough to launch mud balls into the enemy’s base.

“Anyone hit with an earthen ball is out, and they’ll have to leave the field. Also, anyone who uses rocks or pebbles rather than earth will be out for cheating. Anyone aiming for someone’s face will also be out. Conduct the match with good grace like the fine ladies and gentlemen that you are.”

Bah. Now there’s no chance of Friedrich accidentally dying in the chaos of the game...

“Those are the rules. The game starts now!” The teacher blew a whistle to signal the start of the match.

“Let’s do this!” Over in Friedrich’s group, Adolf was looking all fired up. He was really getting into the game.

“Wh-What should we do, Lady Astrid?” asked Minne in a panic.

“We can do whatever we want, as long as we don’t break the rules,” I told her with a grin. “That leaves a lot of options.”

The other camp’s still making mud balls as fast as they can, but I’m not seeing many mud balls on our side. I guess the girls don’t want to get dirty.

“Everyone! We can shower afterward. Give it all you’ve got!”

“Y-Yes, Lady Astrid!”

Now for my strategy. The team that slam dunks the most mud balls into the enemy base wins. Rocks are forbidden. Anyone whose body gets hit is out. Which means...

“Earth spirits, I’ll need your help, please.” I imagined something that then became reality.

“Whaa?!”

A massive earthen wall appeared in front of our base. When the mud balls finally came flying at us, they simply hit the wall with a splat before crumbling apart. Now the enemy would either have to throw the balls high enough to

clear the wall, or try to go around it.

I didn't break any rules with that, did I?

"Minne, take five girls with you to defend the right wing. Lotte, take five girls to defend the left wing. Everyone else, focus on making mud balls. Have you all got that?"

"Yes, Lady Astrid! Understood!"

Now that the base has defenses in place, I'm free to take action.

Although the wall I'd made was stopping the enemy from throwing mud balls into our base, it was also in our way. That left just one option: a mobile strike.

"I'm taking these!" I grabbed six mud balls made by girls who weren't assigned to defense, then used blood magic to leap out from the right side of the wall and onto the field.

I heard Adolf gasp. "One's coming at us!"

What? You thought we wouldn't dare attack because we're girls, Adolf?

"Blau, create as much wind as you can around us. Just enough to change the heading of any mud balls aimed at me."

"As you wish, master!"

It might not be enough to knock a powerful throw off course, but it'll give me peace of mind.

At the same time, I was focused on using my blood magic to warm up my nervous system and boost my strength while I ran in a zigzagging pattern. The field was wide and the enemy base was more than fifty meters away, so it was pretty good exercise.

"Damn! I can't hit her...!"

This zigzagging run was something I'd learned playing airsoft.

I'd crossed the length of the field without stopping, and then I ran along its width throwing mud balls at the boys. "Take this! And this! And this!"

Their base was defended by nothing more than a few sandbags, making it easy to hit their torsos. It felt good to shower my opponents with mud balls.

“Rudolf’s down!”

“Please stay back, Your Highness! I, Deita, will handle this! Oof!”

“Ahh! Deita’s down!”

Heh heh. I’ve thrown the boys’ camp into disarray.

“Hey!” I aimed at the ground around the boys with the remaining mud balls, scoring three points, and then I ran back to my own base at full speed.

“You think you can escape?!” Adolf was in pursuit.

I kept as low to the ground as possible while running straight across the whole distance. Adolf followed behind the whole way. *Good boy. Keep it up.*

“An enemy’s approaching!” I cried to the girls as I entered the base. “Left wing, prepare to attack!”

“Ahh!” the girls cried out as they threw their mud balls. “Whaa!”

Minne and the other girls defending the right wing moved out from the wall I’d made, then they showered Adolf with mud balls. He was some way behind because I’d been running at full speed while using blood magic.

“Hah?!” Poor Adolf was left covered in mud.

“L-Lord Adolf!” Minne cried. “I-I’m so sorry! Let me wipe that off!”

“Forget it. It’s part of the game.”

Oh, that’s right. Minne likes Adolf. I shouldn’t have made her do that. But nice job, Minne! You’ve shown some real feminine charm with how quickly you pulled out your handkerchief and wiped Adolf clean. You might have actually scored some affection points from Adolf just now! Though it’s hard to tell because he’s always so full of himself.

“I need more! Have you made any more mud balls? I’m going on the attack!”

“Yes, Lady Astrid!”

At this rate, our victory’s certain. Adolf, you messed up bad by pursuing me back then. You’re supposed to be a commanding officer. Now cowardly Friedrich is the only one commanding the boys, and he’s no threat to me!

“All right. Here I go!” I sprinted off toward the enemy camp with another six mud balls.

“Stay calm. Wait for her to throw her mud balls. She’ll slow down just as she throws them.”

“As you command, Your Highness!”

Wow. Friedrich was paying attention. He’s right: it’s hard to throw and sprint at the same time, unless you’re a superhuman. Likewise, I’m trying to take each shot just as the enemy’s about to throw.

The boys are moving a lot more since my last attack on their camp. They’ve realized that standing still makes them easy targets... But if they had time to think about that, then I have to wonder why they didn’t make any walls to defend their base. I suppose that’s the myopia of a peace addict at work.

Well, whatever. I’ve got a plan.

Once I got within range of the boys’ camp, I leaped into the air. After jumping to a height of almost two meters, I had a good view of the boys’ stunned faces.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” I threw all of my mud balls at the boys while at the top of my leap.

“Now!” At Friedrich’s command, the boys’ mud balls came flying toward me.

It’ll take more than that!

“Blau! Full power output!”

“Understood, Master!”

Thanks to Blau creating a raging wind with all of her power, the mud balls thrown at me simply succumbed to gravity and fell back to the ground. Jumping up into the air had put gravity on my side, making it easier to knock the enemy’s mud balls off course.

“Wind elemental magic?!”

“A fairy!”

You’ve realized too late, boys.

The only one who wasn’t surprised was Friedrich, the one boy who could see

the flow of my mana. He was still trying to think of a way to turn the situation around.

The battlefield's no place for leisurely thinking!

"A perfect landing!" My leap had taken me far enough to land inside the boys' base. Now I had one thought on my mind. "Your annihilation is here, boys."

The boys had stored their own mud balls in the very part of the base where I'd landed. They'd thrown all of the mud balls they'd been holding at me and missed, leaving them unarmed. They were sitting ducks.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" I threw mud balls at the line of boys, eliminating them one after another—though I made sure to aim for the legs because I was worried about making Friedrich angry. That was a little cowardly of me.

"The match is over!" The teacher blew the whistle as soon as the boys' team was wiped out. "Well... I don't know what to say. This wasn't exactly the game I had in mind, but both teams played by the rules. I have to commend you all for your enthusiasm."

Don't just praise us for enthusiasm! War is all about who won!

"But I think I'll have to make some big changes to the rules... And I'll have to ask that you refrain from using blood magic in all future lessons, Miss Astrid. You might be under a teacher's supervision, but blood magic can still be dangerous."

"Yes, sir..."

Bah. Gym class would've been the ideal place to use my blood magic... If I keep using a little blood magic to boost my reflexes, no one should notice, right?

"Wow. You're incredible as always, Astrid," Friedrich remarked.

"N-Not at all. It was just luck. Luck."

It was obvious that I'd draw Friedrich's attention if I stood out too much, and yet I'd made myself stand out just for the sake of winning a game. Deep down, I had a growing feeling that I might be kinda dumb.

"It's no use being humble. You've already learned to use blood magic. And it's not just magic; you've shown exceptional talent as a strategist as well. You

made a wall to block attacks from the front, strengthened your defenses at either side, and then launched an attack using your superior mobility. It was an excellent strategy.”

What’s this? I thought he was just a shortsighted peace addict, but he actually understood my battle strategy. Not so surprising, I suppose. He is a prince, so he’ll have had expert teaching beyond what a duke can offer. I wonder if he’s had lessons in military history too...

“That said, I do hope we can create a world where people like yourself have no need to fight.”

Gah! There it is! He’s a peace addict through and through.

“With the age of iron and fire drawing near, won’t the empire need to mobilize many different kinds of people?”

“The age of iron and fire? You may be right, but that’s something I’d like to avoid.”

The Plusen Empire had adopted a widely hailed policy of military expansion. It seemed likely that the Osterreich Empire would attempt to assert control over long-held territory in the reich. Meanwhile, it was believed that Empress Ekaterina I of the Mellaria Empire planned to besiege the Plusen Empire. In the game, the Plusen Empire just barely survived the age of iron and fire, but couldn’t do so without resorting to war.

The age of iron and fire’s near, but you wouldn’t think it after listening to this prince!

“Lord Adolf, I’m truly sorry. I’ve gotten dirt on your clothing...”

“They’re gym clothes. They’re meant to get dirty. I’m more worried about the dirt on your handkerchief... I’ll wash it before I give it back. Sorry.”

Oh, what’s this? Are Minne and Adolf slowly laying the foundations of a relationship? Good. I like how this is going. Keep it up and defuse that landmine for me.

Chapter 19 — The Villainess and New Weapon Development

My weapon development project was progressing steadily. The weapon I currently had in development was a machine gun that fired 7.62×51 mm NATO rounds.

These 7.62 mm rounds had a higher caliber and were once commonly used in place of 5.56 mm diameter rounds, which were what my automatic rifle fired. However, higher-ups in the military had come to prefer lower calibers because high-caliber rounds were bulkier, heavier, and gave reduced firing rates that made it harder to achieve sufficient firepower. Still, the larger rounds hadn't fallen out of use completely: they were still used in machine guns and sniper rifles, although the same issues were present in those cases too. Or at least, that's what I'd read in military magazines.

The reason I'd decided to use these troublesome high-caliber rounds in my machine gun was because they're just too damn cool. High-caliber rounds are cool. No further justifications needed. Carrying high-caliber rounds was no problem if I used blood magic, so why not put my needs as a military geek first?

However, development of the machine gun was a problem. Currently, the maximum number of rounds that I could fire continuously from a gun was about thirty. The sudden switch to a machine gun that fired fifty or one hundred rounds was going to cause problems with the mana in the firing pin.

Putting too much mana into the firing pin would cause it to conduct through the metal of the gun, causing rounds in the chamber or within a magazine to fire spontaneously. On the other hand, if too little mana were used it would run out too quickly, making continuous fire impossible.

I was still a newbie when it came to magic, so I didn't have the skill required to quickly top off the mana in the firing pin whenever it was running out. It took me a few seconds to channel mana into a firing pin, and those few seconds could cost me my life. I wanted a way to make that mana last as long as

possible, and for that, I was going to need a technological breakthrough.

“Mister Gnome, can you use this metal in the firing pin?”

“Hm. This metal seldom occurs naturally, though it’s a familiar substance to me. The thing is, I need something more robust.”

The metal in question was the one Dr. Wolff had given me—the material that made it easier to control mana in a substance. This would supposedly allow me to control a fiftieth of my overall mana. If it worked, I’d be able to keep my mana concentrated in the firing pin at all times. But Mister Gnome didn’t look satisfied.

“Well, what about an alloy?”

Guns weren’t just made from pure metals; they were made using various metals combined to form alloys.

“Couldn’t you do something like mixing this new metal with some iron?”

“Hmmm. That could work. I’m surprised you thought of it.”

My knowledge comes from military magazines rather than physics textbooks, so any scientific explanation about steel alloys including this new metal is beyond me! Ahem!

“I’ll give you the mental image, so please do your thing!”

I imagined the exploded-view drawings I’d seen in military magazines, the internal mechanisms I’d seen in Guam, everything I could remember about a machine gun’s structure...

“Finished!”

It’s complete!

Before me was a delightfully big machine gun mounted on a bipod.

The rugged design’s already enough to get me excited!

“I tried using a mixture of iron and that metal for the firing pin just like you said. It seems robust enough, but I’ll leave it to you to test the mana control.”

“Thank you, Mister Gnome!”

Mister Gnome is always kind. He goes along with all my selfish demands.

“Now to fire it!”

Rather than feeding in rounds with a belt, I’d chosen to use a magazine. If I’d used a belt feeding system, I’d have needed someone to assist while firing it. I was in my fight against fate alone; I had to be able to do everything by myself.

I was on my usual firing range, the field at the edge of the ranch. My targets were straw figures.

I tried to suppress my excitement as I lay on the ground and boosted my strength with blood magic before bracing myself for the recoil. The machine gun had a proper optical sight attached, and the straw figure was in the center of its reticle.

I pulled the trigger. With a pleasing *ratatatah* sound, the gun turned the straw figure into Swiss cheese. The sound of the machine gun was music to my ears. It would probably annoy anyone nearby, but it was a sound that stirred my soul.

My hundred-round magazine was spent without the mana running out halfway. I’d been able to control the mana in the firing pin well enough to stop it flowing elsewhere, and it lasted long enough for me to fire all one hundred rounds. This was a big step forward.

“It’s just as noisy as the others, but this one’s different from your automatic rifle. This makes a large-scale attack possible. Something like this could—”

“Destroy the balance of power, right? I get that. But I’m not going to hand this advantage over to anyone else when I’m fighting against my future fate, so don’t worry.”

Mister Gnome’s such a worrier. I’m probably not going to use weapons after my showdown with fate. And this has nothing to do with the approaching age of iron and fire. I already know that the age of iron and fire ends with the Plusen Empire’s victory because it was in the game.

Though it could be a nice chance to get some field data...

“You’re thinking bad thoughts, aren’t you?”

“Not at all. I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort.”

Mister Gnome's sharp.

"I'll just have to take your word for it. The age of iron and fire is coming, and I really hope you'll stay out of it." Those were Mister Gnome's parting words.

"Will I be able to resist getting involved?"

The age of iron and fire would begin near the start of the game, and things would remain fairly stable for a while.

Even the Plusen Empire isn't going to mobilize elementary schoolers or middle schoolers.

At least, that's how I thought about things back then.

....

With the machine gun complete, I used the same metal to upgrade the firing pins of the automatic rifle, shotgun, and automatic pistol I'd made previously. This would allow me to keep fighting throughout prolonged battles.

I'd grown attached to the all-purpose shotgun that I'd used to take down the griffin and the cockatrice, but it needed upgrading to make it easier to use. It was with a heavy heart that I erased the gun and then made it afresh.

One problem still remained: guns alone weren't enough firepower. For that reason, I began working on a grenade launcher. However, there were several technical problems associated with the grenade launcher.

I could fire the grenade launcher using exploding talismans just as I had up to now. The remaining issue was how to control the all-important detonation of the grenade itself.

I could perhaps have used a talisman filled with mana as the detonator of the grenade, with the detonation somehow triggered by the shock of an impact. But that seemed a little complicated, and any mistake made controlling the mana could cause the grenade to explode spontaneously.

"Hmm. What to do?"

Maybe I should forget about the grenade launcher? No. A grenade launcher's exactly what I need to increase my firepower. An automatic rifle and a machine gun aren't enough. I need the grenade launcher for taking out clusters of

enemies. And the development work should be useful for making similar weapons in future.

Such was my thought process.

I had a vague idea of how detonators worked. Similar to the way guns work, an impact would make the firing pin move, the firing pin would ignite some gunpowder, and this would eventually set off more gunpowder in the main unit.

