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Author
Chatsufusa

Artist
fuumi

The Invincible Little Lady



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fuumi

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Prologue

A short distance from the Kingdom of Aldia is a small country known as the Einholst Papacy. As its name implied, it was the headquarters of the continent's religion. Deep inside its famous cathedral, known for its lofty, artistic architecture, four people were seated in one of the rooms.

There was no one else there, of course. The only people allowed in this chamber were the pope and the four cardinals directly beneath their authority. But these cardinals were not on good terms with each other, instead seeing each other as bitter rivals. As such, strained silence hung over the room.

"Now then, Esteemed Cardinal of the Front Seat. How do you plan on taking responsibility for your blunder?" A woman sitting elegantly before the round table sneered at the man sitting opposite her.

"Esteemed Cardinal of the Back Seat...whatever do you mean, 'blunder'?"

"Half of the Annihilation Corps members you were given proved to be useless, and when you were forced to go on the offensive, you even used a Divine Miracle. Despite all that, you failed to dispatch either the queen or the princess. I could scarcely find a more perfect word for your failure?"

The Cardinal of the Back Seat crossed her legs and spoke with an elegant smile. By contrast, the Cardinal of the Front Seat, a corpulent, greedy-looking man, fell into stressed silence as he was unable to retort.

"I, too, would be interested in hearing your explanation," a male cardinal sitting to the left of the Cardinal of the Back Seat agreed. "Why did you go for such heavy-handed methods? It was a festival run by mere students."

"Hee hee, you also find it odd, Cardinal of the Left Seat?" the Cardinal of the Back Seat regarded him with a victorious smile.

Her bewitching eyes had an alluring quality to them that had seen countless men turn to putty in her hands. Few failed to fall for her wiles, so profound were her beauty and powers. The Cardinal of the Left Seat, however, ignored

her and moved the conversation along. In spite of having reached middle age, he was intensely masculine, looking less like a clergyman and more like a muscular warrior.

“These weren’t ordinary students. No, you underestimate them,” the Cardinal of the Front Seat insisted with much distress, beads of greasy sweat running down his face. “The Annihilation Corps tried to cause multiple types of disturbances, yet all of them were resolved more swiftly and calmly than expected. I’ve never seen such organized security. In the midst of all that, the Witch Princess created a golem that caused quite the upheaval, which gave us the idea to use whatever we could within the site. We thus decided to reuse an incomplete undead summoning circle, but this, too, was immediately stopped. They acted so fast, our only option was to invoke the Divine Miracle...”

As he went on to explain in detail how his every attempt had been foiled, the Cardinals of the Back and Left Seats only regarded him with curious expressions.

“True, they *had* adopted some kind of new security policy that left little to no openings. I believe this event was run by the first prince? Rumor has it he takes after the foolish king, but... Perhaps that’s wrong?”

“Even if it was an incomplete summoning, it’s hard to believe four people would be capable of defeating a Divine Miracle. It seems the rumors about the prince leading all sorts of reforms in that academy are true...”

The two cardinals seemed to lose interest in criticizing the Cardinal of the Front Seat’s failures, to which he sighed in relief. But the moment the young man sitting to the right of the Cardinal of the Back Seat spoke up, the three cardinals fell silent.

“The pope is quite saddened at having lost a Divine Miracle in this incident.”

This alone made the power balance between the four cardinals clear. The androgynous young man known as the Cardinal of the Right Seat maintained a calm and collected demeanor unbefitting of his age. Among the four cardinals, he was the sole member allowed an audience with the pope.

“Cardinal of the Front Seat, you are to keep a careful eye on the goings-on in Aldia.”

“B-By your word...Esteemed Cardinal of the Right Seat,” the Cardinal of the Front Seat said, sweating more profusely than he had when the other two cardinals had found fault with him.

The Cardinal of the Back Seat regarded him with a mocking sneer, while the Cardinal of the Left Seat seemed to not mind either of them and contemplated the situation.

“Cardinal of the Back Seat.”

“Yes, Esteemed Cardinal of the Right Seat,” she replied coquettishly, her expression ecstatic. “Unlike the Cardinal of the Front Seat, I am not prone to losing my temper and making rash decisions. Everything is going smoothly on my end. I’m taking good care to win over that man in the Relirex Kingdom. The plan should be complete soon. Also, I’ve lent the divine beast you granted me to my chief subordinate. The witch has yet to discover that place. To make sure everything goes well, I gave quite a bit to that man, so we can use him to suit our needs. He’s powerless to resist me by now... Hee hee hee, unlike a certain useless cardinal, I will meet both your and the pope’s expectations flawlessly.”

“Let’s adjourn on that note. I expect you all will abstain from subjecting the pope to any further failure,” the Cardinal of the Right Seat said, seemingly oblivious to the Cardinal of the Back Seat’s attempts to cajole him.

He then whispered to himself in a soft voice that failed to reach the other three cardinals’ ears. “The first prince of Aldia and the four students that befriended him, hmm...?”

Chapter 1: Long Academy Vacation Arc Part 1

1. I Wish to Engage in Escapism

It was a peaceful afternoon, and I was enjoying teatime in our estate's garden for the first time in what felt like quite a while. Today was a special day off from the academy, set after the Academy Festival's final day.

"We got some new tea leaves, Lady Mary," Safina told me with an elegant smile.

"My, they smell lovely. I'd love to taste it." I picked up the cup, took a whiff of the tea, and sipped it. "Oh, it's delicious."

Birds were chirping somewhere in the garden, punctuating this peaceful moment.

"Oh, did you hear that, Miss Safina? It seems the birds are singing for our tea party. How adorable."

