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# How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

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# How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love Vol.2

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How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love Vol.2

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*"I feel like  
my truest self  
whenever I'm  
with you."*

*"In that case,  
we'll have to  
stay together  
forever."*

# Prologue

“HUH?” I asked, my thoughts halting as I peered into the puddle. “Why? What’s going on here? Is this how treasure chests are supposed to work? They’re called treasure chests because treasure comes out of them, right? Not even Pandora would believe what came out of this box!”

My reflection startled me so much that I could only crack jokes.

Meanwhile, Custode attempted to placate me in a nonchalant voice. “Now, now. Let’s take a few deep breaths and relax.”

However, his words failed to calm me down.

“But this is a hidden room!” I cried. “That’s super rare, isn’t it?! So the treasure should be super rare, too, right?!”

“In a certain sense, this *could* be classified as rare, don’t you think?”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Afraid not,” Custode replied.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I groaned. “Transforming into *this* is supposed to be treasure?”

Custode shook his head. “Actually, the treasure is this right here.”

He held something in his arms while maintaining his miniature form. He’d taken the object from the treasure chest.

“What the heck is that?” I asked.

The glimmering silver sphere looked like a piece of solid metal. It was half the size of my current body. As I gazed at the novel object with wonder, I suddenly found myself floating in midair.

“How adorable!” Embert exclaimed.

The prince had been the one to scoop me into his arms. He had hearts in his

eyes and vigorously nuzzled his cheek against mine.

*Hey, stop that! You're gonna make me go bald! I can feel steam rising from all the friction!*

“This glossy, golden fur,” Embert cooed. “This cute nose and lovely, purple eyes. And finally, these large ears. Everything is perfectly adorable!”

That’s right. My name is Alexandra Vistriano, and I’d transformed into a small fox with a fluffy coat and large ears. Specifically, I was a fennec fox. So anyway, how did I end up here? Well, it all started when I received a letter of invitation from Princess Julietta.

# Chapter One: Death or Engagement

THE Micheli Royal Academy of Magic had gone on summer break a week ago. Yesterday, I'd practically fled the capital to our family estate. My mother—who'd accompanied me here—sipped tea with a delighted smile.

"Thank goodness everyone recognized your engagement without a hitch," she said.

*You're one amazing woman if you consider that a success, I thought while responding with a dry laugh. Personally, I was worried for all our lives.*

Thus, I recalled yesterday's events.



**SHORTLY** after the beginning of summer break, my mother and I received a summons to the castle. During the carriage ride there, my mother let out a disappointed sigh. "You should have dressed up more."

She had a point. We'd been summoned to the castle to hear the announcement of Prince Embert's engagement. His engagement to *me*. That said, I had no intention of dolling myself up and strutting in with a smug grin. My engagement to Embert would only be announced to a handful of key figures today. After imagining the backlash, my will to wear a nice outfit had deflated.

Before long, we arrived at the castle and were led into the audience chamber. Unease lingered in the pit of my stomach the entire time. That aside, a handful of people had already gathered in the chamber. Was it just my imagination, or were the king and queen grinning with excitement while sitting on their thrones?

*Royalty usually arrives after everyone else has assembled, right? Why are they waiting for us with such giddy smiles?*

My father stood behind the excitable king and queen, radiating a frigid aura.

*How does he manage to be so terrifying and so dashing at the same time?*

As that thought crossed my mind, a familiar voice called out to me.

“Oh, is that you, Lady Alexandra?”

The speaker was Lady Anegio. Like me, she was also the daughter of a duke. She wore a royal blue dress for this occasion. Furthermore, she wore an emerald necklace and earrings, the same color as Embert’s eyes. Her brunette hair had been tied up elegantly, and of course, she also wore an emerald hair ornament.

Before I could answer, Lady Palagani—another duke’s daughter—smiled at me. “We haven’t seen each other since the tea party, have we?”

Her dress sported a great deal of amber-colored lace. Though the designs differed from Lady Anegio’s, she also wore an emerald necklace and earrings. The ends of her straight, honey-colored hair had been curled into beautiful ringlets. In summary, both young women had chosen resplendent outfits. Their choice of clothing seemed directly proportional to their lofty expectations.

Finding myself at a loss for words, I only choked out, “Yes, it’s been too long.”

“Pardon me, but why are you here?” Lady Anegio asked me.

My facial muscles twitched.

*Yeah, good question. Of course you’re wondering why I’m here. Still, I’m too terrified to admit, “Actually, I’m a surprise fiancée candidate!” to these pageant queens. I might as well be signing my own death warrant.*

“Um, well...” I mumbled, unable to find the right words. “The royal family summoned me here because they have something to discuss, I guess?”

The two women smiled in response to my pitifully uncertain answer.

“Perhaps you were summoned here to serve as a witness,” Lady Palagani said. “Not only are you one of Embert’s students, but you’re also the daughter of a duke.”

Lady Anegio nodded in agreement. “I think so too. You must have been chosen as a representative of the academy.”

*They're completely off base, but what else are they supposed to think? Especially considering my choice of clothes.*

I was wearing a simple, purple one-piece dress without any accessories. After all, I'd expected the other women to come here dressed to the nines. What horrors might have awaited me if I'd dolled myself up, too? Regardless, the other women didn't comment on my clothes. Instead, both heaved a deep sigh while placing a hand on their chests.

"Can any of you understand how long I've waited for this day?" Lady Anegio asked. "I could hardly fall asleep last night because I was so nervous."

"I could say the very same," Lady Palagani agreed. Her catlike, almond-shaped eyes sparkled with joy. "I've been counting down the hours until this moment. My heart has been racing nonstop at the mere thought of finally standing beside the beautiful Prince Embert."

Lady Anegio snorted. "My, you certainly live in a fairyland."

"You're the one who's living in a fantasy. I expect to see you bawling your eyes out when this is over."

The battle between the two young ladies commenced once more, just as it had at the tea party.

*Do I have to suffer through this again? I wondered with exasperation. Could I sneak out of here while they're at each other's throats, maybe? I inched backward, hoping they wouldn't notice. Alas, fortune didn't favor me.*

"Is something wrong?" Lady Anegio asked.

*Could you not turn those eagle eyes on me, please?*

I deflected her question with a smile. "No, nothing's wrong."

A moment later, Lady Palagani wrapped her arm around mine. "Please stay close to us, Lady Alexandra. You're our witness, after all."

My path of retreat had been blocked.

*Would someone please come to my rescue? Would Custode swoop down and crush this castle if I asked him to?*

As I indulged in escapist fantasies, the door behind the thrones opened. To no one's surprise, Prince Embert gracefully strode into the audience chamber. In the blink of an eye, Lady Palagani let go of my arm. She and Lady Anegio joined hands and squealed with delight. Back in Japan, people often forgot their quarrels when their favorite idol appeared on stage. At that moment, sharing their excitement and joy was all that mattered.

Speaking of which, I nearly squealed with delight upon seeing my older brother standing behind Embert. At any rate, the prince took center stage in front of the thrones. Was it just my imagination, or were the king and queen squealing with delight behind him? All the while, my father's frigid aura intensified. That one definitely *wasn't* my imagination.

Embert spoke in a resonant voice. "Thank you, everyone, for gathering here today on my behalf." Everyone's gazes had already focused on him, and thus, he continued his opening speech. "I have remained undecided about my betrothal for a long while. However, I finally found the young lady I wish to spend my life with."

Cheers rose from the small audience as if a play had reached its climax. Embert was probably enjoying this, too. You couldn't get more peaceful than our kingdom.

"Truth be told, I found her long ago," Embert continued. "Nevertheless, I waited until she realized my feelings for her."

At that moment, the two young ladies began shaking, overwhelmed with emotion.

"What a silly thing to say," Lady Anegio said. "My heart has always been yours, Prince Embert."

"Oh no," Lady Palagani added. "If only I'd been more assertive, then I wouldn't have kept you waiting, Prince Embert."

Their words sent a shiver down my spine.

*This situation is going to give me a heart attack. Gah, if only I could run away!*

Despite my feelings on the matter, the excitement in the chamber only grew.

After a significant pause, Embert declared, “Well then, I’ll now make my announcement without further ado.”

As the chamber fell deathly quiet, Embert descended the platform with heavy footfalls. Of course, he headed straight towards me. Why did he look so needlessly cool while just walking? Anegio and Palagani flushed, entranced by the prince. At the same time, they straightened their backs and fixed their gazes on him. Neither young lady had the slightest doubt that he would stop in front of her. On the other hand, I shrank into myself, my fear growing with each step Embert took.

*What should I do? What can I do? What’s my plan of attack? How am I supposed to take Embert’s hand with all this tension in the air? I’m seriously going to have a heart attack!*

For some reason, Embert’s resounding footsteps stoked the fear within my heart. Were we shooting a scene for a horror film or something? As this nonsensical thought raced through my mind, Embert came to stand right beside Anegio and Palagani. While the prince stared into my eyes, the other ladies gazed at him from the side. As this scene unfolded before me, my terror reached its peak.

*Yikes on a bike! I’ve gotta get outta here!*

After taking a few steps backward, I turned on my heels and bolted.

*Forgive me, Embert, but I’m not strong enough for this. I’ll make it up to you someday!*

At that moment, Embert reached out to stop me from behind. One of his hands grabbed my right arm. His other arm circled tightly around my waist.

“Got you,” he said.

“Eek!” I yelped in sheer horror.

“Ally,” Embert said, his voice echoing from above. “Why are you running away from me?”

I was too terrified to meet his gaze. His oddly sweet tone only filled me with more dread.

"Um..." I responded. "Because I'm scared, maybe?"

Though I tried to play it off as a joke, my words didn't have the intended effect.

"Well, if you're so intent on running away from me..." Embert began, his lips quirking into a sinister grin. At the same time, he strengthened his grip around my stomach, pulling me into a tight embrace. My heart fluttered when I felt his warmth on my back. Leaning into my ear, he continued, "...then maybe I should lock you in a birdcage to make sure you stay put."

His breath tickled my eardrums, sending a jolt of electricity straight down to my waist. "Eek!" I yelped again, my shoulders trembling.

"Heh," Embert chuckled in sheer delight. "Perhaps you should refrain from making such adorable noises. I might lose control of myself."

I couldn't stop shuddering as Embert whispered in my ear. "Em," I said. "Everyone's watching."

"Oh, right. I almost forgot."

When I turned my head around, I found Embert's grinning face right in front of me.

*Yeah, he's doing this on purpose. No two ways about it.*

A moment later, an ear-splitting scream echoed throughout the chamber.

"Wh-Wh-What in the realm is going on here?!" Lady Anegio shrieked, her eyes bulging as she stared in our direction.

"This can't be happening!" Lady Palagani wailed, disassociating from reality. "I must be having a nightmare!"

"What should we do, Em?" I asked. "You should probably explain the situation to them."

"What need is there for an explanation?" he replied. "Everything is exactly as it appears, no?"

*How can he just stand there with such a charming smile?*

Though the current situation might have seemed disastrous, something even

more terrible was about to unfold.

“Prince Embert,” Father said. “My daughter appears to be rejecting you.”

If a painter caught his visage in a portrait, it would be titled *The Descent of the Demon King*. He approached us with long yet slow strides, cutting a fine and terrifying figure.

“What’s this?” Embert asked, releasing me from his embrace and taking my hand instead. “Do you still intend to interfere in your daughter’s love life?”

“Interfere?” Father repeated, glowering at Embert. “You think that’s what I’m doing? I merely want to rescue my daughter.”

Embert laughed. “Whatever do you mean by ‘rescue?’ I can hardly wrap my head around what you’re saying.”

“It’s not the least bit difficult to understand. Based on my observations, my daughter is trying to escape from you. She appears frightened, no?”

Both men wore sinister smiles. All the while, the tension in the air crackled.

“She’s simply bashful,” Embert said. “Apparently, you don’t understand the hearts of young women, Duke Vistriano.”

“And you claim to understand them, Your Highness?” Father responded.

“Why, of course. That said, I have no need to understand any young woman’s heart but Ally’s.”

*A storm is brewing! How do I stop these two?!*

I looked around the room to find Mother. At some point, she’d moved beside my older brother Janus. Both were positively beaming at me. Yeah, neither had the slightest intention of helping out. As soon as I realized that, Father spoke up again.

“Tell me if you want nothing to do with Prince Embert, Ally. Your father will do anything to protect you.”

“Father...” I mumbled. My chest tightened as he stared at me, his expression stern yet dignified.

Meanwhile, Embert tightened his grip on my hand. “You love me, don’t you?”

he asked, gazing down at me. “You can say it plainly. Don’t hold back just because your father is here.”

*Don’t look at me with those sparkling eyes.*

Both men stared directly at me, their gazes spears through my chest. At the same time, I spotted Ladies Anegio and Palagani bawling their eyes out across from me. Both their fathers held their daughters in a consoling embrace, and... Wait, were they crying too? No one on the platform could suppress their excitement. If this were a movie theater, every single one of them would be munching on popcorn. They were already treating this situation like the most riveting play.

*Well, since it’s come to this...*

I would have to rely on the most high-ranking person here. With this in mind, I looked at the king, only to find him sipping tea. *Um, seriously?* Sure, he and the queen weren’t eating popcorn, but they *were* drinking tea.

“Ally!”

As I spaced out amidst the chaos, Embert and Father both shouted my name.

“Yes?!” I cried, snapping back to reality.

Both men crowded around me, exuding terrifying pressure.

*I have to say something, I thought as my heart hammered in my chest. I have to find the right words to convince both of them.*

“I-I love you, Embert, but I also love my father!” I exclaimed, confident this would settle the matter.

*Huh?* I wondered as silence fell over the chamber once more. *What’s going on? Did that not work?*

Embert chuckled. “Apparently, we have no choice but to settle this matter with a duel.”

“It would seem so,” Father replied. “And I don’t intend to hold back just because you’re a prince.”

Mana gathered in both men’s hands as they stared each other down.

Unfortunately, my words hadn't pacified them. Rather, I'd only fueled their hostility.

"Huh?" I asked. "N-No, hold o—"

Though I tried to stop them, a tremendous cheer drowned out my words.

*Is this actually happening? Wasn't this supposed to be the stopping point? This is the exact opposite of what I wanted, you know?*

Numerous small ice crystals floated above Father's palm. "I never intended to give up Ally as a bride. Much less to a wicked prince like yourself. This must be a nightmare."

Likewise, numerous sparks of fire floated above Embert's palm. "A nightmare? That's a rather cruel way of describing the situation, Father."

"Haha! I never want to hear you call me 'Father' again, Your Highness!"

"Heh. There's no need to be so bashful."

Father raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like I'm blushing?"

"Hmph, good question. You've never been very expressive."

"I could say the same of you. The way your smile never reaches your eyes is quite chilling."

*Seriously? What am I supposed to do now?*

This time, I looked at Mother with eyes pleading for help. However, she merely winked at me. Beside her, Janus shrugged and smiled at me. Though I didn't expect anything from him, I looked at the king next. When our eyes met, he beckoned to me. Thus, I let go of Embert's hand and approached the king, hoping he might have a solution. Embert glanced at me momentarily, but upon seeing my destination, he turned his attention back to Father.

"You may approach the throne," the king said, inviting me onto the platform.

Despite having his permission, I still hesitated. In response, the king stood up and personally escorted me onto the platform. At some point, a chair had been placed between the king and queen's thrones.

"Please sit here, Lady Alexandra," the king said. "Let's have tea together."

"Um... what?" I responded.

Tea? Was he really offering me tea in this life-or-death situation?

"Well, um, you see..." I mumbled, flustered and unsure how to respond.

Nevertheless, the king and queen's warm smiles drew me in, and I wound up sitting between them. Without delay, the prime minister offered me a cup of tea.

*The prime minister sure does remind me of Rosario,* I absentmindedly thought while accepting the cup. *They really are father and son, huh?*

When I looked between the king and queen, both of them were wearing friendly smiles.

*Alrighty then. Guess I'll just sit here and drink my tea.*

"Wow," I said with a sigh, unable to stop the words from slipping out. "This tea is fantastic."

"Right?" the king agreed before returning to his beverage.

At that moment, I felt a surge of mana greater than ever before.

"Oh no!" I cried.

Embert and Father's hands pulsed with enough mana to burst at any moment. Fortunately, a magic barrier had been erected around everyone in the chamber except the combatants. That had probably been Janus's doing. Unfortunately, Embert and Father now planned to unleash a storm of mana, as they were both aware of the barrier.

"Are you intending to destroy the castle with all that mana, Father?" Embert asked.

"I could ask the same of you," Father replied. "Regardless, didn't I just ask you not to call me 'Father?' How regretful that our kingdom's crown prince is such a vacuous pretty boy."

Embert chuckled. "Get used to it. I'll be calling you Father for the rest of our lives, after all."

"Ha! As I said, I won't be handing over my daughter to the likes of you!"

A moment later, Father unleashed a volley of ice blades. Likewise, Embert unleashed a barrage of fire blades.

“This can’t be happening!” I cried. “Custode!”

The moment I called his name, the dragon appeared between the combatants in miniature form.

“Huh?” I gaped.

Custode opened his mouth wide and inhaled deeply, absorbing the mana of both combatants. In less than a few seconds, all traces of fire and ice vanished from the chamber.

“You people,” Custode said with a sigh, his voice reaching me telepathically.

Nearly everyone in the chamber regarded him with flabbergasted expressions. Not only were they seeing him for the first time, but he’d also inhaled an enormous amount of mana. Who could blame them for being surprised?

In any case, Custode addressed everyone in the chamber telepathically, “I came here because I sensed Ally’s fear,” he said, looking between Embert and Father. “What in the world are you two doing?”

Embert pointed a stern finger at Custode. “This is a battle between men. Why are you interfering?!”

*Something about this scene feels oddly familiar.*

“That’s right,” Father agreed. “You have no right to interfere, even if you are a divine beast.”

Custode heaved another deep sigh while looking at the men. “Did you two not understand what I just said? I came here because I sensed Ally’s fear. That would make this your fault, no? You were scared, weren’t you, Ally?”

Custode, Embert, Father, and pretty much everyone else looked my way. While I was sipping tea with the king and queen, no less.

“Um, yeah...” I mumbled. “I was, uh, really terrified.”

*Wow, could I sound any less convincing? Honestly, I was scared, but the king*

*offered me tea. What else was I supposed to do?*

Custode heaved his third sigh while looking at me.

*Ugh, sorry.*

An awkward tension hung in the air because of me. Disregarding that, the king handed his tea to the prime minister and stood up. Then, he descended the platform and knelt before Custode.

“Please forgive our rudeness,” the king said. “My name is King Clovis Bartis of Gandolfin. It is a great honor to meet a divine beast such as yourself.”

When the king bowed his head, everyone else in the chamber knelt and bowed their heads as well. Even the queen. And Embert, who’d been pointing at Custode moments ago. I was the only person remaining on her feet. As I began to fall to my knees, Custode interrupted me.

“There’s no need for you to kneel, Ally.” After looking around the chamber, he continued, “Raise your heads, everyone. I don’t require such formality. Allow me to address you first, Duke Vistriano. As you said, Prince Embert is indeed wicked. He’s cunning, harbors intense jealousy, and often frightens Ally. Even so, his feelings for her are genuine. Would you please allow their relationship in deference to me?”

Father clenched his jaw while listening in silence. Despite Custode’s words, he still struggled to acknowledge our relationship. Looking at Father caused my chest to tighten again.

Ember smiled sinisterly. “You have some nerve, Custode, badmouthing me within earshot,” he muttered.

“Ally is precious to me as well,” Custode said, ignoring Embert. “As such, I will stay by her side. If Embert ever makes her cry, I’ll burn him to a crisp in your stead, Duke Vistriano. How does that sound?”

After meeting each other’s eyes, Father and Custode exchanged conspiratorial grins.

“In that case, I’ll acknowledge their engagement in deference to you, Divine Beast,” Father said. “When you burn the prince alive, make sure only his bones

remain.”

“Of course,” Custode replied.

Thus, Father and Custode exchanged a firm handshake.

*And so, the demon lord joined forces with a divine beast. I’m not the only one who realizes how terrifying that combo is, right?*

The queen tittered as she returned to her throne. “It sounds like you’ll need to be on constant alert for dragon fire, Embert.”

“I’m so sorry about this,” I apologized.

The queen shook her head and placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s not your fault, Lady Alexandra. Oh, may I call you Ally from now on? I’m looking forward to us being a family.”

Somehow or another, I’d received an incredibly warm welcome. After becoming friends with Lauris as a child, I visited the castle almost daily. As a result, I’d met the king and queen numerous times before this. While they’d been kind to me since childhood, I still hadn’t expected such a warm welcome into their family.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “I’m looking forward to us being a family as well, Your Majesty.”

“No, no, you’ve got it all wrong,” the queen replied.

As I panicked, wondering what mistake I’d made, the queen grinned at me. “There’s no need to speak to me so formally. You’re practically my daughter now. Talk to me like you would your own mother.”

As I recalled, the king had said something similar during our first meeting. “Okay,” I answered with a smile, joy and nostalgia enveloping me.

As the queen and I smiled at each other, the king returned to the platform and turned to face everyone.

“Now then,” he proclaimed in a booming voice. “I hereby acknowledge the betrothal of Crown Prince Embert Bartis of Gandolfin and Lady Alexandra Vistriano.”

Embert squeezed me around my shoulders, having ascended the platform with the king. Once again, an unsettling chill radiated from Father, who stood at the foot of the small staircase.

“May we be forever happy,” Embert said while looking down at Father with a charming smile.

Then, he kissed me. A moment later, a series of terrifying booms echoed throughout the chamber. A number of ice pillars had shot up around Father.

“Would anyone care if I slugged him just once?” he asked in a voice like rumbling earth.

Embert countered Father’s extreme disrespect with a sinister smile. “Heh,” he chuckled. “You think I would let you hit me just because you asked?”

As the proverbial gong rang again, Custode sighed for the umpteenth time. “I can’t take another minute of this.”

A moment later, he teleported me back to my room.

“Welcome back,” Mary greeted me, unable to hide her surprise.

Apparently, she’d been cleaning my room.



**LATER**, Custode and I moved to the living room, where we lounged over a cup of tea.

“I’m exhausted,” I complained with a sigh.

Mother returned about an hour later. According to her, Janus intervened when Embert and Father seemed liable to start fighting again. Fortunately, his threats had brought the confrontation to an end.

“Ally fled the castle because of you two,” Janus had said. “At this rate, she might even run away from home with Custode.”

Janus’s grin had been terrifying enough to shut both of them up. Afterward, the battle ended abruptly when Embert and Father noticed my absence.

Mother laughed as she recounted the tale. “I wonder if Janus is still lecturing them now,” she said while joining our tea party.

*Janus lecturing the prince and our father, huh? He really is incredible. I can't imagine having a more amazing brother.*

An hour later, Janus returned with a proposition.

"Why don't we hide in the Vistriano territory for a while?" he asked. "I'm about to go on holiday too. Besides, His Majesty will keep Embert and Father busy with work for the next few days."

We took him up on the idea.



**NOT** long after we arrived at our country estate, I received a letter. The senders were Princess Julietta and Lauris. In short, they were inviting me to visit them in Julietta's home country—the neighboring Kingdom of Bragioga.

Julietta had returned to Bragioga at the start of summer break. Shortly thereafter, Lauris followed Julietta there to meet her parents, the king and queen.

"Fortunately, they acknowledged our engagement without any trouble," Lauris had written. "I've decided to stay here with Julietta until the end of Bragioga's Founding Festival. Why don't you and all our other friends come join us?"

"That sounds great," Mother said, giving me permission readily. "Have fun over there. The capital will be bustling with festivities over the next few days."

"This year's Founding Festival will include a sword fighting tournament," Janus added. "It'll be even more exciting than usual."

"A sword fighting tournament?" I repeated.

"That's right. Every three years, fierce warriors from across Bragioga gather to compete for victory. Royal families from nearby kingdoms are invited to watch the tournament as well. It's definitely worth experiencing. Even Prince Embert will attend as an honored guest."

"Oh, I see. Will you be going too, Janus?" I asked.

My brother nodded. "Of course."

*Wow. That does sound like a lot of fun.*

“Do you want to go too, Custode?” I asked.

The miniature dragon was enjoying a cupcake in my lap. “Bragioga, eh?” he responded while holding the pastry in his tiny hands. “I haven’t touched down in a neighboring country in a long time. It might be nice.”

“Have you been there before?”

“Indeed. It must have been several hundred years ago. I alighted there because I was thirsty.”

*Just for a drink of water, huh? Still, this works out perfectly.*

“All right then, let’s go,” I said.

And so, we came to a swift decision to visit Bragioga.

## Chapter Two: To the Kingdom of Bragioga

**TWO** days later, Mary left ahead of me, saying she had preparations to take care of. Consequently, Custode and I would travel to Bragioga alone. Well, it wouldn't be much of an expedition, considering it would only take a few hours. Custode suggested that we fly rather than teleport to savor the journey. I agreed without hesitation. Thus, Mother and the others bade us farewell as we departed for Bragioga.

Out in the garden, Custode had returned to his normal, far larger size.

*How am I supposed to get on his back, exactly?*

Previously, he'd caught me on his back after I'd fallen from a roof. As I considered my options, he spread his wings in front of me and placed them on the ground. When I cocked my head, he said, "Try climbing up one of my wings." After following his instructions, he added, "You should probably sit down."

Despite my bewilderment, I sat down with my arms hugging my knees. Upon confirming my position, Custode slowly raised his wings. The slant caused me to slide down onto his back.

"Whoa, that was fun!" I cried.

Laughing at my excitement, Custode ascended without a sound. Somehow, we took off without being noticed by anyone but Mother and the others who were there to see us off. Perhaps Custode had cast a concealment spell.

"This is way more comfortable than I expected," I said.

I couldn't feel the cold, vibrations, or wind resistance, thanks to Custode's magic.

"Feel free to go to sleep," he said.

*An afternoon nap during a magical flight? Is this death by luxury?*

"You won't get tired without company?" I asked.

Taking it easy while he worked would make me feel guilty.

However, Custode responded with a laugh. “Ha! You needn’t worry about me. I can think of no greater comfort than having you close by. After all, I won’t grow weary while basking in the Goddess’s energy.”

*Divine beasts have a close connection to the Goddess, huh? Well, no reason to turn down such a generous offer.*



“ALLY, we’re here,” Custode announced.

His words woke me from a deep slumber.

“Where are we...?” I mumbled.

Sitting up, I used my sleeve to wipe the drool from my mouth. We’d alighted in the middle of open land. That said, I could see an unfamiliar townscape in the distance. By all appearances, we were on the outskirts of Bragioga’s royal capital. Custode used his wings to lower me onto the ground, similar to how he’d placed me on his back.

“Hm,” he said while shrinking to his miniature size. “I recall a spring being around here somewhere.”

“Really?” I asked with a laugh.

*Things are going to look different a few hundred years later.*

As we headed towards the capital, I cast a concealment spell, just in case. After walking for a while, a bustling street came into view up ahead. It appeared to be the main thoroughfare.

“Wow!” I cried.

The splendid atmosphere hit me all at once. A spirit of merrymaking had seized the entire capital. Excitement surged through me as I observed the colorful decorations adorning the lively city.

“Now, this is what I call a festival,” I said. “Everything is so wonderful.”

The Founding Festival would begin in one week. According to Janus, the sword fighting tournament would take place on the third and final day.

Nevertheless, the festival appeared to have already started. The city was so alive with activity, after all.

"Why don't we look around a little?" I asked. "It would be a shame not to."

"Good idea," Custode replied. "Some appetizing aromas are in the air."

We had plenty of time to spare, as it was just past noon. As such, we strolled down a street lined with food stalls.

"This is heavenly," Custode remarked.

He must have said that three times already. I couldn't help but laugh at the small dragon, who wanted to devour everything he saw. In one hand, he held a skewer of grilled meat. In the other, he had a strawberry and pineapple skewer.

"You could've saved the fruit for later," I said.

"No time like the present. When you see something tasty, you have to grab it immediately."

"Still, alternating between skewers is a little much, don't you think?"

After wiping a bit of sauce from my mouth, I took a bite of strawberry as well. For the rest of our walk, Custode continued his conquest of every food item in sight. I wouldn't be able to keep up with him in a million years.

"I probably won't even be able to eat dinner," I groaned.

Custode had influenced me to overindulge way more than usual. My stomach was paying the price.

"Don't worry," Custode replied. "If you can't eat your dinner, I'll polish it off for you."

*Whoa, he has room to spare after eating so much?*

"Is your stomach a black hole or something?" I asked.

*He's such a small guy. No, wait, he's actually pretty big, right?*

Nevertheless, his insatiable appetite still astounded me.

Custode pondered my question with a serious expression. "I don't think it's a black hole. Even so, I've never had to stop eating because my stomach hurt."

*What's more impressive? That he's never been full or that he knows what black holes are?*

"Well, to be fair, divine beasts can survive without eating," Custode added.

*Holy smokes. I should've been impressed for an entirely different reason.*

While heading towards the castle, I readjusted the chortling dragon in my arms. Was it just my imagination, or did he feel a bit heavier?



"**ALLY!**" a familiar voice called.

Upon arriving at the castle, Princess Julietta Cotarini came out to meet me, grinning from ear to ear.

"Julie!" I cried.

We embraced each other tightly.

*Ah, how perfect. This tiny princess fits perfectly in my arms.*

"I've missed you," Julietta said.

"I've missed you too," I replied. "Congrats on your engagement."

"Heh, thanks. We'll be sisters-in-law soon enough. Oh, and hearing you call me 'Julie' made my heart burst with joy. I wonder why." Julietta wore an adorable smile while blushing faintly.

*Ugh, she's too cute for words.*

Right before the break, Julietta asked me to start calling her "Julie." Since we rarely addressed Lauris as a prince, Julietta wanted the same treatment. Though I'd been reluctant to address neighboring royalty by a nickname, Cita had done so without hesitation. As a result, everyone started calling her Julie.

"Everyone else arrived earlier," Julietta said. "They're waiting inside. Let's go see them now."

Still beaming, Julietta led me by the hand. I couldn't stop grinning myself. Everything she did was so cute.

"Dorky smile alert," Custode mumbled telepathically from the top of my head.

*Seriously? Gross. I hurriedly wiped my mouth with my sleeve. Okay, I don't think Julie noticed. Are some of Em's weird habits starting to rub off on me? I've gotta learn to control myself.*

"Ally's here, everyone," Julietta announced.

When I entered the room, the usual suspects were already having tea.

"Ally!" Cita and Cia cried in unison.

The twins' full names were Felicita and Felicia Camprani. They were the daughters of Marquis Camprani.

"You're late," Oreste said while waving to me. "I've been bored senseless without my sparring partner."

Oreste was the son of Marquis Rodarte. Despite being enormous, he still lost to me in all our sparring matches. Hey, don't blame me for being such a badass.

Rosario—son of Duke Marchetti—smirked. "She was probably stuffing her face at the food stalls before coming here."

*Wait, how did he know?*

Second Prince Lauris Bartis stood up and met my eye. "You finally made it, Ally."

It had only been a few days since we last met, but somehow, he seemed more mature and masculine.

"Congrats on the engagement," I said. "You're looking like a real man now."

Lauris chuckled sentimentally. "Thanks. I don't know why, but hearing that from you feels pretty moving."

Without thinking, I threw my arms around him. He hugged me back just as tightly. This happiness was only possible because of multiple time loops. As that thought overwhelmed me, everyone beamed at us.

"Good thing Prince Embert isn't here," Cia said with a laugh.

After sharing our heartfelt emotions, everyone relaxed with a cup of tea. Meanwhile, Custode gobbled down sweets in my lap. I couldn't help but be amazed. Hadn't he just eaten a week's worth of food in town?

“Does anyone want to do anything before the festival?” Lauris asked.

“Of course,” I answered immediately.

Despite being a small country, Bragioga thrived due to its unique attraction. It was one of the reasons I’d brought Custode with me.

“I’m going to register at the guild and explore the dungeon,” I announced.

Everyone sighed at my enthusiastic words.

“I saw that one coming,” Rosario said.

The others nodded in agreement.

That’s right. Bragioga was home to its very own dungeon. Furthermore, it changed significantly at periodic intervals. Each time the dungeon transformed, the final boss and treasure chests changed as well. As a result, many powerful adventurers gathered in Bragioga, which stimulated the economy. Personally, I was itching to explore it for myself.

“I’m all for you going, but have you told Prince Embert yet?” Cita asked.

Her words caused me to shudder.

Cia rolled her eyes. “That’s a no, then?”

“W-Well,” I responded. “He would just stop me from going if I told him, right?”

Alternatively, he might suggest coming along, but I couldn’t let the crown prince risk his life for my sake.

“I understand how you feel, Ally, but you need to tell him,” Lauris said. “Things could get ugly if he finds out. Worst-case scenario, he might place you under lock and key.”

*Good point. Lauris knows his brother better than anyone.*

“If he’s going to forbid me from going, I might as well sneak out and let him scold me later!” I exclaimed. “Ask for forgiveness, not permission, right?”

Everyone’s eyes widened in the middle of my shouting.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

They weren't reacting to me. Everyone had frozen in fear because of something behind me. Thus, I turned around to get a better look.

*Oh boy. I'm never gonna see the light of day again, am I?*

A grinning Embert stood in the doorway behind me. My brother stood behind him, an uncomfortable smile on his lips.

"Shall I prepare a giant birdcage for you, Ally?" Embert asked.

"Eek!" I yelped.

As Embert approached me, still grinning, a bone-chilling terror overcame me. I wouldn't have been able to move even if I wanted to.

"S-Save me, Custode," I squeaked.

"Sorry, but I can't get there fast enough," the dragon replied.

At some point, he'd gotten off my lap.

Embert grabbed my shoulders. "So, you were planning to visit the dungeon without me?"

"Y-You're so busy, after all," I stammered. "I-I couldn't ask you to come with me, r-right?"

Cold sweat dripped down my back.

"You needn't show that level of consideration to your fiancé," Embert said.

His smile didn't falter the whole time. I couldn't misspeak here. Otherwise, he might seriously place me behind bars.

"I-In that case, would you like to come with me?" I asked.

Embert chuckled. "Of course. That's what I like to hear."

I let out a deep sigh upon seeing his delighted smile.

*Phew. I somehow kept my freedom.*



THE next day, Embert, Custode, and I entered the dungeon at the crack of dawn. Janus hadn't been able to join us because of work.

“Seriously?” I asked. “You should’ve told me sooner.”

“Sorry,” Embert replied with a chuckle. “I was planning to bring it up if you invited me to go dungeon diving.”

“Ugh...”

A long time ago, Embert had studied abroad in Bragioga for a year. During that period, he and Janus had registered with the guild. Together, they’d cleared the dungeon numerous times. I learned all that yesterday after our initial conversation. Their guild IDs, which resembled dog tags, marked them as B-rank adventurers. As a brand-new guild member, I was still a lowly F-ranked adventurer.

“We probably could’ve reached A-rank in another year,” Embert had said.

“Still, we made decent progress for something we did in our spare time,” Janus had replied.

All of us had been too stunned to reply. According to Julietta, it usually took adventurers several years to reach B-rank, even at a fast pace. Furthermore, some people never reached A-rank even after a decade.

“Well, we’re talking about Janus and my brother here,” Lauris had said.

“Exactly,” Rosario had agreed.

Neither of them had seemed the least bit taken aback by this revelation. As such, the rest of us had been forced to accept it as well.

“There’s not a single person in sight,” I remarked.

We’d been exploring the dungeon for half a day. Embert took the lead, Custode followed behind him, and I brought up the rear. We’d reached the twenty-fourth floor. There had been a surprising number of adventurers at the outset. Some people ventured into the dungeon just to sightsee, as you could almost immediately become an adventurer. Certainly, very few monsters were on the first three floors. However, the number of adventurers dwindled as we descended. Hardly anyone had remained past the twentieth floor. At this point, we were only encountering monsters.

“Honestly, I was expecting more monsters, too,” I said.

Embert frowned. “When I last explored the dungeon, powerful monsters appeared in droves after the twentieth floor.”

“Sorry about that,” Custode apologized.

Apparently, the monsters were hiding from him out of fear. The only ones to appear were either confident in their strength or none too bright. Of course, we defeated them without any trouble, and before long, we reached the thirtieth floor.

“This is where the final boss resides,” Embert said.

Once, I had considered the front door to the castle to be large. However, this one was several times larger. I couldn’t see the ceiling, no matter how far back I tilted my head.

“This final boss must be quite the heavyweight,” I said.

Embert nodded. “Indeed. Are the two of you ready?”

“I was born ready,” Custode replied.

“Me too,” I agreed.

Determination burned in our hearts as we stood before the door. A thunderous tremor shook the earth, its vibrations strong enough to throw us off balance. We braced ourselves for the massive door to finally open.

However, a much smaller space—about six feet in each direction—opened in front of us.

“Seriously?!” Embert and I cried out in unison.

Meanwhile, Custode analyzed the situation rationally. “This appears to be the entrance.”

“Huh?” I asked. “Then what’s the point of this absurdly large door?”

“Perhaps it’s just a wall that resembles a door,” Custode replied.

Embert threw back his head and roared with laughter. “Haha! A mere wall, eh? We fell for it hook, line, and sinker.”