Now, how to replicate that with magic... I can make a firing pin loaded with mana that's activated by an impact, and then that'll cause a talisman to explode...but one talisman can't set off another, so the detonator becomes pointless.

It might work if an impact triggers a firing pin loaded with mana, and then the mana flows directly into the main talisman. I can't think of any other way.

Maybe making a grenade that explodes after a given time would be easier. I could set a timer for the firing pin release before launching the grenade, then I could fine-tune the timer for the given situation.

But controlling mana in the firing pin is still a problem... Controlling mana in a grenade after I've launched it some distance away is going to be near impossible; the mana in the firing pin's just going to flow elsewhere and set off the explosion.

Maybe if I use the same metal that I used in this machine gun, the mana might stay in the firing pin after it's launched? Or maybe that's just wishful thinking?

Well, I've had the idea, so I might as well try it. Let's make it right away!

"You're about to make something weird again, aren't you?" Mister Gnome sounded a little surprised.

"Mister Gnome, would it be asking too much if I asked you to make something with a talisman already contained inside it?"

"It's possible, but these are dangerous talismans."

"Tee hee."

"I don't see why you'd take that as a compliment." Mister Gnome sighed, but I just smiled at him. "This structure's going to result in an unpredictable mana

flow. Why not use a metal that mana can't easily flow through?"

"Huh?! Does a metal like that exist?!"

First I've heard of it. If that metal exists, I wish he'd told me sooner.

"Then maybe the machine gun could use the same..."

"Unfortunately, this metal can't handle heat and shock the way orichalcum can. You can't use it for that 'machine gun' of yours, or the whole thing'll crack apart in no time."

Bleh. I guess that would've made things too easy.

"In that case, can you please use the mana-control metal in the grenade's firing pin, reinforce the surface with a stronger metal, and then make the main body out of the metal that mana doesn't flow through very well?"

"All right, all right. Let's give it a shot."

Yay! I love Mister Gnome!

"How's this look?"

What he'd made were grenades and a grenade launcher with a beautiful revolving mechanism, just like I'd imagined.

Ah, yes! This rugged shape really gets me going! It's like it's crying out to me, "Fire me! Fire me!"

"Okay! Now for a test fire!"

"Wh-Whoa! Hold up. What if it blows up?"

Well, I can't just not fire it now that it's here in front me! I've made sure all my explosive talismans are weak ones, just in case. Let me fire it! Lemme enjoy my grenade launcher!

And so, I pulled the trigger.

The grenade wouldn't explode with the impact that initially launched it because the firing pin was locked to prevent accidental detonation. That lock would be released when the rifling of the grenade launcher imparted a spin on the grenade, resulting in centrifugal force that moved the firing pin and allowed a surface cap to come off. With the surface cap displaced, the firing pin would

be left exposed, enabling detonation.

The grenade landed with the firing pin ready in position.

Detonation!

The grenade's explosion was weak, but it exploded right next to the target straw figure.

Perfect! I can see its destructive power from the bits of shrapnel embedded around the straw figure.

Mwah ha ha ha! I've done it. I've done it! Me and Mister Gnome have finally made a working grenade launcher! Wait for me, fate! I'm coming at you with all I've got! You'll get the beating of a lifetime!

"Are you...ill?" I pretended not to hear Mister Gnome's muttering.

But even with a machine gun and grenade launcher, I still don't have enough firepower. It's not enough firepower to wipe out a nation's army. I'm going to be dealing with opponents who use magic to hurl fireballs.

Nothing else for it... I'll have to make the big one. But before that, I'll need to improve my strength and magic so that I can handle it. Set course for a future filled with hope! Let's go!

Chapter 20 — I'm the Villainess, but I'm Invited to the Salon

"Salon?" The unfamiliar word made me look at Minne in confusion.

"That's right! The salon is one of the academy's traditions, and only a select few children of nobles can go there! You've been invited to join, Lady Astrid!"

I've never seen Minne so excited. Is it really worth getting that excited over?

"I'm too busy studying at the library. I'll have to pass on the salon or saloon or whatever it is."

"What?! You'll offend the seniors if you don't join! It's...you know... The supposed aim of the salon is to be a place where nobles can learn correct manners and such."

Supposed aim? So what do they actually do?

"Do I really have to join?"

"Yes, you do. The salon is also known as the shadow student council, and they can get revenge if you snub them. For example, they might make a rule that says elementary schoolers can't touch high school-level textbooks."

Wha?! Those monsters! It's tyranny! An abuse of power!

"Grr! This is going to reduce my precious study time! They leave me no choice. It's just another necessary step toward defeating fate. I'll crush this salon thing, whatever it is!"

"Don't crush it!"

I'm not allowed to crush it? I figured that might be the case.

"Well then, Minne. Let's go together."

"Wha?! I can't go! The salon's a place that only the children of a select few nobles can enter! Girls like me get called noble bumpkins. They'll get mad if I go!"

Huh? That sounds like prejudice. What in the world is this place?

“Fine... I’ll go into this battle alone... Hopefully, I can destroy the salon...”

“Don’t look for ways to destroy the salon!”

I’m not allowed? I can’t just destroy it? I think three or four grenades would be enough to put an end to it.

“Ahhh... This is depressing... I don’t care about salons or sarongs or whatever. I don’t wanna go.”

Why do I have to go someplace where a bunch of kids practice being nobles? I’d rather spend the time studying in the library. It’s not like I’m going to make a good noble anyway, so all this manners and etiquette stuff is useless to me.

And if something does trigger my destruction, then I won’t even be a noble. If I really want to hold on to my noble status, I’d be better off focusing on my studies and weapons development.

But now this shadowy salon organization is going to stop me studying unless I join it... Damn these people! If they only knew what fate awaits me. Actually, maybe refusing to join could be the very thing that triggers my destruction?

With great reluctance, I began dragging my feet in the direction of the salon thing.

....

“Well, this must be the salon.”

The word “Salon” was written on the sign in front of the room I was standing outside of.

We didn’t have anything like a salon at my last elementary school, but it’s another world after all. These things must just exist here.

This is too much of a pain. I’m just gonna go to the library instead and pretend I never got the message.

“Oh, Astrid. You were invited to the salon too?”

Gah. Friedrich is here? And his flunkies Adolf and Silvio too. I suppose they are sons of important nobles. If I got invited, I should have guessed they’d get

invited.

“Astrid, aren’t you going in?” Friedrich asked.

“I-I was just nervous...”

I want to go in even less now that you’re here...

“Then allow me to show you inside. There are several high schoolers here, but I’m sure someone such as yourself won’t be intimidated.”

“Y-Yes. I hope you’re right...”

I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna go...

“Let’s go inside.”

Ahhh...

Friedrich opened the door without any care for my feelings.

Ooh! This room’s furnishings are as grand as our parlor back home! The sofas, the curtains, everything’s superb! And there are tons of desserts on the tables! And they’ve even got servants here!

Hold on... If they’ve got the resources to put together a room this fancy, they should give us a richer curriculum. And they should get us the best teaching staff who are on the cutting edge of their fields. They could let students who want to learn more study the curriculum from the next year up. Bah...

“Oh, Your Highness, please come in.”

While I was in the middle of a mental rant, a female student within the stylish salon called out to Friedrich. The girl who went running over to Friedrich wore the blue tie of the academy’s high school as part of her uniform.

“I hope I’m not causing you any trouble, Vallia.”

“Not at all. The very fact that you’ve graced us with your presence will increase the prestige of the salon, Your Highness.”

I get the feeling that this girl’s the salon boss.

Her features made her look headstrong yet beautiful, her hair was blonde, and her eyes were emerald green. Even in her uniform, I could tell that her

body was well-proportioned, and her skin looked so smooth that I felt an urge to touch it.

So the salon boss is this striking beauty? Her personality's what matters, though.

"And who might this girl be?" the boss asked.

"This is Astrid, daughter of Duke Oldenburg," Friedrich replied. "It's her first visit."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Astrid Sophie von Oldenburg, a first-year student. It's a great honor to be invited here."

"Oh my. You're precisely the cute little lady I've heard you are. Nice to meet you. I'm Vallia Marianne von Wallmoden, a second-year student and the current chair of our Round Table of Spirits."

I knew it. She's the boss. Defeat her and the whole salon falls. But what's with the name "Round Table of Spirits"? Do they think they're like the Knights of the Round Table? I guess that'd make me the Connecticut Yankee.

"What business does the great Round Table of Spirits have with someone like myself? I'm sure there were much worthier students."

"What are you saying? If you're the daughter of Duke Oldenburg, that's more than enough prestige for the salon. In fact, I must insist that you join us. You're famous even in the academy's high school."

Even the high schoolers know about me? I suppose I did help out a lot of high schoolers with their assignments. As much as an elementary school student can help, anyhow...

"So the rumors really were true," Vallia said.

"Rumors?" She had my interest now.

"There are rumors that you and Prince Friedrich are promised to one another."

"Huh?!"

Huh?! What? Seriously? What the?!

“Oh dear. That surprised look is awfully unladylike...though it seems I was right.”

“M-Might I ask how this rumor started?”

I've been doing my best to keep away from Friedrich!

“They say he's the only one who calls you by your first name, and that it was you who protected His Highness when a cockatrice threatened his life during orientation. And now you've arrived with His Highness as your escort. The situation is obvious to anyone.”

Th-That's really twisting the facts... Yes, he calls me by my name for some reason, and yes, it was me who defeated the cockatrice. But this was less of an escort and more of a forced march!

“I'm afraid not. There are certainly no arrangements involving me and His Highness.”

“I'm terribly sorry. I should have known that it's still a secret.”

“N-No... Listen, me and His Highness really aren't...”

“Yes, yes, I understand. These things must follow proper procedure, after all.”

Ah... I can't even argue with this girl.

“Wh-What I really want to know is what happens at your Round Table group.”

“This is a place where nobles can work on their etiquette and form connections beyond their school year. Everyone who attends the Round Table goes on to be an exceptional graduate with a high-ranking position in the Plusen Empire.”

“Wow...”

Boring. Those tasty-looking desserts are tempting me, but all in all, I think I'd be a better graduate if I spent my time studying in the library rather than chitchatting in this place.

“I hear that magic is your forte, Astrid, but what specific field do you excel in?”

“Let's see. I often find myself using earth elemental magic and blood magic.”

Earth and blood magic are the ones I need when using modern weapons, after all.

“M-Master... Don’t you prefer the wind element over earth?” Blau came wriggling out of my pocket with tears welling in her eyes. “Doesn’t having me around make wind better?”

“Oh, sorry, Blau. I can use wind elemental magic fairly well too.”

“You have a contract with a fairy already?” Vallia said. “I have a contract with a fairy of my own. Show yourself, Lina.”

A fairy with tiny proportions, green hair, and green eyes peeked out from behind a plate full of desserts.

I guess that’s Lina.

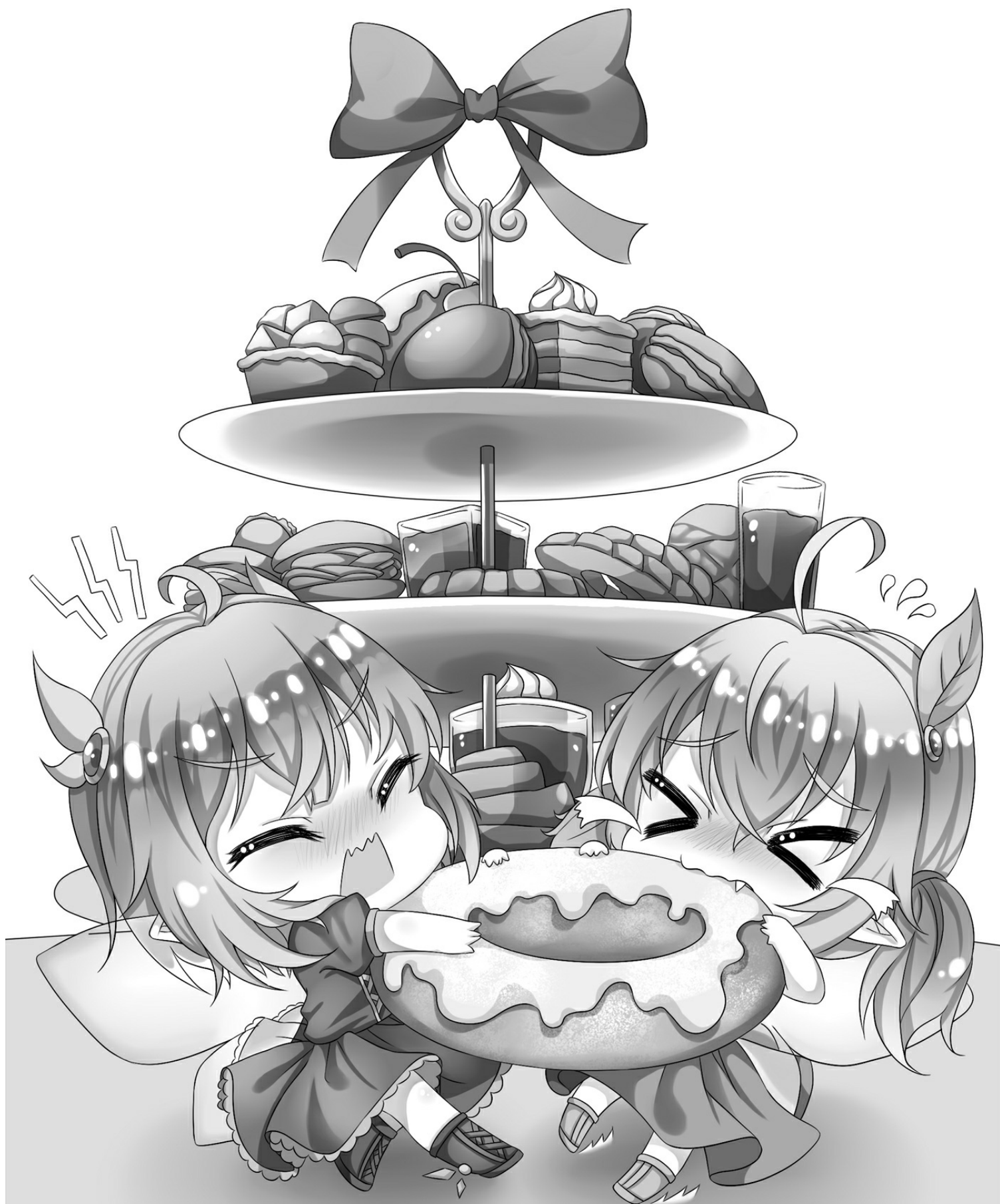
“Her element is earth. Why don’t you make friends with her, Blau?”

“Sure! We fairies should all get along!” Blau went floating over toward Lina looking overjoyed.

“Blau’s name is Blau! Nice to meet you, Lina!”

“These desserts are Lina’s. You can’t have them.”

“Hah?! Share some with me!”



Wow, fairies really do lack social skills.

“Why don’t we sit and relax while we talk?” Vallia suggested.

While Blau and Lina were still vying for ownership of the desserts, the two of us took a seat at a table. Vallia’s seated posture was every bit as sophisticated as you’d expect from a noble. I just did my best to sit in a way that wouldn’t upset anyone, just like back at home. It couldn’t be called sophisticated.

Friedrich and his two cronies also sat down. Annoyingly, they both looked more sophisticated than me.

“Let me explain the activities of the Round Table,” Vallia said while the maid was pouring tea for us all.

The academy’s really wasting its money. I can’t believe they’ve got this beautiful maid here for the sake of a few kids playing pretend nobles.

“The Round Table is a place where high school, middle school, and elementary school students can mingle without barriers and can deepen each other’s knowledge of the subjects we study. It’s also a place where we can form the interpersonal connections that will make up future society while we’re still at the academy, and it’s where we can re-evaluate the pride and the obligations that come with being a noble.”

“Wow...”

The bit about deepening my knowledge is interesting, but I could do without the rest...

On second thought, forming strong connections to other nobles might be a way to stop my family from losing its domain. Then again, my bad end arrives while I’m still in my third year of high school, so it’s hard to say whether it’ll make a difference. When I’m in my third year of high school, my seniors are going to be undergraduates or new members of society. I’m not going to be able to prevent the country from seizing my family’s domain myself. Maybe, just maybe, one of them could be the husband or wife of an influential noble? That could change everything...

“Vallia, I don’t suppose you intend to marry into the imperial family, or

perhaps a duke's family?"

"Yes, I'm engaged to Lord Eugen of Duke Schleswig's house..."

"I do hope we'll become good friends."

Gotta make those connections! I love the Round Table!

"Though it may be more accurate to say that this is a place where members of the Round Table forget about studying, personal connections, obligations, and all that. We like to relax and chat over a few desserts."

"Oh..."

You're telling me this is where high-ranking nobles come to slack off?

"We should study! We should form connections! We should avoid my destruction!"

"Destruction?"

I want to use this place to get a glimpse into high school subjects, make connections to people who might be influential someday, and avoid the destruction that's probably waiting for me in the future!

"Feel free to do as you please. Come here to talk, or come here to study if you prefer. I just want the Round Table to be somewhere where everyone can relax. Those of us from households with a lofty status often feel bad about ourselves and become isolated. That's why I think we need somewhere like the Round Table."

Hmm. That makes me think of Minne and Lotte. Those girls both insist on calling me Lady. I want to get closer to them, but it feels like they push me away. It's just like Vallia says: if your family's status is just a little too high, you end up isolated, like there's a barrier between you and everyone else.

"Never had that problem myself," Adolf chimed in. "Anyone who feels trapped by peerage or whatever just needs to try harder. I've always talked to people without worrying about their status. If someone got all high and mighty because of their peerage, I'd punch them."

Well, Adolf sure talks big. I suppose I can't accuse you of being nothing but talk given how you treat Friedrich like an equal, though. Anyone who can talk to

a prince like that isn't going to be afraid of nobles. But aren't you the one scaring people away, rather than the one who gets scared? Let's hope he doesn't get that confused.

"I consider this a good opportunity. I did worry that I'd be unable to make any friends besides Friedrich and Adolf. I do wish others in noble society would be less concerned with peerage and titles..." Silvio said, sounding very sensible.

I wish I could make friends who didn't care about me being a duke's daughter. I just want some friends who'll stick with me even if my family loses its domain.

But Silvio, I know how it is. Things are going great between you and Lotte.

"What are your thoughts, Your Highness?"

"Hmm... If only high-ranking nobles gather here, then that in itself creates an unnecessary barrier. I do like being able to mingle across the divides of elementary, middle, and high school though. I believe I could learn a lot here."

Just do your studying by yourself! Stay away from me.

"Now that you all understand the purpose of the Round Table, why not use today to speak with its members and get accustomed to the place? My wish is for this to be a safe haven for you all."

Safe haven? It's definitely no safe haven for me. As long as these love interests are still breathing, I'll always have to worry about my family losing its domain.

"Well then. Would you be willing to talk with me a while, Astrid?"

Why'd Friedrich have to lock on to me?

"I d-don't think there's anything we have to discuss."

"Then allow me to introduce a topic. How are you finding life at the academy?"

Damn! Friedrich is so damn persistent.

"It suits me well. I've made friends, and my studies have gone smoothly thanks to my former home tutor. And now that I've been invited to this group, I feel as though my life at the academy will be very fulfilling."

"I'm glad to hear it. Your talent for magic is exceptional, but you're unique in

many ways. I did worry that you might find yourself isolated as a result.”

I don't need you worrying about me. Not one bit! And what does he mean I'm unique? I'm a totally normal elementary schooler. The unique one here is our little imperial highness.

“Have you grown accustomed to life at the academy, Prince Friedrich?”

Suppose I'd better ask to be polite. I feel like I could trigger my own destruction by being overly cold toward Friedrich. I need a careful balance. We've got to be more than acquaintances, but less than friends.

“I'm finding life here at the academy very fulfilling. I feel as though joining the academy has set me free.”

“Set you free?” I couldn't help but question his choice of words.

“That's right. I've been made to study and to train for combat since I was very young, and my fath—His Imperial Majesty can be rather demanding. Those lessons were not easy. After being punished many times, I came to fear him.”

Ah, that's right. His dad is Wilhelm III: the notorious militarist who earned himself the name Soldier King. I'll bet Friedrich's upbringing was like military training. Dr. Wolff always taught me whatever I wanted to learn, so I feel a little sorry for Friedrich.

“Well, that's good then,” I replied. “You're achieving excellent grades here at the academy, and...”

“And?” Friedrich repeated my own word back to me.

“And you seem very pleased when your friends speak to you casually. You must have been released from a lot of pressure. Some people may just want to get close to the boy who'll be the next emperor, but I think that friends like Lord Adolf and Lord Silvio are drawn to you because of your charisma.”

He might be an idealist at times, but he's mostly down-to-earth. I'm sure a lot of people see friendship with Friedrich as more than just a connection with the next emperor. Not that his charm has any effect on me!

“It makes me happy to hear you say so. Given my position, I'm unable to show signs of weakness.”

If you want someone to whine to, you've got Adolf and Silvio. Meanwhile, I'm totally on my own here. No one knows about my future destruction besides me. Even father wouldn't believe me if I tried talking to him. It sucks. I wish I had someone to whine at.

"Why don't we greet our seniors and the other members together?"

"I would love to."

No getting out of it. I'd better go with him.

With some reluctance, I introduced myself to the members of the Round Table.

I'll remember these names and faces. Hopefully one of them can rescue me in the future.

Meanwhile, the fairies had been embroiled in a dispute over custody of the desserts the whole time.

"Lina has a historic claim to ownership of the desserts. I forbid you to touch them."

"You're mean! Why can't we be friends?!"

Must be nice to be so carefree...

Chapter 21 — The Villainess Supports the Trainee Teacher

I'd taken an interest in someone, and that someone was Mr. Bernhard. He was the one love interest that I liked, and at that moment he was a trainee teacher.

Under supervision of the strict Mr. Gericke, Mr. Bernhard's job included making printouts and assisting with classes. He was so busy that it was difficult to find a chance to talk to him.

Getting to know him isn't going to achieve anything besides triggering my destruction, but I just can't help myself. I can't forget about him. He's just too good-looking...

In a recent lesson, I'd seen him help a girl who couldn't get the hang of wind elemental magic by practicing with her until she'd understood it. And when he used his magic, he looked like a perfect example of a mage.

"Is there anything you don't understand?"

"I'm having trouble controlling my wind elemental magic. I can't get the right mental image."

As a trainee teacher, Mr. Bernhard was very modest, but upon becoming a high school teacher he'd eventually master the art of handling his students while also appearing a little moody. I liked that side of him too.

"What's wrong, Astrid?" Friedrich asked. "You appear to be deep in thought."

"I-It's nothing. Nothing at all. Hah hah..."

Friedrich is getting in the way when I'm trying to watch Mr. Bernhard. I hate him.

"Ahh. Were you watching the trainee teacher?"

"Uh... I'm not sure..."

Gah! He's as sharp as mother!

"He looks awfully tired, doesn't he?" Friedrich said. "You can see the exhaustion on his face. Being a trainee teacher must be tough."

That's right. Being a trainee teacher is hard work. They might be a bunch of noble little boys and girls, but trying to teach anything to first-year elementary schoolers is tough.

To take some of the load off the teacher, I did my best to get my own tasks finished up quickly and then help out anyone who was having problems. I wanted to make life at least a little easier for Mr. Bernhard.

"Lady Astrid, has Mr. Bernhard captured your interest?" Minne called out to me while I was gazing at him absentmindedly.

"Well... Maybe a little."

"That won't do. You mustn't forget that you're promised to Prince Friedrich." As always, Minne was determined to set me up with Friedrich.

"Where'd you even get that idea?"

"I can see why you'd be drawn to Mr. Bernhard, though. He has the charm of a mature man about him. Mr. Gericke gets mad when people ask for help, but Mr. Bernhard will always explain things until you've understood completely."

That's exactly it! But cheating's bad, Minne. Your job is to defuse the landmine named Adolf.

I was still looking at Mr. Bernhard.

Just look at the happiness on that girl's face while he's teaching her! I'm jealous!

"Mr. Bernhard." I bravely decided to call out to him.

"What is it, Miss Astrid?"

"There's something I don't understand about wind elemental magic..."

Sorry, Mr. Bernhard. I just want to get some magic teaching from you too.

"Is it possible to produce something like smoke using wind elemental magic?"

“Something like smoke? Yes, I can do that if you’d like me to show you.”

“If you’d be so kind.”

I already know how to make smoke with wind magic, but I can ask anyway. If my questions are at a higher level than the other students, it might make him remember me.

Mr. Bernhard had created smoke while I was still busy scheming. Rings of smoke—like someone smoking a cigarette might make—were rising up into the air.

“Could I give it a try too?”

“Go ahead. I’m watching.”

All right. Here’s something I’ve been meaning to try.

“Smoke!” I imagined the smoke released from a smoke bomb. I envisioned the smoke bombs that the military used, with white, hazy smoke dense enough to stop a laser. I pictured it detonating.

“Stop! Please stop, Miss Astrid!” Mr. Bernhard’s yelling made me open my eyes.

There’s smoke everywhere! What happened? I only meant to make a little smoke.

“Nothingness!” I imagined nothingness and it all disappeared.

“That was impressive...”

“I’m sorry for causing trouble...”

I’d managed to get Mr. Bernhard’s attention, but then I’d made a scene by filling the area with smoke. I felt bad.

“Ah, yes. Now I recall that you’re already studying high school-level topics, Miss Astrid.”

“Yes, but only a little. I’ve only taken a peek.”

Staying humble should make it hard for anything to trigger my destruction.

“Perhaps, if you’d like, you could help me prepare a short test?”

“Huh? Prepare a short test?”

That’s not something you should be passing off on students...

“I’m sure you’ll achieve full marks either way, Miss Astrid. And I’ll make some small adjustments to your questions before I use it. If you have the time, I would really appreciate your help.”

“Then just leave it to me! I’d be happy to help out!”

This is great. Now I can get closer to Mr. Bernhard!

But wait... I’m not meant to do that! This’ll trigger my destruction! But I can’t say no when it’s a request from Mr. Bernhard. Heroine, when you choose your target, please choose someone besides Mr. Bernhard. More specifically, choose Friedrich!

“In that case, come to the staff room in a short while.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

Is this really okay? The teacher’s getting me to help make a test. I can’t imagine how angry Mr. Gericke would be if he found out. But if worst comes to worst, I can probably use my status as a duke’s daughter to make him overlook it.

Ah... Working alongside Mr. Bernhard... I can’t wait!

....

And so I went to visit the staff room.

The teaching staff at the Holy Satanachia Academy of Sorcery were all nobles. In fact, anyone hired by the academy automatically gained some sort of peerage. Whether they were welcomed warmly by other nobles is another matter, however.

“Oh, you really came, Miss Astrid.”

“Yes, Mr. Bernhard. I’m happy to help if you think I’m capable.” I offered Mr. Bernhard a few desserts that I’d swiped from the Round Table.

“Are you sure?” Mr. Bernhard asked, realizing where they’d come from.
“These are the Round Table’s.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. We can pretend that I ate them,” I reassured him. “Sugar is great for stimulating brain activity. I think you should always eat something sweet to relieve fatigue if you need to do some thinking. You look a little pale, and that worries me somewhat.”

“I must apologize. I have so many duties to attend to.”

I heard somewhere that sweet stuff helps your brain work. That one didn’t come from a military magazine.

“Do you really have so many different tasks?”

“Yes. I have to study to pass an exam that will allow me to become an official teacher someday, and I also have to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the children in each class so that I can decide on our approach to teaching. And then I have to take notes regarding my failings and think about what I can do to avoid making the same mistakes, otherwise my time as a trainee would all be for nothing.”

Wow... He’s super busy... Figures that he’d be kinda moody by the time he gets to be a high school teacher.

“I’m happy to help out with lessons wherever I can, so please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I appreciate it. I hate being the sort of teacher who depends on the students. I hope I learn to stand on my own two feet before long.”

You will. I know for a fact that you become a high school teacher, eventually.

“You shouldn’t worry about it while you’re still a trainee. There’s nothing wrong with relying on students a little when you have so many things to do at once.”

“Perhaps I’ll take you at your word. When I become an official teacher, I want to be someone who students can turn to for help. But for now, I’ll focus on actually becoming a teacher.”

It’s that positive attitude that I like! Never give up! That’s the spirit.

Friedrich doubts himself because of friction between him and his dad, Adolf worries about whether he’ll be the next head of the order of knights, and Silvio

goes through an angsty phase because he doesn't like how his dad does things. This game doesn't have any good boys as love interests.

“Well then, Mr. Bernhard, let's make that short test. What's the subject area?”

“Let's make it about the nature of the spirits and the first person to successfully use magic. I want everyone to understand that magic can't exist without the spirits, and that elemental magic was first performed when someone realized this fact.”

Interesting. He really put thought into this.

“Then let's start with the nature of the spirits,” I suggested. “Starting with the types of spirit...”

Through this sort of process, Mr. Bernhard and I put together the problems for the test. Mr. Bernhard was surprised by my detailed knowledge of the historical figures who'd founded magic. I'd studied it all in the library because I loved magic so much. Surprising Mr. Bernhard this way made me feel proud.

Mr. Bernhard had more insight than I did, so he gave me more specifics about the nature of spirits. Being able to talk about something I liked with someone I liked was pure bliss. I felt much more at ease here than at the Round Table.

I can't forget that Mr. Bernhard could be a trigger for my destruction. I shouldn't carelessly get too close...

This is frustrating. This is really frustrating! I just hope that the heroine chooses someone other than Mr. Bernhard as her target.

I'm sure father would be dead set against me being with Mr. Bernhard anyway. Father won't ever approve of a low-ranking noble. He'll demand I find a marquis at the very least, but he'd much prefer I find an imperial family member. That's how high his hopes for his daughter are.

Maybe when my destruction comes, I can run off with Mr. Bernhard... Then again, I'm six years old right now, so I must be way outside of Mr. Bernhard's strike zone.

Chapter 22 — I'm a Villainess, but My Cousin's Cute

The wait is over! Summer break is here!

Not that I was waiting for it. Now I can't study in the library because the academy's closed for summer vacation. I've borrowed a few of the books I want to read, but they're probably not going to last the entire vacation. Maybe I can convince father to make Dr. Wolff come back if I say I'm worried about my grades.