“A wall?” I repeated. “Seriously? My heart was on the verge of bursting, y’know? I was expecting a monster three times the size of Custode.”

“The last boss could still be large,” Custode said. “Perhaps the door is small because humans enter through it. At any rate, the interior seems spacious enough.”

A quick look into the chamber confirmed Custode’s words. After taking a moment to fire ourselves up again, we walked through the entrance with Embert in the lead. As expected, vast space unfolded all around us. A colossal monster lurked within the depths as well.

“Is that a lich?” I asked.

A skeleton twice the size of Custode in his normal form stood in front of us. It brandished a khakkhara staff, had rings on every skeletal finger, and wore black robes. Furthermore, blue flames flickered within the lich’s empty eye sockets. Raucous laughter emanated from the skeletal creature, though I couldn’t tell where the sound originated.

The three of us slumped our shoulders in disappointment.

“Really?” I asked with a sigh.

“Of all the monsters to be the last boss,” Custode said.

“And during Ally’s first dungeon raid, too,” Embert added.

I sighed again. “Well, whatever. Let’s finish this.”

I channeled my mana to swell around me. The magic energy transformed into brilliant white flames that engulfed the lich. As the skeletal monster disappeared, its raucous laughter faded as well. At the same time, its staff and rings dropped to the floor.

“You had too great of an advantage this time,” Embert said. “Shall we visit the dungeon again when it changes form?”

“Sounds like a plan,” I replied.

Undead monsters were extraordinarily weak to holy magic. In other words, a lich stood no chance against me. That aside, I picked up the creature’s staff and rings. Despite how large the skeleton had been, its items had shrunk to human size while falling to the ground. Although the staff seemed ordinary, the rings had some sort of enchantment placed on them. Most adventurers would have

considered them a lucky find, but honestly, none of us needed them.

“Oh, what’s that?” I asked. I spotted a small door beyond where the lich had stood. Perhaps it led to a hidden room.

“There might be a treasure chest inside,” Embert said.

Upon entering the room, we did indeed find a treasure chest. Though not particularly large, it had a stately design.

“Ally, be care—”

I touched the treasure chest before Embert finished speaking. The lid opened with a rattle, and smoke rose from the chest.

“Uh, what?” I asked.

And just like that, I turned into a fennec fox.

## Chapter Three: My Life as a Fox

**WHEN** we returned to the castle, my friends practically mobbed me.

“You’re too cute,” Cita cooed.

“And your fur is as soft as a cloud,” Cia added.

“I want to squeeze you in my arms while I fall asleep,” Julietta chimed in.

The girls tousled my fur however they pleased. I could hardly resist, as I was a little smaller than a cat. Once the girls had transformed me into a disheveled mess, the boys ruffled my fur next.

“Is this really Ally?” Rosario asked. “She’s so cute that I can hardly believe it.”

Lauris nodded. “I could get addicted to running my fingers through this fur.”

“I want a pet just like her,” Oreste said while lifting me in his arms.

At that moment, Embert snatched me away. “I think not. This adorable little creature belongs to me.”

Next, Janus snatched me away. “This should go without saying, but Ally is still a daughter of House Vistriano.” Janus sat on the couch, placed me on his lap, and stroked my fur.

*Yep, Janus’s hands feel the best of anyone’s.*

I grew drowsy while luxuriating in his touch. Of course, I fit snugly in Janus’s lap, as I was no larger than a basketball. As I dozed off, Embert called out to me.

“Do you understand what we’re saying, Ally?”

I looked up at Embert and nodded.

“But you can’t speak?” he pressed.

I nodded again. Honestly, I could’ve laughed as everyone looked at me with hearts in their eyes. Was I really that cute?

“Perhaps you could speak to us through telepathy,” Embert said. “Could you

try sending me a brief message?"

Per his request, I tried to communicate telepathically, but he couldn't hear me. When I shook my head, Embert ruffled my ears consolingly. I tried to say, "Thank you," but all that came out was, "Kyun!"

Everyone in the room froze at that sound, which resembled the yipping of a small canine.

Cita was the first to react, squealing with delight. "What was that, Ally? A yip?"

"It was super cute!" Julietta exclaimed.

Cia covered her face with her hands. "I'm going to start getting nosebleeds just like you, Ally."

As the boys looked at me with dazed expressions, Janus ruffled my fur even harder.

*Uh, try not to make me go bald, okay?*

Meanwhile, Embert froze in place while staring at me. "What... What an adorable little yip!" He reached out to steal me from Janus's lap, practically exploding with excitement.

*Whoa. Scary, much? I need to keep my distance from Em right now. If he hits me with another cheek-nuzzling attack, I might actually go bald.*

I buried my face in Janus's jacket, my ears drooping. A moment later, the dark grey sphere on the table bounced over to Janus's lap, seeming to move of its own free will. It then stood in the way of Embert's hand.

*Is the little fella protecting me?*

Embert withdrew his hand. "Yes, it seems to be alive, just as I suspected."

The dull gray sphere had been inside the hidden room's treasure chest. After casting an appraisal spell on the mysterious object, Janus had only received the description "metal sphere." Despite being metal, the sphere wasn't very solid. Its elasticity was more akin to a rubber ball. For some reason, it seemed determined to stay by my side. Though Custode seemed to have some idea about the sphere's nature, he hadn't said anything yet. Apparently, he wanted

to be certain first.

*Well, curiosity about the sphere aside, I'm mostly concerned about myself right now.*

"Custode," I spoke to the dragon telepathically. "How long am I going to say like this?"

What perils might await me if I didn't return to my normal self soon?

Custode donned a thoughtful expression while curled up on a cushion. "Not too long, I suspect. Someone of your strength should return to normal in two or three days."

"Really?" I asked.

"Indeed. The more mana one has, the faster these kinds of curses tend to dissipate."

"I see. Thank goodness."

Of course, I hadn't thought I would stay a fox forever. At the same time, I'd worried about remaining in this form throughout my stay in Bragioga. As I breathed a small sigh of relief, Embert flared up on Custode.

"Custode," he said. "You're talking to Ally again, aren't you?"

How did he know? Custode and I had been speaking telepathically this entire time. What had given it away?

"I won't permit secrets between the two of you," Embert continued. "What did Ally say?"

Custode heaved a deep sigh. Was Embert a master of pissing off dragons or something?

"Ally was asking how long she would remain in this form," Custode explained. "I told her the curse would wear off in a few days."

"Oh, is that right?" Embert asked.

"Yes. These kinds of curses are all little more than pranks. The stronger someone's mana is, the faster the curse will dissipate."

Embert's eyebrows furrowed slightly. "I'm overjoyed that you'll be returning

to normal, but at the same time... it *will* be a little sad to never see you in this adorable form again."

The prince softly sighed while looking at me in Janus's lap. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

*Whoa, hold up there. I want to return to normal as soon as possible, okay?*



**THE** next day arrived. I was still a fennec fox. Once everyone had finished ruffling my fur in the morning, I started to feel slightly fatigued. Around that time, Embert picked me up and invited me on a walk. When I nodded vigorously to convey my agreement, Embert brought me to the garden with a delighted smile. The garden boasted a modest-sized maze. A rose-covered arch stood at the center, leading to a gazebo. In any event, separate entrances were on the east and west sides of the maze. Thus, Embert and I agreed to start on opposite ends and meet in the center.

"Well then, Ally, you start here," Embert said, stooping down to meet my gaze. "Call for me if you get lost." When I nodded, he grinned and stood up. "Splendid. Let's do our best to reach the goal, shall we?"

As he walked away, a shrill voice called out to him.

"Prince Embert!"

Looking in the direction of the voice, we found a woman approaching us from the castle. Embert's expression changed instantly upon seeing her. His smile might as well have been a mask plastered onto his face.

*Whoa, scary.*

I shuddered slightly in response to his unfamiliar expression. He hadn't even worn this smile when confronting Celette. What kind of person could cause such a reaction in Embert? I narrowed my eyes to get a better look at the approaching woman. As she ran towards us, her brown eyes sparkled, and her orange hair fluttered in the wind. Overall, she bore a passing resemblance to Julietta.

*Who's that?*

I suddenly found myself floating in midair. A moment later, Embert cradled me in his arms.

"That's Julietta's cousin," he whispered.

The woman spread out her arms, preparing to leap towards Embert. However, she halted when he signaled her to stop with one hand.

"Why did you stop me from hugging you, Prince Embert?" the woman asked with a cutesy huff and doe eyes.

*Please no. I can NOT with this kind of girl.*

Instinctively, I knew she and I would never get along. Even her gestures gave me goosebumps. Wait, could I even get goosebumps with all my fluff? At any rate, the woman's eyes landed on me as I fidgeted inside Embert's arms.

"Oh my, how cute!" she squealed.

Her shrill voice echoed across the garden, causing a pulsing sensation behind my eyes.

"What is this little creature, Prince Embert?" the woman asked while reaching toward me. "My goodness, how darling!"

I stiffened and hid inside Embert's arms.

*Ugh, I don't want this lady touching me.*

"My apologies, Lady Damiana, but my fox seems frightened," Embert said. "Would you please refrain from touching her?"

I stared at Embert in surprise. He sounded so monotone, after all.

"Seriously?!" Damiana cried, refusing to back down. "How come?! Let me pet her just a little!"

Embert sighed. "Like I said, she's scared. If you touch her against her will, she might bite you."

I looked at Damiana and growled softly, feeling obliged to comply.

"Eek!" she yelped, feigning terror and trying to grab Embert's upper arm. "How frightening!"

I growled at her again.

"You shouldn't touch me either," Embert said, his monotone voice returning to normal. "This little fox gets cross when other women try to touch me. That's how much she loves me. Adorable, isn't it?"

*Yeah, I might get angry, but I wouldn't bite anyone,* I thought as Embert ran his fingers through my fur.

Fortunately, Damiana gave up on touching Embert. That said, she showed no indication of leaving. Rather, she started fidgeting while still looking up at Embert.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it?" she asked.

"It has indeed," Embert replied, returning to his monotone voice.

*Wait, have they known each other since Embert's study abroad trip?*

"You've grown even more handsome," Damiana said. "The sight of you made my heart race."

"Is that so?" Embert responded.

"Yes. You were quite dashing during your study abroad trip, but you're even more handsome now. I've been longing to see you again all this time. You can't imagine how lonely I've been since you left."

Embert laughed. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Come now, Prince Embert. You're well aware of my feelings by now, aren't you?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

*The secondhand embarrassment is killing me. Could you try being a little more conversational, Em?*

Either way, Damiana didn't seem the slightest bit discouraged or even bothered. What was going on here? To my astonishment, she continued staring at him with doe eyes, her cheeks flushing slightly.

"You remember, don't you?" she asked.

Once again, I erupted in goosebumps at her cloyingly sweet voice. Actually,

the question remained: Could I get goosebumps with all my fluff?

“What are you referring to?” Embert asked, his expression unchanged.

“Three years ago, you promised to marry me when we met again,” Damiana said. “I’ve been waiting for you to come back for me all this time.”

*What the hell?!*

Sure, Embert and I hadn’t been in a relationship three years ago. I was in no position to complain, regardless of whether he’d made such a promise.

*Then why am I so miffed? I wondered while glaring at him. Did he really propose to this pouty little tease? I’m disappointed in you, Em.*

Embert grinned down at me momentarily, tightening his grip on me. Afterward, he turned his mask of a smile back on Damiana. “As I recall, you offered to marry me,” Embert said. “However, I gave you this firm but polite response: Forgive me, but I must decline your offer, as another girl captured my heart long ago.”

Damiana’s shoulders twitched for one split second. “Ah, yes, you did say something of the sort,” she answered with a titter. “Well then, may I ask what happened with that girl?”

“We’re engaged now,” Embert responded without skipping a beat. “Thank you very much for asking.”

Damiana stared back at him dumbfoundedly. “W-Wow,” she said, the corner of her mouth twitching. “I, um, suppose congratulations are in order. Even so, have you considered the matter carefully? No matter how high-ranking this woman might be, I’m royalty from your neighboring kingdom. In terms of political alliances, I’m much better suited to be your wife. My father is the king’s younger brother, and as such, he’s first in line for the throne. I’ve received numerous marriage proposals over these last three years. Nevertheless, I’ve turned them all down because of my feelings for you.”

Embert grinned in response to Damiana’s monologue. His beautiful smile caused her cheeks to flush bright red. Even my heart skipped a beat.

“Political alliances, you say?” Embert responded with a chuckle. “I love my

fiancée regardless of such considerations. If I must speak frankly, however, you don't hold a candle to her in terms of status. After all, she's a holy woman."

"A holy woman?" Damiana repeated, her smile fading. "The one who summoned a dragon?"

*Yowzers, am I famous? It sounds like stories of me have reached Bragioga.*

"That's correct," Embert said. "Therefore, no other woman could ever compete with her, no matter how high-ranking she might be. Besides, I have no interest in anyone else." After making himself as clear as possible, Embert turned and walked away, leaving Damiana alone in the garden. "Let's save the maze for another time," he whispered to me. "I've lost my enthusiasm."

I glanced up at Embert. Should he have spoken to Damiana so harshly? Regardless of her personality, she was still royalty.

*It's frustrating not being able to speak at times like these.*

Embert laughed as he patted my head. "You look worried, my dear, but don't fret. Lady Damiana won't lose heart over what I said."

*That's another problem in itself.*

Embert's next words erased Damiana from my mind. "Even as an adorable little fox, you couldn't hide your jealousy back there. Heh. You're too cute for your own good."



**JANUS** was waiting for us inside the castle. He and Embert had a meeting with the Prince of Bragioga coming up. The two men offered to carry me back to my room, as they were worried about leaving me alone. However, I declined their offer and opted to wander around by myself.

My friends were exploring the city, and Custode had returned to his volcano. Thus, I decided to roam the castle since I had nothing but free time on my hands. Past the courtyard, I found a large pond. Past the pond, I found a villa detached from the castle. Somewhat intrigued, I wandered around the area. Apparently, people lived there since I spotted servants working the grounds. Despite being mildly curious about the residents, I turned around without

investigating further. In the end, I circled the pond in the opposite direction from which I came.

*Seriously, how long am I going to stay a fox? I grumbled to myself. I don't have anyone to talk to without Custode around. It's boring me senseless.*

As I continued walking, I caught voices in the air. *What could that be?* I wondered casually, heading in their direction. Before long, I stumbled upon a gazebo on the edge of the pond, where two men were speaking. At a glance, the man in front wore the garments of a merchant. Unfortunately, he was blocking the other man from view.

*This seems like a suspicious place to conduct business.*

I drew closer, curiosity getting the better of me.

"Did you hear me?" the unseen man asked. "...must not... under any circumstances..."

I couldn't quite make out the conversation.

*Maybe I should get a little closer.*

In all likelihood, nothing would happen if the men spotted me since I looked like a fox. Even so, I hid in the grass as I skulked towards the gazebo. It felt exhilarating, like being a secret agent. Surprisingly, however, the grass around the pond wasn't tall enough to hide me.

*I still can't see the other guy.*

As that thought crossed my mind, I picked up more fragments of the conversation. Despite being closer than before, I still couldn't hear them well, as their voices had lowered even more.

"During... sword... kill... Kin... son... of everyone..."

*Can't you hear better with those humongous ears of yours? Still, I couldn't miraculously improve my hearing, no matter how much I scolded myself. Guess I have no choice but to get closer.*

And so, I walked past the gazebo, pretending to be a wild animal.

The merchant reacted to the sound of rustling grass and looked in my

direction. “What’s that?”

“A fox?” the other man asked loudly enough for me to hear.

“Kyun,” I yipped, playing up my cuteness.

The merchant approached me, and as a result, the other man came into clear view. He was unmistakably a nobleman, clad in an ornate coat and jabot. He looked somewhat familiar, but due to present circumstances, I had other things to worry about.

“What an unusual creature,” the merchant said while scooping me into his arms. “It could probably fetch a good price.”

“What a marvelous coat,” the nobleman added, joining the merchant’s side. “Give it here. My daughter would adore it.”

“Surely, you don’t expect me to give it away for free, milord. I’m the one who caught it.”

“We spotted it together, didn’t we? And now would be a good time to buy your way into my good graces, no?”

*Are they fighting over who gets to own me?! Fat chance! I don’t belong to anyone!*

Yet, no matter how hard I struggled, I couldn’t break free of the man’s grip.

*Oh, fudge. He’s actually going to sell me at this rate. Worse, I might even get skinned alive! Calling for Custode might be risky, though.*

I tried to bite the man’s hand, but my teeth didn’t reach due to how he held me.

*Yikes on a supersized bike! This is bad!*

At that moment, a dull gray ball bounced straight toward us from the castle. After leaping high into the air, it plummeted towards the ground like a comet. With an ear-splitting *WHOMP*, a crater formed near the merchant’s feet.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed, his eyes widening at the sudden impact and crater. “What in the world is that?!”

His grip relaxed due to surprise. Seizing the opportunity, I slipped out of his

arms and bolted away. Meanwhile, the dull gray ball rolled along behind me.

*Thanks, I tried communicating telepathically. You're a lifesaver.*

Yep, you guessed it. The dull gray sphere had been the object to fall at the merchant's feet. Somehow, it had sensed my predicament and come to my rescue. The sphere bounced up and down behind me, seeming pleased with my thanks.

*This thing's kinda cute.*

When I returned to my room, Mary was waiting for me with a look of concern. "Thank goodness," she said. "You made it back safely."

After the dull gray sphere leapt out the window, Mary had worried about my safety. "I'm perfectly fine," I conveyed with a gesture, nuzzling Mary's legs. Smiling, she bent down to pick me up.

"Oh, were you rolling around in the grass?" she asked. "There's a green tint on your fur."

Well, that's what I got for skulking around. In any case, Mary placed me in the bath, and for some reason, the dull gray sphere joined me. Was it not worried about rusting?

*This feels nice. I walked around quite a bit today, huh?*

As the warm water soothed my fatigue, I drifted off to sleep.



**WHEN** I woke up, the sky outside the window had turned orange. Less time had passed than I'd expected. Mary still sat near the windowsill while maintaining her weapons, which were usually concealed.

*Has she gone out since arriving here?* I wondered while examining her. *No, probably not.*

And so, I decided to go on a walk with Mary. Considering my current state, we couldn't leave the castle grounds. That said, I had no idea how to invite Mary out, seeing as I couldn't speak. Thus, I tugged on the hem of her skirt with my teeth.

Mary knelt down to look at me. "What is it, Lady Alexandra?"

*Let's go on a short walk, I thought.*

Of course, she couldn't hear me. Even so, I stared at her with intent in my eyes.

A moment later, Mary tilted her head. "Do you want to go on a walk, perhaps?"

I nodded eagerly, overjoyed that she had understood me.

After caressing my cheek, Mary picked me up. "Well then, I'll accompany you. It's not safe for you to go alone."

*Yeah, yeah, exactly, I thought while bobbing my head up and down. When Mary smiled at me, my heart skipped a beat. She was a truly stunning woman.*

Once outside the room, Mary set me down, intending to follow me. As I considered where she might like to go, my head collided with a giant tree.

"Bwah!" I yipped comically due to pain and surprise.

"Whoops, sorry," an unfamiliar voice said from above. "I didn't see you there, little one."

Looking up, I found a man one size larger than Oreste. I'd collided with a person's leg, not a giant tree.

He knelt in front of me, allowing me to see his dark brown hair and gray eyes. "I truly am sorry. Are you all right?"

In contrast to his appearance, he spoke in a gentle voice. Based on his white and navy fatigues, he was probably a knight of Bragioga's chivalric order. The furrow of his brow conveyed his genuine concern for me.

"Kyun!" I yipped to express my well-being.

"Thank goodness," the man replied with a laugh, patting my head with his large hand. "You seem to be all right."

I leaned into his gentle touch, which starkly contrasted with the size of his hand.

"Is everything okay?" Mary asked while approaching me.

“Is this your fox?” the man asked. “Forgive me for bumping into her, but she doesn’t seem to be hurt.”

Mary and I regarded the man with surprise. Based on his bearing and the medals decorating his chest, he was undoubtedly a nobleman. Nevertheless, he’d apologized to a woman in handmaid’s attire without hesitation. While such behavior was normal among my friends and family, most nobles didn’t apologize to servants. His effortless humility stunned me and Mary.

“No, I should be the one to apologize,” Mary said while cradling me in her arms.

Laughing, the man patted my head again. “There’s no need for you to apologize. I’m the one who bumped into her. But I must say, your fox is quite clever. It feels like she’s understood me this whole time.”

“Thank you very much,” Mary replied.

Was she expressing gratitude because the man had praised me? In any case, I responded with a soft yip to show my agreement.

The man patted my head yet again. “By the way, the chivalric order’s training grounds are beyond this point. Did you have some sort of business there?”

Mary looked down at me. Yes, my goal had been to observe the training grounds. Oreste had told me its location earlier. When I nodded, Mary looked back up at the man and smiled.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier,” she said. “My name is Mary, and I serve as Lady Vistriano’s handmaid. She is the daughter of Duke Vistriano of Gandolfin. I’m a martial arts practitioner and serve as Lady Vistriano’s personal guard. That’s why I wanted to observe the training grounds of Bragioga’s chivalric order.”

The man chuckled. “House Vistriano, eh? You must be quite strong if you serve a family with such powerful individuals.”

*He even knows about my family. Who is this man, exactly?*

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the man continued. “I’m Gaetano Cotarini—nephew to the king and vice-captain of the chivalric order. Truth be told, Duke

Vistriano is famous even in Bragioga. He has a reputation for being incredibly powerful. I actually sparred with his son Janus numerous times when he stayed here. The boy was strong indeed. I would love to spar with you as well, seeing as you guard a member of their house."

*My family is pretty amazing, huh? Tales of our strength have spread all the way to the nephew of a neighboring king. Father and Janus really are a cut above the rest. Hold on a second, though. If Gaetano is the king's nephew, does that make him Julie's cousin? And if so, is he Damiana's older brother?*

As I scrutinized Gaetano, Mary broke my train of thought.

"Thank you so much for the kind words," she said. "However, my fighting style differs from a swordswoman. I normally use concealed weapons, after all."

"You have me even more intrigued," Gaetano responded with a grin.

Thus, he led us to the training grounds. What started as a casual stroll turned into something rather extraordinary. Most of the knights had finished training and were cleaning up the grounds. However, the arrival of the vice-captain and a handmaid carrying a fennec fox caught everyone's attention. Before long, everyone gathered around us with curious expressions.

"Wait for me here," Mary said.

After I nuzzled her cheek, she set me down on a spot somewhat removed from the training grounds. *I was trying to offer her encouragement. Did she understand?*

"I'll do my best," Mary said with a smile.

*Sounds like she got the message.*

Mary and Gaetano's duel turned out to be quite a spectacle. Gaetano's fighting style bore a striking resemblance to Oreste. Mary took a few hits, as his attacks were too powerful to fend off. Even so, she still had the upper hand in terms of speed. Furthermore, she'd trained as a secret agent. After vanishing momentarily, she would launch another attack from an unexpected direction. Their polar opposite fighting styles thrilled not only me but also the knights. Yet, in the end, Gaetano sent Mary's knife flying through sheer brute strength.

“Checkmate,” he said.

Mary smirked. “Not quite yet.”

She swept his feet out from under him. Disarming Mary had made him overconfident, and as a result, he went down like a sack of potatoes. In a flash, Mary straddled Gaetano and placed another hidden knife against his neck.

“Your opponent often has more than one weapon,” she said.

Gaetano laughed heartily. “Ha, too true! I yield.”

The training grounds erupted in cheers as the match concluded. After standing up, Mary and Gaetano started up a friendly conversation. Unfortunately, I couldn’t hear them over the roar of the crowd. Regardless, Mary appeared to be having fun, which filled me with joy as well. Earlier, I’d jumped atop a fence. As I bounced up and down on the edge, my feet slipped, which sent me plunging downwards.

*Oh crap!*

Suddenly, I found myself floating in the air.

“I’ve never seen Mary smile like that,” Embert said.

Of course, he’d been the one to catch me.

Despite her usual composure, Mary laughed surprisingly often as well. That said, she might not have done so with people outside our family. In other words, her smile indicated just how much she’d enjoyed the sparring match. As I reached that conclusion, Embert bombarded me with a cheek-nuzzling assault.

“Ally,” he said with a sigh. “How I missed you.”

Was it just my imagination, or was the friction producing actual heat?

*Yeah, I need to regain my humanity ASAP. If this keeps up, I’m definitely going bald. No, I might get roasted alive before then.*

As I considered the grim fate of my fur, Mary returned with Gaetano by her side.

“You were here, Prince Embert?” Gaetano asked with a jovial laugh. “And you as well, Lord Janus. Then you both saw me thoroughly embarrass myself.”

Embert smiled. “Not at all. It was a splendid match.”

“By the way,” Gaetano said, a note of curiosity in his voice. “Did you have some sort of business here?”

The sun had already set some time ago. Most people wouldn’t train this late.

“I did indeed,” Embert replied, his smile as charming as ever. “I came to pick up this adorable little one.” He then proceeded to nuzzle my cheek.

*For the millionth time, I’m begging you to stop that!*

“Oh, that fox belongs to you, does she?” Gaetano asked. “Still, I’m impressed that you knew her location.”

Embert’s smile transformed into a terrifying grin. “I’ve taken certain measures to always know where she is.”

A chill ran down my spine. I didn’t even have my ring in my current form. Wait, could it have been stored inside me somehow? Or had Embert placed a new enchantment on me? Either way, my heart hammered in my chest. Embert seemed to notice my quickening pulse since he was holding me in his arms.

Chuckling, he whispered softly enough that only I could hear. “For some reason, my tracking spell is still working.”

In that case, the ring must have been stored inside me somehow. I let out a soft sigh while ignoring Embert’s apparent delight.



**AFTER breakfast the next morning, I wandered the castle by myself again. Evidently, I hadn’t learned my lesson. Still, I had nothing but free time until the afternoon. Julietta’s older brother, Prince Giusto, would be holding a tea party around then. I hadn’t seen Embert or Janus since this morning either, as they both had work.**

*Speaking of which, should I even attend a tea party in this form? I won’t be able to communicate without Custode to interpret. And won’t everyone wonder why there’s a fox around in the first place?*

As I wandered to and fro, lost in thought, I eventually reached the garden.

*The breeze feels nice.*

When I spotted a greenhouse up ahead, my curiosity demanded I explore it. Flowers bloomed all over, and it was cooler than expected. Some of the flowers were unfamiliar, causing my chest to swell with excitement. Upon reaching the middle of the greenhouse, I found cacti planted in a sandy area.

*Wow, it feels like I just wandered into a desert.*

The sand in this section was so smooth that it must have been imported from an actual desert. Suddenly, an inexplicable urge to dive into the sand overcame me.

*Um, are these my instincts as a desert-dwelling fox? No, no, that can't be right. I'm still human!*

No matter how much I resembled a fennec fox, I wouldn't act like one.

*Must. Resist. Vulpine. Instincts. I am a HUMAN BEING!*

Why? Why was my tail wagging so giddily despite my efforts to the contrary?

*Get a grip on yourself, Alexandra! Resisting impulse through reason is what it means to be human! Show some self-restraint!*

Alas, even humans gave into their impulses sometimes.

*Yahoo! Time to let loose!*

I dove into the sand, rolled around, and dug holes like there was no tomorrow. It was so much fun that I wanted to kick myself for not doing it earlier.

At that moment, a stifled laugh reached my ears. Startled, I turned around to find a man with a gentle smile standing there. He had silky, strawberry-blond hair and blue eyes reminiscent of lapis lazuli. If I had to guess, he looked somewhere between my age and Embert's.





*What a beautiful man, I thought while staring at him. And he looks familiar, too.*

The young man knelt in front of me. “Did I interrupt your playtime?” he asked with another chuckle. “Sorry about that. You were having so much fun that I couldn’t help but stare.”

Strangely, I didn’t feel uncomfortable, even though he was laughing at me.

“What an adorable little creature,” he continued. “Are you Prince Embert’s fox, by any chance?”

“Kyun,” I yipped in confirmation.

This time, the young man laughed out loud. “Oh, do you understand what I’m saying?” he asked, extending a hand towards me. “You must be quite clever.”

I moved closer to his hand since he seemed like a decent enough fellow. However, I remembered the sand stuck to my fur. Thus, I shook it all off my coat. After a moment’s surprise, the young man burst out laughing. To my dismay, I’d sprayed the sand all over him. My ears and tail drooped as a sense of guilt overcame me.

After brushing the sand off his clothes, the young man patted my lowered head. “Wow, your coat is so fluffy,” he said in a tone of admiration. “You really are adorable.”

*What a sweet guy, I thought, allowing him to pet me for a while.*

“I wonder if I could pick her up,” the young man mumbled.

“Kyun,” I yipped again in confirmation.

“Really?” he asked, appearing hesitant. “You’d be okay with that?”

I placed my forepaws on his knees as he was still kneeling in front of me.

“Thanks,” he said while scooping me into his arms. “You’re so light... and even fluffier than I expected.”

He petted me as I nestled into the crook of his arm. *Yeah, he’s a sweet guy, I thought again, practically purring with delight.*

At that moment, I heard a voice from the entrance of the greenhouse.

"Oh, I have to go now," the young man said, lowering me back onto the sand. He waved goodbye while walking away. "Thank you. I hope to see you again."

*He reminds me of someone*, I thought while watching him leave.

A moment later, I dove back into the sand, unable to resist its call.

After having the time of my life in the miniature desert, I returned to my room. Without a word, Mary grabbed me and placed me in the bath. Once squeaky clean, I curled into bed with the dull gray sphere, exhausted.

A little while later, Custode returned.

"Still a fox, eh?" he asked while setting down a fist-sized stone in front of me.

"What's that?" I responded.

It looked like an ore of some kind, but I couldn't identify what type.

"This is an adamantine ore," Custode replied. "I brought it for that sphere."

The dull gray sphere nestled next to me remained silent. When I poked it with my forepaws, the sphere rolled around the bed, but it didn't react to the ore.

"Perhaps it won't work until you return to normal," Custode mumbled.

He placed the orb on top of the side chest.

"What in the world is this little sphere?" I asked.

"I have an idea, but I don't want to get ahead of myself. We'll probably know for certain when you return to normal. What I *can* say is that it's recognized you as its master."

Apparently, I'd gotten my hands on something quite enigmatic.

"Well, anyway, returning to normal is my top priority," I said. "If I stay a fox much longer, I'm gonna go bald from all the friction."

"You should return to normal soon enough," Custode replied.

"Really? What a relief. For now, I'll get a little shuteye before the tea party."

We all—fennec fox, miniature dragon, and dull gray sphere—nestled together on the large bed. Before long, we drifted off to sleep.



## ☆☆ Embert's Point of View☆☆

JANUS and I had been swamped with work since finishing breakfast. A prince rarely had any time off, even when visiting a foreign country. That said, I'd been invited to an afternoon tea party. I couldn't wait to bring my adorable, vulpine Ally with me. When I imagined her as a fennec fox, a heavy sigh escaped my lips.

"Are you thinking about Ally, by any chance?" Janus asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him. How had a single sigh given away my thoughts?

"She should be arrested for being so cute," I said, unable to suppress another sigh. "Do you think there's any way for her to remain a fox? Had I known this would happen, I would've brought that image-recording crystal ball."

Unfortunately, the crystal ball had been placed in the mage's headquarters for safekeeping. If only I had it, I could preserve Ally's vulpine form forever. When I considered that unattainable wish, yet another sigh escaped my lips.

Janus chuckled at my wistful expression. "Yes, she certainly is adorable."

I glared at him again. "Speaking of which, didn't you bar me from touching her?" I asked, resentment dripping from my words. "Even though you ruffled her fur like a madman?"

"How could I resist?" Janus asked, his smile widening even further. "Remember when she tried to hide inside my jacket? I've never seen anything so adorable."

*Was that when she tried to run away from me?*

Despite the bitter thought, I had only praise for Ally's vulpine form.

"Truly!" I exclaimed. "Her fluffy tail! Her beautiful, sparkling coat! Her adorable, twitching ears! And her round eyes, which shine like purple stars! Everything about her is so wonderful! Ah, what am I to do? Not to mention her yipping! That was cute enough to stop my heart!"

The mere thought of Ally nearly made me swoon. Eventually, I grew so frenzied that I pounded my fists against the table. Chuckling at my antics, Janus poured me a glass of lemon water. I gulped down the beverage, fully aware of

my own delirious excitement.

“Have you calmed down, Your Highness?” Janus asked, his shoulders trembling with suppressed laughter. “Let’s wrap up work as fast as possible. Otherwise, you won’t be able to take your adorable little fox to the tea party.”

I glowered at Janus for a third time. Nevertheless, I followed his advice and refocused on work.

## Chapter Four: The Fox Girl and Her Familiar

“NGH...” I groaned.

I woke up feeling unusually heavy. The reason became clear to me at once. A sleeping Custode lay atop my chest like a small cannonball. Furthermore, something peculiar covered my feet.

“Huh?” I murmured. “Am I...?”

I opened and closed my hand. The sensation felt entirely different from my past two days as a fennec fox. When I turned my head, I found my five fingers—not covered in fur—moving properly. I was wearing my enchanted pinky ring as well. In short, I’d turned back into a human. I’d only remained as a fox for two days, just as Custode had predicted.

Though I wanted to examine myself in the mirror right away, I couldn’t move. Custode had curled up on my chest like a cat, breathing steadily in his sleep. He was, much to my surprise, so cute that I couldn’t bear to disturb him.

“What’s this weird feeling around my feet though?” I muttered.

A cold, slightly heavy sensation covered my feet. It reminded me of the gel in cooling patches. In any case, I strained my head to peer over Custode. What I saw covering my feet puzzled me at first. It looked like a dull gray puddle of water.

“Huh?” I repeated that dumb sound.

*I’ve seen that color before, right?* I wondered, the gears in my head turning.

When the truth sank in, the blood drained from my face.

“Oh no!” I shouted.

A moment later, a familiar magic circle appeared on the ground, radiating light.

“Ally!” Embert exclaimed, appearing atop the circle. Upon seeing me, he

froze, his lips twisting into a sinister smile. “Just where do you think you’re sleeping, Custode?!”

My previous shout had already woken Custode. However, he was still rubbing his bleary eyes with a tiny hand.

*Holy cannoli, he’s so cute! Someone bring me a tissue stat! I feel a nosebleed coming! How often do you get to see such an adorable little creature swaying on your chest? This has got to be one of the seven wonders of the world. Wait, is my brain glitching or something? That’s not important right now! First things first, I’ve gotta calm Em down!*

“We’ve got bigger fish to fry right now, Em!” I cried. “My little sphere... My little sphere melted!” I remained on my back as I shouted, unable to move because of Custode.

*Wow, I must look pretty stupid, huh? No time to dwell on that, though.*

“You two could wake the dead,” Custode grumbled. “What’s going on?” Having finally woken up, the tiny dragon tilted his head at me.

*All right, Ally, time to calm down. Deep breaths, okay?*

A knock came at the door, and Mary burst into the room. “Lady Alexandra!” she cried.

Cita and Cia were behind her as well. My shouting had reached the rooms on both sides of mine. Everyone had raced over to check on me.

After scanning the room, Mary sprang into action, thrusting a knife in front of Embert’s face. “You might be Lady Alexandra’s fiancé, Prince Embert, but if you laid a hand on her while she was sleeping...” Mary paused here, her knife still pointed at Embert as she turned to smile at me. “Oh, milady, I see you’ve returned to normal.”

I smiled back at her. “Yep, back to being a human.”

“Aww, our little fox is gone,” Cita whined.

“Yeah, I’m gonna miss your fluffy coat,” Cia agreed.

I puffed out my cheeks. “Oh, did you prefer me as a fox?”

The twins laughed. “Not at all,” they responded in unison.

*Still, I’m getting tired of lying here.*

“Custode, do you mind moving off my—” Before I could finish speaking, Custode shot into the air. Embert had picked him up by the scruff of the neck.

“It’s high time you got off from there,” the prince said.

*Whoa, I didn’t even see him slip away from Mary’s knife.*

Custode snorted, his legs flailing about in the air. “What are you so cross about?”

Embert brought Custode up to eye level, glowering at him. “Listen here,” he said, his smile growing even more sinister. “Yes, Ally is a holy woman, and you are a divine beast meant to protect her. Regardless, Ally is my fiancée before being a holy woman. Let’s be clear on that.”

Custode snorted again, maintaining his mocking attitude. “Think about this carefully, Embert. Which relationship do you think is stronger? The superficial bond between fiancés? Or a bond forged through our mutual connection to the Goddess?”

“You still insist on arguing with me?” Embert asked, refusing to back down. “In that case, I won’t allow anyone to give you a sweet ever again.”

In response to Embert’s wicked smirk, Custode sighed for the umpteenth time. “You think to placate me with mere sweets?” the dragon asked. “Ha! Well played, good sir. I’ll bow out from this round.”

*Wait, you’re admitting defeat that easily? I quipped internally. And you call yourself a divine beast? I locked eyes with Mary and the twins. They must have been thinking the same thing. But, like I said, we’ve got bigger fish to fry.*

As that hit me, I slowly raised my upper body and looked down. The dark gray puddle of water continued to spread around my feet.

“My little sphere...” I whimpered. “He’s melting! Do something, Custode!”

When I unjustly flared up on Custode, the dragon responded with a carefree laugh. “No need for alarm,” he said. “Give me one moment. Your sphere will return to normal in no time.”

Cool as a cucumber, Custode grabbed the ore from the side chest. At that moment, I spotted Janus leaning on the open door frame.

"Thought I'd find you here," he said. Apparently, he'd been searching for Embert, but he looked at me with a dazzling smile. "Looks like you're back to normal, Ally."

Alas, my tear-stained face was the exact opposite of his. "Janus," I whimpered. "My little sphere. He's..."

Janus entered the room. Immediately after seeing the gray puddle of water around my feet, he grasped the situation. "Custode," he said while looking at the dragon. "Can you save this little one?"

Custode nodded. "Of course."

After drifting over to the puddle, he dropped the ore into it with a light splash. A wave of sadness crashed over me. How could this little fella—the one who'd bounced up and down behind me—have come to this? As tears spilled down my cheeks, the twins sat on either side of me for emotional support.

"Ally," Custode said. "Try infusing your mana into this ore."

"...All right," I replied.

Still crying, I infused my mana into the sunken ore. Insubstantial, golden mist enveloped it before disappearing. When I finished the infusion, everyone looked down at the ore, expecting some sort of change. Without warning, one corner of the gel puddle squirmed viscously. Little by little, the substance converged around the ore. When the gel had finished subsuming the ore, it vibrated in a jellylike fashion. Then, it stopped moving altogether.

Everyone held their breaths in anticipation of what might happen next. The gel—now a distorted sphere—condensed into a smaller form. Finally, a loud POP echoed throughout the room, and the gel cheeped, "Squishy!"

"For real?" I asked.

Something like a dull gray xiaolongbao sat in front of me. Back on Earth, I'd sunk countless hours into a series called *Dragon* something or other. If you've ever played one of those games, you know exactly what the little fella looked

like.

“Is that a slime?” I mumbled.

Specifically, it looked like a metal slime.

*Those would always run away from me in the game, I remembered wistfully.*

“That’s right,” Custode responded with a pronounced nod. “Furthermore, this slime is a rare specimen. By continuously eating adamantine ore, its body turned into adamantine. In other words, it’s an adamantine slime.”

Following its introduction, the rare slime looked up at me. “Squishy!” it cheeped with apparent glee. The slime could fit in the palm of my hand. Upon closer inspection, it had dot-shaped eyes and a line-shaped mouth.

*Are you kidding me? This is, like, the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.*

“How adorable,” I mumbled.

The slime bounced up and down with delight. I had to clap my hand over my mouth before a dorky smile could appear.

“Squishy, squishy,” the slime cheeped while bouncing.

Needless to say, everyone regarded the little fella warmly.



“**ALLY**,” Lauris greeted me. “Looks like you’re back to normal.”

He, Julietta, Rosario, and Oreste were already sitting around the table in the courtyard. After the events in my room, I’d gotten ready and headed here as well. This was our venue for the tea party, after all.

“Yeah, just a little while ago,” I replied.

Julietta dashed over to me, a smile lighting up her face. “Thank goodness you’re better now,” she said while locking arms with me.

Before long, Rosario chimed in with his usual sarcasm. “Still, you were a lot cuter and quieter as a fox.”

Oreste laughed. “Haha, no arguments there!”

I glared at the two boys. Maybe I needed to beat them to a pulp like I had

before the time loop.

Julietta cocked her head, noticing something. “Oh, what’s that?” She was looking at the slime on my shoulder. Lauris and the others followed her gaze.

“Is that the metal sphere from before?” Rosario asked.

“Good eye,” I replied with a grin. “Say hello to Squishy, everyone.”

“Squishy,” the slime cheeped in response to my words.

Lauris and Rosario both sighed.

“First a dragon, and now a slime?” Lauris asked, sounding a touch exasperated. “There’s never a dull moment with you around.”

Rosario nodded. “Too true.”

Oreste laughed again. “We need someone to keep things fun, right?”

Having said that, he stood up and escorted Cita to her seat. The twins had come with me, after all. Rosario followed suit, escorting Cia to her seat as well.

“Hey, who’s gonna escort me?” I pouted.

Neither Embert nor Janus were present to escort me. Evidently, both had an audience with the King of Bragioga. As I took a step forward, grumbling about my lack of a date, someone took my hand.

“Please allow me to escort you,” he said.

When I turned to face the speaker, I found a young man with strawberry blond hair and eyes that sparkled like lapis lazuli. I’d met him in the greenhouse as a fox. After smiling at me, the young man’s face changed to one of slight puzzlement.

“Have we met before?” he asked, scrutinizing me with a furrowed brow.

Julietta’s face flushed. “Ugh, Giusto! Could you please stop embarrassing your little sister with such a hackneyed pickup line?”

When I compared Julietta and the young man, everything snapped into place. He’d seemed familiar during our last encounter because he resembled Julietta.

“Aha, forgive me,” the young man replied jokingly. “Your friend is so stunning

that I couldn't help myself."

*He really looks like Julie. He's about Lauris's height, too.*

In any case, the young man's gentle demeanor coaxed a smile from me.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all," he said, introducing himself to the whole group. "My name is Giusto Cotarini. As you might have guessed, I'm Julie's older brother. From what I hear, my sister owes all of you a great debt. Thank you for being so kind to her."

Prince Giusto exchanged introductions with everyone individually. When he came to me last, I curtsied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "My name is Alexandra Vistriano."

Giusto's lapis lazuli eyes widened as he regarded me. Well, he was standing right in front of me. How could he miss the little fellas on my shoulders?

"Oh, these two are Custode and Squishy," I added.

"Is... that right?" Giusto responded. He probably wanted to make some sort of witty remark. Nevertheless, he continued smiling serenely, his expression not changing in the slightest.

*First princes are something else, huh?*

"Vistriano, you said?" Giusto asked, changing the conversation back to me. "Are you related to Lord Janus, by any chance?"

"Yes, he's my older brother."

Immediately, Giusto's expression brightened, and he grabbed my hand. "Prince Embert and Lord Janus did so much for me during their study abroad trip. Lord Janus is a truly remarkable swordsman. Not even an entire squadron of knights could defeat him. Moreover, he has a wonderful way of looking at things. I have the utmost respect for him."

"Thank you very much," I responded with a smile.

Of course, I couldn't start rambling about my amazing brother to someone I'd just met. However, Rosario sprang out of his seat to stand in front of Giusto.

"You're a fellow admirer of Lord Janus?" Rosario asked. "I've looked up to him

since I was a child.” Even after all these years, Rosario still worshiped the ground my brother walked on.

“Um, your name is Lord Rosario, correct?” Giusto asked. “It’s good to meet someone who feels the same way.”

“Indeed. Unfortunately, I haven’t seen Lord Janus much as of late due to his busy schedule. Yet back in the day, he often tutored me and instructed me in swordsmanship.”

“Color me envious.”

Rosario and Giusto were getting weirdly fired up.

*Um, can I sit down now? Custode’s starting to feel pretty heavy.*

“Rude, much?” Custode grumbled after reading my thoughts.

*Oh, c’mom. No matter how small you are, you’re still a dragon. You’re at least heavier than a puppy.*

Squishy shivered on top of my shoulder in agreement.

“Giusto,” Julietta interrupted with a huff, hands on her hips. “Why don’t you continue this conversation once everyone’s taken their seats?”

Somehow, my thoughts had reached her.

*Oh my Goddess, what a cutie patootie.*

“Dorky smile alert,” Custode remarked in a mocking tone.

Jolting, I lifted him to cover my mouth. At that moment, Lauris met my eye and smirked.

*Gah, life is so unfair!*

Why did Lauris get to hog this angel all to himself? As I glowered at him, a warm touch on my back returned me to my senses.

“I apologize for making you stand,” Giusto said.

He then escorted me to the table with his hand on my back. The couples were sitting next to each other. As the odd ones out, Giusto and I sat next to each other as well.

"The dragon on your lap is named Custode, correct?" Giusto asked when everyone had received their tea. "And the creature on the table is named Squishy? Are they both your pets?"

Custode harrumphed at being called a pet.

"They're not my pets," I replied. "Custode might be small now, but he's a divine beast and my cherished companion. The other little fella is a slime, but he's also my familiar, I suppose?"

"Come again?" Giusto asked, stiffening. "A divine beast and a familiar?"

*Yeah, that's a lot to wrap your head around at once. Can't blame the guy for freezing up.*

Lauris sighed in exasperation. "Learn to explain yourself better, Ally."

*Yeah, yeah, I know.*

As I opened my mouth to give a proper explanation, Julietta interrupted. Brimming with eagerness, she told the entire story of me being a holy woman and Custode coming to find me.

Giusto's lapis lazuli eyes sparkled. "In other words, you're the holy woman who appeared in Gandolfin, Lady Alexandra?"

*Uh oh, looks like he has unrealistic expectations for me now.*

"Well, um, I'm not a holy woman per se," I hedged.

"No, you *are* a holy woman," Julietta countered, her brown eyes sparkling. "You're incredibly strong, beautiful, and kind."

Despite my attempt at humility, Julietta praised me to high heaven. Looking at her made me dizzy.

*Gah, how can anyone be this cute? I can't believe Lauris gets her all to himself.*

Giusto chuckled. "You really love Lady Alexandra, don't you, Julie?"

"Of course," Julietta replied. "And it's not just me. Everyone here loves Ally."

The two grinning siblings couldn't have been more lovely. Seeing their close bond uplifted my spirit. It was a truly precious sight.

"You really are an incredible woman, Lady Vistriano," Giusto said. "On top of having a divine beast companion, you also bonded a familiar in the dungeon. A dragon and a slime are quite the combo."

Based on the twinkle in his eyes, he meant every word without a hint of sarcasm. Though I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks, I laughed off my embarrassment.

Afterward, we discussed the Founding Festival and fun places to visit nearby. Despite his royal status, Giusto didn't act self-important. Rather, he kept a warm smile, appearing to be a kindly prince in every regard. I let my guard down with him, as his demeanor reminded me somewhat of Embert's. Thus, I couldn't help but be startled when he brought his face close to mine.

"You look strangely familiar to me," he said, reaching towards my cheek. "Yes, I've seen these beautiful amethyst eyes somewhere recently." His fingertips were mere inches away from brushing my cheek.

"Ally," a familiar voice echoed from behind, quiet but clear.

Everyone turned in the direction of the voice. Embert strode towards us briskly, his silver hair fluttering in the wind.

"Embert!" Lauris said.

"Hi there, Em," I greeted him a second later.

Lauris had beaten me to the punch. When I glared at him two seats away, he looked back at me smugly.

"Brother-obsessed weirdo," I grumbled.

Lauris chuckled. "Call me whatever you like."

His newfound masculinity might have impressed me before, but his brother obsession remained as strong as ever. In any case, Embert arrived behind me.

"I finished work early, so I decided to join the party," he said. Embert took my hand and kissed my fingertips. His smile was so beautiful that the hearts of everyone present must have fluttered. At this point, however, such displays of affection didn't even faze me.

"I'm glad you came," I responded with a smile. Yet, for some reason, he didn't

release my hand. “Em?”

Staring into my eyes, Embert kissed my fingertips, the back of my hand, and then my palm. Last, he kissed my wrist, briefly licking it.

“Eek!” I squealed.

My surprise coaxed a look of satisfaction from Embert. *Jerkwad*, I thought, clutching my racing heart while glaring at him.

In response, Embert laughed with delight. “You’re as adorable as ever, my precious Ally.”

Most everyone regarded us somewhat critically. On the other hand, Lauris gazed into the distance with a thousand-yard stare.

*Oh, don’t give me that. You and Julie are just as mushy when you’re alone together, right?*

Only one person at the table seemed puzzled.

“Your precious Ally?” Giusto repeated curiously.

It dawned on me that he didn’t know about our relationship. No one had thought to mention it since it was such an obvious fact.

“That’s right,” Embert replied with a smile, still holding my hand. “She’s my fiancée.”

Was it just my imagination, or was his smile a touch sinister? At any rate, he sat down next to me, *still* not letting go of my hand.

After taking a gulp of tea, Embert turned his wicked grin directly on Giusto. “In fact, our engagement was officially recognized a few days ago.”

Giusto’s eyes widened in surprise, and he stiffened for a moment. Nevertheless, his face soon broke into a smile. “Ah, I see,” he said. “Then I suppose congratulations are in order.”

Embert chuckled. “Why, thank you.”

The whole exchange happened with me sandwiched between them. You could cut the tension with a knife. As I squirmed uncomfortably, Custode looked up at me from my lap.

"You're usually pretty slow on the uptake," the dragon said. "But you can feel the tension, too?"

"Y-Yeah," I replied. "Do those two not get along?"

*Could they be too alike for their own good? Similar people don't get along sometimes. Wait, I have another idea. Janus is Em's personal attendant, which means they're always together. That must be a bitter pill for Giusto to swallow, considering how much he adores my brother.*

At that moment, Custode interrupted my very serious deductive reasoning.

"Using all your wits just to read the room, eh? Well, no matter. More importantly, that large cookie over there looks appetizing."

"Huh?" I asked. "Th-That one?"

*Did this dragon just diss me while demanding treats? And that cookie he set his sights on is humongous.*

"Squishy," the slime cheeped while bouncing up and down. Then, he extended part of his body like a tentacle and grabbed the cookie deftly.

"Wow, Squishy, you're so clever!" I cried.

"Squishy!" the slime cheeped again, handing the cookie to Custode.

The dragon nodded in satisfaction. "Yes, this is the confection I desired," he said, taking the cookie in both hands. "You have my gratitude."

He munched on the cookie like a barnyard animal.

"I still can't get over the difference between the way he talks and the way he acts," Cita noted wryly.

Custode's manner of speech didn't change between sizes. As a result, he sounded pretty comical when small. Oh, and he was dropping crumbs on his chest.

"You really are helpless." I laughed, brushing the crumbs off him.

A wave of hostility swelled beside me. Of course, it originated from Embert.

Oreste, who sat on Embert's opposite side, sensed his bloodlust and bent back slightly. "Whoa."

“Custode,” Embert growled. “Why do you always insist upon sitting on Ally’s lap? I still haven’t forgiven you for what happened earlier. Are you trying to pick a fight with me, perhaps?”

Custode laughed with crumbs still stuck to the corners of his mouth. “Haha! And why do you insist upon always repeating yourself? It’s only natural for me to stay close to my holy woman, no?”

“Staying close and sitting on her lap are two entirely different things. How about this? Why don’t you move over to my lap?”

Custode stared at Embert’s legs with the cookie still gripped in both hands. Then, he sank even further into my lap. “Sorry, but your lap looks much less comfortable,” he said.

Embert’s hostility swelled even more. Likewise, he wore the most sinister smile I’d ever seen.

*I’m just gonna sit here and quiver in fear, okay?*

Meanwhile, Custode continued munching on his cookie, paying Embert no heed. Would I have to suffer this same exchange for my entire life? With a soft sigh, I brushed Embert’s arm with my fingertips.

“Please calm down, Em, okay?” I pleaded.

Though his hostility vanished, he still regarded me with narrowed eyes. “Very well then,” he said. “However, I still don’t accept this completely.”

“Thank you.”

Embert kept his eyes narrowed, his mood not the least bit improved. “Is that all?” he asked in a sullen voice.

I cocked my head. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve quelled my hostility, and I’ve stopped antagonizing Custode. Don’t I deserve some kind of reward?”

“A reward, huh?”

As Embert leaned towards me, I could sense what he was hinting at. Thus, I kissed him on the cheek, as he so obviously wanted.

*The things we do for love, right?*

Embert responded to my kiss with a chuckle. Where had his sour mood gone? Upon seeing him brighten so thoroughly, everyone else laughed as well. At first, Giusto had watched this entire scene slack jawed. Gradually, however, his expression relaxed, and he chuckled as well.

“What a surprise,” he said. “I’ve never seen you act like this before, Prince Embert. Lady Alexandra brings out a whole new side of you. I could have mistaken you for an entirely different person.”

“Ally—or rather, Alexandra—is my irreplaceable treasure,” Embert responded with a grin. “I would never relinquish her to any man, regardless of who he might be.”

Being compared to treasure filled me with a mixture of joy and embarrassment. I hung my head and drank my tea to hide my face, which had probably turned bright red.

“Even so, you have no right to stop others from desiring her,” Giusto said.

An icy silence fell over the tea party. Almost everyone froze as a frigid aura radiated from Embert. Only Oreste, Squishy, and I moved. While Oreste’s eyes darted to and fro, I looked at Embert curiously. He was glowering at Giusto with a terrifying expression. Furrowing my brow, I looked at my friends for answers. Everyone merely shook their heads.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Why did everyone freeze up?”

Custode heaved a deep sigh from atop my lap. “Ally...” he said, gazing at me with pity in his eyes.

“What?” I responded. “Seriously, what’s going on?”

“Yeah, what’s the big deal, everyone?” Oreste asked.

“Squishy?” the slime cheeped.

In the end, no one answered our questions. The tea party ended with unease still lingering in the air. As I battled against the distress of being left in the dark, Embert grabbed my hand.

“Why don’t we take a short walk?” he suggested.

Was it just my imagination, or did his voice sound cold? As I opened my mouth to ask what was wrong, Custode flew out of my arms. Then, he grabbed Squishy and said, “I’ll be waiting in your room.” With that, he soared off into the distance. One by one, everyone else headed back to their rooms as well.

“Hang in there,” Cia whispered to me right before leaving.

*Why do I need to hang in there in the first place?* I wondered with a frown.

Embert led the way silently. I followed him, and we eventually arrived at the maze we’d failed to enter before. Embert positioned me in front of one of the entrances.

“Try to reach the goal from here,” he said. “Start after counting to ten.”

“Got it,” I replied, unable to refuse.

After counting to ten, I entered the hedge maze. It turned out to be surprisingly complex. Despite getting lost a few times, I brute-forced my way to the goal. Finally, I walked through the beautiful, rose-covered arch and arrived at the charming gazebo. Embert hadn’t made it yet.

“Nice,” I muttered. “Looks like I’m the winner.”

As I tried to enter the gazebo, someone embraced me from behind.

“Oh?” I asked. “Did you get here first, Em?”

“I did.”

Embert sat down on a bench while still holding me. Naturally, I ended up sitting sideways on his lap. Though Embert remained silent, he showed no signs of letting me go. As such, I leaned into him without speaking either. After a short while, he finally spoke up.

“Ally,” he said.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Tell me the truth.”

“About what?”

I couldn’t help but react with surprise. After all, I hadn’t the faintest idea what Embert was driving at. He wore an earnest yet somewhat angry expression.

“What do you think of Prince Giusto?” Embert asked.

“Prince Giusto?” I repeated.

“That’s right. What do you think of him?”

“Um...”

*Where is this coming from? Honestly, I didn’t know Giusto very well, seeing as we’d just met.*

“I feel a sense of affinity for him because he looks like Julie,” I answered honestly. “That’s all.”

Embert’s expression turned sullen. “Then why did you let him get so close to you? Just because he looks like Lady Julietta? No matter how much they resemble each other, they’re still different people. You know that, right? If I hadn’t called your name, he would’ve touched your face.”

While Embert made a sound argument, Giusto was the Prince of Bragioga. I couldn’t just brush away his hand or tell him to stop. Embert’s words didn’t sit right with me.

“Are you implying that I wanted him to touch me?” I asked, a hint of irritation in my voice.

Suddenly, my vision went dark. Embert had embraced me so that my face was buried in his chest. “I love you, Ally,” he whispered, his voice husky. “I don’t want to relinquish you to anyone. I don’t want anyone else to touch you.”

With my face pressed against his chest, his heartbeat echoed in my ears. Hearing his pulse, which raced even faster than mine, caused my irritation to subside.

“I love you too, Em,” I replied. “So much that I don’t want anyone else to touch you. I’m sorry for being careless.”

When I finished speaking, Embert pressed his lips against mine. His kiss—more urgent and passionate than usual—robbed me of all thought. I melted into the kiss, which grew even more amorous. As I struggled to breathe, a dizzy spell overcoming me, Embert’s lips finally parted from mine. While I hyperventilated, desperate to catch my breath, Embert squeezed me in his

arms again. At the same time, a frightening laugh echoed above my head. Of course, it had originated from Embert.

"He had some nerve to declare war against me," he mumbled, barely audible. "In that case, no one can criticize what measures I take, regardless of whether he's a crown prince. I'll make him regret ever challenging me."

Embert caressed my cheek, his lips curling into a sinister smile. A wicked aura radiated from him all the while.

"I'll never relinquish you to anyone, Ally," Embert declared.

Once again, he pressed his lips against mine. Next, he kissed my neck. As the ticklish sensation caused me to squirm, he bit my collarbone lightly through my clothes. The unfamiliar thrill caused me to shudder delightfully. Embert's eyes lasciviously gleamed as he regarded me.

"Ally," he said with a chuckle. "You're forbidden from showing that adorable expression to anyone but me."

As Embert brought his face close to mine again, I shook my head. The blood in my cheeks felt near boiling. "That's enough already!" I cried. "My heart is going to stop if we go any further. We have to stop now."

However, the lascivious gleam in Embert's eyes merely intensified. "That rejection won't be enough to stop me when I know you don't mean it," he whispered in my ear.

As his breath tickled my inner ear, I uttered a strange cry due to overwhelming embarrassment. "Meeaah!"

For some reason, Embert froze while staring at me. "Ally, you look like..."

"Huh?" I asked. "Could you finish that sentence?"

What did I look like, exactly? I definitely hadn't turned into a fennec fox again, right? My line of sight hadn't changed at all. Even so, Embert's cheeks slightly reddened as he stared at me. Something appeared to have excited him.

"Um, Em, please explain what's going on with me," I said.

"I don't think I'll be able to restrain myself," Embert mumbled, gazing at me with an odd look in his eyes. "This is adorable beyond words."

*Hold up. What do you mean you won't be able to restrain yourself? Come save me, Custode! But first things first, what in the world is happening to me?*





“Calm down, Em,” I said. “This isn’t okay. I’m putting my foot down.”

As I tried to break free of his embrace, Embert stared at me raptly. Despite his blank expression, his grip didn’t loosen.

*This is going from bad to worse. Could someone save me for real?!*

At that moment, something fell from above and landed squarely on Embert’s head. The perpetrator turned out to be Squishy, who engulfed Embert down to the shoulders.

*Do my eyes deceive me, or does it look like Squishy’s head is growing out of Embert’s body?*

I burst out laughing at this scene worthy of a viral video. Thanks to that, however, Embert regained a modicum of composure.

“That was a close one,” he said while peeling Squishy off his face. “I almost got carried away there.”

I jolted. “Wait, you still haven’t explained what’s happening to me.”

Embert took my hand and placed it on top of my head. My fingers pressed against something furry.

“Whoa!” I said, fiddling with the fluffy object. “What’s this?”

Embert took my other hand and placed it on my head. My fingers pressed against another fluffy object.

“What’s going on?” I mumbled. “These almost feel like animal ears...” I stiffened with surprise. There had to be some other explanation, right? Yet the more I fiddled with the fuzzy objects, the more I had to face reality.

*I have animal ears growing from my head?!*

“How adorable,” Embert murmured.

I had no way of knowing when he might lose his mind again.

“A-Anyway, is there anything I can see my reflection in?” I asked.

I needed to confirm what I looked like for myself. My eyes darted around in search of a mirror, but of course, I had no such luck. Then, to my great relief,

Squishy stretched himself into a flat surface.

“That’s amazing!” I cried. “Is there anything you can’t do, Squishy?” I peered into the slime, now resembling a reflective water surface. Unsurprisingly, I found triangular fennec ears sprouting from my head. “This can’t be happening,” I groaned.

As I stared at my reflection dumbfoundedly, Embert dropped an even bigger bombshell on me. “You have more than ears to worry about,” he said.

Hesitantly, I looked behind me. My dress had hiked up slightly when trying to break free of Embert’s embrace earlier. There, I discovered a fluffy tail growing from my lower back, swaying to and fro.

“Wh-Wh-What the hell is this!?” I shouted.

My horrified exclamation echoed throughout the entire courtyard.



“**THAT** nearly gave me a heart attack,” I mumbled with a sigh.

My animal ears and tail had disappeared after a short while. Upon returning to my room, I discussed the matter with Custode.

“It seems to be some sort of after-effect,” he explained. “Perhaps the transformation magic and your inherent magic had exceptional compatibility.” The dragon then curled into a ball, seeming not the slightest bit concerned. Without lifting his head, he continued apathetically, “Well, it’s not that big of a deal, right?”

Irritated, I flipped Custode over. “Take my problems seriously, jackass.”

The dragon’s tiny legs flailed in the air for a few seconds. The comical sight brought a smile of satisfaction to my lips.

Afterward, I petted Squishy and prayed that my fennec ears would never pop up again.



### ☆☆ Embert’s Point of View☆☆

**ONCE** Ally’s fennec ears had disappeared, I escorted her back to her room.

Then, I returned to my room, loosened my collar, and sank into the sofa.

“Talk about a close call,” I muttered to myself in the empty room.

I heaved a deep sigh. If Squishy hadn’t appeared, I would have lost control of myself. The slime thwarting my animal instincts relieved me. At the same time, intense excitement overcame me again when I remembered Ally’s appearance.

“It’s not fair,” I muttered to myself. “How am I supposed to restrain myself when you look so adorable?”

The memory of Ally covering her face with both hands, fennec ears sprouting from her head, nearly caused me to faint in agony.

“And she had a tail as well.”

My mind boiled with excitement at the mere thought of her fluffy tail swaying back and forth. As I suppressed a cry of frustrated delight, a knock came at my door.

“Have you finished work for today?” Janus asked upon seeing my collar. “Oh, do you have a fever, perhaps? Your face looks red.”

Janus had seen straight through my feigned composure.

I sat up and straightened my collar. “No, I’m fine.”

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm down. Nevertheless, the image of Ally with fennec ears appeared in my mind’s eye. It had been burned into my memory, after all.

“Goddess, save me!” I cried out uncharacteristically, heat rushing from my neck to my face.

“What’s wrong, Your Highness?” Janus asked.

I couldn’t let him know what I was thinking. Yet the harder I tried to suppress my thoughts, the more vivid Ally’s twitching fennec ears appeared in my mind.

Janus let out a soft sigh. “Why don’t we call it a day then?” he asked with a chuckle. “You’re clearly preoccupied with something other than work. It’s related to Ally, I presume?”

Yes, he’d seen straight through me. Regardless, I graciously accepted his

suggestion. With that, Janus left the room. Once alone, I began muttering to myself again.

"As I recall, Ally mumbled something like *kemonomimi* when I escorted her back to her room."

Could that have been the word for animal ears in her previous world?

"Kemonomimi," I said. "It has a nice ring to it. Kemonomimi, kemonomimi."

I repeated the word numerous times to commit it to memory.

*Wow, how perverted can you get?* I wondered, shaking my head to clear my mind.

"Still," I muttered. "I wonder if those ears feel the same as when she was a fox."

I couldn't stop thinking about Ally's kemonomimi, no matter how much I struggled.

*At any rate, she didn't notice the ears until she touched them. Are they not attached to nerves? They seem to have feeling based on their movement. Perhaps she'll let me caress them a little the next time they pop up. That would be wonderful.*

Despite being somewhat disgusted with myself, I couldn't wait to see those adorable ears again.

## Chapter Five: The King's Brother and the Prince

I woke with a start the next morning. It was much earlier than usual. The shock of sprouting fennec ears must have prevented me from sleeping well. Mary still hadn't even come to wake me. Even so, I took Squishy on a walk since I was wide awake.

While strolling around aimlessly, I spotted Mary in the distance. Lord Gaetano walked beside her. Both were returning to the castle, holding concealed weapons and a sword, respectively. Apparently, the two had been training since early morning.

*Wait, did Mary train with Lord Gaetano yesterday, too?*

Anyone with eyes could see how close together they were walking. I couldn't help but grin at the romance in the air. Not wanting to interrupt, I tiptoed away, making myself as invisible as possible. After continuing to walk for a while, a goofy grin still on my face, I reached the greenhouse. Of course, that brought back memories of being a fennec fox.

"I definitely won't feel compelled to dive into the sand anymore, right?" I asked Squishy. "Right?!"

"Squishy..." the slime replied anxiously.

*And I won't sprout ears again due to excitement, right? Definitely not!*

A quick scan of the area revealed no prying eyes. Thus, I slipped into the greenhouse, anxiety spurring me onwards. I headed towards my destination by relying on my vulpine memories. As I approached the middle of the greenhouse, I found the sandy area with abundant cacti. My heart raced as I stopped right in front of the miniature desert. Thankfully, I felt no urge to dive in the sand, no matter how much I stared at it.

*Phew, talk about having a weight off my shoulders. Perfectly normal human confirmed. Well, except for my tendency to grow animal ears and a tail, I guess.*

As I breathed a sigh of relief, I sensed someone behind me.

“Those plants are called cacti,” a familiar voice said. “Are you interested in them, by any chance?”

Turning around, I found Giusto smiling at me. Several knights stood behind him as well. My eyes widened slightly at their imposing aura.

“Good morning,” Giusto said, his smile faltering. “I apologize if my guards startled you.”

Thinking back, an inordinate number of knights had been at yesterday’s tea party as well. That said, he was the King of Bragioga’s only son. Perhaps it was natural for him to have tight security.

“Good morning to you, too,” I responded with a smile. “Please don’t worry. It’s only natural for a prince to be well guarded.”

Giusto hung his head, expression still glum. “If only I had a personal retainer as strong as Janus. Well, Prince Embert is incredibly strong himself. I truly envy them.”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t compare myself to those two. Both are abnormally strong.”

While Embert and Janus were exceptional fighters, the King of Gandolfin wasn’t particularly strong. That said, he did have my father—another abnormality—as his personal retainer.

*Yeah, best not to think of them as the norm.*

“It’s reassuring to hear that from you,” Giusto said. “I’m going to be declared crown prince during the Founding Festival. Tensions are running high, and my freedom has been restricted. Truth be told, it’s a bit stifling.”

“You’re being declared crown prince so soon?” I asked.

“Indeed. I’ve already graduated from our royal academy.”

I had assumed Giusto was young, but he was actually three years older than me.

“Congratulations, Your Highness,” I said.

Giusto chuckled. “Thank you very much.”

Something nagged at me during this conversation.

“Hm, what was it?” I wondered aloud.

“Is something wrong?” Giusto asked.

“Umm...”

*I heard something related to the royal family, didn’t I? What was it again?*

After mulling it over, I suddenly shouted, “That’s it!”

Giusto reacted with a puzzled expression similar to Julietta’s.

“Pardon my rudeness, but...” I trailed off.

“Yes?” Giusto asked.

“The day before yesterday, I met Lady Damiana by happenstance. She mentioned her father being first in line for the throne.”

“You heard that, did you?” Giusto responded with a smile. “Currently, Damiana’s father—in other words, my uncle—is first in line for the throne. The order of inheritance will only shift when I become crown prince.”

“Oh, I see.”

Oftentimes, the order of inheritance changed as soon as the king had a son. Other times, the order of inheritance didn’t change until the king’s son became crown prince. From what I understood, this differed depending on the country.

“You must be very busy preparing for the ascension ceremony,” I said, trying to be considerate. “Please don’t overexert yourself too much.”

Giusto’s lapis lazuli eyes momentarily widened before he smiled at me again. “Thank you very much. It warms my heart to know you’re concerned about me, Holy Woman.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but I would prefer you didn’t call me by that title. I don’t think of myself as a holy woman, after all.” Being extolled as a holy woman made me uncomfortable. That’s not how I viewed myself. “Please feel free to call me Alexandra,” I said. “Or even Ally if you prefer.”

“Are you sure?” Giusto asked, his expression brightening. “That sounds wonderful. Please allow me to call you Ally then.”

I nodded, the prince’s genuine joy bringing a smile to my lips. I found him rather adorable, perhaps due to his resemblance to Julietta.

Afterward, Giusto asked me several questions. For instance, had I found anything about staying in the castle inconvenient? How was I spending my time? When I mentioned exploring the dungeon, he couldn’t contain his excitement.

“I’m envious,” he said. “Despite being native to this land, I’ve never explored the dungeon due to my position. In all likelihood, I’ll never be able to set foot there.”

That made sense. If the future king went dungeon diving, and the unthinkable happened to him, the country would be in a tight spot. Embert was just a weirdo.

*I need to help him somehow*, I thought while observing Giusto’s disappointed expression.

“Well then, why don’t you hang out with me and my friends when you have time?” I asked. “Dungeon diving might be out of the question, but there might be enjoyable places to visit around the castle. Just having a picnic would be plenty of fun.”

Giusto’s lapis lazuli eyes sparkled. “Indeed. That sounds delightful.”

Based on his expression, inviting him had been the right call.

“All right, I’ll talk to everyone else as soon as possible,” I said. “We’ll decide what to do specifically then.”

“Yes, that sounds wonderful. Thank you very much.”

Giusto and I left the greenhouse together. He needed to return to the castle, and I wanted to meet up with my friends right away. As we headed back to the castle, discussing our potential plans, I sensed bloodlust from somewhere nearby. At that moment, the sound of something streaking through the air reached my ears.

*It's an arrow!*

Immediately, my mana formed a golden shield that covered everyone present. However, Squishy acted faster and even more magnificently. After jumping off my shoulder, he swallowed all three arrows, which had been loosed from different directions. At the same time, a few knights dashed off in pursuit of the assailants.

"Way to go, Squishy!" I exclaimed.

"Squishy!" he cheeped before expelling the slimy arrows from his body.

*Um, what do you expect me to do with that gooey mess, exactly?*

"You're amazing, Squishy," I praised him.

The slime bounced up and down happily. What an adorable little fella.

Meanwhile, Giusto stared into the distance with a blank expression. With a deep sigh, he turned in our direction. The arrows had probably been targeting him, but judging from his trancelike state, I couldn't be sure.

*They weren't targeting me, right? What have I done to warrant assassination? I was a fennec fox until yesterday morning, for crying out loud!*

"Are you okay, Your Highness?" I asked.

Giusto grabbed my hand, seeming to have woken from his trance. "Lady Alexandra," he said, overcome with emotion. "No, Ally. You truly are an incredible person."

I cocked my head. "Uh, thanks?"

*Squishy's the one you should be praising.*

Nevertheless, the exuberant prince stared at me with impassioned eyes, his grip on my hand tightening. "I've never seen such beautiful golden mana before. It took my breath away. Moreover, you used voiceless incantation. I'll say it again: You truly are an incredible person."

*This prince is a lot more impressive than I gave him credit for. Those assassins were definitely targeting him, but he seems unflappable.*

"More importantly, are you injured, Your Highness?" I asked. I spoke in a

slightly raised voice to snap Giusto out of his daze again.

“I’m perfectly fine,” he responded in a jovial tone.

Something seemed off here.

“If I’m not mistaken, someone just tried to assassinate you, right?” I asked.

The next words out of his mouth stunned me more than a little.

“It happens all the time,” he said. “Oh, but that was the first time they targeted me outside the castle.”

“All the time...?” I repeated.

Assassins targeted him that frequently? As shock rendered me speechless, Giusto grinned at me.

“Some people would prefer I didn’t become the crown prince,” he explained. “Much less the future king. My time at the royal academy was relatively peaceful. However, when I graduated and returned to the castle, the assassins began targeting me again.”

“Do you have any leads on the culprit?” I asked.

“Good question. I have my suspicions, but I can’t say anything for certain right now. The culprit probably isn’t acting alone. That complicates matters a great deal.”

How did Giusto maintain his smile while assassins continuously targeted him? Perhaps he had no choice but to keep smiling. He couldn’t show fear when the culprit could be watching him from anywhere. Even so, he’d been living with the threat of death looming over him since childhood. That thought caused my chest to tighten.



**AFTER** parting with Giusto, I explained the situation to my friends over breakfast. A somber mood hung over the dining table.

Rosario looked at Julietta. “Did you know about Prince Giusto’s circumstances?” he asked.

As Julietta trembled in her seat, face pale, Lauris wrapped his arms around

her. In response to Rosario's question, she shook her head back and forth.

"I had no idea," she said in a feeble voice, her brown eyes welling with tears. "Giusto is always so kind and cheerful. He seemed genuinely thrilled when I told him about my engagement. How could I have known he was suffering so deeply...?"

Upon witnessing her sorrow, I felt a surge of indignation towards the unidentified culprit.

"I want to do something," I said.

To my surprise, Lauris agreed without hesitation. "Let's catch the culprit."

"Sounds like a plan," Oreste concurred.

Cita and Cia nodded.

"If we're going to do this, there's no room for failure," Rosario said while meeting my eye. "You understand that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I understand perfectly, but why are you singling *me* out?" I asked.

*I won't be the one to screw this up... probably.*

Rosario's heavy sigh echoed throughout the dining room. "Things tend to escalate when you get involved. If we start making a racket from the get-go, we won't be able to catch the culprit."

*Wait, when did this turn into a roast of Alexandra?!*

As Cita giggled uncontrollably, Oreste roared with laughter. "Aha, you're right about that," he said. "We might as well throw stealth out the window with Ally around."

Rosario glared at Oreste. "The same goes for you."

Oreste hung his head. "...Y-Yes, sir."

I giggled. After shooting me a quick glare, Lauris cleared his throat and took control of the conversation. "At any rate, we have to protect Prince Giusto at all costs," he said. "We'll need your help too, Custode."