"Astrid, how was your time at the academy?" father asked over dinner.

"It was very fulfilling, father. I made friends and formed a lot of new connections after being invited to the Round Table," I told him, trying to make sure he wouldn't worry about me.

I want him to think my grades are bad, so I'll keep quiet about the library.

"Oh, that is good news. I made many friends at the Round Table myself. You'll find people of high society there, so if you want to make friends, the Round Table's the place. Those are the connections you'll find useful in your future."

"Y-Yes. I'll try to do so."

I don't feel comfortable around the Round Table members. Not only do I have to put up with the stuck-up, big shot nobles, Friedrich is there too, so I can never relax. Whenever I try borrowing books from the library and reading them at the Round Table, I can't concentrate because of Friedrich and the high schoolers looking over my shoulder.

Well, maybe soon I'll have been to the Round Table enough times to be polite. Then I can go back to visiting the library.

"And how are things between you and Prince Friedrich?"

"There's n-nothing in particular to say about His Highness. Rest assured, I've done nothing that might upset him."

You're really getting me down by making me talk about Friedrich while I'm at

home, father...

“Is that right? Stefan, the Chancellor, tells me that Prince Friedrich has grown very fond of you.”

Silvio! So you're the source of the data leaks!

“H-He must be imagining it. Even His Highness has grown quite tired of being around a magic maniac like me, I'm sure.”

“That won't do. There can be no future suitor for you besides His Highness. House Oldenburg itself is descended from the imperial family. This is a reunification of our families. I trust there's no other boy who takes your fancy?”

Father's so tactless! You can't just ask a girl that!

“Th-There's no one. As I've said, I don't consider myself worthy of His Highness. A magic maniac such as myself is a poor match for someone of such status. I think a lady with more grace and courtesy would suit him better.”

“You may be right about that.”

I'm glad you accepted my excuse, but I wish you'd argue just a little! You really think I'm rowdy and uncivilized, don't you? That's one more reason to feel down.

“Your time at the academy is long. Do what you can to become a better suitor for His Highness. There's certainly no problem with your lineage.”

“Yes, father...”

No way! I refuse, one hundred percent! Father's probably going to give up anyway once the heroine appears and starts getting romantic with Friedrich. The heroine turns out to be the illegitimate child of some duke or other, so he won't be able to argue.

“You might also want to know that Iris will be visiting from next week onward.”

“Iris?!”

Iris was my younger cousin. I was an only child, but Iris was like a little sister to me. I loved her so much that I'd recovered my past life memories by racing down the stairs to see her and sliding down face-first. There was a two-year age

gap between us, but she had mana just like mine, so she'd probably enroll at the academy later.

"That's right. I thought perhaps she could come with us to the villa. How about it?"

"That sounds like a great idea! I'm all for it!"

Yes! Our villa's right by a lake, it's got great scenery, there's game in the forest nearby, and it's the perfect shooting range!

Maybe I should keep the guns away from Iris, though. She's four and won't understand how dangerous guns are. I'll carry the pistol and shotgun for self-defense in a case she can't access. I should have a lockable trunk somewhere...

Accidents happening because of a gun being left in a child's reach is a common story in America, so I need to be careful. I'd rather leave my pistol and shotgun behind, but it's too easy to get attacked by magic beasts around here lately. I got attacked by a griffin while hunting, and then a cockatrice during the orientation, so who knows what'll attack me at the villa.

"If Iris's family doesn't object, we might stay the whole summer at the villa," father said. "The cool weather makes it easy to relax."

Air conditioning didn't exist in this world. The closest thing we had was creating a cool breeze using magic. That worked for a while, but turning yourself into a human air conditioner by using magic constantly would cause your mana to run out, and eventually you'd die. I didn't want to die for the sake of a little bit of cooling, so for that reason, I loved the idea of going somewhere cool to escape the summer heat. I couldn't stand hot weather.

"I'm looking forward to visiting the villa."

"Yes, you should forget about magic once in a while."

While father and I were both in agreement, mother simply stared at me with her usual faint smile.

She couldn't possibly know that I'm planning to take the shotgun...could she?

....

And so I'd come to the villa.

Though we called it a villa, it was actually a spacious mansion. The fact that this sprawling mansion belonged to a duke would have surprised no one.

It's so cool! It's like the heat of the lower altitude was just a bad dream! There's no place like the mountains in summer. I like the beach, but nothing can compete with the cool air in the mountains.

"Astrid!"

I was just gazing down at the lake from the villa's terrace when a cute girl's voice caught my attention.

I know this voice...

"Iris!"

"My big sister Astrid!"

I turned just in time to see a small girl come charging full-force into my stomach.

Guh—

"Astrid! It's been so long!"

"Yep, long time no see. I haven't seen you since Yule Day last winter."

The girl who'd plunged into my stomach was, of course, my cousin Iris. Her official name was Iris Maria von Braunschweig. She was two years younger than me. Her ash blonde hair was cut so neatly that it reminded me of a doll, and her smiling face was so adorable that I couldn't help but smile myself. Although she was only two years younger than me, she was so much shorter than me that it made me worry.

"I'm so happy to see you again, Astrid! Let's make a lot of memories together this summer, just like last year! Perhaps we can sail a boat in the lake, or even go exploring in the forest!"

"Yeah. Those both sound good to me."

Iris seemed genuinely overjoyed to see me, and seeing her that way made me feel happy myself.

"Don't you have a fairy, Astrid?" Iris asked curiously.

“She’s in here,” I said while tapping my breast pocket. “Blau, get out here and see Iris.”

Blau looked a little grumpy as she crawled out from my pocket. “H-Hello, Miss Iri—”

“Wow! It’s a fairy!” Before Blau could finish saying hello, Iris grabbed Blau tight and began nuzzling her cheek.



“Wah! That hurts! Please hold me more gently! And please stop rubbing your face against mine!”

Looks like Iris has fallen for Blau. I guess Blau looks like a living doll from a kid's point of view.

My gaze shifted away from Blau.

A little girl playing with a fairy. How adorable.

“M-Master! Please help! This girl's more ferocious than a dragon!” Blau was crying uncle as she desperately tried to struggle free.

“All right. Iris, maybe that's enough. You're giving Blau quite a shock.”

“Okay... Bye bye, Miss Fairy...”

The moment Blau got free, she dived back into my breast pocket.

Is Iris really that fearsome?

“Iris, will you come with me to greet your mother and mine?”

“Okay! Let's go together!”

Iris's family, the Braunschweigs, was another ducal family. They were great nobles on the same level as the Oldenburgs, so I wanted to be on good terms with them just in case my own family ever looked likely to lose its domain. My hope was that they would join my father to raise an army and revolt the moment our domain was seized.

“You must tell me, Astrid, what sort of place is the academy? Is it fun?”

“It is fun. It's a dangerous place, but I learn something new every day. There's a fantastic selection of books in the library, the teachers are excellent, and I've made friends there too.”

“It's a...dangerous place?” Iris asked, sounding puzzled.

It's not something I can explain to Iris, but the academy is full of danger. There are landmines buried everywhere, and stepping on one could trigger my destruction. For example, there's Friedrich, and then there's Friedrich, and also Friedrich...

“But I’m still your best friend, aren’t I?” Iris asked, looking a little forlorn.

“Of course you’re my best friend, Iris,” I replied, hugging her tight. “You’re my cute little sister!”

I was an only child in my past life, and then the same again in this life, but I’m so happy to have someone who’s like a sister. Iris is cute, and she’s a good girl, and she’s cute, and she doesn’t mind my magic research, and she’s cute...

But even good girls like Iris start getting rebellious before too long. Someday she might not want to hug me or treat me like a big sister anymore. That’s a sad thought...

“Astrid?”

“It’s nothing. Just something on my mind.”

Stay as my innocent little sister forever, Iris.

“Is it true that Prince Friedrich is in your class?”

“Y-Yeah... He is, but I don’t really talk to him.”

It would seem someone’s spreading rumors. They must be identified and eliminated.

“I was a little worried... If you were to be wed to Prince Friedrich, you’d become the empress, and then we wouldn’t be able to do things together like we do now...”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. Prince Friedrich will never be interested in an eccentric magic maniac like me. And there are better girls at the academy.”

Finally, someone else who’s against the horrible idea of a marriage between me and Friedrich! That’s my little sister for you! She actually gets me. I think I’ll let her play with Blau later.

“Better than you? You’re fun to be around, you get along with everyone, and you excel at your studies. That’s exactly why I’m worried Prince Friedrich is going to take a liking to you.”

She’s adorable, this little cousin of mine. I wanna nuzzle against her cheek.

“Even if I did become empress through some major misfortune, you’ll always

be my little sister and my best friend, Iris. That'll never change, so wipe that frown off your face."

"Thank you, Astrid. I'm sure you'd make a wonderful empress."

I hope not. Actually, I couldn't even if I wanted to. The heroine's just itching to swoop in and ruin everything.

"Let's go greet our parents. Then we can go boating!"

"Yes, Astrid!"

Phew. Being with Iris is soothing. She's the perfect little sister. Two years from now, Iris should be joining the academy. I've got to make sure I never stop being her cool big sister!

Chapter 23 — I'm the Villainess; Is This the Titanic?

After we'd greeted my aunt and my mother, we had a servant prepare a boat so that we could go out on the water. Our knight Erhard was also sent along with us; apparently, it's dangerous for children to go boating alone.

Although Erhard was a knight, he was wearing a military uniform rather than armor that day. He'd have a hard time saving us from drowning if he went out in full armor.

Besides Erhard, my family had a further four thousand soldiers, a force slightly bigger than a modern-day regiment. The commander of this regiment was my father himself.

In the Plusen Empire, nobles on father's level had their own armies, and they were expected to fight under the emperor when the situation demanded. Lords and imperial royalty could also employ mercenaries. Under Wilhelm III, a national standing army was now being formed, and that army was becoming a force with considerable power.

This all meant that if our domain were seized, I'd have to fight this new standing army, the mercenaries, and the armies belonging to local rulers.

That'll be a stretch with the firepower I've got right now... I need more. Some sort of massive, unstoppable firepower that'll bring shock and awe to my enemies.

"Astrid?"

"Oh, sorry, Iris. I was lost in thought."

I shouldn't be wasting my time on needless thoughts when I've finally got a chance to spend some time boating on the lake with my favorite cousin. The fighting isn't going to start any time soon, assuming the world follows the same path as the game.

"Every time I come here, this lake looks beautiful," I told Iris. "The thin mist makes it look otherworldly today."

“It truly does. It’s as though we’re in a fairytale world.”

The boat advanced slowly, keeping close to the lakeshore. We were surrounded by beautiful scenery. A lush forest spread out from the shore, and the lake itself was clear. Occasionally, we’d see the silhouettes of fish passing beneath the boat, adding to the otherworldly atmosphere.

“Astrid, I haven’t been studying magic the way you did. Will I still get along at the academy?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll learn it all from the teachers. And I’m sure you’ll be invited to the Round Table of Spirits, so I’ll be there to explain anything you don’t understand.”

As Duke Braunschweig’s daughter, she was bound to be invited.

“What’s the Round Table of Spirits?”

“It’s like a salon for sons and daughters of high-ranking nobles. Basically, it’s just a place where students slack off.”

I saw the Round Table as a place for noble girls to enjoy a leisurely chat over tea, and also as a place where the sons and daughters of nobles gathered to share gossip. No one seemed to care about the studying, interpersonal connections, or obligations that Vallia had mentioned.

On the other hand, I’d been able to get seniors with good grades to help me with my studies, and I was getting to know several important nobles, including Vallia, who would someday marry into the family of Duke Schleswig. It was all sure to be useful when I took on fate in the future.

Heh heh heh. Just you wait, fate! I’m going to tear you a new one.

“Does that mean I’ll be able to see you at the academy too?” Iris asked.

“Yep, we’ll see each other. I don’t visit the Round Table so much right now, but once you join, I’ll go there every day.”

I found nowhere more depressing than the Round Table, but that would all change when my favorite cousin joined. It would be transformed into a soothing space. If all went well, Iris might even guard me from Friedrich.

“Now I can’t wait to join the academy! I was worried that I might not make

any friends, but if you're there, then I don't have to worry."

"I'll make sure you find some good friends."

Iris was shy. Although she was comfortable around me, she always hid from unfamiliar people.

She'll get used to being around people after joining the Round Table. I'm not going to let my cousin be left by her lonesome.

Iris giggled. "Now you've really made me look forward to going to the academy."

"That's good. Two years from now, we'll enjoy life at the academy together."

Yup, yup. When Iris enrolls, it'll be so much fun!

I wish I could marry Iris. She's just that cute. Though my real target is Mr. Bernhard... Even if he'll never share my feelings, I still like him.

"Astrid...is that a horse over there?"

"Huh?" I was confused because Iris was pointing toward the middle of the lake rather than the shore.

A horse on the lake?

"Oh no!" cried Erhard. "That's a kelpie!"

Kelpie? That rings a bell. Oh right, the part-horse, part-fish chimeras that appear in lakes. They're magic beasts that supposedly drag you down to the lake bed and eat you if you ride on one. And even if you don't, they'll come for you and eat you regardless if they're hungry enough. This looks like a hungry one...

At that very moment, it was charging toward our boat with incredible speed.

"It's coming at us!" I yelled.

Why'd you have to get hungry at a time like this?!

"Erhard, protect Iris! I'll kill this thing!"

"Huh? But how can..."

I grabbed the shotgun that I'd been wearing on my back, released the safety,

and took aim at the approaching kelpie. It must have been real hungry because the way the kelpie came bounding toward us made me think of a sprinting cheetah.

“You’re not laying a finger on my cute cousin!”

I amped up my muscles with blood magic and pulled the trigger while aiming at the kelpie. At the same time, Blau flew out of my breast pocket and silenced the sound of the shotgun. But the slug only grazed the kelpie before flying off somewhere behind it.

Gah, it’s hard to aim when the boat’s rocking!

The kelpie then began to circle around us cautiously, as if it realized that it was facing an enemy with an unknown weapon.

Here’s my chance.

I slid the fore-end to load a fresh round before firing a second slug at the kelpie. This time the slug hit the creature in the abdomen, causing it to thrash around as if it was in great pain.

With a loud whinny, the kelpie then charged at us in a zigzagging motion in an attempt to settle the score.

Third shot...missed. Fourth...missed. One shot left!

“You damned sashimi platter! Can’t you just die quietly?!” I yelled from the bottom of my stomach as I took aim at the kelpie’s head and pulled the once more trigger.

Fifth shot...hit!

After the slug had bored through the kelpie’s head, scattering bits of its brain, the beast sank back into the lake with its body convulsing.

“Phew. That was close,” I said to myself while swiftly loading another five slugs into the shotgun.

You never know when a second kelpie might pop up. Can’t let my guard down.

“Astrid, you’re incredible!” Iris cheered. “Was that magic?!”

“Yeah, that was magic. It’s my own creation. It’s really dangerous, so don’t ask

me to teach it to you.”

“What? Why not?!”

Sorry, Iris. I made a promise to Mister Gnome.

“Erhard, were there always kelpies in this lake?”

“No, this is the first kelpie sighting here. Perhaps it wandered in after being driven out of some other place. There are four lakes in this region.”