"Of course," the dragon replied telepathically, nibbling on a croissant atop my lap. "This sounds like a good time."

*Hey, could you not drop crumbs all over me? I thought, glowering at him.*

“All right, let’s do this!” Oreste cried.

Everyone else raised their fists. “Let’s do this!” we cheered in unison.

“Squishy!” the slime cheeped from atop my shoulder, seeming equally fired up.

“Julie,” I said. “We’ll protect Giusto at any cost.”

Despite the tears still streaming down her cheeks, Julietta donned a brave smile. “Thank you.”

I vowed in my heart to give the culprit a good thrashing.

“What’s this?” a familiar voice asked. “It sounds like you lot are planning something fun all by yourselves.”

Embert and Janus entered the room just as we were wrapping up the conversation. Was it just my imagination, or did they always appear at the most opportune times? In any event, Lauris got straight to the point.

“Embert,” he said. “Did you know about assassins targeting Prince Giusto?”

Embert sighed softly, not appearing the least bit surprised. “Where did you hear that from?”

“Straight from the source. Ally was with Prince Giusto when the assassins attacked.” As soon as he finished speaking, the realization of his mistake dawned on Lauris’s face.

“Ally,” Embert said, turning a wicked smile on me. “Let’s have a chat later, shall we?”

“...Okay,” I groaned.

*Just had to go and open your big mouth, huh, Lauris?*

Embert sat down next to me, and Janus stood behind us.

“Well?” Embert asked. “Do you mind explaining what happened?” After listening to my explanation, Embert furrowed his brow in contemplation. “The assassins have started targeting him in the castle, eh? They must be panicking.”

I frowned. "You knew about this all along, Em?"

The way he spoke gave that impression.

"I did," Embert replied. "Prince Giusto and the King of Bragioga consulted me about this matter not too long ago. That's why I visited earlier than I originally planned."

"Do you have any leads on the culprit?" Rosario asked.

Embert and Janus exchanged glances.

"Yes, I have my suspicions," Embert replied. "However, we don't have conclusive evidence. By all appearances, the culprit is using professional assassins adept at covering their tracks. Even so, the culprit has finally started to panic. They need to finish the job before the crown prince ascension ceremony."

I tilted my head in confusion. Why did the culprit need to finish the job before the ascension ceremony? The assassins could still target him after he became crown prince, right? Based on their puzzled expressions, everyone else appeared to be wondering the same thing.

"Giusto will inherit a certain artifact when he becomes crown prince," Julietta explained. "That's probably the reason for the culprit's urgency."

All eyes immediately focused on Julietta. What in the world could this artifact be?

"For generations, the crown prince has inherited an enchanted ring," she continued. While speaking, she touched her necklace that I'd enchanted. "The ring isn't as strong as Ally's amulets, but it detects poison and reduces physical damage by half. When the dungeon first appeared in the distant past, two of these rings were found in a treasure chest on the lowest floor. Ever since then, the king and the crown prince have each worn one of the rings. Obviously, it's much harder to take the life of someone wearing one of them. That's why the culprit has grown desperate."

As I considered it deeply, I felt someone's gaze boring into me.

"Ally," Embert said, resting his chin on his fist while meeting my eye. "Shall we

go on a short walk once you've finished your breakfast?"

*Is he still mad that I spent time alone with Prince Giusto?*

"Um, why don't we all go together then?" I suggested.

Naturally, I was apprehensive about how things might unfold. However, I fell silent upon seeing Embert's sinister, wordless smile. All the while, everyone regarded me with obvious sympathy.

*Ugh, why did I only bring Squishy with me back then? He's the only one who can't vouch for my innocence!*

When I glowered down at Custode, I found him holding a fresh croissant.

"Welp, here we go," he said with obvious delight.

"What do you mean by 'here we go'?" I asked telepathically, looking at him with pleading eyes. "Are you coming with me, or are you about to gobble down that croissant?"

Custode laughed. "Don't fear. I'm coming with you."

*Thank goodness, I thought with a small sigh of relief. Embert nearly sent me into cardiac arrest the last time we were alone together. Custode won't let anything like that happen.*

Thus, Embert escorted me out of the dining hall.



**EMBERT** and I headed towards the pond on the other side of the courtyard. We held hands the entire way. Eventually, we arrived at the gazebo, where the merchant had tried to capture me two days ago. As I sat down next to Embert, Custode sat on my opposite side. Squishy remained on my shoulder.

After letting out a soft sigh, Embert turned to face me. "You weren't injured, were you?"

"Not at all," I answered. "Thanks for asking. And I'm sorry for worrying you."

When I hung my head, Embert placed a hand on my cheek. "I know you won't fall prey to some run-of-the-mill assassin. It's your recklessness that worries me. I wish you would rely on me more. The way you prioritize others over yourself

worries me the most. You need to take care of yourself as well, regardless of how strong you are. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, sorry about that..." I mumbled.

I understood perfectly. At the same time, my body tended to act of its own accord. I had come to this world due to dying from protecting a mother and child from a reckless driver. How could I change my nature?

"Please rely on me," Embert said. "I'm your fiancé. I want to be closer to you than anyone. I always want to be the one protecting you."

Tears welled in my eyes. Embert truly loved me, didn't he?

"Thanks," I replied, the tears spilling down my cheeks. "I love you, Em."

Embert gulped loudly. "Ally, that's not fair," he murmured, his cheeks flushing slightly.

*Don't tell me...*

My hands shot to the top of my head. Yep, I'd grown fennec ears, just as I'd feared. Embert placed a hand over his mouth in an attempt to restrain himself.

Upon seeing my fennec ears for the first time, Custode regarded me with evident fascination. "Well, well, this is an unusual sight."

Unfortunately, I'd grown more than just ears. I could feel something fluffy on my lower back as well. That had to be a tail.

"What causes this to happen, exactly?" I asked Custode.

*I have no control over when I sprout these animal parts. That's a massive cause for concern, don'tcha think?*

"I can't say for certain," Custode responded. "However, they seem to sprout when you're feeling particularly emotional."

"Ugh, how am I supposed to think straight when you're so adorable?" Embert asked. "What am I to do here?"

"Wh-Whoa!" I cried. "How about you don't do anything, please and thank you?!"

Squishy stuck himself to Embert's face with a wet *splat*. He must have reacted

to the panic in my voice. Embert peeled the slime off his face.

“That calmed me down a bit,” he said. Then, he looked at me with eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You haven’t shown those ears to Prince Giusto, have you?”

*Why is he bringing up Prince Giusto now?* I wondered, cocking my head.

Embert’s eyes darted away from me. “Cute gestures won’t appease me. Why were you there to save Prince Giusto in the first place?”

“Why?” I responded. “We ran into each other in the greenhouse.”

“Ran into each other, did you? By complete happenstance?”

“That’s right. I woke up earlier than usual, took Squishy on a walk, and bumped into Prince Giusto by coincidence.”

“The prince didn’t do anything to you, did he?” Embert asked.

*Um, what do you mean by “anything”?*

I cocked my head again, unable to understand what Embert was implying.

“That’s not fair!” Embert exclaimed, wrapping his arms around me. “Didn’t I just say that a minute ago? Why must you act so adorably when you’re already so cute? I’m not strong enough to restrain myself!”

Embert had a weakness for animal ears; that much had become clear. Still, inside his arms, I couldn’t help but giggle at his insane antics. At that moment, my body twitched as a pleasant jolt ran through my fennec ears.

“Well, that settles it,” Embert said. “Your ears *are* connected to nerves.” He breathed softly into one of my fennec ears, causing me to shudder again.

“Why?!” I cried. “I didn’t feel anything when I touched them myself!”

Embert smirked. “Because the man you love is touching them now, of course.”

*Yuck. I’m definitely not conceding that point. It would feel like admitting defeat.*

Nevertheless, I shuddered each time Embert teased my fennec ears.

"Save me, Custode," I pleaded telepathically.

"Quiet," the dragon responded. "I hear footsteps approaching."

"What?" Embert and I responded in unison.

Startled, both of us strained our ears. Before long, we heard noises from the direction of the detached villa. It sounded like the rustling of clothes.

"H-Hold on a second," I whispered, pressing my hands against the top of my head. "What should I do about these?"

Fortunately, I didn't feel my fennec ears. By some magic, they'd disappeared, which coaxed a sigh of relief from me and Embert. While we waited in silence, the people from the detached villa drew closer. Though they would soon come into sight, we heard their voices before seeing them.

"Father," a familiar woman's voice said. "Would you please invite Prince Embert to our manor today?"

All emotion vanished from Embert's expression. He donned a smile so devoid of feeling that I wanted to ask, "Did you just put on a mask?" As I marveled at his abrupt change in demeanor, a man's voice spoke next.

"Ha! You're truly fond of Prince Embert, aren't you, Damiana?"

Clearly, the voices belonged to Damiana and her father. In that case, they must have lived in the detached villa.

"Huh?" I mumbled.

For some reason, the man's voice sounded familiar. The moment that occurred to me, Damiana and her father appeared in front of us.

"Oh?" Damiana asked, sounding pleased by this unexpected encounter. "What are you doing here, Prince Embert?"

She began jogging over to us before stopping short. As I tried to puzzle that out, Embert chuckled. Damiana had halted for one simple reason: Embert still had his arms around me. I'd become so accustomed to his embrace that it hadn't occurred to me. Though I tried to pull away from him, he wouldn't let me go. In fact, his hold on me only tightened. As Damiana's eyes bulged, her face turning bright red with fury, I could do nothing but stare at her silently.

“What’s wrong, Damiana?” her father asked.

The sight of the middle-aged man in a black coat caused me to recoil. During my brief stint as a fennec, a nobleman and a merchant had tried to capture me. Now, that very nobleman had appeared right in front of me. No wonder his voice had sounded familiar.

“Ally?” Embert asked, having noticed me recoil.

“I’m fine,” I replied in a whisper. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Who the hell is that woman?!?” Damiana shrieked, her face twisting into an ogre’s scowl. “What’s going on here?! Who do you think you are, clinging to my prince like that?! Show me your face!”

Damiana stomped towards the gazebo, her outstretched hand pointed at me. Just before she could enter, however, something repelled her. Upon closer inspection, a magic barrier had been erected around the gazebo. “Eek!” Damiana yelped before toppling backward. After catching his daughter, her father narrowed his eyes in my direction.

*Care to glower at someone else? I didn’t do anything.*

“Who dares lay her filthy hand on my holy woman?” Custode asked with a snort. “I’m most unamused.”

Apparently, the barrier had been his doing.

“Squishy!” the slime cheeped furiously. Somehow, he still looked cute when angry.

“Well done, Custode,” Embert said with a satisfied chuckle.

Custode smirked. These three—prince, dragon, and slime—made for a wicked team.

In any case, Embert let go of me and went to stand before Damiana and her father. He now wore a smile of genuine delight rather than the previous mask.

“You’re being incredibly rude, Lady Damiana,” he said. “This is my beloved fiancée. I cannot permit the likes of you to casually lay your hand on her. Furthermore, I heard some rather peculiar remarks from you. If you continue acting with such disrespect, I’ll have to take that into consideration as a

representative of Gandolfin. You understand what I'm saying, don't you, Royal Prince Pieno?"

Though Damiana gaped in disbelief, her father's expression remained the same. That said, his aura clearly changed. Unfathomable darkness radiated from him. I had no words to describe his demeanor except deeply unsettling.

*I still need to introduce myself,* I thought despite my slight sense of revulsion.

Thus, I stood, joined Embert's side, and curtsied. "My name is Alexandra Vistriano," I said with a smile. "I'm Crown Prince Embert's fiancée."

My stomach turned when I met Pieno's gaze. It felt as though his body had been crafted from negative emotions. Embert wrapped an arm around my waist to provide reassurance. Presumably, he'd sensed my discomfort.

"As I said, Alexandra is my beloved fiancée," Embert said. "I planned to introduce her during the Founding Festival, but we've gotten somewhat ahead of schedule."

Pieno stared at me as if appraising something for sale. "If this young lady is your fiancée, she must be the holy woman, no? It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Holiness. I'm Pieno Cotarini—the King of Bragioga's younger brother. Rumors of you have reached my ears for quite some time. Considering your beauty, perhaps you should be called a goddess rather than a holy woman. I would be honored if you allowed me to kiss your hand as a gesture of friendship."

Despite his gentle words, wickedness lay beneath his gray eyes. When I hesitated, Embert hid me behind his back.

"As I said, I cannot allow anyone to touch Alexandra casually," Embert said. "Not even the royal prince. Don't make things too difficult for us, would you? Otherwise, you might incur the wrath of our divine beast."

After catching sight of Custode in the gazebo, Pieno snorted. "Is that the divine beast you speak of? Quite a grand name for such an adorable little creature."

Damiana took this opportunity to cackle with laughter as well. "Oh my, are you talking about that little black creature? Aren't dragons supposed to be

much larger? Perhaps Lady Alexandra isn't much of a holy woman if she can only summon that tiny little thing."

A wave of hostility surged from Embert. However, I felt an even more terrifying pressure from behind. It originated from Custode.

"Crown Prince," the dragon said. "Don't fly into a rage over their nonsense. Those who can't even gauge my power are of no significance."

Embert chuckled. "Perhaps you should take your own advice and stop radiating such a menacing aura."

"Alas, that awful girl sickens me to my core."

"Yes, I couldn't agree more."

Thus, Embert and Custode continued glaring at Damiana.

"Eek!" she squealed.

"Haha, forgive us," Pieno said with an ingratiating smile. "We seem to have offended you, Prince Embert, and your divine beast. Come with me, Damiana. We'll take our leave here. Once again, I'm terribly sorry."

He then took Damiana's arm and began to leave. After a few steps, however, he turned back towards me. He wore a composed expression as if nothing had occurred.

"Your name is Lady Alexandra, correct?" he asked. "By way of apology, I would love to have you over for tea during your stay."

With that, he strode away before anyone could react.

The air around Embert turned frigid. "That sly devil has set his sights on you, has he?"

"I definitely won't be having tea with him," I said. "Something about him gives me the creeps. Plus..." I proceeded to tell Embert about Pieno's ominous conversation with the merchant.

"Fascinating," Embert said. "This information could prove quite valuable."

My shoulders slumped. "Sorry I wasn't able to hear them more clearly."

Embert shook his head. "What are you saying? I'm just glad you weren't

captured. Who knows what terrible fate might have awaited you had they succeeded? You mustn't approach that sly devil from here on out. Of course, I'll do everything in my power to protect you as well."

"Thanks," I responded with a laugh.

"Squishy, squishy!" the slime cheeped while bouncing on my shoulder.

Apparently, he would protect me, too.

"Thank you, Squishy," I said.

"Don't forget me," Custode chimed in. "I'll turn your enemies into ash if you desire."

I laughed again. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

*On top of having a fiancé who I love, I also have reliable allies, I thought. How blessed can a girl get?*

And so, I returned to the castle with a grin.



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View☆☆

"IT'S about time," Janus remarked while checking his breast pocket watch.

"You're right," I replied, staring down at my right hand. "Let's leave once we've taken care of these documents."

*Her ears were just as soft as... no, even softer than I anticipated.*

I balled my right hand into a fist. When Ally's fennec ears had sprouted a second time, I'd touched them with this very hand, unable to restrain myself. I'd also breathed into her ears, causing them to twitch adorably. Similarly, Ally's shoulders had trembled with surprise. After losing complete control of myself, I'd poked her ears and caressed their backsides. As I'd attempted to touch their insides, however, Pieno and Damiana had appeared. Unfortunately, that had caused Ally's fennec ears to vanish.

*I wanted to enjoy them a little while longer.*

"That was a supremely rude interruption," I muttered to myself.

“What are you talking about?” Janus asked, his sharp ears not missing a single syllable.

I wouldn’t be able to deceive a man of Janus’s caliber. As such, I told him about everything except for Ally’s fennec ears.

Janus chuckled, radiating a frigid aura. “Surely, you wouldn’t allow my adorable sister to have tea with the royal prince.”

“Of course not.”

I couldn’t let Ally associate with Damiana or that sly devil any further.

“It’s a relief to hear that from you,” Janus said with a smile. He then left the room with the documents in hand.

Once alone, I leaned back in my chair and stared at my hand again.

“I can’t wait to stroke Ally’s head when her fennec ears pop up again,” I mumbled.

How would it feel to caress her fluffy ears and silky hair at the same time? Eventually, I wanted to touch her bushy tail as well. Stroking it from base to tip would be delightful. Perhaps burying my face in it would be just as splendid. As those thoughts crossed my mind, I couldn’t suppress a chuckle.

“This might not bode well,” I muttered.

Apparently, I had something of a fetish for animal ears. I’d vaguely suspected this the first time, but now, my thoughts had surpassed perversion. Nevertheless, I couldn’t forget that fluffy sensation. The mere thought of Ally’s fennec ears was unbearable.

“What am I to do?” I asked. “I might have to keep Squishy by my side at all times.”

Otherwise, I might lose my inhibitions. Or perhaps I was barely clinging to them at this point. Fortunately, I always regained some composure when Squishy attacked me.

In any case, I heaved a deep sigh, unable to get the image of Ally’s twitching fennec ears out of my mind.



## ☆☆ Alexandra's Point of View ☆☆

COME afternoon, I visited a lake managed by Bragioga with my friends. The lake—located in a forest—was larger than expected. The forest stretched out on the eastern and opposite sides of the lake. However, I couldn't see the end of the lake on the western side.

"Whoa, there are a lot of people here," I said.

"Right?" Lauris responded. "Nothing like going for a swim on a hot day."

People were swimming in an enclosed area of the lake. Rather than a seaside resort, this was something of a lakeside resort. Several tents were on the shore where people could change. Julietta had reserved one tent for the boys and another for the girls. As such, we all decided to change in our respective tents.

The boys finished changing before us. As soon as we left our tent, all of them gasped. We girls were wearing rash guards and tight shorts. That said, the shorts came a little above our knees. The other women at the lake wore one-piece, linen dresses that covered their calves. Generally speaking, it was inappropriate for women to show skin in this world. However, the skirts of those linen dresses clung to your legs when you got into the water, which made swimming difficult. Likewise, the skirts puffed up when filled with air, exposing your legs underwater. Embarrassing, right? Thus, I'd made these outfits before coming here.

*I'm always happy when knowledge from my previous life comes in handy, I thought. At the same time...*

"Is this a little too exciting for the boys?" I asked.

The boys were as still as statues, their faces bright red. At first, the girls had been embarrassed to wear these outfits. Yet after putting them on, comfort had won out over shame. As for me, I hadn't felt the slightest bit embarrassed. I'd worn bikinis in my previous life, after all.

"Y-Y-You're showing too much skin!" Lauris stammered.

"Really?" I asked. "A little skin never hurt anyone, right?"

"It's hurt a lot more than you know!" Rosario exclaimed, unable to take his eyes off Cia.

Without speaking, Oreste approached Cita and wrapped her in a bear hug. "I can't let other men see you like this."

However, Cita had a counterattack ready. "You don't think it looks nice on me?"

"N-No, that's not what I meant."

*She's keeping you on the back foot there, Oreste.*

"Well then, you *do* think it looks nice on me?" Cita asked, continuing her assault.

"Yeah," Oreste mumbled. "You look adorable."

Cita giggled. "Glad to hear it. Just so you know, this outfit is really easy to move around in. I won't trip underwater and don't have to worry about my legs getting exposed. We'll be able to enjoy ourselves without any reservation."

Oreste grinned. Cita had won this round.

Rosario spoke up next, his face still beet red. "At the very least, could you please find something to cover your legs while you're on shore?"

"All right, how about this?" I asked.

When I snapped my fingers, a sarong wrapped around each girl's waist.

"Wow, this is so cute," Cia mumbled in astonishment.

Cita and Julietta spun around delightedly as well. As I reveled in everyone's cuteness, Lauris spoke to me in a low voice. "Wrap one of those around yourself, too."

"Ugh, why?" I complained. "It's such a pain in the butt."

I would just have to take it off when I got in the water. Plus, I didn't find this sort of outfit the least bit embarrassing.

"I'll tell Embert," Lauris said with a smirk.

My eyes darted around the area. Embert tended to appear at precisely these

sorts of moments. Realizing this, Lauris glanced around anxiously as well. However, we found no sign of Embert.

“Phew, he’s not here,” I said.

At that moment, someone’s chuckling reached my ears. “Is Prince Embert your greatest weakness or something?” a familiar voice asked.

Giusto had arrived with his guards in tow. He strolled up to us in a shirt free of any ornamentations. Clearly, he had every intention of going for a swim.

“I wrapped up work as fast as I possibly could today,” he said.

We’d invited Giusto to join us for this outing, just as he and I had discussed in the greenhouse. Originally, we’d planned to come together, but Giusto had arrived late due to some important work.

“You came at the perfect time,” I said with a laugh.

Thus, we got into the lake along with Giusto. At first, the water being colder than the ocean surprised me. However, I quickly got used to the temperature after submerging myself. From the corner of my eye, I noticed the other girls squealing with delight in the shallows. Meanwhile, Oreste, Lauris, and I donned serious expressions.

“On your mark...” Rosario began, Squishy resting on his shoulder. “Get set... Go!”

The three of us swam at once. After touching the fence that designated the end of the swimming area, we turned around. None of us were allowed to use magic for this serious competition. A fierce battle unfolded between us, but in the end, Lauris won by a narrow margin.

“Victory!” he exclaimed.

“Damn it,” Oreste swore.

“Ugh, I was so close,” I complained.

Giusto swam up to me as I seethed with frustration. “That was incredible,” he said. “You came so close to winning even against men.”

“It’s better not to treat Ally like a lady, Your Highness,” Oreste said. “After all,

I've never beaten her in a martial arts contest."

Giusto's lapis lazuli eyes widened with surprise as he regarded me.

*Whoa, you're gonna burn a hole in my face if you stare at me that hard.*

Around the time three holes had been burned into my face, Giusto grinned at me from ear to ear.

*His smile is so similar to Julie's, I thought while gazing back at him.*

At that moment, he grabbed my hand. "You truly are remarkable, Ally. Being a holy woman is incredible in itself, but you're amazing even at your core."

"Th-Thank you very much," I replied.

I broke into a smile. His sparkling eyes were so reminiscent of Julietta's. As we laughed softly together, the conversation came to an end. Even so, Giusto showed no signs of releasing my hand. When I wondered when he would let go, Julietta called out, "I brought snacks!"

At some point, a table and chairs had been set up in the shade of a tree.

"Shall we go?" Giusto asked.

Though I expected him to let go now, he continued holding my hand while escorting me. Cia's smirk sent a shiver down my spine. At any rate, Giusto sat me down next to him and even served me sweets.

"Custode, Squishy!" I cried, the excessive treatment making me uneasy.  
"Snack time!"

Custode was lounging on top of Squishy, who'd spread out on the water to the size of a cushion. The tiny dragon was the portrait of elegance, unconcerned with my awkwardness. I sighed in relief as the two creatures heard my call and returned to my side. Squishy shrank back to his usual palm-sized form. Of course, Custode perched himself on my lap and grabbed the sweets Giusto had served me.

Squishy grabbed a few sweets himself, immediately absorbing them into his body. When I first offered the slime treats, he'd responded with a puzzled, "Squishy?" and hadn't eaten them. Yet now, he gobbled down as many sweets as Custode, thoroughly accustomed to them.

"Slimes sure are strange," I said, staring at my familiar. "Squishy can float on water even though he's made of minerals. There's something mystical about them, don't you think?"

Custode laughed. "Perhaps it's because slimes have no concept of how they *must* behave. The wild ones live without much thought, getting by somehow or another."

*Goddess save the slimes—the embodiment of slow living!*

Custode smirked at me. "You're not too different from a slime yourself."

*Seriously? I'm not that devil-may-care about life, am I?*

"I could say the exact same thing about you," I retorted.

Custode responded with a hearty laugh. "Yes, I suppose so."

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Giusto said while grinning at me. Evidently, he'd been listening to our conversation this whole time. "Just watching you puts me in a good mood," he continued. "I'm envious of Prince Embert for having such a wonderful woman as his future queen."

"Th-Thank you very much," I replied.

*Honestly, he thinks way too highly of me.* As I considered that, Lauris and Rosario snickered across from me. I would have to give them a stern talking-to later.

Julietta giggled. "I'm glad we feel the same, Giusto. Ally truly is amazing. Us becoming sisters-in-law is a dream come true."

I nearly swooned at her unwavering cuteness.

"Dorky smile alert," Custode warned me.

"Huh?" I responded. "No way."

Custode roared with laughter as I slapped a hand over my mouth. The twins and Oreste laughed at me as well.

Snack time passed amiably. After finishing our light meals, we discussed getting back into the water. However, Custode was staring into the distance east from us.

“I sense bloodlust,” he said sharply.

In a flash, I erected a mana shield around us.

“Oreste!” Lauris cried while running eastward.

Arrows flew towards us from the upper air, high above Lauris and Oreste. The archers appeared to be firing from the trees. Fortunately, none of them hit us. My mana had enveloped everyone, and Squishy devoured the arrows just as he’d done before.

“It’s not over yet,” Custode said.

A second volley of arrows soared towards us, but Squishy devoured them again. Once the slime had finished polishing off every arrow, I heard Lauris shout, “Stop right there!” At that moment, I felt an enormous surge of mana.

A few moments later, Lauris returned. “They got away,” he said with a heavy sigh. “There were three men wearing balaclavas, but they used a magic artifact to teleport away.”

The enormous mana surge had probably been the magic artifact activating. In any case, the arrows Squishy spat out were the same model as the previous assassination attempt. That said, they were normal, commonly used arrows. Tracing them back to the culprit would likely be impossible.

“They might retreat gracefully, but their actions are despicable,” I said.

As I prickled with irritation, Giusto gripped my hand. “I’m honored you’re angry on my behalf,” he replied.

The prince maintained a listless attitude as if he hadn’t suffered countless attempts on his life. That quelled my irritation. After taking a deep breath, I looked him in the eye.

“The culprit is wealthy enough to own a magic artifact that can teleport several people at once,” I said. “What’s more, they know your movements, Prince Giusto. The mastermind—or a collaborator—is probably in our midst.”

Giusto squeezed my hand. “I should have expected as much from a holy woman,” he responded with a grin. “That’s exactly right. After all, my uncle is the culprit.”

“Come again?”

Everyone stood stock-still, staring at the prince wordlessly.

“...You knew the culprit’s identity this whole time?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Giusto confirmed. “As the royal prince, my uncle has the most to gain from my death. It makes perfect sense, no?”

*Initially, I thought he resembled Julie, but that’s not right. He’s more similar to Em, isn’t he? Sure, he might look like his sister, but he has a certain mental fortitude. He probably has a cunning side, too. Is cunningness a prerequisite for becoming king or something?*

Giusto chuckled at my dumbfounded expression. I let out a soft sigh as he continued squeezing my hand.



IN the end, we returned to the castle without swimming again. We continued the previous conversation over tea in the living room.

“As of now, we can’t arrest my uncle, much less accuse him of a crime,” Giusto said. “While he’s clearly the culprit, we don’t have any concrete evidence.”

Cita wore a serious expression. “Then it’s imperative that we capture one of the assassins, right?”

Giusto nodded. “Unfortunately, that’s proven quite difficult, considering the speed of their getaways. Although we can trace spell remnants back to their source, we can’t do the same for the mana in magic artifacts.”

In many cases, magic artifacts contained the mana of more than one person. That made it difficult to identify the source. An artifact capable of teleporting multiple people at once would contain an immense quantity of mana. Almost certainly, a number of people had imbued the device with their magical energy. Identifying any one person would be impossible.

“Why don’t we perform an exhaustive search of every place the assassins have targeted you?” Oreste suggested.

Giusto shook his head. “We’ve already done that and come up empty-

handed. For starters, we don't even know how my uncle is contacting the assassins. As a noble supremacist, he would never venture into the city himself. We haven't noticed him inviting any suspicious characters to his manor, either. Likewise, there are no signs of him exchanging letters. All that aside, access to the castle is already limited. Merchants and artisans undergo strict examinations when coming and going. There shouldn't be anyone with questionable motives on these grounds."

"Could a servant be acting as an intermediary then?" Rosario asked.

Giusto shook his head again. "We've looked into that as well and found nothing."

*This royal prince is one sly devil, I thought. Hm, wait a second.*

"Um, I might have an idea," I mumbled.

"That's a first," Lauris quipped.

*Rude, much? I thought with a huff. I have ideas all the time!*

"You know the gazebo across the pond in the courtyard?" I asked. "I saw the royal prince chatting with a merchant there. Could that have been his intermediary?"

"Huh?" Lauris asked while leaning forward. "Did you hear what they were talking about?"

When I shook my head, he slumped back onto the sofa with a dramatic sigh.

"A merchant, you say?" Giusto asked, his brow furrowing in contemplation. "We should know every merchant who comes and goes from the castle. However, my uncle summons them around the clock to buy an excessive number of luxuries. Perhaps he orchestrated the entry of unaccounted-for merchants."

Julietta perked up. "In that case, we might be able to apprehend the assassins if we find that merchant."

Her words fired everyone up.

Cita frowned. "But even if we capture the merchant, there's no guarantee he's one of the assassins, right?"

That valid point silenced the room. At that moment, a knock came at the door.

“There’s no need to search for him,” a familiar voice interrupted.

*Yep, I saw this one coming a mile away. Everyone else probably did, too.*

The new arrival was, of course, Embert. Janus followed behind him, as did another young man with white hair and sparkling obsidian eyes.

“Is that you, Severin?” I asked.

As soon as he spotted me, Severin approached me with a cheerful wave. “Hey there, Ally! Good to see you again.”





I couldn't help but wave back in response to his usual enthusiasm. After reaching me, Severin clicked open the attaché case in his hands. He then took out what appeared to be a small, rectangular crystal.

"Take a look at this," he said. "Remember when you proposed a device to speak with people over long distances? Well, we made it."

"Wait, really?!" I exclaimed.

Severin placed the rectangular crystal in my hand. "Pour your mana into it when you hear a beep. Just a little, though."

While speaking, Severin took out another device from his case and operated it somehow. Before long, a soft whistle emanated from my device. As instructed, I poured mana into it, and Severin's face appeared in the center of the crystal.

"Well, what do you think?" Severin asked, his smug expression plain to see on the screen. "Pretty impressive, right?"

*This is exactly like a video call.*

"Holy cow, this is amazing," I replied. "This is even better craftsmanship than I expected. The mage's order is something else."

I recalled visiting the mage's headquarters. Although Severin had spearheaded this project, everyone else I'd met in the cafeteria must have poured their hearts into it. I would have to give them all a thank-you gift. As I considered that, Severin handed devices to everyone else as well.

"Oh?" I said. "You made enough for everyone? That's really amazing."

While everyone fiddled with their imitation smartphones, brimming with curiosity, Giusto scrutinized the one in my hand. "What in the world is that, Ally?" he asked, looking over my shoulder.

"Oh, it's—" I began, but Embert cut me off.

"It's a magic tool that allows you to speak with others directly over long distances," he said. "While it's still in the prototype stage, we have plans to sell it on a large scale in the future. Speaking of which, I still haven't introduced you to Severin Fregolini. He's a member of the mage's order in Gandolfin. Truth be told, I summoned him here to bring a certain other artifact."

Giusto cocked his head. “What kind of artifact?”

“Do you mind showing everyone, Severin?” Embert asked.

“Not at all, not at all,” Severin replied.

He produced a familiar crystal ball.

“Oh, that!” I exclaimed.

I hadn’t forgotten this nifty little artifact, which could record magic videos.

“This might look like the same crystal ball as before, but it’s different,” Embert said. “We made some slight improvements based on the previous model. When you told me about the gazebo across the pond, an idea occurred to me. We might be able to keep an eye on the scene by setting this up there.”

*Sharp thinking, Em. We’ll be able to record everything in the vicinity without needing constant surveillance.*

“We designed this crystal ball to start recording whenever someone passes by it,” Severin explained. He handed the crystal ball to Embert, who continued the explanation for Giusto’s benefit.

“This artifact can record moving images of what happened in its vicinity. If I’m correct, the royal prince will speak to the assassin once more before the Founding Festival. Including today’s assault, they’ve failed to kill you twice within the castle, after all. By now, they must have realized that their previous methods will never succeed. Thus, I expect them to revise their strategy.”

“I agree,” Giusto responded with a nod. “I appreciate everything you’ve done to help, Prince Embert. My sincere thanks to everyone else as well.”

Giusto’s expression contained a mix of relief, happiness, and a touch of bashfulness. Smiling, the rest of us nodded as well.

## Chapter Six: The Mighty Mages

AFTER breakfast the next day, we girls had tea in the courtyard. That included me, Cita, Cia, and Julietta. The boys had gone to the chivalric order's training grounds together. Custode and Squishy had accompanied them as well. All of us were in high spirits, this being our first girls-only hangout in quite some time.

"Have you started making your dress for our debutante?" Cia asked.

"Of course not," I replied, my eyes widening. "It's still the middle of summer. Our debutante isn't coming up for a while."

Cita's eyes widened as well. "We only have three months left. You need to start making your dress soon. More importantly, your and Embert's engagement announcement will coincide with the debutante."

*Yeah, yeah, I know, but it's still kinda early to think about dresses, right?*

Despite my mental protest, Julietta nodded along with the twins. She'd already ordered her dress for Bragioga's debutante. However, she had *another* dress in the works for Gandolfin's debutante. She planned on participating in Gandolfin's debutante ball first. During the break, she would return to Bragioga and join their debutante ball as well.

"Lauris offered to give me a dress for Gandolfin's debutante," Julietta mumbled, her cheeks flushing.

*Damn you, Lauris, I thought while holding back the desire to swoon. Why do you get to hog this sweet angel all to yourself?*

According to the twins, their parents were providing their dresses. Meanwhile, Oreste and Rosario had offered to give them accessories.

"Have you talked about your dress with Prince Embert?" Cita asked.

I shook my head. Embert and I hadn't discussed anything of the sort. After all, our engagement hadn't been formalized until shortly before coming here.

“I bet Prince Embert will provide everything,” Cia said. “The dress, the shoes, and even the accessories. He’ll coordinate everything to match his hair and eye colors.”

“Probably,” Cita and Julietta agreed in unison.

I sighed. “Yeah, I can see that happening.”

As everyone laughed at my comment, a familiar man’s voice interrupted our conversation. “You girls seem to be having fun,” he said while walking up to us.

“Oh, Uncle Pieno...” Julietta greeted him awkwardly.

Despite his amicable grin, something about the guy still skeeved me out.

“I heard your pleasant voices while heading back to my manor,” Pieno said. “I never expected to find such beautiful ladies here with the holy woman.”

Cita and Cia looked puzzled, having never met Pieno before. On the other hand, Julietta seemed most unwelcoming towards her uncle. Of course, I felt the same way. Nevertheless, Pieno introduced himself to Cita and Cia.

“It’s nice to meet you two young ladies. I’m Julietta’s uncle, Pieno Cotarini.”

The twins’ eyebrows shot up for just one moment. Before long, however, they stood up and greeted him with smiles and curtsies. Afterward, we tried to resume the tea party, assuming the exchange was over. Usually, you would expect a man in Pieno’s position to say, “Well then, please continue,” and excuse himself. Yet, for some reason, he showed no signs of leaving. In fact, he appeared to be waiting for us to offer him a seat. Of course, we had no intention of doing anything of the sort. On the contrary, we practically radiated the sentiment, “Get the hell out of here!” Though Pieno must have gotten the hint, he shamelessly refused to leave.

Sensing my irritation, Julietta rose to her feet. “Well then, shall we head to the training grounds soon?”

The twins stood up as well, agreeing with the suggestion.

Finally, I rose and turned to face the royal prince. “We made plans to meet up with our other friends, so we’ll take our leave here. Let’s be on our way, *ladies*.” I curtsied and attempted to leave.

“Do you mind waiting a moment, holy woman?” Pieno asked while grabbing my arm.

I glowered at him. “You might be the royal prince, but it’s still rude to grab a lady’s arm, don’t you think?”

“Oh, my apologies,” Pieno replied, still not letting go of my arm.

Furthermore, he didn’t seem to mind my scornful glare. When I glanced at Julietta, she nodded as if to say, “Go for it.”

*If I have her permission, I can give him a piece of my mind, right?*

“Prince Pieno,” I said while donning my best villainess expression. “Did you forget Prince Embert instructed you not to touch me?”

Pieno didn’t mind my words. “Yes, he did mention something of the sort,” the royal prince responded with a mocking grin. “Yet no matter how much of a fuss you raise, Prince Embert isn’t here right now. It’s not as though I intend to harm you, either. I simply wish to invite you to have tea with me. Truth be told, my wife passed away before me. Won’t you humor a lonely man with conversation, lovely young lady?”

*That’s your way of making a request?* I wondered, barely containing my urge to hit him.

“You expect me to have tea with the sort of man who grabs a lady’s arm like this?” I asked. “I would refuse the offer of any such man, regardless of his status.”

Pieno tightened his grip on my arm. I grimaced momentarily due to the slight pain and pressure.

“You would refuse the request of a royal prince from a friendly nation?” he asked. “The man first in line for the throne? You might be a holy woman, but you’re also no more than the daughter of a duke. It seems you don’t grasp the power dynamics here.”

*Yeah, I’m starting to get a little pissed.*

“Certainly, you *are* first in line for the throne,” I said. “Only for a few more days, though.”

Those words hit Pieno where it hurt. He squeezed my arm even tighter, not bothering to hide the rage on his face.

“Impudent little girl,” he growled. “When I become king, I’ll make you my slave.”

What on earth was this old man saying? His statement caught me so off guard that I burst out laughing.

“Aha, what kind of nonsense are you spouting?” I asked. “You could never make me your slave. Do you want to go to war with Gandolfin, Your Highness?” I spoke the last part in a whisper, certain that would quiet him down. However, my words didn’t get through to him.

“Bragioga might be small, but we have powerful adventurers at our disposal,” Pieno said, an incendiary gleam in his eye. “Your kingdom might be the one to lose.”

*This guy reminds me of Celette. That’s probably why he creeps me out.*

“You seem to have made a grave misunderstanding,” I said. “The adventurers aren’t soldiers of Bragioga. Furthermore, have you forgotten about the divine beast you’d be antagonizing?”

Pieno burst out laughing. “Haha! Are you talking about that dragon welp? It may have spirit, yes, but our kingdom wouldn’t lose to such a puny creature.”

*Okay, this guy’s officially an idiot. Your daughter was trembling beneath that puny dragon’s pressure, remember? This doofus will never be king in a million years.*

“You think that’s his actual size?” I asked with a chuckle. “Have you never considered that he might be colossal in his true form?”

“Then, by all means, I would love to see your dragon’s actual size.”

Based on his expression, Pieno didn’t believe me at all. Moreover, he still held my arm in a tight grip. Irritated, I sent a jolt of electricity through his hand. Of course, I used a voiceless incantation to avoid detection.

“Ouch!” Pieno yelped.

As a crackling sound reached my ears, the royal prince finally released his

grip. A faint bruise had formed on my arm, which I immediately healed with holy magic.

“Oh my,” I said. “Static electricity is unusual in the summer. We must be very incompatible. If we stay together any longer, you might suffer even more pain. I’ll take my leave to ensure that doesn’t happen. Good day to you, Prince Pieno.”

I led everyone away from the courtyard. Though I heard Pieno grumbling behind me, I didn’t turn around. While heading back to the castle, I stopped and looked at Julietta.

“Sorry about that, Julie,” I apologized. “I picked a fight without thinking.”

That sly devil might have been infuriating, but he was still Julietta’s uncle. When I offered a heartfelt apology, Julietta shook her head fervently.

“Don’t be sorry!” she exclaimed. “Uncle Pieno has always been like that. Honestly, I can’t believe he and my father are related by blood.”

Truer words had never been spoken. I’d met the king during my first day in Bragioga. He’d been a warm person, similar to Julietta and Giusto.

During this conversation, Lauris and the others hurried over to us with panicked expressions. Squishy happily jumped from Oreste’s head and into my arms.

“Is everyone okay?!” Oreste exclaimed.

Julietta and the twins furrowed their brows, not following the question.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I didn’t let him touch anyone else.”

The boys exhaled deeply, relieved by my answer.

“What about you, Ally?” Rosario asked while meeting my eye.

“I’m perfectly fine,” I replied with a wink. “I even got a little payback.”

Rosario laughed. “Of course you did.”

“You should’ve done more,” Custode said while hanging on Lauris’s shoulder.

I shut the tiny dragon up with a cookie I’d brought. Meanwhile, the other girls wore puzzled expressions.

Cia turned to Rosario. “Do you know what happened with the royal prince, by any chance?”

“Sure do,” Rosario answered.

The girls looked even more puzzled. Well, who could blame them? After all, how did the boys know about something that had just happened to us? By way of explanation, I took my smartphone out of my pocket. Yep, you heard me right. After giving the magic artifact to everyone, Severin asked me to name it. In the end, I’d landed on “smartphone.” Sure, I’d tried to come up with a different name, but at the end of the day, smartphone had the perfect ring to it.

Imitating me, Severin pulled out his own device with a grin.

“I immediately called Severin while everything was going down,” I explained.

As Severin fiddled with his smartphone, our previous conversation with Pieno played from it.

“When I received Ally’s call, the screen was dark, and I could only hear the audio.” Smiling, Severin shook his smartphone lightly. “I thought something might be up, so I recorded the conversation. Including a recording feature seems to have been the right call.”

That’s right. The person who received a call could also record it. Severin had begun recording when Pieno asked me, *“You would refuse the request of a royal prince from a friendly nation?”*

“Having evidence sure is important,” I said with a grin.

Lauris and Severin grinned back at me.

“Oh, but don’t let Embert hear this yet,” Lauris warned. “I have no idea how he’ll react.”

I nodded emphatically. That went without saying. As soon as Embert heard this recording, he would act without a second thought.

“Let’s use this recording as a last resort,” I said. “We still want to arrest Pieno as the mastermind behind Giusto’s assassination attempts. That’s our top priority.”

This recording was simply insurance to prove Pieno’s other crimes.



“IT’S so dang hot out here!” I bemoaned.

The sun had reached its zenith and was hot enough to melt a person. Earlier, while having tea with the girls, the light breeze had felt pleasant on my skin. However, the heat had become sweltering with the approach of the afternoon.

All my friends were relaxing or taking naps in their rooms. Since no one else wanted to be active, I visited the lake with Custode and Squishy. Mary had joined us as well. Despite her reluctance, I’d persuaded her to wear one of my newly designed swimsuits.

After a light swim, I began floating on my back. Custode was using Squishy as a swim ring, floating around with apparent delight as well. Following a light swim of her own, Mary began preparing tea underneath a large parasol. She wore a black rash guard, tight shorts, and a sarong that matched the color of her eyes.

*She’s so beautiful, I thought as Mary gracefully prepared tea. By this world’s standards, she might be a spinster, but back on Earth, unmarried women her age were a dime a dozen.*

“The tea’s ready, milady,” Mary called.

After getting out of the lake, I wrapped a sarong around my waist and took a moment to relax.

“Have you ever considered getting married?” I asked offhandedly.

“Milady,” Mary replied, her face falling as if the world had ended. “Do you not need me anymore?”

“Huh? No, that’s not what I meant at all. You’re so beautiful. I was just thinking how cute your children would be if you married.”

Mary’s expression returned to normal. “I plan to help raise your children,” she said, shaking her head. “Based solely on appearance, they’ll probably be the cutest children in the world. I’ll help raise them from day one to ensure they don’t inherit their father’s twisted nature.”

“Oh, uh, good thinking,” I responded with a dry laugh.

Certainly, my children stood a real chance of turning out just as cunning as Embert.

*But setting those worries aside...*

Just like the previous Alexandra, Mary had experienced numerous painful time loops. At long last, she'd arrived in this world of second chances. Naturally, I wanted her to be happy. Of course, marriage wasn't the only path to happiness. Even so, the reassurance of a loving relationship—having someone to lean on—couldn't be understated.

As I considered that, a boisterous group approached the lake. Based on their white and navy fatigues, I recognized them as the chivalric order within moments. While they complained about the heat to a ridiculous degree, I noticed someone unexpected among their ranks.

"Janus?" I asked.

My brother led the group alongside Gaetano.

"Oh, Ally, are you here to cool off as well?" Janus asked, approaching me with a radiant smile. While everyone else slumped beneath the afternoon sun, only he seemed unaffected by the heat. Those who reached Janus's superhuman level probably didn't even sweat. "I see you and Mary are wearing matching outfits in different colors," he continued with a chuckle. "How adorable."

He kissed me on the cheek as usual. His clever, effortless praise of us reminded me of what a wonderful person he was.

"Thank you, Janus," I said before returning his kiss on the cheek.

Next to Janus, Gaetano had frozen in place, his face bright red. His gaze was fixed on Mary. Though Mary feigned composure, her ears were slightly red as well. After a moment, Gaetano shook his head, looked in my direction, and offered a knightly greeting.

"My name is Gaetano Cotarini. I'm Julietta's cousin."

*Oh, that's right. I was still a fennec when we last met. When I spotted him with Mary later, I tried to stay out of sight.*

"My name is Alexandra Vistriano," I said. "I apologize for my appearance."

"No, no, you look fine," he replied with a laugh. However, his gaze remained fixed on Mary. "I've heard about you from Lord Janus," he continued. "You're as beautiful as he described."

"Thank you very much."

Was it just my imagination, or was that compliment actually intended for Mary? He was probably reluctant to address my handmaid right in front of me. It's not like I cared about that sort of thing, though.

"I've heard about you from Mary as well, Lord Gaetano," I said with a soft laugh. "Our Mary is quite strong, isn't she?"

"Strong is an understatement," Gaetano replied, launching into stories about their sparring matches. "I've invited her to train with me countless times since then, but I'm always at the mercy of her agility."

*Are you at her mercy in another sense, perhaps?* I thought while looking at Mary.

"I've had enough of a break," I said. "Why don't you come swim with me, Janus? In the meantime, you can keep Lord Gaetano company, Mary."

Mary looked taken aback for only a moment. Grinning, I took Janus's hand and led him away to give the lovebirds some privacy. While Squishy rested on my shoulder, Custode perched on Janus's shoulder.

"You can feel the love in the air, right?" I asked.

Janus picked up on my meaning immediately. "It's hard to miss," he answered with a smile.

After Janus had finished changing, we went into the lake together. A number of knights were already splashing around in the water. "I'm gonna go for a quick swim," Janus said before heading in their direction.

Meanwhile, I took off my white sarong and remained in the shallows. There, I played around by pushing Custode, who was floating on top of Squishy. A little while later, Janus returned from his light swim.

"Is Em still working?" I asked.

"Haha, unfortunately!" Janus replied with a hearty laugh. "He's having a

conversation with Prince Giusto and the King of Bragioga. Mostly about the royal prince.”

*Yeah, that makes sense.*

At the same time, I also cocked my head. “Shouldn’t you be with them?” As Embert’s personal retainer, it was unusual for Janus to leave his side while in a foreign country.

“Embert gave me a half-day off,” Janus responded with a smile. “A magic barrier is protecting the meeting room, and plenty of guards are present as well. I joined the knights for dueling practice, but the heat made training unbearable before long. So, we came here for a swim. I plan to return when the meeting ends, but Embert will probably come to meet us first.” Janus’s laughter coaxed a smile from me.

Custode burst out laughing as well. “He’ll probably come rushing here the moment the meeting ends, no?”

“Squishy, squishy,” the slime cheeped. Apparently, Squishy was thinking the same thing. We could hear a few knights clamor about a swimming contest nearby.

“Would you like to join us, Lord Janus?” one asked.

My brother chuckled. “Bold of you to challenge me.”

Thus, he decided to participate. The knights were competing to see who could touch the fence and return here the fastest, just as I’d done with the boys. About ten of them lined up at the starting point.

“Good luck, Janus!” I cheered.

Everyone’s attention focused on me.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” one of the knights said. “Could you cheer for me too?”

Of course, I did no such thing. I shuddered to think how Embert would react to me cheering for another man.

“Go!” the knight acting as referee shouted.

Everyone dove into the water at the same time. Needless to say, my brother

crushed the competition.

As Janus swam over to me, I laughed softly. “They never stood a chance,” I told him.

For some reason, the other knights crowded the water around me as well. Being surrounded by such brawny men, all of them showering me with compliments, felt rather oppressive. As I thought that, Janus muttered under his breath, “This might be bad.” Not a moment later, a tremendous pillar of water erupted from the center of the lake. Everyone turned to look at the pillar, unable to comprehend what was happening.

“Oh?” I muttered. “Do my eyes deceive me, or...?”

Upon closer inspection, someone appeared to be inside the water pillar. I squinted to get a better look, but that necessity soon disappeared.

“Really, now,” Embert said with a dark chuckle. “Why do you always seem to attract these vermin?”





A chill ran down my spine. When had Embert transformed into the demon lord? He radiated the aura of a final boss while floating in the water pillar, a sinister smile on his lips. What kind of magic was he using to float, exactly? As such trivial questions raced through my mind, Embert vanished and reappeared on the shore. He'd probably used teleportation magic.

"Perhaps I really should prepare a birdcage," he said with a serious expression emanating wickedness. "I'll lock you up and hide you somewhere safe. Otherwise, my jealousy might burn this entire kingdom to ashes."

The knights stared at Embert dumbfoundedly. Meanwhile, Janus and Custode roared with laughter by my side. After transforming from a swim ring back to his original form, Squishy jumped on my shoulder.

"Oh, give it a rest, prince of chaos," I said with a heavy sigh, walking over to Embert. Of course, I wrapped my sarong around my waist. "Please calm down, okay? The knights are just showing an interest in Janus's little sister. You know nothing untoward happened, right?"

Embert's wicked aura vanished. Perhaps my words had reached him, or something else had caught his attention. In any case, his eyes bore into me.

"Did you make that outfit?" he asked. He was interested in my swimsuit, which he'd never seen before.

"Sure did," I replied, spinning around to show it off. "Does it look good on me?"

Embert threw his arms around me. "You look adorable, Ally. It's unbelievably frustrating that I wasn't the first to see it."

I didn't mention that Giusto and my male friends had already seen this swimsuit. Why cause even more chaos? Thus, I kept my lips shut tight while Embert called me adorable. As I accepted his praise without comment, he suddenly lifted my chin. Wait, did he plan on kissing me here? In front of so many people? No, I couldn't let that happen.

"Squishy!" I cried.

In response, the slime rammed itself into Embert's face. Likewise, Mary

placed a concealed weapon, which she'd hidden Goddess knows where, against his neck.

Janus, who stood to my left, wore a charming smile. "Now isn't the time or place for that, Your Highness."

*Phew, that was close.*

"My apologies," Embert said while peeling Squishy off his face. "I forgot myself."

Still floating in the air, Custode flipped onto his back and guffawed.

*He won't laugh himself to death, right?*

After calming down, Embert joined us in the water. Meanwhile, Mary and Gaetano spent the entire afternoon swimming together and chatting beneath a shady tree. I began considering their relationship earnestly. Their difference in status worried me, but if marriage was on the table, House Vistriano could always adopt Mary.



**DINNER** turned out to be a lively affair. Giusto, Severin, Janus, and Embert joined all the usual suspects. We discussed the upcoming Founding Festival and how we'd spent the afternoon. Eventually, the conversation shifted to the assassins. According to Severin, Pieno hadn't met with the merchant in the gazebo yet.

"The next attempt will probably happen tomorrow or the day after," Embert said. "A clever assassin would probably strike during the sword fighting tournament. After all, that's when Prince Giusto will be preparing to appear in public. Imagine the sheer number of people coming, going, and switching shifts. An assassin would have no better opportunity to slip in. There's also Prince Giusto's speech to consider."

Giusto nodded. "I agree with you wholeheartedly. Starting tomorrow, the servants will be busy preparing for my ascension ceremony and the following celebration. Many people, including merchants, will come and go from the castle. That will give Uncle Pieno the perfect opportunity to meet with his intermediary."

Everyone's expressions turned grave. The sword fighting tournament would be Pieno's last chance to murder Giusto. The assassins would likely attack in full force. If we caught Pieono's meeting on "camera," we could possibly thwart them beforehand. In other words, we also had the chance to round up the assassins in one fell swoop. Naturally, this fired us all up.

Giusto's sudden chuckle cut through the tension. "Forgive me," he said. "You're all so reliable that I don't feel an ounce of fear towards the assassins. I have Prince Embert—the future wise King of Gandolfin—as well as the omnipotent Lord Janus by my side. I even have the holy woman, her divine beast, and all her friends to protect me. Could I ask for better allies?"

*He's right about that. Our group has already saved the world once, after all. How could we lose to mere assassins?*

Everyone grinned in response to Giusto's words. Before long, a peaceful air enveloped the dinner table again.

"Oh, in other news, the dungeon transformed again," Embert said.

My hand, which had been using a knife to cut into fish, stopped. "Really?"

"Indeed," Giusto replied. "I just received a report from the guild. The transformation occurred because you and Prince Embert defeated the final boss."

The dungeon transformed naturally or when someone defeated the final boss. This time, the change had occurred due to the latter.

I turned to Custode. "Does that mean different enemies will appear now?"

"Mostly likely," the dragon replied.

In that case, I had to visit the dungeon again. When I glanced at Embert, I found him grinning back at me. If I had my fennec ears right now, they would have been standing straight up. My tail would have been swishing back and forth as well.

"Do you want to come with me, Em?" I asked.

Embert smiled approvingly. "Yes, of course. I'm glad you asked this time. We can go after breakfast tomorrow."

“Awesome sauce!” I exclaimed. I dropped my utensils out of sheer excitement, not caring how ill-mannered I appeared. In response, everyone froze, looking at me with wide eyes.

“Yes, the cause appears to be overexcited emotions,” Custode said. “Just as I presumed.”

His words caused me to freeze as well. Julietta studied me from across the table, her gaze fixed on the top of my head. It wasn’t just her either. *Everyone* was staring at the top of my head. On my left, Embert examined me with an entranced expression. There was no denying it now.

“S-S-So cute!” Julietta cried.

The twins started making a fuss as well.

“Are those real, Ally?” Cita asked. “My Goddess, they’re adorable. Let me touch them later.”

On my right, Janus touched the ears that had presumably sprouted from my head. My shoulders twitched, causing him to laugh.

“Are these adorable ears a side effect of the curse or something?” he asked, still caressing them. “Based on his expression, His Highness already knew about these, I presume?”

I nodded up and down, squirming at the ticklish sensation.

“Hmm, perhaps you should switch seats with me,” Janus said. “Sitting next to His Highness might be unsafe in your current state.”

*That’s Janus for you. He knows Em like the back of his hand.*

As Janus took my hand to help me up, Embert grabbed my other hand.

“Don’t go,” he pleaded with a spellbound expression. “Having those adorable ears exposed to everyone else is shocking enough, and now you’re going to leave my side?”

My danger sense went on high alert.

“Your Highness,” Janus said. “Please fix that ogling, slack-jawed expression on your face. Otherwise, I’ll make certain you never come near Ally again.” Despite

his grin, my brother seemed all too serious.

“And I’ll burn you to a crisp,” Custode added with a smirk.

Embert let go of my hand, on the verge of tears.

“What’s this?” Janus asked as we switched seats, appearing to notice something. “Do you also have a tail, by any chance?”

My fluffy tail was discernible even beneath my dress. I didn’t miss the sudden gleam in all my friends’ eyes. In particular, Severin’s obsidian eyes sparkled like the night sky. His expression read, “Would you consent to becoming my guinea pig, Lady Alexandra?” No, I absolutely would *not*, thank you very much. If I didn’t force everyone to back down ASAP, I would be in danger of going bald again.

I took a deep breath while sitting down again, praying I would return to normal soon. From then on, the conversation revolved solely around my fennec ears. Fortunately, they disappeared on their own after a short while.

As I told Severin and Giusto about my brief stint as a fennec fox, the final course arrived. Everyone dug into their fruit crepes and sherbert.

“Could it be...?” Giusto murmured. When I cocked my head, his lapis lazuli eyes stared straight into mine. “Were you the one frolicking around in the greenhouse while covered in sand?”

My face stiffened. Giusto was more terrifying than I gave him credit for. Was he really going to bring that up now in front of everyone?

“I see,” Giusto said with a delighted chuckle. Apparently, my reaction had confirmed his suspicions. “You were the fennec fox this whole time. That little creature was truly adorable.”

*Seriously?* I thought while staring at Giusto. *Did he do that on purpose? Or is he just a huge airhead? Does he not notice the sinister aura radiating from Em? I can’t even bring myself to look to my left right now.*

I focused on my dessert again, heart pounding in my chest. Meanwhile, Squishy deftly used a spoon to eat the dessert provided for him and Custode. That charming sight helped calm me down somewhat.

“When did you learn to use a spoon so well, Squishy?” I asked. “You’re so clever.”

“Truly,” Cita agreed, grinning at the slime. “It’s surprising how intelligent he is.”

Thanks to Squishy, a peaceful atmosphere enveloped the dining room again. When I stuck my fork into an apple slice, my last bite of dessert, Custode squeezed my hand.

“Hm?” I asked. “What is it?”

The dragon’s golden eyes watered. “Do you mind giving me that fruit? Mine was so sweet and delicious.”

Squishy was staring at me, too. In the end, I folded beneath their pleading gazes. “You guys are too much,” I said. Thus, I used my fork to cut the apple slice in half and gave one portion to each creature.

“Squishy,” the slime cheeped.

“Delectable,” Custode agreed.

As I laughed at them munching on fruit, Giusto grinned at me.

“You’re like a jewel box,” he said.

I furrowed my brow, unable to understand his words. “How so?”

Giusto regarded me even more warmly. “During our few days together, you’ve shown me so many different expressions and aspects of yourself,” he responded with a chuckle. “It’s like someone upended a jewel box. You really are a captivating woman.”

“Thank you,” I replied, not entirely grasping the analogy.

*I’ll take that as a compliment, I guess?*

I heard a sharp *snap* from Janus’s other side. Curious, I turned to see Embert holding a fork broken cleanly in two.

“Forgive me,” he said, his sinister aura filling the room. “I misjudged my strength.”

What was going on? Did he not like that I’d given Custode food?

“Please calm down, Your Highness,” Janus warned. “Ally is just clueless.”

Embert’s sinister aura vanished in response to these words. That said, what was I clueless about, exactly? When I looked at Janus, he merely chuckled. Likewise, my friends regarded me with smirks or exasperated expressions. Seriously, what was going on?



**AFTER** dinner, I returned to my room and relaxed in the tub. A little while later, Julietta and the twins visited. All of them appeared to have taken baths as well. As such, we lounged on my bed in our negligees. The bed was large enough to accommodate all four of us lying down without issue. This was a guest room in the royal castle, after all.

“Still, your fennec ears were so cute,” Cia said. “Could you pop them out again?”

*Oh, c’mom, is this what you came over for?*

“Nope,” I replied. “According to Custode, my ears only pop out when my emotions run high.”

“Seriously?” Cita asked. “What a letdown.”

*Wow, you too? I doubt they’ll pop out again tonight, so by all means, feel free to leave.*

Julietta bowed her head to me. “Ally,” she said in a flustered tone. “I’m sorry about my brother.”

“Huh?” I asked, cocking my head in Julietta’s direction. “What are you sorry about?” I didn’t understand the reason for her apology at all.

“What did I tell you, Julie?” Cita chimed in. “Ally’s completely clueless.”

*Could someone please tell me what I’m clueless about? I thought while stroking Squishy, who sat quietly on my lap.*

Cita leaned forward eagerly. “What do you think about Prince Giusto, Ally?”

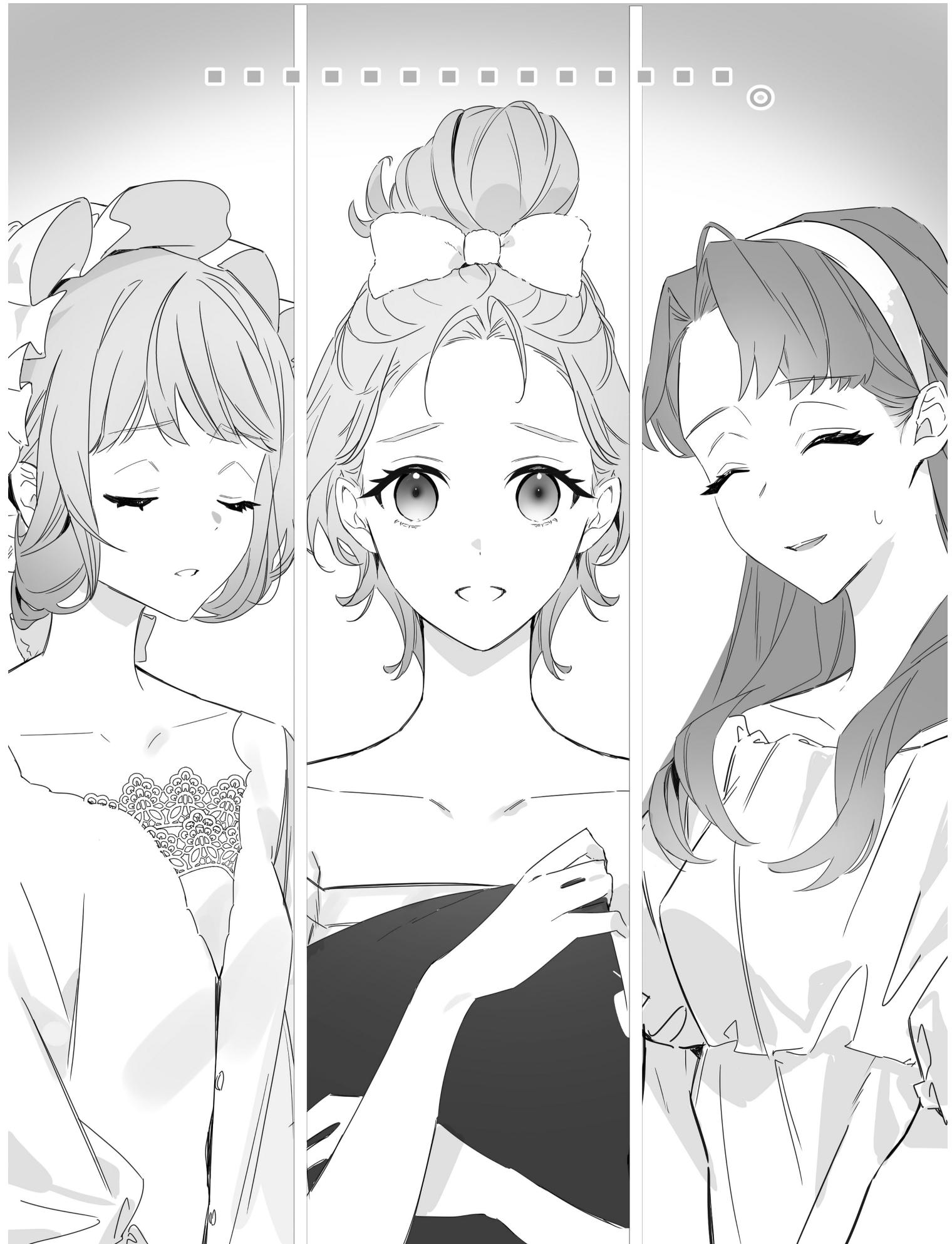
*What a strange question. He looks like Julie and is surprisingly cunning, I suppose? But I know that’s not what Cita wants to hear.*

"I think he's a wonderful person," I replied. "All the young ladies in Bragioga probably adore him."

"What else did I expect?" Cia responded with a soft sigh.

*Hey, why is everyone looking at me with pity in their eyes? What the heck am I doing wrong here?*





“Prince Giusto likes you, Ally,” Cita said, hugging a cushion.

I stiffened at the unexpected comment. “Come again?”

Then, Cia delivered the finishing blow. “You and Oreste are the only ones who haven’t noticed.”

“Seriously?!” I exclaimed.

Cia’s blow nearly KO’d me. Was I really on the same level as Oreste? I couldn’t be that dimwitted, right? The mental shock deflated me.

“Hey, there’s no need to make fun of Oreste, too,” Cita complained.

Yeah, I would never recover from this. *Still, things suddenly make a lot more sense.*

“That’s why Em seems on edge around Giusto,” I muttered to myself. “His sinister aura always comes out whenever Giusto is involved.”

Julietta bowed her head again. “I’m truly sorry. When Giusto threw down the gauntlet to Prince Embert, my heart beat out of my chest. I thought I might cry.”

*Are you sure you’re not about to cry right now?*

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I said while throwing my arms around Julietta. “Em might be a handful, but he wouldn’t let this escalate to a conflict between nations. After all, Em thinks highly of your brother. I’m positive everything will be fine.”

I was telling the truth about Em thinking highly of Giusto. He’d said as much in the gazebo. *On the other hand, he did start radiating his sinister aura afterward...*

Cita balled her hands into fists. “In any case, the fate of our countries is in your hands, Ally.”

“Really, the fate of our countries? That’s a bit grandiose, wouldn’t you say?”

“I agree with my sister,” Cia added to my surprise. “But you love Prince Embert, don’t you?”

“Of course,” I responded with a nod.

Cia nodded firmly as well. “In that case, you need to make your feelings clear to him. Even more than usual. Got it?”

“Y-Yeah, I understand.”

*I still have no idea how this connects to the fate of our two countries, though.* As I wondered that, Cita continued rubbing salt into the wound of my stupidity.

“The happier Embert is, the more peaceful our countries will be,” she said. “Make sure he knows you love him ten times over.”

“I agree with Cita,” Julietta added. “Please save the world again with your love, Ally.”

*Even Julie, huh? Alrighty then. I might not know what's going on, but I've got this.*

“I'll do my best,” I replied.

*After all, everyone's supporting me. I can't respond with anything but my full, unwavering effort.*

Custode shook with suppressed laughter beside me. Wasn't he supposed to be asleep?



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View ☆☆

**AFTER** dinner, I had a meeting with Janus and Severin. Unfortunately, I couldn't compose my mind in the slightest. Severin, who must have guessed the source of my distress, brought up Ally's fennec ears.

“Ally certainly is fascinating,” he said. “Shame the treasure chest that turned her into a fennec fox disappeared. I would've loved to research its structure. I might have to ask Ally if I can study her instead.”

“Severin,” I growled. “Are you in a hurry to die?”

Severin laughed at my threat. “Aha, I'm only joking. Besides, Ally would never speak to me again if I asked her to be my guinea pig.”

Janus brewed us tea during this conversation. Once finished, he sat across from me, not a trace of mirth in his eyes. “When did you learn about Ally's

fennec ears, Your Highness?” he asked.

“Hmm...” I mused. “Right after the curse lifted, I suppose.”

If you crossed Janus during times like these, he could be even more terrifying than his father.

“I see,” Janus replied. “Come to think of it, you did seem restless around that time.” Here, his sapphire blue eyes glinted dangerously. “So? You reacted strongly to Ally’s fennec ears. I trust you haven’t done anything inappropriate in the past, yes?”

I shook my head vigorously. “Of course not! Well, to be precise, I almost did... However, Squishy’s body slam brought me back to my senses, and I regained control of myself!”

“Regained control of yourself, eh?” Janus asked with a heavy sigh.

Severin and I both stiffened. Yet, contrary to my expectations, Janus’s demeanor softened.

“Certainly, Ally is breathtakingly adorable with her fennec ears and tail,” he said. “Her appearance alone could bring a man to his knees, but the feel of her fluffy ears... That could become somewhat addictive.”

When Janus let out a small laugh, I nodded excitedly. “Yes, exactly!” I exclaimed. “Ally could be likened to an aloof Goddess of the moon. Combining that appearance with oversized, fluffy ears breaks all the rules. She’s so precious and adorable that I fear my heart will stop. Moreover, her ears feel just as soft as when she was a fennec fox. Each time I touch them, and they twitch in response, the sheer cuteness nearly causes me to swoon. What must her tail feel like? The mere thought drives me to the brink of madness.”

“Your Highness,” Janus said in an icy tone, interrupting my rambling.

“...Present,” I responded, regaining my composure.

Janus smiled. “Do try to exercise some restraint.”

“...Noted.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see Severin trembling with suppressed laughter. In any case, we turned our attention to the matter at hand.

## Chapter Seven: The Divine Beast and the Holy Sword

THE next day, we stood before the dungeon. A steady stream of adventurers vanished into its depths. Evidently, news of its transformation had already spread.

“Let’s hope the final boss proves more challenging this time,” Embert said with a grin. He’d been in high spirits all morning. Hopefully, that was because of my sincere efforts to show my love. I’d taken the advice of my gal pals to heart, after all. “But don’t worry,” he chuckled. “No matter what sort of powerful monsters appear, I won’t let any of them lay a finger on you.”

For the past few minutes, his dazzling smile had been charming every lady adventurer in the vicinity. That said, he continued staring at me, oblivious to the squeals and giggles of delight. His gaze would probably burn a hole in my face before long.

Custode chuckled inside my arms. “He must be delighted that you fed him breakfast this morning.”

Per usual, Squishy rested on my shoulder. That aside, I’d used a sophisticated technique during this morning’s breakfast: feeding Embert fruit from a fork. As a result, he was still on cloud nine.

“Even in a shirt and trousers, your beauty is beyond measure,” Embert said.

Did he have to speak so loudly? But yes, I was wearing slim black trousers and a man’s white shirt. Embert wore a white shirt, light brown trousers, and darker brown boots.

*How does he look so dazzling in such a simple outfit? I wondered. Could you tone down the flattery, considering how much you stand out?*

Of course, now wasn’t the time to say this out loud. Shifting gears, I strode into the dungeon. Its transformation astonished me. The new dungeon differed from the old one in every conceivable way, starting with ambiance. At one point, we traversed a dense forest despite being underground. At another

point, we navigated a dark expanse. Basically, the interior changed with each floor. Thanks to Custode, however, we effortlessly arrived at the thirtieth and final floor once again. The final boss waited beyond the door in front of us.

“At least the door is a normal size this time,” I said.

“What’s this?” Embert asked while opening the door. “It looks like someone made it here before us.”

He was observing a spot a few paces beyond the door. A magic artifact, which someone had clearly brought into the dungeon, sat there. The artifact—about the size of a child’s backpack—emitted a continuous flow of magic, creating a large cage. The cage entrapped what appeared to be the final boss. The creature had three pitch-black, snakelike heads. Furthermore, it had large, black, bat-like wings. Finally, its thick tail was reminiscent of a log. The creature was about as large as Custode at full size. A single one of its heads was taller than me.

“Why did the previous adventurers only imprison it?” I asked.

“Perhaps they weren’t confident in their ability to defeat it,” Embert responded.

Indeed, the creature emanated a formidable aura while sleeping inside the cage. According to Embert, the previous adventurers had fled upon realizing they were no match for the monster. Yet somehow, they’d still imprisoned it? Something felt off about that hypothesis. Regardless, defeating the creature now would solve the problem. As I approached it, however, I realized what had been bothering me.

“Hey, look at this,” I said.

A large magic circle had been drawn beneath the mana-formed cage. Embert squinted to analyze the circle better.

“This is a magic circle for teleportation,” he said.

“Seriously?” I asked. “Someone is trying to teleport this monster somewhere else?”

Why on earth would anyone do that? Pandemonium would ensue if this

creature appeared in the middle of a city. It would probably go on a destructive rampage until someone defeated it. Only a handful of people could vanquish a boss of this caliber, regardless of how many adventurers resided in Bragioga. Currently, I didn't know where the perpetrator planned to teleport this monster. Nevertheless, the person behind the devious plot was close at hand.

"The humans behind this are utterly corrupt," Custode said.

I nodded in firm agreement. "Do we have any way of identifying the culprit?"

After examining the magic circle from various angles, Embert shook his head. "Unfortunately, we can't identify them from this alone. I attempted to study the lingering mana, but this magic circle appears to have been drawn using a magic artifact."

The perpetrator must have spent a great deal of money on this plot. It required two magic artifacts: one to draw a magic circle of this size and another to imprison an enormous monster. What was the culprit trying to achieve by spending so much money?

"They're probably targeting the Founding Festival," Embert growled.

That seemed like the correct answer. The person behind this trap was likely attempting to wreak havoc on the festival. Although I didn't know their exact intentions, I couldn't allow their plan to succeed. Defeating the monster would be our first step towards thwarting them. Typically, dungeon monsters spawned of their own accord, but final bosses were different. Once defeated, the final boss wouldn't reappear until the dungeon transformed. Thus, I examined the monster through the cage, contemplating how to vanquish it as fast as possible. At that moment, something occurred to me.

"Custode," I said.

"Yes?" the dragon responded.

"Is this creature a friend of yours, by any chance?"

"What are you on about?"

I frowned. "Sure, it might have three heads, but it sort of looks like a dragon, right?"

I'd seen a kaiju similar to this monster back on Earth. Had it been on television or in a movie? At any rate, two other kaiju had teamed up to fight an enemy like this three-headed creature.

"How dare you," Custode replied with an indignant huff. "Use your eyes! This creature doesn't even have hands! It's obviously a snake!"

*Um, hands?*

I took a closer look at the monster, and sure enough, it didn't have hands. While the creature *did* have legs, it had wings where hands should have been.

"I can't believe you would compare me—a divine beast—to this lowly snake," Custode continued. "When we return to the surface, I'll have to educate you on the true nature of dragons."

Apparently, he was very particular about monster classifications.

"Sorry, sorry," I apologized.

I approached the cage-generating artifact. A magic barrier had been erected around the rather simple device. For someone of my skill, bypassing the barrier and turning off the device would be child's play. At the same time, I needed to exercise caution. The monster could attack as soon as I turned off the device, after all. A moment later, however, my vigilance turned out to be unnecessary.

"I'll vanquish this puny serpent in a single blow," Custode declared. "Behold our difference in power!"

The little dragon was even more fired up than usual. Angering him had worked in our favor. Custode's enthusiasm influenced Squishy as well. The slime vibrated atop my shoulder, appearing just as fired up.

"Alrighty, here we go," I said.

I dispelled the magic barrier and turned off the device. The cage vanished, and the three-headed serpent woke from its slumber. The creature raised its heads slowly, golden eyes glinting as it focused on us.

*It's coming!*

The creature lunged towards us at a speed unimaginable for its size. Even so, the battle ended before I could even brace myself. Squishy leapt forward with

enough speed to rival the serpent. He devoured one of the creature's wings, throwing it off balance. In a flash, Custode used his claws to decapitate one head after another. Although this happened right in front of me, I stood there openmouthed, unable to comprehend what had transpired. The battle had literally taken place in the blink of an eye.