A stray kelpie? What a bother. I wonder where it wandered in from.

“I’m amazed that you defeated a kelpie... Even the Adventurer’s Guild would class kelpie extermination as a high-difficulty quest.”

“Must’ve been beginner’s luck. We came pretty close to getting eaten there.”

If that last shot hadn’t hit, Iris, Erhard, and I would have all been eaten. What a dreadful thought... That’s the first time I’ve felt fear in battle. Having people to protect really complicates things.

“We should head back to the villa in case there are any more kelpies around,” I suggested.

“You’re right,” agreed Erhard. “We can’t see whether there are enemies in the mist.”

With that, we decided to call an end to our boating. It was a shame because I’d hoped we could stop at the shore somewhere to enjoy sandwiches.

You damned kelpie! You’ve robbed me of time I could have spent with my cousin!

Back at the villa, Erhard informed father of what had happened.

“There was a kelpie?!”

“Yes, Your Grace. It may have come from another lake. I recommend dispatching the adventurers guild to search the lake here.”

“Indeed. It’ll be hard to enjoy time off at the villa with kelpies appearing in our lake. I had talked with Diethard about going fishing, but I suppose we’ll have to call it off.” Father was also angry now that the kelpie was ruining his vacation. Diethard, by the way, was Iris’s dad.

“So, where did the kelpie go?” father asked.

“Lady Astrid defeated it and sent it to the bottom of the lake.”

Ack... Erhard...you don't have to tell him everything.

“Astrid did? Astrid, when did you learn magic powerful enough to defeat a kelpie? How did you even defeat the kelpie, for that matter?”

“I... Uh... I heated up the lake with fire magic, and then I showered it with hot water. It was a real close one.”

“Huh? Lady Astrid used that strange weapon to—”

“Shush! Shush!”

I'm not even sure whether hot water could take out a kelpie.

“Very well. I'd lecture you about keeping out of danger, but I'm impressed that you defended yourself against a kelpie. And you defended Iris too. The important thing is that you're both unharmed.”

Father was so relieved that me and Iris were both safe that he didn't pry any further.

Phew. Thank goodness... I'm not sure how I'd explain this one away otherwise.

“Astrid, you were so cool!” Iris said. “I want to be just like you!”

“You'll learn magic once you join the academy. Then you'll just need to study hard.”

“No! I'm going to ask my father for a home tutor starting today!”

Uh oh... I might have just created a magic nerd-in-training. Apologies to Iris's parents.

Well, I'm sure a sensible girl like Iris will study hard. She's bound to become a mage with a bright future. There's no harm in that! I hope, probably, maybe...

Anyhow, with the kelpie dead, now I can spend time at the villa with Iris!

“Iris, what do you want to do now?”

“I'd like to eat lunch on the same hill as usual.”

Ah. The hill that she likes. There's a great view from there, so I like it too. I

used to pretend to be an artillery observer there when I was alone. Impact, now!

“All right, let’s head to the hilltop!”

“Okay, Astrid!”

We went on enjoying our summer vacation to the fullest.

Chapter 24 — The Villainess Is the Subject of Rumors at the Salon

“And then, Iris was being so, so cute. So cute that I started thinking maybe I’ll prepare her lunchbox next time.”

“That’s the fifth time you’ve told me that story, Astrid.”

As usual, I was at the Round Table reading books about blood magic while chatting with Vallia. I was telling her how I’d spent my summer vacation, and I was trying to get across just how cute Iris was, but Vallia was looking increasingly tired. That was probably just my imagination.

“So does that mean you can cook?” Vallia asked.

“A little. Though nothing as impressive as what a chef would make.”

Don’t underestimate people who spend a lot of time outdoors. We make our own food to eat on the road. Though when there was a restaurant along the road, I’d just go there instead.

“Are you quite sure that there’s no one you admire, Astrid?”

“Y-Yes. There’s no one at all. I’m still in my first year of elementary school, so maybe it’s a little soon for me.”

I did like Mr. Bernhard, but he was so busy as a trainee teacher, and father would never approve of such a low-ranking noble. All I could do was admire him from afar...and sometimes up close. I was still helping him make homework assignments and such. I’d bring him desserts from the Round Table too.

“Have you made no progress with Prince Friedrich?”

“I doubt magic maniacs like me are to His Highness’s liking.”

Please! Why does everyone around here keep trying to set me up with Friedrich?!

“You’re wrong about that,” a voice said, intruding on our conversation. That’s

right, it was Friedrich.

“Y-Your Highness? How much did you hear?”

“A little. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop; I just couldn’t help but overhear.”

I’ll bet he really strained his ears! What a jerk!

“I actually find you quite charming, Astrid. You’re incredibly sociable, you have such an agreeable personality, and you’re a hard worker who never neglects her magic studies. Honestly, there’s nothing to dislike about you.”

You’re a dumb peace addict, you’re the bringer of my destruction, and you’re a weak little boy. Honestly, there’s nothing to like about you.

“Your Highness, it’s not nice to make fun of me like that. We both know I’m a terribly dull magic maniac, devoid of any charm.”

“Not at all. You genuinely are charming, Astrid.”

Come on... You’re going to tie the knot with the heroine in the end anyway. Just leave me alone!

“Miss Astrid, you got a moment?” We were interrupted by the appearance of someone unexpected.

“Lord Adolf? What’s the matter?”

It was Adolf. Even though I rarely spoke to him, he wanted to talk to me. “You can use blood magic, right? Could you teach me a little?”

“Blood magic...?”

Blood magic was the thing that he worries about in the game, wasn’t it?

“I think you should receive more proper instruction from a teacher. Blood magic is quite dangerous.”

“If you can use it, it can’t be that bad.”

Grrr! Is that how this knucklehead thinks of me?!

“Very well. I could teach you some simple things, but please don’t expect too much from me.”

“Thanks.” Adolf simply walked off without saying anything more.

That's a funny attitude for someone asking a favor!

“What’s this? Adolf just asked Miss Astrid for lessons in blood magic?” Now Silvio had come to join the conversation. “You are a skilled teacher after all, Miss Astrid. I’ve learned things from you in our lessons myself. It’s another sign that you’re a superb mage. You have my respect.”

Hearing that from Silvio doesn't please me in the slightest. You're another landmine.

“Do you see how many people depend on you, Astrid?” Friedrich added. “That’s proof of your great charm.”

No, he's just asking the magic maniac for help with the things he doesn't understand.

“Friedrich!” Adolf shouted over. “Come talk to me!”

“All right. I’ll be right over.”

Just my personal opinion, but shouldn't Adolf be a little more respectful toward Friedrich? You've got to tread lightly when you're dealing with the boy who'll be your master someday.

“Well, look at that,” Vallia said. “It seems you’re winning the affection of all the boys around you, Astrid.”

“Not at all. I just happen to be useful to them.”

It's obvious that I'm getting used here. Thanks a lot for that.

“I don’t think that’s it. Your charm draws people to you. Otherwise they’d simply ask the teachers for help with magic. When they choose you instead, that shows how charming you are.”

No, no, no. That's not true. It's because our teachers are useless! With all the money it takes to run this fancy salon, they could hire more competent teachers. We need teachers that'll get more involved. They can replace ones like the old guy who falls asleep in the middle of lessons.

“Regardless, the way you’ve stolen the hearts of Adolf and Silvio in addition to Prince Friedrich makes me think you’re bewitching them, Astrid.”

“No... I haven’t stolen any hearts...”

Since when did I steal the heart of Friedrich or anyone else?! Objection!

“Oh, Astrid, have you stolen the hearts of Adolf and Silvio too?” asked another of the seniors.

“She’s bewitching them all,” Vallia told her.

They’re talking about it as if they can’t hear me! Cut it out!

“I honestly haven’t stolen any hearts. A more fitting suitor for His Highness will appear, and I’m already aware of girls who Lord Adolf and Lord Silvio are more fond of!”

“Oh, you’re stealing them from someone else?”

“No! I! Am! Not!”

Minne and Lotte are both trying their hardest. I’m not about to ruin their efforts.

“I’m telling you, those three boys have nothing to do with me. These rumors are quite embarrassing. There’s no one in my heart!”

“Are you sure?” Vallia began to smile at me knowingly. “I’ve seen the way you take desserts away from here. Who are you giving them to?”

“Th-That’s just because I like to eat them outside...”

Damn. They’re going to find out about Mr. Bernhard.

“It does seem as though you admire someone who doesn’t attend the salon.”

“Y-You’re imagining things. You’re imagining it.”

If they realize it’s Mr. Bernhard, that’s going to cause all kinds of trouble. He’s a trainee teacher, and there’s such a big gap in social status. Not that those things bother me, but if father ever hears about it...

“I’ll take your word for it for the time being. But if it were me, I’d be so happy to make Prince Friedrich my own.”

“Me too,” the other senior agreed. “If only I’d been born a little later...”

If you like him that much, stop worrying about age and go get him. That idiot’s

friendly with everyone. Just help him patch things up with his dad and you get to be empress!

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard the rumors about that trainee teacher?” the other senior said, changing the subject.

“What sort of rumors?” Vallia asked.

Whoa. Hang on. What’s this about?

“They say he’s getting a student to do his work for him. Can you imagine a future teacher at the academy would be relying on students?”

“That’s unacceptable! That’s no way for a teacher at this prestigious academy to behave. Someone needs to make this teacher pull himself together.”

Ahhh... They’re talking about Mr. Bernhard... I want to defend him, but I shouldn’t because it’ll cause trouble for me. But, I have to...

“I’ve heard that being a trainee teacher is an incredibly difficult job,” I said before I could stop myself. “They have to assist in lessons every day, they have to take exams to qualify as a teacher, and there are various other tasks as well. When you think about it, isn’t it only natural for them to accept what help they can get?”

“Well now, it sounds as though you’re aiming to become a teacher, Astrid,” the other senior remarked.

“Teaching is an important profession, but I don’t think it’s an appropriate position for a duke’s daughter,” Vallia warned me.

Phew. I’m lucky they got the wrong idea. Hopefully they’ll keep on believing it.

“Come to think of it, I’ve seen you coming out of the staff room a few times,” Vallia said. “Or is that my imagination?”

Guh. V-V-Vallia...why...?

“W-Well... I...I got called in because of my bad grades! That’s why I had to go to the staff room! Ha ha!”

“Really? I’ve also seen you carrying desserts there from the Round Table. Don’t tell me you’re bribing the teachers?”

“Eheh heh...”

Phew! Vallia threw me a real curveball there. She had me panicking for a moment.

“But I’ll have to ask you to stop giving out so many desserts to people who aren’t Round Table members. You could cause a misunderstanding. Especially when it comes to young teachers...”

She’s as sharp as I feared. She’s almost as sharp as my mother. I have to be careful not to slip up.

....

“Well then, Lord Adolf. Allow me to teach you the basics of the basics of blood magic.”

Time had passed and classes were over. Normally, I’d read in the library for a while then go home, but instead I was giving Adolf a lesson in blood magic.

I’m not even getting paid for this. Why’d I agree to teach him blood magic?

“First, please focus on your own body. Circulate your mana through your entire body and look for any irregularities in the flow.”

“M-Make my mana flow through my body?” Adolf seemed hesitant to follow my instruction. “The same way we do it for elemental magic?”

“That’s right. Please create a small flow of mana.”

We’re not stopping just because you sound scared. If you didn’t want my teaching, you shouldn’t have asked for it.

“Mana through my body... Mana through my body...”

If he can just get this bit right, blood magic won’t be too hard. I managed to use blood magic on my muscles right away without even needing the monitoring stuff.

But Adolf started to groan, as if making the mana flow through his body was a struggle.

“You don’t have to put so much effort into it. Just take it easy. Collect mana from your organs, then make it flow through your body so that it follows the

flow of your blood.”

“N-Now I’m even more confused. I can draw my mana out, but how do I make it flow inside my body? You’re sure it should flow?”

Blood magic is literally magic in your blood, so yes, you’ve gotta make it flow through your body.

“Please give me your hand.”

I suppose I’d better give him a demonstration.

“What?”

“This is how you do it.” I made my mana flow through Adolf’s body.

All right. He’s healthy as can be. Damn, he has less body fat than me... I can’t see anything that would prevent his mana from flowing...

“Do you understand? My mana is flowing through your body right now. Can you feel it?”

“Y-Yeah. It’s like something warm flowing into me...”

Okay. Now he gets how it’s meant to feel.

“I’m going to draw out my mana, so please try replacing that flow with mana of your own.”

There’s no way he can mess it up with this much help.

“Mana inside my body...” Adolf began to groan again.

That’s weird... It shouldn’t be that hard...

“Lord Adolf, are you all right?”

“Do I look all right?”

You don’t. You’re really struggling.

“It’s dangerous to make your mana flow too forcefully. Please relax.”

“I get it. I get that...”

I was monitoring Adolf closely, but I couldn’t tell whether any mana was flowing through his body. “Lord Adolf, I think perhaps you should ask for proper

instruction from a teacher. Or perhaps you could ask a knight to serve as your home tutor.”

“No!” Adolf shouted back. “I’m not doing that!”

I couldn’t help but be startled by the way he’d yelled at me.

“Oh... I...I’m sorry,” Adolf said. “I know I was the one who asked you for help. Listen, I’ll learn to make mana flow through my body, and then you can teach me the next part once I’ve got the hang of that.”

“All right. Well, until next time...”

We left the lesson at that, but no matter how long I waited, Adolf never did come back to me to ask for more blood magic lessons.

Chapter 25 — I'm the Villainess, and My Cousin Has Entered the Academy

Time passed quickly, and I was in my third year of elementary school before I knew it.

We'd learned the fundamentals of the earth and wind elements in our first year, the fundamentals of the fire and water elements in our second year, and now we were learning applications for the earth and wind elements in our third year. In our fourth year, we'd be learning applications for the water and fire elements.

Throughout the whole process, the teachers gave us careful instruction about mana control. I'd learned it all from Dr. Wolff in two years, but it seemed it was mastered slowly here at the academy, starting in elementary school and continuing through high school.

Poor mana control could result in the blood magic taught in middle school being used incorrectly, which could be life-threatening. The academy needed to teach mana control very thoroughly for that reason.

Although my mana was seemingly limitless, mana control was essential whenever I needed to do something precise with it, such as when making talismans for my ammunition. The risk of making my ammunition fire spontaneously gave me another reason to keep diligently studying mana control!

I had the most mana of anyone in my year; Friedrich was second place, and Adolf was third. Silvio didn't have a particularly high amount. I'd say he had just barely enough to be called average.

Now that those two years had passed, my cousin Iris was finally entering the academy!

Yay! A breath of fresh air after my days of constantly defusing deadly landmines!

Only first-year and fourth-year students attended the inauguration ceremony, so third-year students like me couldn't be there, but I heard that Iris was the spokesperson for new students! Iris's excellence was a source of pride for me.

"Astrid!" After my third year of elementary school had started, a voice called out to me as I was walking along a corridor.

"Iris!"

"Yes, it's me, Iris! I'm finally here!"

Iris was wearing the same sailor jacket and pleated skirt as me, except it looked a hundred times cuter on her. She looked super pretty, like a little doll. I felt proud to be a big sister to a girl so cute.