"How do you like them apples?" Custode asked while puffing out his fluffy chest.

Without thinking, Embert and I applauded the tiny dragon, who looked pleased with himself.

"You do credit to divine beasts everywhere," Embert said. "Honestly, I didn't expect you to perform so brilliantly in your current form."

"And your coordination with Squishy was incredible," I added. "Squishy is a slime, right? How was he able to lunge at that enormous creature without flinching?"

This battle had thrown my tier ranking of monsters out of whack. Despite being a slime, Squishy was close to S-tier. I had no words to describe him except "amazing." In any case, Squishy bounced back towards me. Part of his body had expanded like a tray, and he carried something on top of it.

"What's that?" I asked.

Squishy jumped into my arms and showed me what he was carrying. It was a stone too large to fit in one of my hands. It had wonderful coloring, shifting between green, red, and even purple.

"This is Alexandrite," Embert said. "It's a very rare gemstone. Furthermore, its luster is magnificent despite being uncut."

"Wait, did Squishy take this from the monster?" I asked while examining the stone.

Smiling, Embert nodded. "That seems to be the case. I believe Squishy wants to give you his war trophy as a present."

Squishy vibrated to indicate his agreement. Could the little fella get any cuter?

“Are you okay with that too, Custode?” I asked.

The dragon smirked. “Of course. I give this stone to my beloved holy woman, who can’t tell the difference between a serpent and a dragon.”

“...Thanks, you two,” I said.

Custode still seemed to hold a grudge, but I could deal with that later. As I observed the alexandrite’s shifting colors, a door appeared in the back of the chamber. Inside, we found the same treasure chest as before. This time, I cast an appraisal spell on it, determined not to be fooled twice.

“It seems to be filled with ores or something,” I said.

Squishy bounced over to the treasure chest and opened it deftly.

“No, Squishy, wait!” I exclaimed while racing over to him.

However, the chest didn’t expel smoke or anything else of the sort. For his part, Squishy seemed overjoyed by its contents. Timidly, the rest of us peered inside. Just as I’d predicted, a great many ores filled the chest.

“It appears to be adamantite,” Custode said.

“Is this everything?” I asked.

“I believe so.”

Squishy bounced up and down with absolute delight. He probably wanted to eat the ore.

“Ally and I only watched this time,” Embert said. “Eat as much as you like, Squishy.”

Dot-shaped eyes sparkling, Squishy gobbled down the entire chest of adamantite.

“Huh?” I asked. “Did he get bigger?”

The meal had fattened Squishy up. He wouldn’t be able to ride on my shoulder anymore. Also, I could see something swirling inside his translucent body.

“Squishy!” I cried. “You ate too much! Spit it out!”

Despite my pleading, Squishy had no way of spitting the ore out. Worse, it produced a low rumbling while swirling inside him.

“What’s going on, Squishy?!” I cried, his abnormal state bringing me close to panic. “Can you help him, Custode?!”

“Squishy!” the slime cheeped before spitting something out.

Perhaps it would be better to describe the action as “giving birth” rather than “spitting out.” In any case, the object fell to the ground with a pleasant clink. I approached it timidly, wondering what on earth Squishy had brought into this world. It turned out to be a beautiful silver sword.

“Could it be?” Embert muttered, picking up the sword and examining it. He swung the sword at a boulder six feet away. The boulder split in half, even though the sword hadn’t touched it.

“What was that?” I asked, my mouth hanging open.

Embert looked absolutely delighted.

“H-How did you do that?” I asked while staring at him.

Chuckling, Embert handed the sword to me. To my surprise, it barely weighed anything. Even so, just looking at it overwhelmed me. It seemed sharp enough to cut at the slightest touch.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Embert asked. He looked down at Squishy, who’d returned to his normal size. “This is an adamantite sword of the finest quality. Our Squishy here gave birth to something quite extraordinary.”

Custode pointed to the alexandrite still in my hand. “Do you mind if I borrow that for a moment?”

“This?” I asked. “Oh, yeah, that’s fine.”

Custode scraped off a portion of the alexandrite as if scooping up a snowball. After embedding it into the base of the sword, he turned back to me.

“Ally,” the dragon said. “Try imbuing this gemstone with holy magic.”

Though I didn’t understand, I did as he instructed. A moment later, the silver sword turned platinum. Moreover, it exuded an aura of purity while retaining

its overwhelming sharpness.

“And there you have it,” Custode said with a laugh. “We’ve made a holy sword.”

My and Embert’s eyes widened.

“Truly?” he asked. “Can a holy sword be made so easily?”

I shared Embert’s suspicions. However, Custode answered like it was no big deal.

“Any sword created by an adamantine slime would be one the finest in the world,” he said. “On top of that, it also received the divine protection of a holy woman. At this point, that blade is undoubtedly a holy sword.”

The very concept of holy swords had just been overturned in my mind. Didn’t the hero who fought against the demon lord usually wield the holy sword? In that case, had a hero appeared somewhere? As I fell into a mini panic, Custode laughed.

“That sort of hero doesn’t exist in this world,” he said. “But if I must choose a hero, perhaps it’s Embert—the one holding the holy sword.”

*Yeah, I’m not so sure about that one.*

“That sort of hero?” Embert repeated while cocking his head, not privy to my thoughts like Custode.

Squishy vibrated, similarly confused.

*Still, what Custode said makes sense. Since this world doesn’t have a real demon lord, I suppose the hero doesn’t exist either. Wait a minute. If Em’s the hero, does that make my dad the demon lord? But my dad would probably just dodge the holy sword while roaring with laughter. Oh no, does that make the demon lord stronger than the hero?*

As my mind raced incoherently, Embert poked me between the eyebrows. “You’ll get wrinkles if you keep furrowing your brow in contemplation.”

“Oh, sorry,” I apologized. “Everything I once believed just got turned upside down...”

His words helped me regain my composure. Thus, I stared at the sword in his hands again. The beautiful platinum blade radiated light within the dark dungeon. Still, what on earth would I do with this holy sword? I didn't have a use for it.

"What shall we do with this sword?" Embert asked, apparently having read my mind.

"Why not keep it as a trophy?" Custode responded.

Embert nodded. "Do you want it, Ally?"

I blinked. "Me?"

*Hey, don't palm it off on me. I like sword fighting and all, but I'm not that good at it.*

"Shouldn't you take it, Em?" I suggested. "I don't have any use for it."

"Well then, I'll take you up on that offer," Embert replied with a grin. "This will be the grand prize for the sword fighting tournament on the festival's last day."

I cocked my head. "Is there usually a prize?"

"Yes," Embert responded with a chuckle. "I hadn't been able to find a suitable prize, and I'd been racking my brain to come up with one. This sword appeared at the perfect time."

As Embert gazed at the sword in satisfaction, I cocked my head. After all, why did *he* need to choose the prize? Sure, he might have earned the king's trust while studying in Bragioga, but why did this decision fall to him?

"Em," I said, my tone and expression serious.

In response, he furrowed his brow. "What is it?"

"You're not planning to take over this country, right?"

"Come again?"

Silence fell over us. A few minutes later, Embert burst out laughing, having understood my implication.

"Aha, I won't do anything of the sort," he assured me. "I would never dream

of taking over Bragioga, no matter how dissatisfied I am with Prince Giusto. Haha. You have quite the imagination, Ally."

I narrowed my eyes at Embert as he doubled over with laughter. Was my question really that funny? At the same time, Custode also flipped onto his back in midair and laughed.

"She's more than just imaginative," the dragon said. "Her thoughts go in the most outlandish directions."

*Wow, sorry for speaking my mind.*

Despite my frustration, I couldn't think of a retort.

Embert patted my head. "You're truly a delight to be around," he said with another chuckle. "While the duty of choosing the prize has fallen to me, you needn't worry. I have no intention of taking over Bragioga or interfering with their governance." Here, Embert moved his hand to caress my cheek. "I will never relinquish you to anyone, but at the very least, I can hand over this sword."

Embert's hand moved to my chin and tilted my head upwards. Somehow, the color of his eyes seemed deeper than usual as he gazed at me. While the beautiful sparkle of his emerald-green irises captivated me, his lips brushed mine. He then regarded me with a gentle smile.

"Ally," he said in a honeyed voice, his face approaching mine again.

Fortunately, Squishy stuck himself to Embert's face, preventing him from touching me further. As we headed back to the surface, I couldn't help but laugh at the slime's antics, which were becoming routine at this point.

A lot had occurred on this excursion, but in the end, we'd cleared the dungeon without trouble. Thus, my guild rank rose to C.



**UPON** returning to the castle, I heard voices arguing in the entrance hall. As I approached them, curious about the commotion, Julietta's back came into view. She seemed to be in a heated discussion with someone. Within moments, I identified her interlocutor as Damiana. The moment she spotted us, Embert's

face darkened.

“Prince Embert,” Damiana called out in a saccharine voice.

Until now, she’d been glowering at Julietta while striking a daunting pose. As soon as she spotted Embert, however, she adopted a coquettish air. While I marveled at her sudden transformation, Embert clucked his tongue beside me. Startled, I looked up at him. He wore an impassive expression, not even bothering to fake a smile. I shuddered. Why were beautiful men always so terrifying when stone-faced?

Regardless, Damiana shoved Julietta aside and strode towards us, hearts practically bursting from her eyes. She didn’t seem to have noticed Embert’s expression.

Despite having been pushed, Julietta continued to admonish Damiana. “Like I said, Prince Embert is engaged to Lady Alexandra.”

“Are you okay?” I asked while running over to Julietta. “What the heck is going on here? It sounded like you two were fighting.”

Julietta glared daggers at her cousin. “She stormed up to me and demanded to know where Prince Embert was. When he studied abroad in Bragioga three years ago, she followed him everywhere. No matter how many times he asked to be left alone, she never listened. Back then, I couldn’t be as direct with her since Prince Embert didn’t have a fiancée. She should know better now, but she won’t stop mocking you, Ally.” Here, Julietta turned to speak directly to her cousin. “It’s no wonder you don’t have any suitors with that attitude.”

*Wait, didn’t Damiana claim to have turned down numerous proposals? Guess that was a lie.*

Damiana glowered at Julietta, ignoring me. Yeah, that pretty much substantiated my hypothesis. Huffing, Damiana turned away from us and approached Embert. “Would you like to have tea at my manor, Prince Embert?” she asked in a saccharine voice, attempting to wrap her arm around his.

However, Embert slipped away from her advance. “Princess Julietta,” he said while still looking at Damiana impassively. “What did your cousin say about Ally?”

Julietta looked grateful for the opportunity to speak. "All right," she said, fists clenched and brimming with anger. "Here's every word of Damiana's nonsense: 'Regardless of what others might call her, Lady Alexandra isn't very powerful, is she? I mean, what kind of holy woman is only capable of summoning such a tiny dragon? Oh, and what's with that disgusting slime she carries on her shoulder? In the end, both of them are just monsters. Is she a witch rather than a holy woman, perhaps? If so, Prince Embert must be under her bewitchment. A woman like her isn't worthy of such a fine man.' And that about sums it up..."

Tears filled Julietta's eyes as she recounted Damiana's words. It was touching to see her get so angry on my behalf. I had a truly wonderful friend.

I wrapped my arms around her while she trembled. "Thank you for caring so much about me," I said, rubbing her back consolingly. "I love you, Julie."

Julietta hugged me back, crying even harder. "I hate being related to her. It's so frustrating..."

*S-So cute*, I thought while tightening my embrace. After jumping on my head, Squishy extended part of himself like a tendril to pat Julietta's head. All the while, Damiana glared at us disdainfully.

"Lady Damiana," Embert said.

Damiana looked up at him with sparkling brown eyes. Hearing her name called, rather than mine or Julie's, delighted her.

*Her eyes are the same color as Julie's*, I thought. *So why aren't they the least bit cute?*

"You seem to have been looking for me," Embert continued. His expression was still as impassive as ever. At the same time, a foreboding sweetness emanated from his gentle voice.

However, Damiana seemed oblivious to this chilling contrast. "That's right," she said while beaming up at Embert. "I came to invite you for tea at my manor. Why don't we leave together now?" When Embert remained silent, not responding to her invitation, Damiana continued, "You must have gone mad while under that woman's spell, Prince Embert. You don't truly love her, do you? After all, you've loved me for these past three years. Isn't it suffocating

being forced into an engagement with someone pretending to be a holy woman? Don't worry—I'll heal you of her bewitchment. So, shall we leave her behind and go to my manor? I'll lead the way."

For some reason, Embert was holding Custode in his arms. Although both radiated hostility, Damiana didn't notice this as she blathered on haughtily.

*Welp, this looks like the end for Damiana. Not my problem, though.*

I observed Embert and Custode while still hugging Julietta. Neither of them seemed likely to stop even if I intervened. Besides, that idiot woman had made Julietta cry. What did I care?

Embert donned his most sinister smile yet. "Let's take a walk outside, shall we?" he asked, radiating a terrifying aura.

Damiana giggled. "Just what I wanted to hear."

How had she not noticed Embert's terrifying aura? Even worse, she tried to wrap her arm around Embert's with a jubilant expression. Right before she made contact, however, Custode growled at her.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't look like you'll be able to escort me," Embert said. "My dragon is in something of a foul mood. Forgive me, but let's proceed as we are."

After regarding Custode like he was vile, Damiana turned her doe eyes on Embert. "Perhaps you should leave the dragon with that woman, Prince Embert."

Custode growled again.

Likewise, Embert shook his head while still smiling wickedly. "Apparently, he doesn't want to leave my arms. Oh, but don't worry. I'll hold onto him tightly so that he doesn't escape."

Realizing she couldn't push the matter further, Damiana walked beside Embert. She turned back to me with a smug look on her face. "Well then, have a nice day," she said with a titter.

As I watched her and Embert in silence, Julietta looked up at me with an anxious expression. "Are you okay with this, Ally?" she asked.

*Is Julie some sort of Goddess? She's cute even when she's anxious.*

"Yeah, it's fine," I responded with a sigh. "There's no stopping Em now."

"Huh?" Julietta asked with a puzzled expression.

*She's cute when she's confused, too, I thought with a laugh.*

I gave Julietta's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Well then, want to go spy on them?" I asked.

I cast a concealment spell on Julietta. Afterward, we followed Embert and Damiana into the garden while maintaining a safe distance. Seeing Damiana speak to Embert excitedly filled me with mixed emotions. I felt uneasy, a little sympathetic, and a smidge of superiority.

*Wow, that makes me sound terrible, I thought as we walked.*

Eventually, Embert and Damiana stopped at the pond. Julietta and I hid behind a tree just close enough to hear the conversation. In all likelihood, Embert had noticed us following him. Thus, he'd chosen a place where we could find cover.

When Embert came to a sudden halt, Damiana looked up at him. "What's wrong?" she asked. "My manor is still a short way ahead."

"Oh, I have no intention of visiting your manor," Embert replied, his wicked smile still not faltering.

The temperature dropped by several degrees. Embert radiated a chilling aura, his tone equally frigid. Julietta and I shivered at the cold. Despite our distance, I noticed Damiana's cheeks twitch. Even she had picked up on the change in atmosphere.

"Oh?" she asked. "Wh-What's going on, Prince Embert?"

When Embert didn't respond, silence fell over the area. As I continued watching him and Damiana, rubbing my arms to stay warm, Embert finally spoke.

"You didn't get very good grades in school, did you?" he asked.

That unexpected question caused Damiana to gape. Of course, Julietta and I

were just as dumbfounded.

“The entire way here, I pondered how to get through that thick skull of yours,” Embert said.

Julietta and I burst out laughing. However, we immediately covered our mouths to stifle the sound. Fortunately, Damiana gave no indication of having heard us.

“Yet no matter how much I thought, I couldn’t come up with a solution,” Embert continued. “For now, I’ll be straightforward, but know this: If you still fail to understand, I may have to resort to using force.”

Tears filled Julietta’s eyes as she shook with suppressed laughter. Meanwhile, Damiana regarded Embert with a puzzled expression, still not grasping the situation.

“Prince Embert?” she asked, sounding genuinely confused.

With a soft sight, Embert turned his gaze from Damiana to me. “Allow me to speak briefly about my past,” he said. “As a child, I faced numerous assassination attempts. My father is a rather wise king. Oftentimes, avaricious nobles view wise kings as a hindrance. However, my father had the most powerful man in Gandolfin as his personal retainer. As a result, the assassins targeted me—a child—instead. After the birth of my younger brother, the attempts on my life continued, albeit less frequently. The masterminds probably intended to kill me and install my young brother as their puppet king. Well, thanks to those experiences, I grew strong enough to protect myself. Yet, at the same time, I lost the ability to trust other people. When Janus became my personal retainer, I no longer had to fear for my life. Even so, I didn’t regain the ability to trust others. I only trusted Janus and my family. When speaking to anyone else, I always wore a false smile.”

Embert’s eyes grew distant as he reflected on the past, his expression somewhat melancholy. A moment later, however, a gentle smile appeared on his lips.

“Around that time, an adorable angel appeared before me,” he continued. “After taming a rampaging magic horse, she enchanted me with her lovely smile. Despite being a highborn lady, she laughs, gets angry, and even blushes

without putting on airs. Her ever-shifting expressiveness stole my heart. Because of her influence, I regained the ability to smile genuinely. Ever since then, she's been my most precious treasure."

While Damiana gaped at Embert, my face began to boil. Even Julietta placed her hands on her cheeks, her face just as red as mine. I thanked my lucky stars Cia wasn't here. If Embert's monologue had reached her ears, she would have teased me relentlessly. In any case, I fanned myself with a hand in an attempt to cool off. At the same time, Damiana wore a somewhat irritated expression, still not understanding Embert's words.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

*Well, what else did I expect from her?*

However, Embert continued his monologue, uninterested in answering her directly. "Over time, my newfound treasure lit a fire in my soul. Before long, my tender affection transformed into a love that verged on madness. I will do anything for her. I will eliminate anything that harms her. Likewise, I will protect everything she loves. These are my innermost feelings. In other words, anyone who speaks ill of her is my enemy. It's my duty to eliminate any such person."

Despite everything Embert had said, Damiana still looked puzzled. In response, Embert's lips twisted into a sinister smile.

"Therefore, you are my enemy, Lady Damiana," he said decisively.

Damiana cocked her head, still utterly clueless. "Your enemy?" she mumbled.

*No matter what you say, she's never going to understand,* I thought.

Nevertheless, Embert continued, "You've spoken ill of my beloved Ally, Lady Damiana. You've called her a witch and accused her of bewitching me. Another woman who attempted to torment Ally said similar things. That alone is punishable by death. Do you really think Ally lacks strength as a holy woman? Do you really think this dragon is a mere hatchling?"

Custode extricated himself from Embert's arms, spread his wings, and hovered in front of Damiana's face.

"I considered this foolish girl's prattling beneath my notice," the dragon said.

"However, your mockery of Ally changes matters. Behold me with those filthy eyes and decide if I truly am a mere hatchling."

Custode exploded in size. Within moments, he was large enough to cover the entire pond. Overcome with shock, Damiana fell onto her backside.

"This is my true form," Custode said. "I would reduce your manor to smithereens simply by flying over it."

As Custode roared with laughter, the blood drained from Damiana's face.

*All right, this has gone a little too far,* I thought before dispelling my concealment.

"Custode, that's enough," I said, walking over to him.

"Couldn't you have waited a little longer to spoil the fun?" he asked.

Of course, Custode had been aware of my presence since the beginning. In any case, he returned to his smaller size and settled into my arms.

Conversely, Embert didn't cease his attack. After crouching down next to Damiana, he whispered something in her ear. From where I stood, I couldn't hear his words. Based on his sinister grin, however, he was definitely threatening her. When her face turned from pale to ashen, I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. As I debated whether to intervene on her behalf, Embert finished and joined my side. Meanwhile, a handmaid raced over to Damiana, who still couldn't stand.

"What the heck did you say to her, Em?" I asked. "She's as white as a ghost."

On top of her deathly pale complexion, she was also shaking like a leaf. While Custode's explosive growth had contributed to that, Embert had delivered the finishing blow. When I glared at him for taking things too far, he kissed my cheek, not showing the slightest remorse.

"I simply explained to her how wonderful my treasure is," he responded with a chuckle.

*Liar. You definitely said something else.*

Even so, I didn't expect him to tell me. Judging from her appearance, Damiana probably wouldn't talk smack about me anymore. In fact, she seemed too

terrified to ever say my name again. Although I felt somewhat sorry for her, Embert wouldn't harm her further if she left me alone.

To my surprise, Julietta looked satisfied. *Does she get along that poorly with Damiana?* I wondered, taking her hand again. As we walked back to the castle together, Embert trailed behind us in high spirits. I couldn't help but laugh at him.



### ☆☆ Embert's Point of View☆☆

**HOW** can I get through to this woman? I pondered while walking beside Damiana. Honestly, I doubt that words alone will be sufficient, I finally concluded.

"I could just burn her to a crisp," Custode said telepathically, still nestled in my arms. His thoughts were even more extreme than my own.

"If possible, I would love to do the same thing," I replied telepathically. "Unfortunately, she belongs to the royal family of a friendly nation. That complicates matters."

Custode snorted. "Well, does this area work for you?"

"Yes, I believe so."

If we kept walking, the little birds following us wouldn't have a place to hide. Thus, I stopped and began discussing my past. I spoke to Ally rather than Damiana. Originally, I hadn't intended to share my tragic past with Ally. Nevertheless, I wanted her to know everything about me. No, that wasn't quite right. Of course, part of me wanted her to know my past. At the same time, her concern over the attempts on Giusto's life irritated me. As such, I spoke out of petty jealousy, hoping to convey how much I had suffered as well.

*I'm truly helpless when it comes to Ally, aren't I?*

Despite my self-mockery, proclaiming my love for Ally gave me great satisfaction. I could see her flushing bright red even from this distance. While suppressing a smirk, I crouched next to Damiana, who'd fallen on her backside. For one moment, her expression brightened, as she probably expected me to

help her up.

“See now?” I whispered in her ear. “My Ally can tame a full-sized divine beast with just a few words. Remarkable, isn’t she? Someone like you could never hope to compete with her. If you ever speak ill of her again, I’ll punish you myself. Frankly, I would prefer to cut you down here and now. I’m only restraining myself because you belong to the royal family of a friendly nation. Oh, and keep this in mind: I show no mercy to my enemies, regardless of whether they’re women.”

Damiana seemed to understand my words this time. The shock of seeing Custode’s true size had caused the blood to drain from her face. Now, she was as white as a ghost, her entire body trembling. Chuckling, I walked over to Ally, who was glowering at me.

*She’s cute even when she’s angry.*

When I reached Ally, she immediately scolded me. Even so, I couldn’t help but smile and kiss her on the cheek.

“Honestly,” she complained.

That said, she didn’t pursue the matter any further. After taking Julietta’s hand, she began walking back to the castle. That, too, was such an adorable sight that I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face.



### ☆☆ Alexandra’s Point of View☆☆

“CAN’T sleep,” I grumbled.

The moon shone with a pale glow high in the night sky. Despite the late hour, I was too excited to feel the least bit tired. At dinner, my friends and I had discussed our plans to explore the city during tomorrow’s Founding Festival.

*You’re acting like a child the night before a field trip,* I chastised myself.

That didn’t help me feel any more tired. Thus, I gave up on sleep and went for a short walk. Custode and Squishy were sleeping like logs in my bed. Not wanting to disturb them, I slipped out of bed as quietly as possible. However, if anything were to happen, I knew they would come to my aid immediately.

I loved summer nights. A cool breeze occasionally swept past me, unlike during the day. Faint lights illuminated the maze in the distance. Unconsciously, I found myself drawn to its somewhat eerie yet mysterious ambiance. The trees surrounding the maze were as tall as me with my hand raised straight up. Despite the moonlight filtering through the leaves, it was still dim.

*Um, yeah, this is actually kind of scary.*

Even so, my feet kept moving forward. Since I'd completed the maze before, I reached the goal without getting lost.

"Wow," I mumbled upon seeing the gentle illumination.

Many small, spherical lights were wrapped around the gazebo's roof. That must have been done for the Founding Festival, as I hadn't seen them before.

"It's like Christmas," I said with a laugh. I stared at the lights in silence for a short while, feeling somewhat nostalgic. Christmas didn't exist in this world, after all.

Suddenly, I recalled Embert's story from this afternoon. I hadn't known assassins had targeted him throughout his childhood. As a result, he'd lost the ability to trust other people. Despite facing such terrifying experiences from a young age, he continued to fulfill his princely responsibilities. He must have suffered a great deal back then, but even so, he'd grown into an upstanding crown prince.

"Em really is incredible," I muttered to myself.

Reincarnating and swapping places with Alexandra seemed trivial by comparison. *Em is always the one to embrace me, but if he were here right now, I would console him in my arms.*

As I marveled at the beautiful lights, a familiar voice reached my ears.

"Found you."

A gorgeous man stood in front of me, his silver hair glowing palely in the moonlight.

"Em," I replied.

"Yes indeed," he responded cheerfully, sitting down beside me. "What a

beautiful sight."

For a short while, we gazed at the lights together without speaking.

"Can't sleep?" Embert asked, finally breaking the silence.

Smiling, he placed his hand on top of mine, which rested on the bench. Beneath the light, his silver hair shimmered, and his emerald-green eyes sparkled. I was reminded of his breathtaking beauty all over again.

"I'm just too excited for the Founding Festival," I admitted playfully.

"Is that so?" Embert responded with a smile, causing my heart to swell with love for him.

"Em," I said. When he looked at me curiously, I decided to voice what had been on my mind. "About the story you told at the pond..."

"Yes?"

"I had no idea assassins targeted you throughout your childhood. You even lost the ability to trust other people. All my suffering seems trivial compared to yours."

Embert listened to me in silence, his expression unfailingly beautiful and gentle. Seeing that nearly brought me to tears.

"After hearing your story, I had a thought," I said. "You're always the one to embrace me, but now I want to comfort you. So..." I rose to my feet and stood in front of Embert. "I might not be able to console the child Em, but I can hug you now." I cradled Embert's head against my chest. "You've fought so hard. It's honestly amazing. I love and respect you so much."

Embert wrapped his arms around my back. For a short while, we held each other without speaking, but Embert's laughter eventually broke the silence.

"Thank you," he said, his head still buried in my chest. "I lived in terror as a boy, unsure who my allies were. There was a time when I couldn't even bring myself to eat. However, I grew strong thanks to those experiences. Meeting you saved me and allowed me to change." Here, Embert tightened his embrace. "I love you, Ally. That said..."

When Embert chuckled, I cocked my head, unsure what was so funny.

"Your chest feels wonderful," he said. "It's making my heart race."

I immediately pushed him away from me.

"Oh, is it over already?" Embert asked, unabashed.

My face exploded with heat. "Seriously? And here I was trying to comfort you. More importantly, why are you here so late at night?" I tried to scoot away from Embert to calm my racing heart. However, he immediately grabbed my hand.

"What a funny question," he said. "Obviously, I'm here because I tracked your location." His matter-of-fact tone caused my head to droop.

*Oh, right, the tracking magic, I thought while glaring down at my pinky ring. How could I forget?*

"I wanted to check your location before going to sleep," Embert continued. "When I sensed you in such an unexpected place at this hour, I came straight away." As he spoke, Embert pulled me into his chest this time. "And then you cradled my head against your chest. It was such a splendid reward that I nearly did something improper."

Despite the chilling implication of his words, he smiled radiantly and leaned in for a kiss. Jolting, I used my free hand to cover his mouth. In response, Embert's eyes widened to their full extent.

*Wait, did my fennec ears pop out again?*

I instantly feared for my safety upon seeing Embert's reaction. Though I struggled to break free, my attempts proved meaningless.

"Are you showing me those ears on purpose, Ally?" he asked. "Is this a means of testing my patience? It won't work. I have no patience when it comes to you."

After pulling me into a tight embrace, Embert pressed his lips against mine. As I melted into his kiss, he caressed my fennec ears. The strange, ticklish sensation caused me to shiver.

*Holy friggin' cannoli, this is bad! Someone save me!*

As you might have guessed, a certain slime struck Embert in the face a few

seconds later.

## Chapter Eight: The Founding Festival

THE first day of the Founding Festival arrived. Both the morning sky and my mood were as bright as could be. Custode and Squishy were in high spirits as well. All my friends and I—save for Embert and Janus—changed into clothes that would blend into the crowd before we left the castle.

We found the city even more boisterous than it had been a few days ago. Beautiful flowers and ribbons decorated the streets. This lovely sight made me grateful to be in Bragioga all over again. Apart from the numerous food stalls, we also spotted street performers here and there. Likewise, plays were being performed in the city square.

“Let’s check out the food stalls first,” Oreste suggested.

When everyone agreed, we hunted for the most appetizing food stalls. Oreste and Lauris bought one treat after another, ordering for Custode as well. All three of them tossed their treats into my spatial storage until it was full to bursting.

“That really is a handy spell,” Oreste noted.

*Spongery*, I grumbled inwardly, tossing my own treats into storage.

After stocking up on food, we stopped to view some street performers. A little later, we headed towards the square, as Cita and Cia wanted to see a certain play. Apparently, there would be multiple performances throughout the day, each by a different troupe.

Cita’s hazelnut eyes sparkled. “The next play is supposed to be a romance.”

While Oreste’s moony expression gave me the ick, we sat down and waited. Yet, no matter how much time passed, the play showed no signs of starting. What’s more, some sort of commotion seemed to be taking place backstage.

“I’ll go see what’s happening,” Severin said before heading towards the stage. Before long, he returned with an explanation. “Apparently, they can’t start

because the actress playing the heroine hasn't arrived."

*Yeah, you obviously can't have a romance without the heroine.*

"Is the play canceled then?" Cita asked, her face falling.

Julietta looked disappointed as well.

"The troupe is still deciding whether to cancel," Severin answered.

Two troupe members appeared from backstage and scanned the crowd. They seemed to be looking for someone. Eventually, one of them pointed in our direction.

"Excuse me!" he cried.

However, both troupe members froze while looking at us. What the heck was going on? The other audience members stared at us well. Finally, the troupe members woke from their reveries and came to stand in front of me.

"Pardon me, but would you please perform in our play?!" one of them exclaimed.

"...Come again?" I asked.

Question marks popped up above all our heads.

*Why me? Because I have Custode and Squishy? Do they want me to put on some sort of sideshow instead of a play?*

As my mind raced, the other man bowed his head and explained. "I apologize for asking this out of the blue, but would you play the heroine? Honestly, I first considered asking your friend—the young man who checked in on us—to dress up as a woman."

All eyes turned to Severin.

"Really?" he asked. "I wouldn't mind."

Everyone's faces twitched ever so slightly.

"Well, you would look nice in women's clothes," Cia said while regarding Severin.

Cita and Julie nodded in agreement. Yeah, he probably could pull off drag

well. Despite the approval from us girls, Lauris and Oreste stared at Severin with confused expressions.

Noting the pause in our conversation, the troupe member cleared his throat. "Young lady," he said to me. "While your friend is quite beautiful, I knew you were perfect for the role the moment I saw you. Would you please play the heroine? You don't need to worry about the lines since we can prompt you from backstage. We've worked so hard for today. I would hate to give up without even trying!"

To my surprise, the first response to this enthusiastic offer came from Rosario.

"Do you mind helping them out, Ally?" he asked.

"I would love for you to do it as well," Cita agreed. "I was really looking forward to this play. I'm sure it'll be wonderful with you as the heroine."

Julietta nodded in agreement.

"I want to see you act, too," Cia chimed in.

*Well, that's Rosario and all the girls. What kind of woman would I be to refuse?*

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

As the troupe members cheered, a magic circle appeared behind the last row of seats. Then, Embert appeared in a flash of light.

"I won't allow another man to touch Ally," he declared.

"A-Are you kidding me?" I stammered.

How had Embert known what was happening?

*He's not using some sort of eavesdropping spell now, right?* I wondered, my eyes widening.

Severin chuckled sheepishly. "Sorry, Ally," he said while holding out his smartphone. "Embert asked us to contact him as soon as you got up to no good."

"Filthy spy," I grumbled.

*Why am I being treated like a loose cannon?* I wondered with a huff.

After making his way to me, Embert placed a hand on my cheek. "Forgive me, Ally. I wanted to come to your rescue in case of an emergency or if any miscreants approached you. That's why I asked Severin to keep an eye on you."

I pursed my lips in dissatisfaction. "Is me performing in a play an emergency?"

Embert caressed my cheek, his apologetic expression changing into a sinister smile. "Of course. You're playing the heroine, correct? You think I would allow an unfamiliar man to touch you?"

The two troupe members shivered beneath Embert's frigid aura. Nevertheless, one of them mustered the courage to speak.

"Um, is this man your significant other, by any chance?" he asked. "Would it be possible for him to play the opposite role?"

"Wouldn't that inconvenience the original actor?" Rosario asked.

The troupe member shook his head. "No, not at all! Truth be told, I was going to play that role, but... how should I put this? You two would look amazing on stage together. I'm sure our audience would be delighted as well. So, how about it? I'll prompt the lines from backstage, of course."

We were already attracting looks from our surroundings. Plus, the women were practically swooning over Embert.

"What do you think, Ally?" Embert asked with a chuckle.

His smile had transformed from sinister to eager. Based on that expression, there was no stopping him now. Julietta and the twins looked just as thrilled. While Lauris heaved a deep sigh, the other boys seemed equally excited.

"Yeah, why not?" I responded, standing up and clenching my fist.

Embert grinned at me. "Let's do our best."

We changed into stage costumes under the direction of the two troupe members. While I wore the outfit of a common girl, Embert dressed up like a nobleman. Before going on stage, we sat down to read the play. The story began with a passing nobleman rescuing a common girl from street thugs. Naturally, that sparked a romance between them. Alas, their different social

classes stood in the way of their relationship. What's more, the nobleman already had a fiancée. Despite the odds, the two characters triumphed over fate and were united in love. It was a tale as old as time. That said...

"Feeling moved?" Embert asked.

I sniffled while reading the script. Embert and my past self from Earth would never have ended up together. When that thought hit me, I couldn't help but empathize with the characters.

"Can you blame me?" I responded. "If I'd met you as my past self, we never would've ended up together. I—"

Before I could finish speaking, Embert threw his arms around me. "Ally," he said. "Even if you were a commoner, I would abandon my current position to be with you. How could I do anything else? I've loved you for so long, after all."

"Em..." I sobbed.

After wiping away my tears, Embert whispered in my ear. "You might want to calm down, lest those adorable ears pop out again."

I stiffened. Sprouting animal ears now would cause a huge commotion. Nodding, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.



"**LOOKS** like we brought the house down," Embert said.

During the curtain call, we received thunderous cheers and a standing ovation. It was enough to shake the entire venue. While women cried the name of Embert's character, men shouted the name of mine. Afterward, the troupe thanked us profusely.

"You're welcome to join us any time," one of the members offered before we parted.

"That was wonderful," Cita said. "I haven't blubbered like that in a long time."

While Cita's eyes and nose were red, Julietta was still crying. Oreste and Lauris were consoling each one respectively.

Cia, whose nose was similarly red, threw her arms around me. "Your pained

expressions broke my heart, Ally.”

What could I say? My performance had turned out well thanks to my empathy for the heroine.

Severin laughed. “The crowd went wild when Embert gave you that passionate kiss.”

*Hey, that was no laughing matter for me. I was terrified of my fennec ears popping out again. Thankfully, I had the thought of our stored meat skewers and sausages to distract me.*

Embert wore a composed expression, not at all concerned with my struggles. “That kiss wasn’t even close to what I consider passionate,” he said with a hearty laugh. “I had to restrain myself in front of an audience.”

Apparently, the original leading actress had overslept. After the performance, she’d joined the other actress—who’d played the rival fiancée—backstage. Both women had tried to seduce Embert, which I hadn’t told my friends. If anyone asked how he’d turned them down, I would have to describe the kiss he’d given me backstage. That one was going to my grave.

“Shall we head back soon?” Embert asked. A moment later, however, his smartphone rang. After a brief conversation with Janus, he grinned and said, “Looks like I’m needed at work.”

Thus, he and Severin returned to the castle. The rest of us continued to explore the city at a relaxed pace before returning as well.



**THE** major event for day two of the festival was a parade. Beautiful men and women from the city would ride on floats, scattering flower petals and candy. According to Julietta, full flowers were sometimes mixed in with the petals. If you gave one such flower to the person you loved, and they accepted, the two of you would find everlasting happiness. That was the superstition, at least.

“Wouldn’t that turn the parade into a battlefield?” I asked.

I imagined the crowd brawling over flowers, yet on the contrary, strict rules were in place. First, you couldn’t move from your spot. Second, you couldn’t

steal flowers from others. Lastly, you couldn't take more than one flower. In other words, luck played a major role in getting one. To my surprise, the boys were determined to do just that.

Julietta smiled at me. "Oh, but you can take as much candy as you like."

*I would've expected that comment from Cia, but now Julie? Is that how everyone sees me?*

As I hung my head, Oreste placed a hand on my shoulder. Wow, was he going to console me?

"Let's compete to see who can get the most candy," he said, looking me straight in the eye.

*I have no right to feel disappointed. What else did I expect from this meathead?*

Yet deep down, I couldn't wait to flex on him.