"Iris, how's the academy been? Actually...I guess you can't answer since you've only just joined."

"Well, I'm a little nervous because there are so many people..."

Ah. She's as shy as I thought. It's cute, but as her big sister, I want to see her make friends.

"Oh? Who's this, Miss Astrid?"

"Oh, Mr. Bernhard. This is my cousin, Iris."

Oho? I didn't expect to see Mr. Bernhard here today. Lucky me! Now I can show off Iris.

"Iris, this is Bernhard von Bronikowski. He was a trainee teacher who used to assist in my lessons."

That's right; I spoke in past tense. Mr. Bernhard had now graduated from being a trainee, making him an official teacher. He taught first year classes at the high school. That meant I'd be parting ways with Mr. Bernhard until I reached high school myself. How sad.

"N-Nice to meet you," Iris said as she hid behind me. "I'm Iris Maria von Braunschweig..."

This is too cute.



“Isn’t she cute, Mr. Bernhard?! She’s my cousin!”

“She reminds me of you when you first entered the Academy, Miss Astrid. Though you’re more like the queen of the elementary school now.”

Huh? What? That’s the first time I’ve heard that.

“I hear that Miss Iris spoke on behalf of the new students.”

“Yes. They made her the representative because she’s such a good girl.”

It was probably more to do with the high status of Duke Braunschweig, but it’s still amazing that someone as shy as Iris could say a few words as the new student representative. I’m proud to be her big sister.

“If Prince Friedrich hadn’t been in the same year, I’m sure you would have been the representative, Miss Astrid. We knew you were a talented mage before you joined the academy, and you are the daughter of Duke Oldenburg.”

“I wonder about that.”

Having to give a speech would’ve been a pain, so I’m actually glad Friedrich was there to take the bullet. Thanks, Friedrich. You were actually useful for once.

“When it comes time to give a speech at your graduation ceremony, it may be you who’s chosen.”

“Do you think so?” I replied. “I’m not so sure...”

I’d rather big jobs like that go to someone else.

“What about you, Mr. Bernhard? How’s the high school?”

“I had a lot of trouble with elementary school, but high school is troublesome in many ways of its own. Even though my goal was to become an elementary school teacher, I was assigned to the high school...”

Ah. I thought something was weird. It didn’t make much sense for a future high school teacher to be assisting classes in the elementary school. The slave drivers who run the academy probably just assign staff at random. What an academy!

“It’s easy to spot when an elementary schooler is playing a prank, but not so

much with high schoolers. It's hard to keep track. It would be quite a problem if any bullying happened at this prestigious academy of ours, so I have to be alert at all times."

"Give it all you've got, Mr. Bernhard! I'm rooting for you!"

I guess even other worlds have bullies. Oh wait...wasn't Astrid the ringleader of the bullies? That's what happened between her and Mr. Bernhard to trigger her destruction in the game. I guess he had a real hard time in that story.

"I have to attend a meeting with the other teachers. I pray that you have a fulfilling life here at the academy, Miss Iris." Mr. Bernhard gave Iris a smile and a wave as he walked off.

"Was that the Mr. Bernhard you're always talking about?" Iris asked as she finally came out from behind my back.

"Yep, that's him. Isn't he cool?" I said, smiling a little.

"I can see why you're always giving him praise. He seems like a nice person..."

Huh? Don't tell me I just triggered the Bernhard route for Iris? No, no, no. That wouldn't happen. The age gap is way too big. I need to stop thinking about the world like it's a game. I do need to worry about event triggers, but it's not like everything that happens in this world is an otome game event. Still, I think I could give up on Mr. Bernhard if Iris really wanted me to...

"What's wrong, Astrid?" Iris looked at me with a wholly innocent expression on her face.

Yep, that's right. Iris isn't just pretending to be an innocent little girl like I am. She's a real life six-year-old, and that's too young for romance. I'm overthinking things.

"It's nothing, Iris. Now why don't we visit the Round Table?"

"All right!"

When Iris does fall in love, I hope she finds a good person. It would be nice if we could talk about our love lives someday.

....

“Laura! This is my cousin Iris who I’ve told you about!” I entered the Round Table’s room and introduced Iris to Laura von Lichnowsky, the new chair who was managing the group.

Our previous chair, Vallia, had successfully graduated and married Lord Eugen of Duke Schleswig’s family. We now kept in touch through letters. I was making sure to maintain that connection.

Our new chair was a second-year high schooler. She was a valuable member whose specialty was science, and she’d been helping me understand books from the library each day. It made me wonder whether the chair of the Round Table was always a girl.

Incidentally, Laura’s fiancé was the son of a marquis, and I wanted that kind of connection.

I’ve gotta keep up my connection collection.

“I’m I-Iris Maria von Braunschweig... Nice to meet you...” Despite being the star of the show, Iris was hiding behind my back as she nervously scanned the many unfamiliar faces of the Round Table.

“Wow! You weren’t lying when you said Iris was cute! I don’t bite, so there’s no need to hide. We’ve got lots of desserts here.”

I’d hit it off right away with Laura because of how friendly she was. My only complaint about her was that she ate a few too many desserts each day. On the other hand, she didn’t look fat, so I could only assume she had a fast metabolism. I was jealous.

“Come on, Iris. Shall we go in together?”

“O-Okay, Astrid...”

I should have known that not even Laura could win over Iris right away. Being surrounded by all these older students must be making her nervous.

“I’d heard that beauty runs strong in the Braunschweig family, and now that I’ve seen little Iris, I know that it’s true. You must try this dessert; it’s delicious.”

“Isn’t she the cutest? She is, right? Isn’t she just so cute?”

I wanted Iris to get used to being around other people. It didn’t matter

whether it was Round Table members or other students in her year, I just wanted her to enjoy her time with others at the academy. I couldn't be by Iris's side at all times, and if my family's domain were seized, the two of us would live far apart.

"I was already planning to invite you to the Round Table, so it's convenient that you're here, Iris," Laura said with a big smile. "Welcome to the Round Table of Spirits. We're glad to have you with us. Please think of everyone here as a friend."

"Th-Thank you," Iris replied, smiling a little.

If we keep this up, will it be enough for Iris to get over her shyness?

"You really are cute," said one of the older Round Table members. "Little Astrid is cute too, so I suppose it makes sense given that you're her cousin."

"You're lucky to have a big sister like Astrid," said another member.

The high schoolers and middle schoolers were drawn to Iris. She was clearly nervous, but she still smiled when she heard people give me compliments.

This is good. They can use me as a starting point to get through to her.

"Oh, is this a relation of Astrid's?"

Blech. We could have done without him here.

"I'm honored to meet you, Miss Iris. My name is Friedrich. I'm fortunate enough to be in the same class as your cousin."

Yeah, because this academy doesn't ever rearrange the classes! Which probably means I'll be stuck with him for a long time unless something happens. It's enough to make hell look like a comfortable alternative.

"Hmph..."

Huh? Iris was smiling bashfully at everyone else, but now she's looking at Friedrich warily. Ah, she thinks that Friedrich is going to steal me from her. I remember talking to her about it. But don't worry, little sis. That's one route I'd never trigger. Not willingly at least... I pray it doesn't happen. For real.

"Oh. Did I say something wrong?"

“N-No, it’s just, I don’t think you should get so close to Astrid...”

Whoa! She’s a dependable sister! B-But won’t this make him mad? We’re eight years old already.

“Ha ha ha. I’ve no intention of bullying your cousin.”

“B-But even so! She’s a big sister to me, and I treasure her!”

Whoa... I think I hear a little anger in quiet little Iris’s voice. Just a little.

“What’s this?” laughed Laura. “It seems you’ve made her suspicious of you, Prince Friedrich.”

“Oh dear,” said Friedrich with his usual nonchalant smile.

Smile while you can, Friedrich! I’ve just gained the support of a new ally!

“You’re Miss Astrid’s cousin, aren’t you?” Adolf was next.

We have to deal with you too, Adolf? I haven’t heard from you since our little lesson, so you’ve got me wondering what’s up with you. I’m half-worried that I might have stepped on a landmine back then.

“That’s r-right,” Iris replied. “Um...”

“It’s Adolf. Adolf Franz von Wallenstein. Nice to meet ya. If you don’t mind me asking, you can’t use blood magic, can you?”

“Not at all. My home tutor told me I’m far too young to use blood magic.”

Huh? Her home tutor told her that? Dr. Wolff taught me it all without a second thought.

“I see,” Adolf replied before muttering to himself, “It’s not for children. There’s time yet.”

That’s a real complex he’s got! We won’t learn blood magic basics until middle school, and we won’t start the real lessons until high school, but I still wonder if he’ll be all right. I suppose I can get Minne to help him out if it comes to it. I’ve already decided that I’m setting Minne up with Adolf. A word of warning, heroine: keep your hands off him. I’ve kept Friedrich free for you.

“You have the cutest cousin, Miss Astrid.”

Saved you till last, did they, Silvio? You're not too difficult of a landmine to avoid, so I should be safe now.

"Y-You must be the chancellor's son," Iris said to him.

"Yes... The name's Silvio Heinrich von Stein. Chancellor Stefan is my father."

Oho? Was that a frown I saw on him just when he mentioned his dad? Don't tell me he's started fighting with his parents already. Bleh. I'd hoped he'd at least wait until high school. Don't make me babysit you too...

"Thank you ever so much for introducing me to the Round Table's members, Astrid. I'm starting to feel I'll be at home at the academy."

"Glad to hear it! And you've got me too, so let's get the most out of the academy, Iris!"

I'm sure there'll be more hurdles to overcome, but it's good to see Iris settling in.

Chapter 26 — I'm the Villainess, Now How about a Get-Together?

"A Round Table get-together?" I echoed back.

I was at the Round Table as usual, with Iris sitting next to me reading a book for little girls. I'd been reading a book on blood magic when Laura suggested a get-together.

"Yes, I'd like to hold a get-together for Round Table members. What do you think?"

"Do we need one? I mean, we can already see each other every day, can't we?"

Thus far, there hadn't been any real events arranged by the Round Table. For better or worse, children with elite noble parents tended to be busy with family affairs, making it impossible to plan anything.

"I'm not sure I'll have the time either..." I said.

"That's the thing. If it weren't for that issue, I could call up former members and arrange a real lively get-together. Is there nothing we can do?"

"Sadly not... Though I'd like a chance to talk with the former members too."

I'd love to see Vallia again now that she's graduated. She rarely comes to the academy now that she's married into the busy family of a duke.

"A get-together?"

Guh. Why'd you have to be here, Friedrich?

"Would you like me to arrange it?" Friedrich suggested. "Perhaps I shouldn't say it, but with me there to attract guests, there should be a rather high number of attendees."

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind, Your Highness?" Laura asked.

As much as I hated to admit it, Friedrich definitely was capable of pulling a

few strings and getting every important noble to attend. The empire was swarming with people wanting to make connections with the imperial family, my father included.

“It would be a wonderful solution,” Laura said. “We could even take the opportunity to establish this as an annual event.”

“If I do what I can while I’m an academy student, perhaps it will become a tradition in the years that follow.”

And so it was that I was there to witness the birth of the Round Table of Spirits get-togethers.

“Now we need to decide on a venue,” Laura said. “Should we host the event at the academy? Or perhaps somewhere else?”

“I think we should host it outside the academy,” Friedrich replied. “We don’t know how many former members will attend, but if there are too many, there won’t be space on the academy grounds. I’m also concerned we’ll cause trouble for the staff and students here.”

It’d be a little unfair to use the academy grounds to put on a get-together for high-ranking nobles only. The academy might be big enough to accommodate all the children of the empire’s nobles, but the catering we’ll need could be another problem.

“Did you have somewhere else in mind?”

“My manor would be one option, or perhaps there’s somewhere better suited.”

The venue... I wonder what’s best.

“Ah! How about Grand Hotel Havel?” Friedrich suggested. “The service there is excellent, and I often hear about it being used to host large events.”

Grand Hotel Havel? That swanky hotel? If Friedrich can suggest that without a second thought, it really shows who’s top of the pecking order. He talks about lavish spending like it’s nothing.

By the way, Havel was the name of the nation’s capital.

“That’s a wonderful idea. The hotel’s food is said to be excellent.” Laura

removed a book from a shelf as she was speaking. “Then our venue shall be Grand Hotel Havel. We need to decide on a date and time, make invitations, and other such preparations.”

“What’s that?” I asked her.

“This book contains the names of Round Table members and what they went on to do after graduation. We can use this to contact former members.” The book’s thickness suggested that the Round Table of Spirits had a long history.

“Do we know their addresses?”

“Aren’t you the minister of posts’ daughter? Finding the address of an important noble is easy if you know their name. We can use this for preparing the invitations.”

Right. The name of an important noble carries a lot of weight. Get their name, and the rest is easy.

“If we can assume invitations won’t be an issue, I guess the next thing is securing the venue.”

“Yes. Given the popularity of the Grand Hotel Havel, we’ll have to ask them to fit our get-together in with their busy schedule.”

Popular hotels like Grand Hotel Havel must get flooded with requests. How do we even get a reservation there?

“In that case, should I go there to find out whether we can get a reservation?” I offered.

“Are you sure?” Laura replied. “That’s a big help. I’d say we should pick the next available date, but I suppose we’d best allow at least a month so everyone has a chance to adjust their schedule after receiving their invitation. That would be enough I think.”

It seemed I’d be heading off to check out Grand Hotel Havel.

“Please allow me to accompany you.”

Blech. Why do you have to get involved, Friedrich?

“It’s r-really no trouble. I can handle this by myself.”

“It would be improper of me to leave all the work to you, Astrid. Please allow me to aid you a little at least.”

What a nuisance! He’s insufferable.

It was Iris who spoke up next: “I’ll go too!”

My cute cousin Iris was fitting right in at the Round Table. She smiled a lot lately, and was always by my side whenever I was there. She was wary of Friedrich, however.

I just hope she doesn’t overdo it and make him angry...

“The three of us can go. The more the merrier, they say.”

I don’t know what logic led him to that conclusion, but at least he’s not angry...

Now I suppose the children of the emperor, Duke Oldenburg, and Duke Braunschweig are all going to show up at once. That’ll really put the pressure on them.

“All right, we’ll all go to book the venue after school,” I agreed.

“I’m counting on you,” Laura told me.

We’d agreed to head to Grand Hotel Havel after school.

Friedrich won’t be able to make me step on a landmine so easily as long as I’ve got Iris with me. Probably, hopefully, maybe...

....

Grand Hotel Havel was in a commercial district in the center of Havel. The academy we attended was to the south of Havel, the palace where the imperial family resided was in the center of Havel, and the commercial district was in the western part.

It was a little too far to walk. I could have gotten there in no time by sprinting with blood magic, but that would mean leaving Iris behind—same with Friedrich, but leaving that guy behind wouldn’t bother me at all.

Hence we were heading toward the hotel by horse and carriage. A horse and carriage belonging to Friedrich, no less.

“Astrid, it’s unusual to see you take the initiative like this.”

“Isn’t it?”

Jeez. I wish he wouldn’t talk to me. I’ve got Iris next to me glaring at him, but it’s like he doesn’t notice. Iris should probably stop making that face, though...

“At first, it seemed as though you felt displeased with the Round Table. It was as though you didn’t want to attend, and you generally spent the entire time reading library books whenever you were there.”

Well, yeah! Getting dragged into the Round Table was a real annoyance at first. But then there were good people like Vallia and Laura, and the older students started to talk with me about my studies, so the Round Table wasn’t so bad. And then I decided that a small group might be an ideal place for a shy person like Iris to make friends.

“Now you’re an indispensable member of the Round Table. You’re someone with the ability to lead others in whatever you do, whether it’s studying, sports, or magic. That’s something I envy about you...” Friedrich’s gaze became distant as he spoke.

Ah. He was worried that he might not make a good emperor, wasn’t he? After all, his father’s Wilhelm III, the military leader with boundless charisma. He’s the man they call the Soldier King because he’s trying to turn the Plusen Empire into something even bigger. Who wouldn’t feel daunted if they had to fill the shoes of someone like that? I’ve got some sympathy, but he needs to talk it out with the heroine, not me!

“Why not be more like His Imperial Majesty?” Iris suggested.

Whoa! Little sis, don’t bring up that touchy subject!

“I can never be like my father; I’ll always lack his strength. The sound of marching boots doesn’t fill me with confidence, the war cries of soldiers don’t stir my heart, and I don’t have the courage to risk my life on the battlefield. If I tried to be my father, I’d only fail.”

He’s got some serious issues... He’s going to fall apart before he ever becomes emperor. There’s still about another five years before we reach high school. You’ve gotta at least hold out until then! Just wait until the heroine shows up,

and then she can baby you and solve all your problems.

"I see. I want to become more like Astrid," Iris gave me a big smile as she spoke.

"You should stay how you are now, Iris. You don't need to be anyone else. I have my good points, but so do you. I think I'd cry if a cute girl like you turned into someone like me."

That was really cute just now, Iris, but I'd be real sad if you became a magic nerd, living in a minefield among the triggers of your destruction.

"Everyone has their good points, don't they?" Friedrich mumbled as if something was on his mind.

Has he finally lost it?

"You really are charming, Astrid. I'll continue to rely on you from here on."

"As y-you wish..."

I don't get what he's saying. All I know is that he's trying to make me step on a landmine. I'd better stick to vague, half-hearted replies. You're a mine that has a way of moving itself around, so I have to watch myself.

Heroine! Where are you?! Get here before I lose my mind!

But the sad thing is, even when the heroine appears, everything that might trigger my destruction won't just disappear. I'm not going to bully her myself, but I don't know whether she'll be safe at high school...

As these thoughts were going through my mind, we'd arrived at the hotel.

Once inside Grand Hotel Havel, the mention of Friedrich's name was enough to make the general manager come out.

The general manager's showing up to deal with an eight-year-old? Well that's the imperial family for you...

We made a reservation for our get-together, and then the general manager saw us off as we left the hotel with the venue secured.

The way Friedrich was smiling in the carriage throughout the ride back really creeped me out.

Chapter 27 — I'm the Villainess; This Is a Get-Together

The venue was booked, the invitations were sent out, and the day's schedule was prepared, meaning that we'd finished arranging the get-together as per Laura's instructions.

To prepare for the get-together, I had to choose a dress suitable for an evening event. I picked one that wasn't too revealing and had a navy blue color that I liked, and I paired it with white opera gloves. As for my hair, I planned to put it up in a chignon style rather than wearing it straight like normal—or rather, I was going to get someone to do it for me. That would be all my preparations complete.

Father discussed the event with me back at home. "A Round Table evening function? How splendid. The former members include some highly influential nobles. This could be a chance to deepen our ties with the nobility while fully abiding by society's customs. It's also a good opportunity for you to get closer to Prince Friedrich."

"Y-Yes, it is..."

I don't wanna! Someone needs to defuse that landmine for me! Use POWs if you have to!

"Who will you be choosing as your escort?" father asked.

"You perhaps, father?"

I didn't know it before coming to this world, but this kind of event normally involved girls being escorted by boys. When I'd first heard the word "escort" I'd wondered why I'd need a security detail, but that was just because my brain was warped from reading too many books about military stuff.

In this case, an escort was someone the girl had a close relationship with, such as a lover or fiancé. But I was still just eight years old, which was too soon for me to have a lover or a fiancé. I wasn't quite so precocious.

“Hm. Well, I have bad news then: I have to be in a meeting that evening.”

“Wha...?”

No way! It's not like I need an escort to attend, but it'll be super obvious if I don't have one. Everyone'll whisper to each other, "Get a load of that loner." I'm not having that.

“Aren't there any boys at the academy who'd escort you?”

“No, but...maybe I'll find someone else who was left over...”

Will there even be anyone left over? They're all little lords and ladies from good families, so it's possible that everyone has a partner already. I might be the only one left out... That's depressing...

“Well, we have to do something. If it comes down to it, I can delay my meeting; it would bring disgrace to the Oldenburg name if my daughter was humiliated, after all. But do try to find yourself a partner at the academy.”

“Yes, father!”

I was left dashing around and scrambling for a partner with just three days until the get-together.

....

I tried asking every single senior student who I knew in the salon. “Please! Be my partner for the get-together!”

“Sorry. I've already agreed to be my cousin's partner.”

“My older sister doesn't have a partner yet...”

“Well... There's a girl in my year who I'm probably going with.”

Gah! I shouldn't have waited until three days before the event.

“Astrid, are you all right?” Iris asked out of concern when she saw me take my seat with tears in my eyes.

“Iris, can you be my escort?”

“I'd love to! But I'd like it even better if you were my escort!”

“It was a joke, Iris...”

Little sis sounded pretty serious just now... Actually, dressing as a boy and then escorting Iris wouldn't be so bad. I'll be the one to escort Iris! I shall safely deliver the fleet from the eastern shores of America to the English mainland!

Uh... I really don't have time for these jokes. I need to get serious about finding a partner.

"Is someone escorting you Iris?"

"My father agreed to escort me. But I'd prefer if it were you."

That figures. I should have guessed Iris would choose her dad. We're still elementary schoolers after all. But Iris, you can't ever tell your dad that you prefer me over him. You'll make him cry.

"Hey, you. I heard you're looking for an escort."

Gah. Here comes Landmine No. 2, aka Adolf.

"Th-That's correct. But I don't think it's a problem. If I must, I can ask my father to be my partner."

"Right. Well, I could escort you if you like."

Huh? Why you?

"A-Are you sure?"

"In fact, let's say I'm the one asking. Let me escort you."

Whoa! How come you're so forward today?

"But you have Minne, and..."

"Ah... Yeah, I do have Minne, but she can't go because she's not a Round Table member. There's no problem with me escorting you, is there?"

Come on! Listen to yourself! You're trying to work your charms on me when you've already got a girlfriend! You're already cheating on an emotional level! Minne's going to cry!

"In that case...please be my escort, Lord Adolf."

"Sure. Looking forward to it, Miss Astrid."

In the end, I had to accept his offer because I was worried that doing anything

else might trigger my destruction.

Sorry, Minne. I'm just going to borrow Adolf for a while. I'll make sure to clean him before I give him back.

"By the way, who is Prince Friedrich escorting?"

"Miss Laura. The organizer and the prince make a good pair, don't they?"

Oh, Laura already defused the landmine named Friedrich for me? That's a relief.

"I really wanted you to escort me, Astrid..." Iris said.

"Sorry, Iris. I would if I were a boy."

Iris looked disappointed, and I wasn't exactly delighted either.

This puts my chances of stepping on a mine way up, and I'm betraying Minne to boot. Why does Adolf even want to escort me anyway?

"I feel a storm coming..."

The get-together had gone from something to look forward to to something I was secretly dreading.

....

It was the day of the get-together. I put on the dress I'd prepared and traveled to Grand Hotel Havel by horse and carriage. There were many carriages out in front of the hotel, presumably because of the event.

We'd booked the top floor for our venue, so that's where the get-together was underway.

"Oh, there you are." Adolf had been waiting for me on the top floor. He sounded full of himself as usual.

He does look pretty dapper in that tuxedo, though—for an eight-year-old, at least. It's not so hard to believe that he'll be the next captain of an order of knights. I totally get why he's a love interest in the game.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, Lord Adolf."

"No worries. Everyone knows women take a long time getting ready to go

anywhere.”

Wow. This kid thinks he knows a thing or two about women, does he?

“Wanna head in?”

“Yes, let’s.” I took his hand in mine and headed through the open doorway that led into the hall.

The hall could only be described as grand. When we first came to look at the place, the hall had been an empty space, but now it was lined with tables covered with food and desserts. Just looking at it was enough to make me feel hungry. There was also a band playing an unfamiliar but beautiful piece of music near the front of the hall, which really brought the event to life.

However, the main attraction had to be the former Round Table members, all of whom were looking dazzling. Each one was dressed in a gorgeous outfit. The men all suited their tuxedos perfectly, and the women were wearing elegant dresses with vivid colors.

“Isn’t it amazing?” I asked in awe.

“Yeah. It’s beyond what I expected,” Adolf replied, seeming somewhat overwhelmed.

“First, let’s go to greet Laura,” I suggested. “She’s the organizer, after all.”

“You’re right. We’d better say hello to Friedrich too.”

Adolf and I made our way through the magnificent hall in search of Laura and Friedrich.

“Ah, there they are.” Adolf had spotted them.

Finding Laura and Friedrich hadn’t taken much effort. It wasn’t difficult because they were at the center of the biggest crowd of people. It was probably just a natural consequence of there being so many people who wanted stronger ties to the imperial family. Using Friedrich to draw in more attendees had certainly been effective.

“Oh, Astrid!” Laura saw me and began to wave. “Get over here!”

“Good evening, Laura. You look splendid.”



“Thank you, Astrid. I hope you know that your own dress looks stunning too.”

Laura was wearing a cream-colored dress. The latest fashion trends all looked amazing on her. Now I understood why Laura didn't get fat no matter how much she ate: all of the weight must have been going to her chest because her boobs had grown huge.

I-I'm still eight! My time will come!

Adolf chose his words carefully as he greeted Laura. “I'm honored to have been invited tonight, Miss Laura.”

“There's no need to be so formal, Adolf. Talk like you would normally.”

Someone must have trained him up good. Maybe it was his dad, the head of that order of knights. He delivered that greeting perfectly. Now I see why Minne fell for him.

“Prince Friedrich, I pray you have a wonderful evening.”

“Oh, Astrid. I hope you have a good time too. I see you came with Adolf.”

We had to say a bunch of greetings to Friedrich too. No one goes around greeting people more than nobles.

“That's right,” Adolf told Friedrich. “I've still got to settle the score.”

“Yes, I heard. I'm sorry I couldn't help.”

“You've got nothing to be sorry for.”

Settle a score? D-Did I set off a landmine at some point without realizing?! Wh-When did that happen?!

“Well, I hope you both enjoy the get-together.”

“Th-Thank you...”

I can't enjoy this anymore. My only weapons are a shotgun, a pistol, an automatic rifle, a machine gun, and a grenade launcher. That's not enough firepower to take on a nation's army! Any uprising I trigger is just going to get put down!

Wah! What'll I do? What'll I do?!

“Is something wrong?” Adolf looked at me suspiciously.

“N-No... It’s nothing,” I replied.

It’s me who wants to ask what’s wrong here! This is why you wanted to escort me? To settle a score? That sounds like trouble, no matter how you think about it.

“Astrid!” A cheerful voice interrupted my anguished thoughts.

“Iris! What a cute dress!”

“Your dress is beautiful too, Astrid!”

My little sister Iris appeared and put me at ease. She was wearing a dress in a navy-blue color that matched mine, and it featured a large ribbon that made it resemble the dresses fairies typically wore. She really looked cute. I expected no less from my little sister. I felt proud to be a big sister to her.

“It seems you’re always looking out for my daughter.”

“Duke Braunschweig, it should be me expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to enjoy Iris’s company.”

A big shot had made his appearance. This was Lord Diethard von Braunschweig, the twelfth head of the Braunschweig family.

Ah, I remember now that Iris was going to be escorted by her dad. He might not have a ministerial position like my father, but he’s plenty influential nonetheless.

“I worry when I see Iris off to the academy, but she comes home with a smile on her face each day thanks to you. I owe you my gratitude.”

“Not at all. I’ve done nothing to deserve such praise.”

All right! I’ve won Duke Braunschweig’s favor and made a good impression on him! Now if my family’s domain is seized, maybe he’ll raise an army together with father!

“Father, I really would have liked to have had Astrid escort me instead...”

“Ha ha. You really do like Astrid, don’t you?”

Iris, you can’t say that to your dad...

“There are so many familiar faces here that you’ll have to pardon me. Please give Paul my regards.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

Duke Braunschweig left, taking Iris with him.

Following Duke Braunschweig around while he greets all his old school friends can’t be much fun for Iris. I’ll make sure I spend time with her later.

“Astrid!” Another familiar face appeared, and this time it was Vallia.

“Vallia!”

The man by her side had to be Eugen, a member of Duke Schleswig’s family. He was a tall young man, and his smile was so warm and friendly that I felt sure he was a good person.

“Astrid, how’s life at the academy?” Vallia asked.

“Every day has been fun since my younger cousin enrolled,” I replied with a smile. “How’s married life, Vallia?”

“Each day is trial and error. Keeping this man happy is a difficult job. The moment I take my eyes off him, he’s chasing after other women, so I’ve really got my hands full trying to keep him happy and stop him running off.”

“Hey, come on now, that’s not true. I don’t have eyes for anyone but you.”

Ohh. Newly married couples sure are nice.

“You must be Astrid,” Eugen said to me. “I’ve heard you’re a magic genius. If you ever go on to study at the university, you must let me read your dissertation. I still have an interest in magic.”

“He graduated top of his class after finishing his degree,” Vallia explained. “I’m sure you and him would get along, Astrid.”

Oho. So the Schleswigs have some interest in magic?

“If that time ever comes, then of course,” I told him.

“I expect we’ll see great things from you,” Eugen said.

I gave Vallia and Eugen a polite bow before the two of them left.

“Miss Astrid, have you got a moment?” Adolf suddenly asked.

“Y-Yes! Did you want to discuss something??”

B-Bring it on! I’ve got the Oldenburgs, the Braunschweigs, and probably the Schleswigs on my side!

“There are too many people here. Let’s go to the terrace.” Adolf led the way to the hall’s terrace without answering my question.

“What did you want to talk about?”

If this is my destruction coming, I’ll hit back with all the firepower I’ve got!

“It’s about blood magic. I’m sorry I never got back to you. I’m escorting you tonight as a token of my gratitude for the patience you’ve had with me.”

Huh? No destruction?

“I’ve been trying hard to make mana flow through my body ever since then, but I can’t get it right. I was too embarrassed to tell you. You said it was too early for me to learn blood magic, and perhaps you were right.”

So that’s what happened... Even though he never mentioned blood magic once, he was struggling with it the whole time. He kept on practicing alone. That’s what I’d expect of a captain’s son. He’s certainly not lacking in determination.

“But I’m still worried. Will I ever be able to do it? Every member of an order of knights must use blood magic. It’s indispensable on the battlefield. But I just can’t imagine myself ever being able to use it.” Adolf looked straight at me.

“How did you learn blood magic?”