Embert, Janus, and Severin had been busy since the play. As such, I headed into town with everyone except them. Many people were already waiting for the parade on the main street. My friends and I joined the crowd, giddy with excitement. Before long, loud fanfare reached our ears. Mounted knights headed the parade, their horses trotting in step with each other. When a line of brilliant floats came into view behind them, cheers erupted from the crowd. Breathtaking men and women stood atop the floats, tossing flower petals and candy from their baskets. The colorful petals and candy wrappers sparkled in the sunlight. Naturally, the beautiful sight fanned the crowd's excitement.

The children in front focused on picking up candy, paying no heed to the flower petals. Meanwhile, I caught the petals and candy the children couldn't reach.

After several floats had passed, however, disaster struck.

A crimson rose had been thrown right behind the children on the other side of the street. A few young men reached out excitedly to grab the rose. Everyone in the area leaned forward inside the already jam-packed crowd. To my horror, they began toppling like dominoes. The children didn't notice, still focused on picking up candy. At this rate, the falling adults were going to crush them.

Screams rose from nearby.

“No!” I shouted while racing to the other side of the street.

“Ally!” my friends called, but at this point, I couldn’t stop.

As a float closed in on me, I reached out to the children. Mana surged through my body, and golden light emanated from my outstretched hand. The golden light fluttered in the air like a feathery robe. It cushioned everyone who’d fallen, not just the children. After returning everyone to their original positions, the golden light transformed into particles and disappeared. It was as if no one had ever toppled forward.

After a brief moment of being stunned, the children looked around in confusion. Relief at their safety washed over me. Unfortunately, I also spotted the float closing in on me *from* the corner of my eye. Turning in that direction, I found men and women staring at me wide-eyed from atop the vehicle.

*Am I going to be run over in this world, too?* I wondered with odd detachment.

“Ally!” Custode exclaimed.

“Squishy!” the slime cheeped.

A dull gray xiaolongbao fell onto my head and enveloped me.

*Um, what?*

Custode grabbed Squishy with me inside him, grew to full size, and soared upwards.

“I must admit, you had me worried for a moment,” Custode said.

“Squishy, squishy!” the slime cheeped.

*That surprised me, too.*

I couldn’t speak inside Squishy, even if I wanted to reply to him or Custode. It was an indescribably strange sensation. However, I could still breathe. Immediately after I confirmed that, Custode let go of Squishy and me.

*Oh no!*

I let out a voiceless scream, and a moment later, I found myself riding on top

of Custode's back. Thanks to Squishy, I didn't feel any pain. The slime spat me out and returned to his original size.

I took a deep breath. "Phew, that scared the heck outta me. Thanks, you two."

After jumping onto my hand, the slime bounced up and down happily. "Squishy," he cheeped.

Custode heaved a deep sigh. "You charge in without thinking, don't you?" he asked with mild exasperation.

*Sorry, can't do anything about my instincts.*

"Well, what do you think?" I asked. "Will we be able to touch down?"

I wouldn't be surprised if the crowd had fallen into a panic. After all, a black dragon and a slime had appeared out of nowhere.

"You appear to be famous in Bragioga as well," Custode responded, much to my surprise. "The crowd can't stop talking about the holy woman's appearance. Oh, but Julietta is crying."

Of course, royalty and nobility had known about me for quite some time. Even so, it surprised me that stories of the holy woman had spread among the common folk. That aside, Julietta must have been crying out of concern for me. How could I make that adorable angel shed a single tear? What kind of villainess was I?

"I can't forgive myself for making Julie cry," I said.

While Custode remained silent, Squishy cheeped his name in agreement. At that moment, I received a call from Cia. When I answered, she appeared on my smartphone's screen with a furrowed brow.

"Are you okay, Ally?" she asked anxiously.

"Yep, I'm fine," I responded with a smile. "We'll touch down once the parade has passed."

Cia breathed a sigh of relief. "Got it."

I could hear Cita asking, "So, she's not hurt?" from beside her twin.

Once the parade had passed, Custode began his slow descent.

“Wouldn’t it be better to land somewhere else?” I asked. “This might cause a commotion.”

“It shouldn’t be an issue,” Custode replied.

Thus, we landed in the same spot as before, and as expected, a commotion ensued. Fortunately, the crowd didn’t seem to be panicking. I could hear the people’s cries of “Holy woman!” When Custode shrunk down to his miniature form, a large crowd gathered around us. Before long, a few children appeared in front of me. They held out something while fidgeting nervously. Curious, I crouched down to meet their eyes.

One of the children opened his hand to reveal a few candies in his palm. “Thank you for saving us,” he said with a wide grin. “This is a token of our appreciation.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “You worked hard to collect this candy, right?”

The boy shook his head. “Gandolfin’s holy woman used magic to save our lives,” he said while glancing at Lauris. “That’s what your friend told us. So, this is our way of saying thank you.”

“I saw your magic!” the girl beside him chimed in. “It was so beautiful and sparkly!”

Other children who’d seen my magic spoke just as excitedly. The sight caused me to swell with happiness.

“Thank you,” I said while accepting the candy. Then, I took my hard-won candy out of spatial storage and distributed it to everyone. “Well then,” I continued with a smile. “Here’s *my* token of appreciation for calling my magic beautiful.”

“Wow, thank you!” the children cheered, grabbing the candy from my hands.

As I watched them run off, Julietta threw her arms around me.

“Thank goodness,” she said. “I’m so glad you’re not hurt, Ally.”

“Yeah, sorry for making you worry,” I replied.

When I hugged Julietta back, the twins threw their arms around me as well.

Sighing, Rosario joined our circle. “Why does pandemonium always break out when you’re around?”

“I’ve noticed that too,” Oreste said.

“It’s inevitable at this point,” Lauris agreed.

Despite their words, both of them joined the group hug as well.

“Ugh,” Custode groaned while getting crushed inside my arms.

That earned a laugh from everyone.

Incidentally, everyone had learned about me being a holy woman from the adventurer’s guild. I’d gone dungeon diving with a slime, a miniature dragon, and the Crown Prince of Gandolfin, after all. No wonder I couldn’t keep my identity secret at this point.



**WHEN** we returned to the castle, Embert and Janus were waiting in the reception room.

“I thought you all would be back soon,” Embert greeted us with a charming smile. However, his lips curled sinisterly upon seeing me. “...Well, it looks as though you made quite a splash.”

His frigid tone caused everyone to shiver, not just me. I held a veritable bouquet in my arms. Following the parade, a continuous stream of townspeople had given me flowers as a token of gratitude. That had continued until we left the city limits. The next thing I knew, I’d wound up with enough flowers to open a floral boutique.

“Y-You’re reading too much into this,” I stammered, panic garbling my explanation. “No one meant anything strange by giving me these flowers. After all, I even received some of them from women.”

Embert’s smile turned even more sinister. “In other words, you’re just as popular with women, is that right? Heh, this is quite a conundrum. Well then, shall we decorate your birdcage with the most beautiful ornamentations, Ally?”

Fear gripped me. Embert's eyes gleamed wickedly, indicating his seriousness.

*Wait, if he's already discussing ornamentations, does that mean he's actually going to build the birdcage?!*

Panic-stricken, I flapped my mouth open and closed, unable to form words. Unable to bear the sight, Lauris came to my rescue.

"Ally," he said. "Don't you have something to give my brother?"

*Nice one, Lauris!* I cheered mentally.

"Oh, yeah, that's right," I mumbled, trying to ignore Embert's grim expression. "Um, what should I do with these flowers, though?"

I couldn't decide where to set down my bouquet. "Squishy!" the slime cheeped before devouring them all.

"Whoa?" I looked at the satisfied slime. "Squishy?"

I couldn't think of anything else to say. Well, I suppose everything was all right based on how delighted he looked. With my hands now free, I shifted gears, taking out a crimson rose from my spatial storage.

"Here you go," I said, holding out the rose to Embert.

Looking surprised, he accepted the rose. "What's this?" he asked while staring at the flower.

"It flew towards me during the parade," I replied. "Pretty, isn't it? I kept it in storage this whole time to give to you."

I'd caught a single flower during the parade. Lauris, Cita, and Rosario had done the same. Of course, they'd given their flowers to Julietta, Oreste, and Cia, respectively.

My words had stunned Embert, causing his ears to grow redder by the second. "Th-Thank you so much," he said.

*What a relief, I thought while basking in his adorably bashful expression. Looks like that cheered him up.*

In a flash, Embert grabbed my hand and folded me in his embrace. "I'm truly delighted," he said before kissing my cheek. "This flower symbolizes our

everlasting happiness, doesn't it?"

I hugged Embert back, his smile a clear indication of his joy. Secretly, I hoped this would take his mind off the birdcage.



THE final day of the Founding Festival arrived. Today's main event was the sword fighting tournament. The tournament had a large number of combatants, as anyone could participate, regardless of social status. The only requirement for entry was being an adult. As a result, Oreste hadn't been able to register, even though he'd desperately wanted to.

The announcement of Giusto's crown prince ascension would occur when the champion received their prize. Though the preliminary matches had already begun, Giusto would only appear in the arena for the final matches. Other members of royalty and invited guests would begin watching the tournament at the same time. As such, my friends and I decided to visit the stadium around then as well.

While returning to my room after breakfast, Embert called out to me. A moment later, he slapped the wall behind me and leaned in close. Why did having my back pinned against the wall cause my heart to race so fast? This sort of closeness was nothing new for me and Embert.

"Please don't do anything reckless, Ally," he said. "You understand what I mean, don't you?"

I nodded, unable to meet his gaze due to my heart hammering in my chest. My breath caught as his lips came within an inch of mine. Nevertheless, Embert continued.

"You always claim to understand but still rush into danger without thinking. I can't help but worry about you. We won't be able to sit together this time, so please don't do anything reckless. If you can't promise me that, you're going straight into a birdcage when we return to Gandolfin."

"...I understand," I replied, barely managing to utter the words.

"Then it's a promise," Embert responded with a radiant smile.

Afterward, he left with Janus, as they had something to take care of.

Finally free, I stumbled out of the dining room, where my friends were waiting for me.

"Embert means business when he has that look on his face," Lauris said.

"I'll do my best not to wind up in a birdcage then," I replied.

*No need to worry. I won't do anything dangerous... probably. Gah, I can't even speak confidently for myself!*

"Squishy!" the slime cheeped encouragingly from atop my shoulder.

Likewise, Custode puffed out his fluffy chest from atop Lauris's head. "I will always protect you," the tiny dragon proclaimed.

As I smiled at the reliable little fellas, Oreste placed his hand on my head. "The rest of us are here too," he said with a grin.

Everyone else nodded in agreement and laughed.



**THE** stadium was deep within the eastern side of the capital. Fortunately, there were different entrances for the general public and people connected to the royal family. Thus, we got in without any trouble. The highest row of tiered seats belonged to the royal family and their guests. Meanwhile, a huge crowd of people filled the spectator seats. There were tents selling drinks and other goods at periodic intervals. The entire spectacle reminded me of sports stadiums back on Earth.

Rosario looked down at the crowd with astonishment. "We were told what to expect beforehand, but the number of people here is staggering."

Oreste leaned over the railing to look at the crowd as well. "Is everyone who lives in the capital here right now?"

Lauris sighed as he scanned our surroundings. "I doubt we could even pick out an assassin in this crowd."

As we idled away the time, more and more people arrived. At this point, even our VIP seats were mostly full. Even more opulent seats were located at our

two o'clock. Presumably, the king and his entourage would sit there.

"Wait, where is Em sitting?" I asked.

I couldn't find Embert or Janus anywhere, even though most of the seats had been filled.

"Good question," Lauris replied, glancing around for any sign of them. "Embert and Janus left before us because they had something to take care of, right?"

Before we could find them, fanfare signaling the start of the tournament rang out. Two energetic announcers sat in box seats slightly above the center of the spectator seats. Evidently, these two men would be guiding the proceedings. At their cue, the fanfare rang out again. A moment later, Prince Giusto, Royal Prince Pieno, and the King and Queen of Bragioga entered the VIP seating area. Incidentally, Julietta had been permitted to sit with us per her request. As thunderous cheers filled the stadium, the royal family took their seats, waving to the spectators all the while.

"Now then!" one of the announcers boomed. "The final person to arrive is Crown Prince Embert Bartis of Gandolfin—the reigning champion!"

Tumultuous cheers shook the stadium.

"Huh?" I asked.

While my friends and I gaped, only Julietta grinned.

"Wait, what's going on?" I pressed. "Em's the reigning champion?"

Before we could grasp the situation, Embert swaggered into the arena. He favored the crowd with a radiant smile before halting in the center. Shrill cries pierced my eardrums, and delighted squeals of "Prince Embert!" rose from various places in the audience. The sheer volume brought us back to our senses.

"Did Em seriously win the last tournament?" I asked.

He must have enjoyed studying abroad in Bragioga quite a bit. What else had he done besides winning a tournament and becoming an adventurer?

"Should I even be surprised?" Cia asked, sounding astonished despite herself. "Plus, he's captured the heart of nearly every woman here."

"That's my brother for you," Lauris replied.

Everyone chuckled at his self-satisfied expression.

"Each tournament, the reigning champion provides the grand prize!" the announcer boomed even louder. "This time, we have something so extraordinary that it defies belief! Something you won't find just anywhere!"

Embert thrust the sword in his left hand skywards.

"The blade in Prince Embert's hand is a holy sword!" the announcer continued booming. "Furthermore, it has the divine protection of a holy woman!"

Silence fell over the stadium. Embert unsheathed the sword, revealing its platinum blade. Light so blinding that I couldn't look at it directly overflowed from the sword. Gradually, the light faded, and the blade returned to its former platinum. Although the crowd had been dazzled until this point, everyone's excitement now reached its zenith. Cheers erupted from the audience like an explosion.

Custode, who'd been dozing in my lap this whole time, finally stirred. "Ha! He's actually using that sword as the grand prize."

"Now then!" the announcer boomed. "Who will be the one to claim this magnificent holy sword?! At long last, we begin the finals of this year's tournament!"

As the entire stadium pulsed with excitement, the finals began. The matches were one-on-one and single-elimination.

At some point, Rosario had acquired a pamphlet with the list of matches. "How curious," he said while unfolding it. "Lord Janus isn't competing."

"Really?" I asked, peering at the pamphlet over his shoulder. Sure enough, I couldn't spot my brother's name anywhere.

"Lord Janus isn't competing because, ultimately, he's here as Prince Embert's personal retainer," Julietta explained. "He didn't compete three years ago either. Prince Embert put on an incredible performance back then. He ended every match with a single strike."

Though Rosario looked disappointed, Lauris wore a smug expression. Honestly, I felt disappointed as well. Still, Janus *had* acted as Embert's retainer and guard during their study abroad trip. He probably hadn't done anything to show off in a public setting.

After leaving the arena, Embert joined Janus in another box.

"Okay, I understand that Em won the last tournament," I said. "But he's not participating in this one, right? He's sitting over there, after all."

Julietta shook her head. "Prince Embert will make another appearance later. Heh, just wait and see."

Her adorable smile rendered me speechless.

In any case, the tournament progressed smoothly, and before long, we reached the quarterfinals. I didn't sense anything out of the ordinary yet.

"That's a pretty significant height difference," I noted.

During each match, we analyzed the contestants, predicted who might win, and discussed what we would have done differently. Overall, I was having a blast.

Lauris laughed with a mix of derision and exasperation. "There doesn't seem to be anyone stronger than you, Ally."

Rosario looked down at his pamphlet to check the names of the combatants. "As of yet, there hasn't been anyone stronger than Oreste either."

However, Oreste's expression turned serious when the next set of contestants entered. While one man had a large build, the other was so slender as to appear delicate.

"This name..." Rosario looked back and forth between his pamphlet and the contestants. "It belongs to a prince of the desert kingdom if I recall correctly."

The smaller man was a Prince of Sard. This desert nation was Bragioga's neighboring kingdom opposite Gandolfin. Could he have been studying abroad here, perhaps? The prince seemed to be at a severe disadvantage, judging from his size. His opponent was the very definition of a giant. Furthermore, he wielded a rather large—though not quite oversized—sword.

"There might be a huge size difference, but I bet that prince is strong," Oreste said.

Sure enough, the Prince of Sard turned out to be a powerhouse. Their differences in speed were obvious. Consequently, the prince kept the giant at his mercy for the entire duel.

"Sure, he might be fast, but he's still slower than Ally," Oreste said while observing the match enviously. "Even I could win against him."

Not being able to participate must have been frustrating for him. I patted Oreste's shoulder consolingly. "Just register for the next tournament and go bananas," I replied in a half-joking tone. "I can't compete in a sword fighting tournament, no matter how much I might want to. Still, if the contestants could use martial arts rather than just swords, I'd love to join in."

Cita smirked. "Keep talking like that, and you'll wind up inside a birdcage."

"That's right," Cia agreed. "Prince Embert might be eavesdropping on this conversation."

Panicked, I checked my smartphone. Fortunately, it wasn't active, so I had nothing to worry about. Yet, just in case, I glanced around. Yep, nothing to worry about. I didn't see anyone resembling Severin in our vicinity.

"Enough with the scary jokes," I said with a soft laugh, placing my smartphone back in my pocket.

When I glanced at the box where Embert sat, a chill ran down my spine. He was clearly looking at me. Did my eyes deceive me, or had his expression taken on a sinister cast? No, I had to be misreading things. I shook my head to dispel the chill and Embert's ominous gaze.

"It's almost time," Lauris said.

In the center of the arena, the Prince of Sard faced down a man dressed like an adventurer. The final match was about to begin. When the duel ended, Giusto would be introduced as the new Crown Prince of Bragioga. He would give the victor a trophy, prize money, and an invitation to the upcoming ball. Speaking of which, the top three contestants would all receive invitations to the ball.

Lauris spoke to everyone in a low voice. “I know we’re all interested in the match, but don’t forget to keep an eye on Prince Giusto’s surroundings.”

Everyone nodded. However, as one might expect of the final match, it didn’t reach an early conclusion. Apparently, the adventurer had attained B-rank, just like Embert and Janus. He moved with impressive agility and excelled at dodging attacks. Those who lived under the constant threat of danger were strong indeed. On the other hand, the Prince of Sard’s agility hadn’t diminished either. In fact, he seemed to be *gaining* speed. The audience watched the fierce battle unfold with bated breath. Finally, the duel concluded when a blade soared through the air.

“The winner is... Prince Fred Gibramil of Sard!” the announcer boomed.

The crowd erupted in cheers. The Prince of Sard waved to the spectators with a joyful expression. Meanwhile, Custode scrutinized our surroundings. I focused as well, trying to detect any hostility. My three guy friends were already descending towards the arena.

“The award ceremony is about to begin!” the announcer boomed. “Before that, however, His Majesty the King has an important announcement to make!”

As the crowd fell silent, the king rose to his feet.

“Congratulations on your victory, Prince Fred Gibramil,” he said in a kind yet dignified voice. “Your performance was a fitting climax to our Founding Festival. Before we proceed to the award ceremony, I have an important announcement to make. Today, I declare my son—Giusto Cotarini—the Crown Prince of Bragioga.”

The audience, which had been listening to the king silently, broke into applause. Cheers of “Congratulations!” and “Long live Prince Giusto!” could be heard from all around the stadium.

“Now then,” the king continued while surveying the crowd. “For his first duty as crown prince, I would like Giusto to preside over the award ceremony. Is that acceptable to everyone, even though we haven’t performed the ascension ceremony yet?”

Thunderous applause and cheers rose from the audience.

“Thank you,” the king said. “Well then, Giusto will now perform his first duty as crown prince. Pay close attention, everyone.”

At His Majesty’s cue, Giusto entered the arena. Tumultuous applause, shrill cries, and enthusiastic cheers greeted him. He strode towards the central winner’s podium, his expression peaceful as he waved to the crowd. As soon as he reached the podium, however, I felt hostility radiating from every direction.

“They’re coming!” I called out to everyone through my smartphone.

My mana instantly enveloped Giusto. Numerous arrows whizzed through the air, heading straight towards him. Not a single one reached him. My three guy friends had already sprinted to Giusto’s side and formed a protective barrier around him. While Lauris and Oreste cut down the continuous stream of arrows with their swords, Rosario burned them with magic.

“More incoming!” I cried.

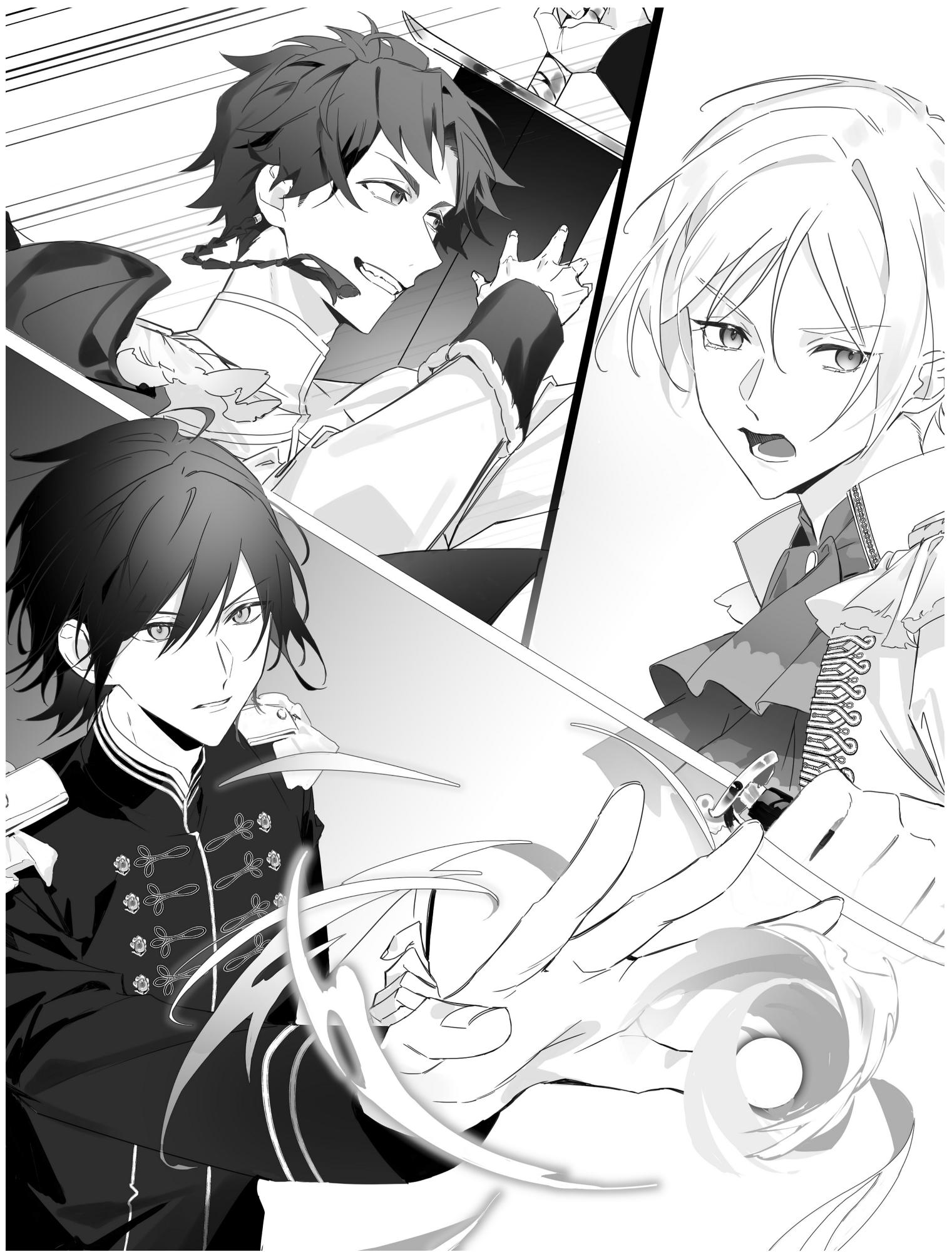
Arrows whizzed through the air again. At the same time, multiple people with knives leapt from the stadium into the arena. The guys would have a tough time deflecting the next volley of arrows with them around.

“I’m going out!” I shouted.

Cia grabbed my shoulder in an attempt to stop me. “Ally! Weren’t you told to stay put and locate the enemy?”

Despite her words, I couldn’t sit here and do nothing. Our enemies were attacking in full force. Worse, their numbers were far greater than anticipated.





Truth be told, we'd known the enemy's plan in advance. On the first day of the Founding Festival, Janus had called Embert after the play to report activity from the crystal ball. Thanks to Severin's crystal ball, we'd recorded Pieno and the merchant discussing their assassination plot in the gazebo. We'd uncovered their plan to attack Giusto with a relatively large force. I'd been ordered to identify the number of archers and their positions. Meanwhile, the boys had been entrusted with confronting the assassins directly.

"Listen closely, Ally," Embert had said once everyone had viewed the recording. "I want you to focus on informing everyone when the arrows are fired. No matter what happens, don't set foot in the arena."

I'd protested, of course, but Embert hadn't given his assent.

"Lauris and the others should be able to handle the assassins by themselves," he'd continued. "Janus and I will be on standby as well. Understand?"

I hadn't understood at all. Upon seeing my silent refusal to answer, Embert had heaved a deep sigh.

"In that case, I'll allow you to join the battle if something unexpected occurs during the operation," he'd acquiesced. "Naturally, Janus and I will also join the battle in such an event. How does that sound?"

*And something unexpected is happening at this very moment... right? I mean, none of us anticipated this many assassins, did we?*

"There are more enemies than expected," I said. "I'm joining the fight."

Cia seemed to understand that she couldn't stop me. "Why did I even try to stop you?" she asked with an exasperated laugh. "Give them all you've got then."

Cita nodded. "We'll be cheering you on from here."

"Be careful," Julietta said with a worried expression.

And so, Custode teleported us to the arena. Immediately, I felt a wave of hostility radiating from above.

"Squishy!" I cried. "Custode!"

The slime leapt into the air and devoured the entire volley of arrows. Meanwhile, Custode swooped down on the villainous archers and hurled them into the arena.

“All right, looks like I’m up next,” I said.

A few assassins in the arena charged towards me. Without Squishy and Custode by my side, I must have looked weak.

“Like moths to a flame,” I muttered wryly.

I grabbed the shoulders of my dress with both hands and pulled with all my might.

“Hey!” Lauris shouted, seeing what I was about to do.

With the sound of ripping seams, the neckline, sleeves, and shoulders of my dress came undone. My guy friends, the nearby assassins, and everyone else in the stadium froze in place. Well, who could blame them? I appeared to be stripping in public, after all. My dress split cleanly down the middle and fell to the ground.

“Ta-da!” I announced.

Of course, I wasn’t naked. I’d been wearing a shirt and trousers under my dress. Earlier, I’d asked Mary to make the seams of my dress easy to tear apart.

Oreste laughed. “Talk about a surprise.”

“Indeed,” Rosario agreed with a chuckle. “And in the middle of an emergency, no less.”

Lauris wore an expression of unmistakable anger. Two men who looked even angrier descended into the arena.

“Were you trying to give me a heart attack, Ally?” Embert asked.

“Even I can’t condone that sort of behavior,” Janus added. “I’ll have to give you a proper scolding later.”

Both handsome men looked more deadly to me than the assassins.

I sighed. “Even you agree with Em for once, Janus?”

As the two men drew their swords, still smiling wickedly, the crowd erupted in

shrill cheers. This sound brought the stunned assassins back to their senses. Thus, they resumed their attack. Despite the sheer number of enemies, we never felt overwhelmed. Embert and Janus cut down our foes at a lightning-fast pace. They were so strong that I wondered, “Am I even needed here?” Since the threat of archers had disappeared, the guys could focus on the enemies in front of them. Next thing I knew, a large number of men in balaclavas lay collapsed around the arena.

“I barely had time to show off,” Custode said upon returning with Squishy. After spitting out the arrows he’d eaten, Squishy jumped onto my hand.

“Good work, you two,” I said.

As I began to dispel the barrier around Giusto, I caught sight of Pieno in the arena. Since when had he been here? A man in a cowled, black cloak stood beside him. After a few silent steps, the cloaked man dashed towards Giusto. Neither Giusto nor the others noticed the assailant.

Without delay, I wound up and threw Squishy like a baseball. The slime flew straight and true, striking the cloaked man’s arm. The man nearly dropped his knife due to the impact. Immediately grasping the situation, our clever little Squishy gobbled up the knife.

The man slowed for a brief moment, taken aback. An instant later, however, he continued racing towards Giusto. I was already sprinting as well. Using my momentum, I delivered a flying kick to the man’s jaw, which sent him sprawling backward.

“That was awesome, Ally!” Cita called.

I waved to my gal pals in the stadium. Oreste rushed over to me. “You’ve got to teach me that move!” he exclaimed, brimming with excitement.

“Damn you,” a low, resentful voice echoed behind me.

Giusto turned to face the speaker.

“This was my last chance,” Pieno continued while glowering at his nephew. “But you’ve always had the devil’s luck, haven’t you?”

“Uncle Pieno...” Giusto murmured.

The sadness in his voice caused my chest to ache. For years, Giusto had known about his blood-related uncle trying to assassinate him. Even so, facing him down and hearing his resentful words must have been painful. Sadly, Pieno couldn't even comprehend Giusto's suffering. Teeth clenched, the man withdrew something from his pocket. The object—a small, pitch-black box—filled me with a sense of revulsion.

"I wanted to finish things without using this," Pieno said. "But now you leave me with no other choice." Smirking, he crushed the black box in his hand. A moment later, a large magic circle appeared in the arena.

"This is bad!" Giusto exclaimed.

Recognizing the danger, he pulled me into a protective embrace. Embert, Janus, and my guy friends readied their swords in preparation for whatever might emerge from the magic circle. The spectators remained motionless, unsure what was happening. Many seemed to believe this commotion was some sort of sideshow. In fact, some eagerly awaited what would happen next. Nevertheless, the magic circle merely emanated a soft glow. Nothing emerged from it.

"Why?!" Pieno roared, glaring back and forth between the magic circle and the crushed box in his hand. "Why is nothing being summoned?!"

Witnessing Pieno's fury reminded me of something. Still in Giusto's embrace, I looked over at Embert and Custode.

"Um, is that magic circle what I think it is?" I asked.

Embert, having drawn the same conclusion, burst out laughing. "Ahaha! Then it *was* you, after all, Royal Prince Pieno!"

Pieno turned his glare on Embert. "What the hell is going on?!" he bellowed. "Why are you laughing?!"

"Well, you see..." Embert began before breaking into laughter again. "Aha! This is too much. I can't stop myself."

Embert's unceasing laughter eased the tension in the air. Even Giusto regarded him with a puzzled expression.

“Certainly, I had my suspicions,” Embert continued with a chuckle. “Even so, I dismissed them. After all, I didn’t think you would be foolish enough to go that far, considering your position. Heh, I’m starting to get a clearer picture of things. Your daughter must have inherited her stupidity from you.” Embert strode over to me and pulled me away from Giusto. “I know you were trying to protect my Ally, but how long did you intend to keep holding her?” he asked, flashing a wicked smile. “I’ll need to give you a stern talking to once this matter is resolved.”

Giusto chuckled, his lips quirking into a charming grin.

*Whoa, this is getting scary. I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything.*

Custode smirked from atop my shoulder. “You sure are popular.”

*And you sure are heavy,* I thought, removing him from my shoulder and cradling him in my arms like usual.

“Don’t ignore me!” Pieno roared. “As soon as my summoning spell finishes, you lot will be trampled to death!”

Embert remained composed even in the face of Pieno’s rage. “Unfortunately, the monster you’re waiting for won’t appear here.”

“What’s so funny?!” Pieno bellowed, Embert’s words merely fanning his fury. “What do you know that I don’t?!”

After exchanging a glance, Embert and I shrugged in unison.

“You’re trying to summon the dungeon’s final boss, correct?” Embert asked, seeming to savor each word. “Unfortunately, that creature won’t appear here.”

Pieno’s temper flared even hotter. “What did you say?!” he roared, raising his fist to strike Embert. Mid-attack, he stopped and furrowed his brow, seeming to have realized something. “Wait. You went to the dungeon, didn’t you?”

“Indeed,” Embert replied, his smile unwavering. He regarded the suspicious Pieno with an expression of mock apology. “On the deepest floor, we found an enormous serpent with three heads. It was sleeping within a rather large cage. Of course, we destroyed the cage, not having the faintest clue that *you* had set it up.”

For some reason, Embert's playful tone elicited squeals of "So cute!" from the crowd. *You've got it all wrong, I wanted to say. He's being sinister, not cute.* Still, I kept my mouth shut, as now wasn't the time for such comments.

"You destroyed it?" Pieno asked with an incredulous expression. "That cage had a barrier protecting it."

*Yeah, it sure did, but I'm a holy woman, remember?* I quipped internally. *I can dispel that sort of barrier as easy as pie.*

Embert chuckled. "Ally can dispel barriers of that level in the blink of an eye. Furthermore, I'm afraid I have even worse news for you. On top of destroying the cage, we also defeated the monster."

Pieno froze, unable to respond. I could see the gears turning in his mind as his eyes widened. "Don't tell me..." he mumbled in a barely audible voice. However, Embert and I—as well as Giusto, presumably—heard every syllable.

"Aha, that's exactly right!" Embert exclaimed. "Squishy and Custode—our slime and dragon combo—defeated the monster in an instant. And therefore..." Here, Embert took a forceful step closer to Pieno. "...not a single thing will go according to your plan."

The blood drained from Pieno's face. Then, a chuckle escaped his lips while he looked at the ground. His quiet laughter transformed into a booming guffaw that echoed throughout the stadium.

"Ahahaha!" he roared. "I never expected to be thwarted this thoroughly! Perhaps I should have kept a closer eye on you, Prince Embert. Even so, this isn't over. I won't allow it to end like this!"

Pieno radiated a wicked aura. The sense of revulsion I felt towards him intensified.

"Get back, Em!" I cried.

Pieno clapped his hands together, and a pattern of black vines surfaced on them. My sense of revulsion had originated from the black box in his hands, not the man himself. In an instant, the black vines engulfed him. Then, they spread throughout the arena at an alarming rate. Looking behind me, I found the vines coiling around the feet of everyone in the arena except Giusto.

“Em!” I cried. “Janus! Everyone!”

As screams erupted from the seats closest to the arena, some panicked spectators attempted to flee. Presently, the chaos had only gripped the lower seats, but in all likelihood, it would soon spread to the higher levels. At this rate, a great many people would suffer injuries. I spun around to look at the entire stadium, unsure what to do. All the while, the vines spread rapidly. Before long, they reached the first-floor seats. Worse, the vines had ensnared my friends, rendering them immobile.

“No!” I exclaimed, on the verge of panicking. “Everyone!”

“Pull yourself together, Ally!” Embert shouted.

“Calm down, Ally!” Janus bellowed. “We’re still okay!”

With terrific speed, both men cut down the attacking vines one after another. Unfortunately, they had their hands full protecting themselves. I couldn’t expect them to do anything more.

“What should I do...?” I mumbled. Tears welled in my eyes as I failed to think of a way to save everyone.

“You can handle this, Ally!” Custode shouted encouragingly. “It’s just a curse! Use your purification magic!”

Custode grew to his full size, raised his head skyward, and let forth a thunderous roar. As a tingling sensation spread throughout my body, everyone in the arena halted.

“Quickly!” Custode urged. “Now’s your chance!”

Seeing everyone go motionless stunned me. However, Custode’s words jolted me back to my senses.

“Get a grip, Ally,” I said, slapping my cheeks to fire myself up. “You’re a holy woman, aren’t you?”

I let out a deep breath and forced my mana to swell within me. After feeling it rush from my body, it surged upwards, ascending higher than the stadium seats. Custode beat his massive wings, which shone with dark luster, diffusing my mana in every direction. The magical energy rained down on the entire

arena, glittering like gold dust. While this lasted for less than a minute, the audience began to stir. They looked up curiously at the sky as if nothing unusual had occurred. The vines that had threatened to devour the arena had vanished.

“Em!” I cried.

Relief washing over me, I leapt towards Embert, who was making sure the vines had disappeared. Despite his surprise, he caught me in his arms while I embraced him around the neck.

“Thank goodness,” I said while sobbing like a child. “That was a close one.”

“Ally,” Embert replied gently, still holding me tightly. “I never doubted your abilities as a holy woman. You are truly remarkable, my love. I’m falling head over heels for you all over again.” He kissed me on the eyelids, his expression as gentle as his voice. Then, he set me down softly.

“You did well, Ally,” my brother called from behind.

“Janus!” I cried. I leapt into his arms next.

“Atta girl,” he said with a chuckle, squeezing me in his arms. “I knew you could do it.” He kissed me on the top of my head.

“Talk about a surprise,” Oreste said while scratching his head. “Those vines were so fast that we couldn’t put up a fight.”

Laughing, Rosario and Lauris nodded in agreement.

A moment later, everyone’s gaze focused on a single point. Pieno must have used up all his mana, for the vines consuming his body had vanished. What’s more, he’d collapsed onto the ground, appearing to have aged ten years in a single moment.

“Uncle Pieno,” Giusto said. “On top of your numerous attempts to kill me, you also used that dreadful magic artifact in the middle of this massive crowd. Fortunately, the holy woman was here to stop you. Yet, unfortunately, I cannot forgive these crimes. You will face the appropriate punishment.”

When Giusto raised his hand, several knights approached him. They lifted Pieno’s limp body and carried him outside the arena.

“Ally,” Giusto continued. “Thank you for saving Bragioga and its people. You

are a splendid holy woman indeed. None of us fell prey to the vines thanks to your protection. Both this nation and I are in your debt.” Giusto bowed his head, took my hand, and kissed the back of it.

“I’m just glad my powers were able to help,” I said. Giusto’s grandiose words caused a blush to creep up my cheeks. When I laughed awkwardly, he responded with a charming smile reminiscent of Julietta’s.

“Everyone!” Giusto exclaimed while looking around the arena, his smile unfaltering. “I sincerely apologize for this tragedy caused by my uncle’s misconduct. We contained this situation thanks to Crown Prince Embert of Gandolfin and his dependable allies. Above all, we owe an immense debt of gratitude to the holy woman who purified this area with her beautiful holy magic and her divine beast. Let us show them our thanks.”

Giusto’s words echoed throughout the silenced arena. When he finished, one person began clapping. Then another. Before long, thunderous applause spread throughout the entire crowd, shaking the stadium. The spectators came alive once more, their cheers and shrill cries enveloping the arena.

Once the excitement had died down, the champion’s award ceremony began. When Giusto invited us to watch from nearby, seats were hastily prepared for me and my friends. Thus, Giusto provided this year’s champion—Prince Fred Gibramil—with a medal, a trophy plaque, and a promissory note wrapped in silk.

“Huh?” I asked, cocking my head. “What about the sword Em brought?”

*Didn’t he say that was part of the grand prize as well?*

“Prince Embert—the champion from three years ago—is about to duel the current champion,” Janus explained. “The winner will receive the sword.”

*I had no idea. But come to think of it, Julie mentioned something about Em making an appearance later, right? In other words, this is a deciding match between champions, huh?*

As I nodded in understanding, another question popped into my mind. “Why didn’t you participate, Janus?” I asked.

My brother probably would have won the tournament if he’d competed.

Janus brought his pointer finger to his lips in a playful shushing gesture. “I’m simply His Highness’s personal retainer,” he said with a smile. “It would be unbecoming for me to show off my strength.”

Of course, the women in nearby seats sighed heavily and squealed with delight at his smile.

When the award ceremony ended, Embert entered the arena with the holy sword. Naturally, the crowd went wild over the duel between two handsome, strong men. While Embert had an elegant flair, Prince Fred possessed a rugged charm. Scattered women screamed the men’s names at the top of their lungs. I even spotted a few of them fainting due to anemia or oxygen shortage. The medical rooms must have been in pandemonium.

Embert handed the holy sword to Giusto, and the duel began at last. No magic would be allowed in the contest of pure swordsmanship. Though both duelists moved with impressive skill, Embert had more energy to spare. Prince Fred displayed agile footwork, and despite his slender build, his strikes carried significant weight. Nevertheless, Embert parried each of Fred’s attacks, a provocative smile on his lips.

“Time to put an end to this,” Embert finally murmured. He knocked Fred’s sword high into the air. The blade spun a number of times before landing with its point in the ground.

“The winner is Crown Prince Embert Bartis!” the announcer boomed.

The crowd erupted in cheers, shaking the stadium once again.



**AFTER** the tournament, Bragiogan VIPs and invited guests gathered in the castle for a banquet. While the banquet took place in the great hall, my friends and I enjoyed a smaller victory celebration in the opposite courtyard. A smorgasbord of hamburgers, sandwiches, and other hand foods had been set out for us.

The Bragiogan VIPs and foreign guests had tried to invite me to the actual banquet. However, Embert, Giusto, and the King of Bragioga had barred them from approaching me. Following today’s events, everyone realized the value of

my position as a holy woman. Personally, I wanted nothing to do with their political schemes. Thus, Embert had blocked my participation by highlighting our engagement and my age, as I was still a minor.

“Let’s liven up this party,” Cita suggested. “Who cares if it’s just a small victory celebration?”

And so, everyone created magical spheres of light that floated in the night sky. As the colorful orbs wavered in the air, we ate and chatted beneath their phantasmal beauty. Once everyone had eaten a fair amount, the conversation shifted to the tournament.

“In the end, Em kept the holy sword,” I said.

From there, we discussed Embert’s impressive swordsmanship. I hadn’t known he was so skilled with a blade.

Lauris grinned boastfully. “He’s never had the chance to demonstrate his sword skills publicly with Janus at his side.”

*Apparently, the brother-obsessed weirdo knew all along, I thought. Our nation sure is peaceful.* Sipping tea, I watched Custode munching on a fruit-filled sandwich. All the while, Squishy valiantly brought him more and more food.

“Ally,” a honey-tinged voice called out to me.

I recognized Embert’s voice without even turning around. He and Janus had left the great hall to join us in the courtyard. The two men looked divine with the moon at their backs, eliciting a collective sigh from everyone present. In terms of handsomeness, they were in a league of their own.

“Hey, you two,” I said in the most cheerful tone possible, trying to ignore my racing heart. “Is the banquet over?”

“Indeed,” Embert replied. “Everyone is free to do as they please now, and it pleased me most to join you.”

I cocked my head. Wasn’t this the perfect opportunity to mingle with the other guests and improve relationships?

Embert poked my cheek, a shadow darkening his face. “I couldn’t stand the incessant buzzing of those wasps any longer. Whenever someone opened their

mouths, they begged to meet the holy woman. It was growing quite tiresome.”

*Oh, it's my fault, huh?* I thought with a twinge of guilt. *Sorry about that.*

Embert poked my cheek again. “Besides, I wanted to touch your face as soon as possible.”

My somewhat elevated heart rate quickened even more. Gorgeous, moonlit men were terrifying to behold.

In the blink of an eye, Embert created a chair from magic and sat next to me. After taking a sip of tea, he picked up a piece of chocolate in front of him.

“What did you think of my swordsmanship?” he asked.

“It was amazing,” I answered honestly. “You were so dashing out there.”

Embert tossed the chocolate into my open mouth. Then, while staring at me, he licked the melted chocolate from his fingertips.

*Huh? What the heck was that? Is today the day he pulls out all the stops to seduce me?*

“Mm, how sweet,” Embert said with a roguish grin.

*Um, excuse me, but could you please restrain yourself? If you keep laying on the charm, my poor heart will explode. I might have to call Squishy for urgent support.*

At that moment, another person arrived from the great hall.

“Thank goodness,” Giusto said. “I was afraid this party might have wrapped up already.”

I didn’t fail to notice Embert clucking his tongue.

“Hello there, Prince Giusto,” he said without leaving his seat. “Is it wise for the man of the hour to leave his own party?”

Giusto laughed. “At this point, everyone’s too drunk to notice if I’m there or not. As such, I’ve come to join all of you instead.”

While they appeared to be having an amicable conversation, charming smiles on their lips, I could see the sparks flying.

"Um, it's starting to feel cramped here," I said. "I'm gonna go over there."

Shuddering, I moved to the picnic blanket next to the table. However, both Embert and Giusto joined me on the blanket. The others watched us with either grins or bated breath.

"Perhaps you should discard your one-sided feelings and choose a fiancée already," Embert suggested. "After all, you're the crown prince now."

"What's this?" Giusto asked. "You didn't have a fiancée while studying abroad in Bragioga, Prince Embert, and you were older than I am now."

Embert chuckled. "I hadn't officially become the crown prince back then. Besides, I was still waiting for my beloved to notice me."

On my left, Embert twirled a lock of my hair around his finger. On my right, Giusto stared at me with a dazzling smile. I couldn't have been more uncomfortable.

*What kind of game is this supposed to be?*

As usual, Custode continued eating on my lap. "Must be difficult," he said telepathically, smirking through a mouthful of egg tart.

Squishy was also eating a mountain of eclairs on my lap. He seemed to be enjoying them.

"Found you," an unfamiliar voice said.

Turning towards the voice, we found Prince Fred Gibramil—the winner of the tournament—standing there. He strode over to us and stopped in front of me.

"I've been wanting to meet you, Your Holiness," he said.

"Come again?" I asked.

Prince Fred was a strikingly handsome man with a healthy tan, chocolate-colored hair, and amber eyes.

*Why does he want to meet me? Either way, I'm impressed he has the courage to speak to me in this situation.*

"I watched you deliver a flying kick to that assassin," Fred explained. "I fell for you at that moment. Would you please marry me and become—"

“Prince Fred,” Embert interrupted. “Did you forget I announced my engagement to Lady Alexandra during the banquet?”

Fred glared at Embert with an annoyed expression. “My feelings remain unchanged, regardless of whether she’s your fiancée. It’s hardly uncommon to break off engagements in this day and age. So long as I win Her Holiness’s heart —”

“Prince Fred,” Giusto interrupted this time. “From what I’ve heard, you have multiple fiancée candidates, do you not?”

Custode burst out laughing so hard that he rolled off my lap. Squishy continued eating his eclairs. He’d switched from chocolate to almond flavored.

When Fred wouldn’t let go of my hand, I looked up at the sky, unsure what to do. I caught sight of a fiery orb shooting upwards. Moments later, an explosion followed, and fireworks bloomed across the night sky.

“Wow,” I said. “How beautiful.”

After wresting my hand from Fred’s grip, Embert twined his fingers around mine. “The Founding Festival is finally coming to a close,” he said.

We would soon depart Bragioga, where we’d made so many fond memories.

“I had a wonderful time here,” I said.

Embert chuckled. “Me too.”

We continued watching the fireworks, which faded and bloomed over and over again.

## Chapter Nine: New School Year

**SUMMER** break and our time abroad ended, and our sophomore year began. Once again, my friends and I were all in the same class. Since the academy divided us into classes based on exam scores, most of our fellow students remained the same. While this lacked novelty, I felt an invisible sense of solidarity between us, as we'd all experienced the ordeal with Lady Celette together.

The young lady who'd apologized to me after the rooftop incident was in our class as well. She'd made new friends, and the other students didn't appear to be ostracizing her, which relieved me. The other young lady from the rooftop incident had quit school and moved back to her family's domain. I would probably never see her again.

My friends and I sat together, just like we had during our first year. Before long, the classroom door opened, and our homeroom teacher walked in... along with Embert.

“Oh?” I asked. “What’s going on? Wasn’t he only going to be our assistant teacher for one year?”

As the girls squealed with delight, my friends and I stared at Embert dumbfoundedly, unable to accept reality. After glancing in our direction, Embert flashed a charming smile and spoke.

“Originally, I only planned to work here for a year,” he said. “However, I’ve received requests to continue teaching dance, swordsmanship, and so forth. As such, I decided to continue helping with several classes. I look forward to spending another year with you all.”

My friends and I heaved a deep sigh at Embert’s dazzling smile.

“Why do I suddenly have a bad feeling about this?” I muttered under my breath.

“What a coincidence,” Lauris said from beside me. “I had the exact same feeling.”

Rosario—who sat in front of Lauris—nodded. “Me too.”

Cia smirked, seeming to have her own suspicions.

*Seriously, why is Em pretending to be a teacher for another year?*

The reason would become apparent all too soon.



**AFTER** class introductions had ended, we headed to the cafeteria as usual. Beside me, Lauris cut his steak with a grave expression.

“There must be a reason for this,” he said without preamble.

Immediately, we all knew he was talking about Embert.

On my other side, Cia’s expression lit up with anticipation. “I think so, too,” she agreed.

Next to Cia, Rosario was eating a rice omelet and Hamburg steak with an unperturbed expression. “It must have something to do with Ally,” he said.

*What’s with his meal? I quipped internally. That’s exactly what children ate for lunch back in Japan.*

Across from me, Oreste—whose brain was slowly transforming into pure muscle—gobbled down a steak twice the size of Lauris’s. “This year seems like it’s gonna be a blast,” he said. “More importantly, can you teach me that flying kick, Ally?”

“Are you okay, Ally?” Cita and Julietta asked simultaneously.

*Poor little me, I wept internally. Of all my friends, they’re the only two who are actually concerned about me.*

As I cut into my Hamburg steak drenched in sauce, someone called out, “Ally!” from the cafeteria entrance.

I recognized the cheerful voice at once. “Severin?” I asked, and after turning around to face him, I froze in place.

*What's going on? Am I seeing things?*

Severin walked towards us with two men on either side of him. While the girls in the cafeteria squealed with delight, everyone at my table—excluding me—stirred excitedly.

“Oh, give me a break!” Julietta huffed.

*So cute.*

“It’s been a little while, hasn’t it?” Severin greeted me in his usual tone. “I actually wanted to ask you about something, Ally. It’s related to the device that rains down hot water while you’re in the bath—”

I clapped my hand over Severin’s mouth. “Hold up, hold up, hold up. I need you to wait for my brain to catch up with the situation.”

Severin continued mumbling something incoherent behind my hand, but I ignored him.

“Why?” I asked, finally removing my hand from Severin’s mouth and looking between the men on either side of him. “What’s going on here?”

Severin wasn’t the one to reply.

“It’s been too long,” Giusto said, taking my hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world and kissing it gracefully. “Truth be told, I wanted to experience the wonders of Gandolfin for myself. As such, I’ll be studying here for the next year. I hope we can continue to be friends, as we were during the summer.”

“And I came here to win your affection,” Prince Fred spoke up from Severin’s opposite side. “I’m hoping you’ll break off your engagement with Prince Embert and return to the Kingdom of Sard with me.”

His straightforward declaration hit me like a ton of bricks. Most girls would have fallen for his charm instantly, so why did I have a pounding headache? As I massaged my temples, frustrated, Severin’s carefree voice cut through my thoughts.

“We’re all going to be in the same class,” he said. “Sounds like fun, right?”

*Fun? Maybe for you and Cia, but not for anyone else.*

Julietta's face fell. "Sorry about this, Ally. I forbade Giusto from coming, but..."

Her dejected expression was so adorable that my headache vanished. In any case, I vowed to stay as far away from Giusto and Fred as possible.



**HOW** had things come to this despite my vow? The next day, as I looked at the young men lined up in front of me, my pounding headache struck again. Dance lessons started immediately at the beginning of our sophomore year. With our debutante approaching, we would spend much more time in this class. Furthermore, we were having joint lessons with Severin and the other fourth-year students. After all, it would help to practice with experienced dancers who'd already debuted in high society.

"Everyone is free to choose their own dance partners," the teacher said. "Upperclassmen, please look around carefully to ensure that no sophomores are left by themselves."

At the teacher's words, everyone moved at the same time. Giusto, Fred, and—for some reason—Severin came to stand in front of me. As the three of them held out their hands, I sighed.

"Didn't the teacher just instruct the upperclassmen to make sure all the sophomores have partners?" I asked.

Severin burst out laughing. "I only followed them because it seemed like a laugh. Sorry about that. I'll find another partner."

While Severin moved behind me to ask Julietta to dance, Giusto and Fred didn't budge.

"I believe I can provide excellent instruction," Giusto said.

"So can I," Fred countered. "I'll lead you perfectly."

Choosing either of them would create hard feelings. As I groaned in frustration, the two men looked behind me and clucked their tongues.

"Unfortunately for you two, I will be serving as Ally's dance partner," Embert's voice echoed from above.

While Fred looked unamused, Giusto's smile stiffened. Embert swiftly led me

away from the two young men, glaring at them from the corner of his eye. Soon after, the music started, and we moved in time with the rhythm.

"Honestly," Embert grumbled. "I can't let my guard down for a moment around them."

I laughed. "Yeah, what's up with those guys?"

"No matter how many times they cross swords with me, they stand no chance of winning. Perhaps I really should have taken over Bragioga, though for different reasons than you assumed."

I laughed at Embert's crabby expression. Somehow or another, he appeared to be enjoying the situation as well. *It's probably because he trusts me*, I thought while breaking into a smile.

"What's got you grinning from ear to ear?" Embert grumbled.

Despite his sullen expression, his dance form remained perfect.

"It makes me happy to know how much you trust me," I responded with a laugh.

Embert tightened his grip around my waist, having understood my meaning from those few words. "Of course I trust you. Though I do get jealous, I know you would never fall for another man. What worries me is never knowing what you'll do next."

"Sorry about that."

My body tended to move of its own accord. I had no control over this single aspect of myself. When I looked down, Embert kissed me on the head and tightened his grip around my waist even more.

"It's fine," he said. "I like this version of myself who worries about you. In fact, I feel like my truest self whenever I'm with you."

I laughed softly. "In that case, we'll have to stay together forever."

As Embert and I smiled at each other, the music stopped. At that moment, Giusto and Fred approached us again.

"May I have the next dance?" Giusto asked.

"No, I'll have the next dance," Fred declared.

Clucking his tongue in annoyance, Embert hid me behind his back. While Giusto and Fred raised complaints, Severin and my friends laughed at our antics. Surely, yet another eventful year awaited us.

"This sure is peaceful," I muttered from behind Embert's back.

# Epilogue

I was about to collapse from exhaustion in the middle of the royal castle's bustling dance hall.

"Well done." Embert chuckled. "That was the last of the greetings."

I let out a heavy sigh, my eyes watery. After addressing the debutantes, the king had officially announced my engagement to Embert. Then, the torture of receiving congratulations from every present noble had begun. At least Embert had been by my side. When the last conversation finally ended, my legs nearly gave out from beneath me. At last, Embert escorted me to where my friends had gathered.

"Good job, Ally," Cita said, leading me to the sofa. "Sit here, okay?"

Meanwhile, Cia handed me a glass of juice.

"Thanks, everyone," I said. "Wow, this is the most exhausted I've been all year."

*How does this feel more draining than clearing a dungeon? It's kind of incredible.*

Julietta began cooling me off with her folding fan. "And this year is about to end." She giggled. "In other words, the most exhausting event came at the finale."

As I nodded emphatically, Julietta's adorable smile restored some of my energy.

"Exactly," I said. "I have a newfound respect for the royal family."

The thought of enduring this for the rest of my life made me want to cry a little. Strangely, however, talking to my friends helped me recover.

"That said..." Cita began. She and her sister looked between me and Julietta. "I wasn't surprised by Ally's dress because I expected it," she continued, "but

Julie's dress *did* catch me off guard."

Cia nodded. "Brothers sure do think alike, huh?"

I wore a silver ball gown with diamonds studding the neckline and hemming. When I'd first put the dress on, its radiance had astounded me. Plus, all my accessories were matching emeralds. Likewise, Julietta wore a green dress with matching amber accessories. In other words, both brothers had given their fiancées dresses and accessories that matched their hair and eye colors.

"Ally's dress is the color of Embert's hair," Lauris said. "But Julie's dress is the color of my eyes. They're completely different, no matter how you look at them."

No one responded to Lauris's smug declaration.

*Yep, brothers sure do think alike*, we all thought.

At that moment, Fred approached us with a smirk on his face. "Prince Embert," he said. "Are you so insecure about your engagement that you have to bring this much attention to it?"

Embert's lips twisted into a wicked smile. "I'm not the least bit insecure. Rather, I merely wanted to show everyone how well my colors suit Ally."

Another voice chimed in from a different direction.

"Then why don't you let her try out my colors as well?" Giusto asked. "I'm sure they would suit her even better."

The three princes had been bantering with each other in this fashion for the past three or four months.

"You guys sure do get along well," I'd mentioned at one point.

"Come again?" Embert had responded with a sinister smile.

*He's probably just embarrassed.*

As I disregarded the three princes' argument, Oreste turned to look at me.

"How is Gaetano doing?" he asked.

"He's fitting in perfectly," I replied. "Janus and Father train him personally on occasion, so he's having the time of his life."

Following the events in the arena, Pieno had been executed. Given the severity of his actions, that had been the natural consequence. That black box had been a cursed artifact, not a magic artifact. According to Custode, it had made me feel sick due to its malevolent aura.

Later, Gaetano and Damiana were stripped of their royal status due to their father Pieno's crimes. Evidently, Damiana had become a recluse after the fright Embert and Custode had given her. Shortly thereafter, Damiana had been sent to a nun's convent with lenient rules, as she couldn't find a decent man to marry her. However, Gaetano had chosen to leave Bragioga himself. Immediately, he'd arrived on our doorstep with a startling proposal.

"I have nothing left to offer you, but would you be my bride, Mary?" he'd asked.

Currently, Mary and Gaetano were living together in a detached villa on our manor's grounds. Thanks to recommendations from Embert and my family, Gaetano had joined the chivalric order, where he'd quickly distinguished himself. Since Oreste trained with the knights, he and Gaetano occasionally sparred together. The two had become fast friends.

Giusto, who'd begun listening to our conversation at some point, sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. I've been worried about Gaetano, but I wasn't sure if I should ask about him."

And so, I talked about him a little more.

"Gaetano is very passionate," I said with a soft laugh. "Occasionally, I see him in the manor with Mary, and he's head over heels for her. It's made Janus, of all people, start considering marriage, even though he had no interest in it before. My whole family has been speculating that Mary and Gaetano might have an adorable baby in the near future."

"I see," Giusto responded with a smile. "That's truly wonderful to hear."

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

"Why don't you visit our manor soon?" I asked. "You too, Julie. I'll make sure to let Gaetano know you're both coming."

Lauris, Oreste, and—for some reason—Fred expressed their interest in joining

as well.

“In that case, why don’t we all have a tea party at my manor?” I suggested.

A moment later, music signaling the start of the dance began to play.

Embert held out his hand to me. “It’s tradition for all debutantes to dance.”

“Of course,” I replied, placing my hand on his without hesitation.

After helping me to my feet, Embert gracefully escorted me to the dance floor and pulled me into his arms. As the music continued, the debutantes danced with light steps. The fluttering of our colorful dresses took on a dreamlike quality. All the while, Embert’s silver hair and emerald eyes sparkled beneath the dazzling light of the chandelier.

*I can’t believe I’m marrying such a beautiful man.*

I felt as if I were in a dream. Men as gorgeous as Embert didn’t exist on Earth. He would probably be an international celebrity there. As I thought that while dancing, Embert looked at me slightly suspiciously, noticing something amiss with me.

“What are you thinking about while dancing with me?” he asked. “Depending on your answer, I might not forgive you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. This unbelievably handsome man being so attached to me felt absurd.

“Actually, I was thinking about you,” I replied. “You probably would have been an international celebrity in my previous world.”

“Do you mean that in a good way?” he asked.

“Of course,” I responded with another laugh. “There are no men as dashing as you in my previous world. If you existed on Earth, you would have been so far beyond my reach that we never would have met.”

Embert tightened his grip around me. Naturally, this drew our bodies closer together. My cheeks flushed as the warmth of Embert’s body pressed closely against mine.

“I-I can’t dance like this,” I complained, hoping he would loosen his grip.

“Ally,” he responded while embracing me even tighter. “Even if I wound up in your previous world, I would do everything in my power to find you.”

His earnestness astonished me, rendering me momentarily speechless. Yet, after a moment of bewilderment, I shook my head.

“I was just joking, Em,” I assured him. “Please don’t take it so seriously. I only meant to say how beautiful you are.”

Even so, Embert didn’t loosen his grip. Unsure what else to do, I eventually kept speaking despite my embarrassment.

“In that case, if the two of us end up leading completely different lives in my previous world, please come find me. Promise you’ll never stop searching for me, no matter how different I look.”

Embert’s expression softened. “Of course. I’ll do everything in my power to find you, no matter what world we’re in. You’re my destiny, after all.”

With that, Embert swept me up in his arms and spun us around in dizzying circles. Based on his delighted expression, my words must have made him quite happy. Just looking at him filled me with joy as well.

“Hold on!” I exclaimed with a laugh. “You’re making me dizzy!”

After spinning us around in countless circles, Embert set me down lightly and embraced me. We’d drawn stares from the entire ballroom, and without my notice, the music had stopped. Usually, I’d be mortified at this point, yet for some reason, the comfort of being inside Embert’s arms outweighed my embarrassment. Perhaps I was excited that our engagement had been announced.

“I love you, Ally,” Embert said. “If you so wished, I would conquer the world for you.”

He must have been a little overexcited, too. I would never ask him to conquer the world for me. As I opened my mouth to say this, a certain divine beast floated over to me with a cookie in both hands.

“World domination, eh?” Custode asked. “Not a bad idea.”

“Huh?” I asked. “When did you get here?”

"How could I miss my precious holy woman's coming-of-age celebration? Besides, I suspected plenty of delectable treats would be here."

Instead of joining the celebration, he'd flown straight towards the desserts without even greeting me. Honestly, how much did this dragon love sweets? Though I narrowed my eyes at him, he didn't seem bothered in the least.

"So, Embert, you're planning world domination?" Custode asked.

"Yes, if Ally wishes it," Embert replied.

"I see."

*Could you guys not get so carried away? I'd prefer that you didn't start saber-rattling while everyone's watching us.*

"We're not doing that," I replied firmly, looking between Embert and Custode.

Custode looked disappointed. Were divine beasts with an eye on world domination even a thing? In any case, the next song began, indifferent to us. At this point, I wanted to escape the spotlight, but Embert showed no signs of moving.

"Ally's father would be on board with world domination, don't you think?" Custode asked.

Smirking, he glanced over to where my father was standing with a few other men. Despite being in the middle of a conversation, his eyes were fixed on us. Upon seeing my father, Embert's lips quirked into a wicked smile that might have seemed charming at a glance.

"Apparently, my future father-in-law still doubts our love," Embert said with a sinister chuckle. "Or, perhaps more likely, he's simply a doting father who can't stand to give his daughter away."

"Hey, Em, could we move away from—"

Before I could finish speaking, my vision went dark. By the time I realized that Embert had kissed me, the ballroom had already begun to stir. Flustered, I pushed my hands against his shoulders to escape. Unfortunately, I couldn't budge an inch due to his tight embrace around my waist. Though I asked him to let me go between kisses, it had no effect.

“W-Wai—”

Embert seemed to enjoy not letting me finish my sentences. Custode merely laughed, showing no indication of coming to my rescue. The idea of everyone watching us caused me to flush with shame.

*Holy moly, this is apocalyptically bad! My fennec ears are going to pop out!*

“We need to show your father how much we love each other,” Embert said breathlessly, ignoring my panic.

However, something unexpected happened when he tried to smooch me again.

“Get him, Squishy!” Father’s dignified voice rang out.

Squishy flew towards Embert as if I’d ordered it myself. As usual, the slime latched onto Embert’s face.

“Why did you obey Duke Vistriano’s order, Squishy?” Embert asked, tearing the slime off his face and flashing a wicked smile. “You’re Ally’s familiar, are you not?”

“Squishy,” the slime cheeped happily, not understanding Embert’s words.

Meanwhile, Father smirked at Embert, exuding an aura frigid enough to freeze the people around him.

“Maybe Father really is the Demon Lord,” I mumbled, finally free of Embert’s barrage of kisses.

After clucking his tongue, Embert looked at me with a serious expression. “I’ll never lose to him. No matter what anyone might say, I have the holy sword in my possession. According to Custode, I’m the Hero; therefore, I can’t lose to the Demon Lord.”

Somehow, those words sounded adorable coming from Embert. Thus, I stood on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Yeah, keep up the good fight,” I said with a smile.

Embert returned the smile, and his face drew close to mine again. “I love you, Ally.”

*His emerald eyes sparkle so beautifully.* As that crossed my mind, I decided to express my feelings as well.

“I love you too,” I said.

At some point, the surrounding noise had stopped reaching my ears, and I softly closed my eyes.

## Side Story: How Much of This Is a Dream?

I was taking a relatively hot shower to wash off the sweat.

*Another good workout today.*

While shampooing my hair, I noticed something amiss.

*Wait, have showers already been invented in this world?*

I couldn't recall hearing from Severin that he'd finished the project. Even so, I was undeniably standing beneath a shower. Speaking of which, the length of my hair seemed different as well. As I cracked open just one eye to keep the suds out, I found black hair—as dark as Rosario's—covered in bubbles.

“Huh?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

I didn’t fully grasp this change in my appearance, but first and foremost, I needed to finish rinsing off. After rushing through my shower, I wrapped a towel around myself and stepped out into a familiar locker room.

“This place...” I mumbled to myself.

No doubt about it. This was the locker room of the kickboxing gym I’d attended in my previous life. When I examined my reflection in the large mirror on the wall, my old self looked back at me. She had black hair and dark brown eyes.

*Is this a dream?*

Despite the shock, it didn’t feel entirely real.

*Could I be lucid dreaming due to my exhaustion from the ball? I wondered, staring at my past self for the first time in years. But if this is a dream, maybe I should just have fun with it.*

Thus, I finished changing and left the gym, deciding to enjoy this dream world for as long as it lasted. Once outside, I found myself amidst a bustling crowd of people.

“How nostalgic,” I said with a laugh.

As neon signs flickered to life, I marveled at everything while walking down the city street. Then, I noticed a group of people a little farther ahead. When I squinted to get a better look, a gaggle of squealing girls around my age ran past me.

“Is Embert really here?” one of the girls asked. “It’s not every day you meet a famous model.”

“He should be,” another girl replied. “I saw it trending on social media.”

I came to a halt, my eyes widening. “Embert?” I muttered to myself. “As in *my* Em?”

Yes, this had to be a dream. How could Embert exist on Earth, after all? Curiosity piqued, I ran towards the crowd. Upon arriving, a sea of people surrounded me. Of course, I couldn’t see the person in the center of the commotion. Only the staff’s warnings of “Don’t push!” and “No flash photography!” reached my ears.

“This isn’t going to work,” I grumbled.

Why couldn’t I see what I wanted to in my own dream? As a test, I wished for the crowd to part, but nothing happened. Giving up, I turned to leave. At that moment, I crossed paths with a woman muttering to herself in a white, one-piece dress. I strained to better hear what she was saying.

“My Embert, my Embert, my Embert,” she murmured over and over again.

Her abnormal aura caught my attention, and I couldn’t help but follow her with my eyes.

“Get your hands off my Embert!” she shrieked all of a sudden.

A momentary hush fell over the area. Before long, screams rose from the crowd, and people shoved each other to get away from the woman. At that moment, I spotted a large knife in her hands. With the crowd pulling away from the woman, I could see the man standing opposite her.

*Yeah, that’s definitely Em.*

A man too beautiful for this world stood behind two bodyguards in black

suits. He had emerald eyes and silver hair that shimmered like moonlight. He wore a Chesterfield coat, a white T-shirt, and black trousers. A pair of sunglasses hung from the collar of his shirt, and he wore a scarf that matched his eyes around his neck.

“Wow, Em looks amazing in this world’s fashion, too,” I said. “He’s even more divine than I imagined.”

Though his appearance captivated me, I returned my gaze to the woman. We had bigger fish to fry right now.

“These people are in your way, right?” the woman asked, her breath ragged. “I’ll free you from them.”

With that, she dashed towards Embert, swinging her knife around wildly. Her erratic movements made it impossible for anyone to approach. As a result, Embert and his bodyguards had no choice but to retreat. The rest of the crowd kept their distance as well, sensing the woman’s madness. Meanwhile, I sneaked up on her from behind with silent footsteps. After closing in on her, I grabbed her wrist and squeezed. When she dropped her knife due to pain and pressure, I twisted her arm behind her back.

“What the hell are you doing?!” she shrieked, struggling to break free.

I twisted her arm even harder, and she fell to her knees, unable to withstand the pain. Finally, one of the bodyguards took over, binding her wrists with something like zip ties. The woman hung her head, face contorted with frustration. A moment later, the crowd erupted in cheers.

“That was amazing, miss!”

“You’re hella strong!”

“Weren’t you scared?”

As various people called out to me, I waved off their compliments. “No, no, it was nothing,” I replied.

I sensed someone standing in front of me. I expected it to be one of the bodyguards, but when I looked up, sparkling emerald eyes stared down at me.

“Thank you very much,” Embert said. “You saved my life.”

It was strange to hear him speaking fluent Japanese in his familiar voice. I couldn't help but stare at him, as the situation felt so surreal.

"Would you mind telling me your name?" Embert asked. "I would love to thank you properly."

*Oh, of course, I thought, my chest aching. He doesn't recognize my old self.*

Though Embert looked the same as usual, I'd returned to my previous self. I was neither a holy woman nor particularly beautiful. Even so, I'd foolishly hoped that Embert would recognize me. When that hope turned into pain, I grit my teeth to hold back my tears.

"N-No, it's not that big of a deal," I said, straining to speak each word.

I bolted from the busy street.

A little while later, I found myself in a park.

"A swing set..." I muttered to myself.

The relatively large park had all the usual playground equipment. Feeling somewhat wistful, I sat on one of the swings. Without lifting my feet off the ground, I rocked back and forth lightly, heaving a deep sigh.

"How silly to get hurt in a dream," I continued muttering to myself.

Yes, this was most certainly a dream. Embert's reaction shouldn't have bothered me. Despite knowing this, I heaved another sigh.

"Phew," an unmistakable voice called from behind. "I finally caught up with you."

"Why...?" I mumbled.

Embert circled around and placed his hand on my cheek. "I thought you might be crying. It worried me so much that I chased after you."

Embert's hand was as gentle as ever. At last, the tears spilled from my eyes despite all my efforts to hold them back.

"Sorry," I apologized. "It's only natural that you wouldn't recognize me, Em. I shouldn't have let myself get hurt like this."

In all likelihood, he wouldn't understand what I was saying. Though he did

look at me with a puzzled expression, he reacted to something entirely different than I expected.

“Um, did you just call me Em?” he asked.

Jolting, I averted my gaze from him. Only I—or rather, Ally—called him by that name. When I tried to run away again, overcome by an indescribable sense of discomfort, Embert grabbed my wrist.

“Why do you keep running away?” he asked. “And why do I hate the idea of letting you go?”

These words caused me to stop in my tracks.

Still holding my wrist, Embert circled around to face me. “Who on earth are you?” he asked. “Why am I so reluctant to let go of your hand when this is the first time we’ve met?”

He didn’t appear to be lying and didn’t let go of my hand, either. Thus, we stared at each other without moving. At that moment, someone called out from behind, “It’s time to move to the next site, Mr. Bartis.”

Embert lifted my hand. “This might seem abrupt, but would you take this?” While speaking, he took something golden out of his coat pocket. “I found this in a shop earlier and felt an overwhelming impulse to buy it. Yet, for some reason, I want you to have it now.”

With that, he placed an adorable, miniature golden birdcage in my hand.

“Why?” I asked.

Embert grinned. “Let’s meet again. No matter what, I’ll come find you.”

With that, he jogged over to the person calling for him.

“Em,” I mumbled. Heart racing, I stared down at the birdcage he’d given me. It appeared to be a small container. “This is cute, but something about it being a birdcage bothers me...”

I continued staring at it with somewhat mixed emotions. No sooner than I opened the tiny door with my finger, a blinding light engulfed me.

“Wha—?” I asked.

When the light disappeared, I found myself inside a large birdcage with terrifyingly elaborate decorations.

Embert placed a hand on one of the bars from outside the birdcage. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked with a chuckle, looking at me with rapt attention. “I had the finest artisan in the capital craft it for me. Now, I can keep you to myself forever.”

Without another word, Embert turned around, walked away, and vanished into empty space.

“Wait!” I exclaimed, reaching a hand through the bars.

Though I should have been alone, I felt someone grab my hand. As I jolted awake, an unfamiliar ceiling filled my vision.

“Wait, what?” I mumbled.

While I struggled to grasp the situation, a familiar voice asked me, “Are you okay?”

Turning towards the voice, I found Embert sitting in a chair beside me and holding my hand.

“Embert?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he replied. “You seemed to be having a bad dream. Are you okay?”

“Oh, um, yeah. I’m fine. More importantly, where are we?”

I sat up and looked around but still didn’t recognize the room. Even so, Custode and Squishy were also sleeping on my pillow. As I looked at their adorable faces, Embert hit me with a most unexpected response.

“It’s my bedroom,” he said.

“Come again?” I asked. “You’re joking, right? Why am I here?”

*How did I wind up here, of all places? This has to be some kind of prank.*

“It’s not a joke,” Embert assured me with a charming smile. “You fell asleep during the ball, as you appeared to be quite tired, and I carried you here. Heh, you certainly looked adorable sleeping on my bed. I had trouble restraining

myself..."

*Okay, got it. This is definitely a dream.*

"Oh, wow, is that right?" I responded carefreely after coming to this realization.

At that moment, a familiar roar echoed from the other side of the door.

"Move aside!" Father bellowed. "If you stand in my way, I'll cut the lot of you down along with this door!"

*Wait, what? I thought, panic starting to set in. This is still a dream, right? Yeah, definitely. I'm not wrong about that, am I? No, I can't be. If this isn't a dream, I'm screwed.*

"Tempting me first thing in the morning?" Embert asked, his grin changing into an altogether different expression. "Very well then, I'll respond accordingly. I'll rub those adorable fox ears to my heart's content. Perhaps we should show your father."

Embert approached me with an ecstatic expression, the bed creaking under his weight.

*Is this what it means for a nightmare to become reality?*

"Calm down, Em, okay?" I pleaded. "Look, let's just go back to sleep. That way, we'll wake up for real."

"That sounds wonderful," Embert replied. "Yes, I'll let you sleep as much as you want after I've finished doting on you."

*This is bad. No matter what I say, nothing will get through to him right now.*

Embert continued approaching me, finally driving me to the edge of the bed.

*I might be in serious danger.*

"Custode, Squishy, wake up!" I cried at the top of my lungs.





## Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illust Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



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