“Um... My home tutor instructed me, I tried my best, and I managed to learn it,” I answered.

“I see... You really are a magic genius after all. Maybe it’s impossible for an ordinary person like me...”

Huh? Since when did the cocky character develop such low self-esteem?

“It’s too soon to decide whether you’ll be able to use blood magic or not. We don’t learn the basics until middle school, and even then we don’t learn to put

it into practice until high school. Needlessly worrying about it at this stage could be what makes you fail.”

If you worry, it makes Minne worry.

“You’re right,” Adolf said, clenching his fists. “There’s still time.”

“And don’t keep your worries bottled up. There are plenty of people you can talk to. I think Minne could give you good advice.”

“Minne? She does get good grades in magic...”

Exactly. Get Minne to teach you magic, and get romantic with her while you’re at it.

“I’m sorry for everything. Please allow me to make it up to you,” Adolf said with a grin.

Haah... I feel like I’m part of a bomb defusal squad. Well, anyhow, now that Adolf’s picked himself up again, it’s time to enjoy the get-together!

Epilogue

The get-together ended without incident, and I returned to ordinary life at the academy. Although I'd feared my destruction was nigh, I'd somehow made it through the get-together.

Who does Adolf think he is, scaring me like that?!

"Lady Astrid, how was the Round Table's get-together?" Minne asked me.

"It wasn't bad," I told her. "I got to see some old friends and eat some good food."

The incident with Adolf aside, I got to see Vallia, and I couldn't complain about how good the food was. Get-togethers weren't so bad after all.

"Who did you have escort you, Lady Astrid? Prince Friedrich, I presume?"

"Not him..."

For some reason, she suggested Friedrich.

Why Friedrich?

"Then might I ask who?"

"M-My father escorted me. I still have to rely on father for these things!"

If I carelessly let her know that Adolf escorted me, I can just imagine her getting upset and going into heartbroken mode. I have to change the subject before she realizes!

"Miss Astrid." While I was still trying to think of something to say, who should appear but Adolf himself.

Why'd you have to show up at a time like this?!

"Wh-What is it, Lord Adolf?"

"Perhaps this means I still haven't repaid my debt to you, but the words you gave me were quite beautiful. I might ask for more help from you in the future. I'll be counting on you when the time comes." Adolf left us alone once he was

done speaking.

“Lady Astrid! Wh-What was that about? A debt?! Beautiful words?!”

“Calm down, Minne! It’s nothing! Honestly!”

Damn it! Adolf, you bastard! Why’d he have to dump this awkward problem on me?!

After that, it took an hour to make Minne’s rage subside.

Regardless, I’d decided on a plan for the future.

First, I didn’t want to get any deeper into the minefield. In other words, no getting closer to Friedrich, Adolf, or Silvio than I had to.

Second, I wanted to expand my network of friends to prepare to wage civil war within the empire.

Third, I wanted to strengthen my weapons in preparation for that same war.

Keeping away from the minefield was the main aim. If it came down to it, I was ready to make Friedrich’s head roll on the executioner’s block via a civil war, but I hoped to keep things peaceful. Avoiding the minefield, treading carefully, and not getting involved were my three main guiding principles.

But even so, I still had to be prepared for a civil war in the empire.

In cooperation with great noble families like the Schleswigs, who Vallia had married into, and the Braunschweigs, who were Iris’s family, I’d have to fight against Friedrich and the imperial family if they ever tried to exile the Oldenburgs from the empire.

Most importantly, I was going to strengthen my weapons!

My current weapons—an automatic pistol, an automatic rifle, a machine gun, a grenade launcher, and the shotgun I was always carrying—wouldn’t give me enough firepower. I was going to need much, much, much more firepower.

What’ll I make? Heh heh. I know what. I’ll get started as soon as I’ve got enough free time. I’ll create an incredibly powerful weapon that’s sure to leave Friedrich and his men cowering. Its completion will mean my victory if there’s a civil war in the empire!

That said, I've got barely any actual combat experience, and I'm not even sure I could pull the trigger on an actual battlefield. I think I'd hesitate if I actually had to kill someone. At any rate, that's one "flaw" I'd like to work on. I've got some ideas about how to do it, so I know it's not completely impossible.

"Lady Astrid? Are you sure nothing happened between you and Lord Adolf?"

"I told you it was nothing. Lord Adolf just didn't like seeing me left by myself, so he felt obligated to escort me. You know what a kindhearted gentleman he is."

"M-Maybe you're right. Lord Adolf is wonderful, after all..."

Haaaah... I'm too young to be living life in a minefield. It looks like I'll never get to enjoy my youth. This is so unfair! I want a do-over! I yelled at God within my mind, but I got no reply.

Damn it. It's like no matter what I do, I'm headed for a bad end! I demand victory and a happy end for me even if it means screwing over the whole empire! I'll join forces with local rulers, wield powerful weapons, and when the time comes, I'll be the victor of a civil war!

Well, I've still got lots of time before that fateful day. I can keep on steadily preparing myself. The heroine hasn't even appeared yet. I can't let myself get hasty.

But wait... If I'm in my third year of elementary school right now, doesn't that mean I've only got five years until the heroine comes to the academy? Five years isn't that far off! I've got to hurry! I can't go on like this! I need to get started on some new weapon that's going to level the playing field!

The Astrid Arms Factory is now fully operational! Think back to that time. Remember that trip to England. The weapon I saw and actually touched, the stories from the retired soldier who'd actually used it.

"Lady Astrid, Lady Astrid! Who did Lord Silvio escort?"

"Who did Prince Friedrich choose as his partner?"

Lotte! Minne! Give me a minute! These annoying girls might not stand out all that much, but I'm starting to worry that they'll become surprisingly distracting.

Though if I had no friends at all, I really would be lonely...

“Lord Silvio was—”

In the end, I spent another day just chatting with my friends. But I hadn't given up on making new weapons!

I'll create the modern weapons I adore, and I'll win in the civil war that's bound to happen! I'm never going to lose to Friedrich and his bunch!

The next weapon I make will be the one that dominates the ground...

Extra Story

It happened during my second year of elementary school. This year, like every year, featured an entrance ceremony for new students during the fine days of spring.

But I had no interest in that.

“Ah...” I was sitting face down at my desk, feeling blue.

“What’s wrong, Lady Astrid?” Minne asked when she saw the state I was in.

“I hate this. It’s depressing living in a world with no military magazines.”

“Military magazines?”

That’s right. They don’t exist in this world. There’s not a single magazine with all the details of the state of the world’s armed forces, nothing reporting on self-defense force activity, and no easy-to-read magazines full of cute illustrations for beginners!

“They were the one thing that brought me joy.”

In my previous life, I’d read all the military magazines I could get my hands on along with a few fairly thick books, but this world gave me no way to lose myself in that hobby.

“Were military magazines a pastime of yours, Lady Astrid?”

“Pretty much. I also liked going to air shows and events at bases.”

I’d been pretty active for a geek. I enjoyed various events in a lot of different regions. I’d take a digital camera and collect photographs of tanks, jets, and warships. Before I came to this world, that is!

This world doesn’t have a single military magazine, and there are no military base open days either! Even if they did have magazines, they’d be worthless because they’d all be about crossbow performance! I want magazines with the latest info about tanks, jets, and warships! And maybe some war history!

This world did have books on war history, but it was all ancient history! It was all so old that the analysis made no sense! They'd praise armies for pointlessly charging in and getting wiped out because apparently that's courageous! You can't fight a war just by following your emotions like that!

I sighed to myself. *Where am I going to find a new hobby?*

"Why don't you try embroidery, Lady Astrid? It's fun."

"Uh... I'm a little too clumsy."

I'm not getting into embroidery! I want the smell of oil and steel!

"I wonder what happened with Japan's plans to introduce a next-generation fighter plane." I sighed. "Did the People's Liberation Army Navy's Type 001A air carrier ever enter service? Is the United States Armed Forces still using M4 carbines? What state are Germany's armaments in right now?" My thoughts were filled with the military news from Earth that I had no way of keeping up with.

"L-Lady Astrid? Are you all right?" Minne asked gingerly.

"No, I'm not all right. Is embroidery really enough to keep you occupied, Minne?"

"Yes, embroidery's fun. Just look at this. I can make beautiful things like these." Minne showed me a piece of cloth embroidered with floral patterns.

I couldn't deny that it was beautiful.

Hmmm. Embroidery? That's so widespread in this world that all girls are expected to know it. Mother often does it along with her knitting. I'd often see her doing that before I entered the academy.

I suppose it could help me improve my concentration in preparation for the war that's going to accompany my destruction. It might actually be a good hobby to have. It's worth a shot!

"Do you think you could teach me?"

"I'd love to! I'm sure you'll find it to your liking, Lady Astrid!"

I'm always reading blood magic research and flicking through high school-

level magic books, but that's not a hobby. A hobby has to be separate from your main occupation. It has to give you a change of pace! So let's give embroidery a go!

"You prick the needle through here, like this."

"You mean like this?"

"That's right. You're getting the hang of it." Minne had started teaching me embroidery right away.

There wasn't much to it besides poking a needle through taut fabric to sew some thread into it. But it really was a change of pace. It also required precise hand movements, making it a promising way to improve concentration.

Prick, prick, prick. I thought I was too clumsy, but this is going pretty well. At this rate, I'll be finished in no time.

"Lady Astrid...what exactly is that pattern?"

"The insignia of Strike Fighter Squadron 31."

"Strike...fight...?"

The thing I was busy making was the insignia of a United States Navy strike fighter squadron, an insignia once seen flying through the skies on the side of the famous—and awesome—F-14 Tomcat jet fighters. It was a charming design that featured a black cat carrying a bomb.

I'd once collected military patches and then either stored them safely or had fun sewing them onto my clothes.

I might be in another world, but I can still make the insignias myself and then sew them onto my dresses, can't I? Hey, that might be pretty cool!

"Finished! And nicely done, if I do say so myself!"

"That was quick, Lady Astrid. I expected no less!"

I've made the insignia of Strike Fighter Squadron 31!

"From tomorrow onward, I'm wearing this on my uniform! I'm now the top gun!"

"Y-You can't do that! You'll get in trouble if you modify your uniform like

that!”

“It’ll be fine if no one notices.”

I’m doing it! I’ve already decided I’m the top gun! You’re not stopping me now, Minne!

“Now if I sew it onto my uniform like this...” I sewed the insignia onto an empty region on my shoulder. “Done!”

“Lady Astrid, you’re going to get in trouble!”

“It’s fine, Minne! If the teachers have a problem, I’ll shoot their jets down myself!”

I’m the top gun! I’m fearless no matter what jet fighter I’m up against! Take to the skies! Victory will be mine!

Back at home the next day, my maid did a great job of spotting the insignia and removing it. I tried to protest against this unjust treatment, but that just made father angry at me.

“And that’s why I want to remake it, Minne.”

“You won’t put it on your uniform again, will you?”

“Not this time.”

I promise. Villainesses never lie.

“Then let’s begin,” Minne said.

“Yeah!”

Time for a second attempt!

“Prick, prick, prick. This is fun once you get used to it.”

“Hearing you say so makes me glad I made the suggestion.”

I quite enjoyed watching shapes appear just by poking a needle through the cloth a few times.

“Lady Astrid...may I ask what your embroidery pattern is?”

“It’s the emblem of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.”

“Special...?”

The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, also known as the Night Stalkers. They’re a special aviation unit with highly skilled helicopter pilots who’ve participated in numerous well-known operations. In Afghanistan, they’re known for crossing the mountain regions and flying through the night to transport the Green Berets, who are also famous in that region. The point is, they’re an amazing unit!

“Th-That’s quite a bold crest...”

“It sure is,” I agreed. “They are a world-renowned special operations unit after all.” I continued to prick away until I was done. “Finished! It’s not bad if I do say so myself!”

“I expected no less, Lady Astrid!”

It’s finished!

“I’ll sew this onto some part of my bag later...”

“Lady Astrid?!” Minne yelped as I picked up my school bag.

“What? I can’t put it on my uniform, but this should be fine. I’m fixing it to my bag!”

“Y-You can’t! Not on your bag! You’ll get in trouble!”

“It’s fine! It’s fine! It’s only one!” I ignored Minne’s objections and affixed the emblem to my bag.

Now I’ll feel like I’m heading to school as part of a special operations unit instead of just being on my boring old commute! Take to the skies! Victory will be mine!

Or so I thought. Once again, my maid found the emblem and removed it.

“Minne! It’s time to try again! This time I’m making the Delta Force emblem!”

“Where do you intend to attach this one, Lady Astrid?”

“My sock!”

This time it's the emblem of the Delta Force, a unit that can call itself elite even within the United States Army! I feel like a special operations soldier out to defeat some terrorists! Onward, into enemy territory! Victory will be mine!

This time I successfully affixed the insignia to my sock, but my weak sewing technique wasn't enough to stop it coming off in the wash...

I've had it with embroidery!

Afterword

First of all, I'm happy just knowing that you've picked up "Villainess: Reloaded! Blowing Away Bad Ends with Modern Weapons"!

And it's nice to meet you. I'm 616th Special Information Battalion.

I suspect that many of the people who choose to read this book will have at least a little interest in the military. I came up with various ideas that should satisfy those military enthusiasts, so I hope you'll enjoy them.

Those with no interest in the military might also be relieved to know that I've also tried to capture the amusement of having a villainess attend school. Various events that you'd generally associate with villainesses occur, and then Astrid deals with these situations in ways that go beyond everyone's expectations.


In this volume, Astrid learned the basics of magic and took out some cattle rustlers, and then she began her confrontations with enemies (or landmines, in her words) such as Friedrich. It remains to be seen how she'll handle the battlefields that still await her.

And on that note, the series will continue in the next volume!

I'd like to give my thanks to my editor for helping put this book together, to Wuhuo-sama for providing the beautiful illustrations, and once again, to all of the readers who've chosen this book! I hope you'll continue to enjoy the series!

My best wishes to you all!

616th Special Information Battalion

A comic panel featuring a young girl with long, flowing red hair and large blue eyes. She is wearing a red dress with a dark, ruffled skirt and white lace cuffs. She has a surprised expression on her face, with wide eyes and an open mouth. To her left is a large, dark, mechanical structure that resembles a pump-action shotgun, with a long barrel and a complex mechanism. The background is a dark, forest-like setting with green foliage and a blue sky with white clouds. The scene is lit with a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The girl's hair is adorned with a small red bow and a white flower. The overall style is anime-inspired with vibrant colors and detailed shading.

“You there.
Young lady.”
My innocent joy
was interrupted
by the voice of
an old man
coming from
somewhere
near my feet.

“I did it!
A pump-action
shotgun!”



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

Wind Fairy
Blau



The wind fairy floated
down and landed
softly on my palm.

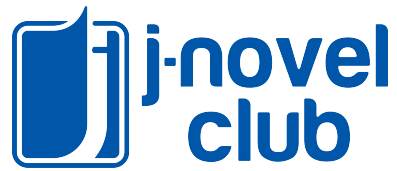
*“By this contract,
I, Blau of Carpath
Forest, shall bind
my soul to thee,
Astrid.”*











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Villainess: Reloaded! Blowing Away Bad Ends with Modern Weapons Volume
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by 616th Special Information Battalion Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by
Zubonjin

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