"Yes, it's lovely, Lady Mary."

We looked around the garden, smiling elegantly.

"Yes, yes, I think that's quite enough escapism out of you two. Looking at you is making me feel pathetic."

A girl who we were trying quite hard not to look at spoke to us mercilessly, to which our expressions stiffened. Magiluka was sitting beside us, her eyes fixed on us peevishly.

"H-Heh heh heh, whatever do you mean, Miss Magiluka? Escapism, us? Perish the thought. Isn't that right, Miss Safina?" I said softly.

"Right you are, Lady Mary!" Safina mimicked my smile and sipped from her teacup.



“The letter from the palace said that we are to visit on our next day off for an audience with His Majesty to discuss your achievements. I’m afraid there’s no escaping this reality, you two.”

Magiluka’s words made me freeze up and also accidentally grip my teacup too hard. The cup cracked in my grasp, producing a noise eerily similar to a freezing sound effect. Tutte, always at the ready, silently retrieved the wreckage from my hands. A minute later, the reality of the situation washed over me.

“Aaah! Reality! Reality is crawling all over me! Get it off before it lays eggs!” I writhed where I sat, looking up at the sky for help that would not come.

“L-Lady Mary, settle down!” Magiluka tried to soothe me.

But would simple words be enough to calm me down at a time like this? Of course not!

“Miss Safina, don’t just sit there and watch. Help me calm... Huh? Miss Safina?”

Magiluka tried to turn to Safina for help, only to find that there was no point in even asking. While I was freaking out, Safina sat there limply with her mouth ajar, like her soul had just slipped out of it.

“Pff, ha ha ha, you lot truly are amusing to behold!” the princess sitting opposite Magiluka cackled at us.

Emilia came to visit today—this time dressed properly and not incognito.

“O-Oh, goodness, Your Highness, we didn’t mean to make such an embarrassing display in front of you...” Magiluka got to her feet and apologized for the two of us.

Emilia, however, raised her hand to stop her.

“No, no, do not let it bother you. You are our friends, so no need for such formalities. In fact, we would be delighted to see more embarrassing displays on your behalf. They are quite amusing! Mweh heh heh...” Emilia said with an impish laugh.

Hearing this, I finally snapped back into sanity. Safina shuddered too, indicating her soul finally settled back into her body.

“You lot faced and vanquished that monster fearlessly, yet you cower at the prospect of speaking to that foolish man. Seeing you act like this is comical!” Emilia continued.

Hey, please refrain from calling the king foolish outside closed doors!

“Oh, and speaking of your victory, what was that technique you used? One of you unleashed five spells at once while the other attacked with a sword from four directions simultaneously, and you coordinated your attacks, at that... We’ve never seen anyone come up with such an absurd idea, to say nothing of putting it to practice!”

The topic of our finisher was one I preferred remained untouched. “Oh, you’re exaggerating, Your Highness.” I waved a hand dismissively. “Right, Safina?”

“Eh heh heh, yes, Lady Mary,” she nodded bashfully. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it without the special equipment to help me.”

“R-Really?”

My idea to avoid drawing unwanted attention to our technique was simply to have Safina and I say we’d only been able to pull off the finisher thanks to the equipment we’d had on. Most people didn’t linger on the matter any longer after hearing this. Safina, wallflower that she was, had gladly agreed to use this response.

“I swear, this is why prodigies are insufferable...” Magiluka grumbled to herself. “Even with that equipment, not everyone can manage something like that.”

I willingly chose to pretend I didn’t hear that so as to leave this matter untouched.

“Let’s bring the conversation back on track,” I said, trying to change the subject. “Princess, from the sound of it, I assume you know His Majesty?”

“Why yes, we’ve known him since he was this small,” Emilia said boastfully, holding up her index finger and thumb to form a C. “We were introduced to him, for we were both royalty of our respective countries.”

Wait, no way the king was ever that tiny, I thought to myself, Emilia's bad humor gradually calming me down.

"Well, either way, there is no need to be so tense around that man. That one, once you take your eyes off him, immediately starts going after girls. Ilysha then finds him and punches him in the face until he faints."

I never asked for this kind of insider information, I thought to myself gloomily as my opinion of the king took a nosedive. Magiluka and Safina also smiled nervously, unsure as to how to respond.

"In that regard, his son is far better. At first, he spoke much like the king, so we thought he was the same as his father, but given time to mature, he's become quite the promising man." Emilia nodded to herself sagely.

"Yes, well, that's thanks to Lady Mary and her high jinks..." Magiluka said with a dry smile.

"Oho, so it's your fault?!" Emilia laughed.

"H-Hey, don't spread incriminating rumors!" I said. "Besides, you were as much a part of it as I was!"

"Oh, was I?" Magiluka asked coolly.

"We both prostrated ourselves, you traitor! As punishment, give me a bit of that jiggle!" I protested and pointed at a certain part of Magiluka's body.

"Wh-What are you talking about?!" Magiluka went red in the face and covered herself with her arms.

"You really are amusing, you lot! We would love to invite you to our country once... Oh, that is a fine idea, if we do say so ourselves..." Emilia mumbled to herself.

We all shuddered at the idea.

We can't go to the demon country! Just meeting our own country's king is making me distressed! Imagine meeting the Dark Lord!

"Hmm. We just recalled we have some business to attend to. We must take our leave. Farewell!" Emilia rose from her seat, spread out her wings, and hovered into the air.

“Hey, wait! What you just said was a joke, right?!” I called after her.

Emilia simply met my words with a vicious smile and flew off. With her gone, we could only stare blankly at the sky.

Oh, I’m getting a bad feeling about this...

2. An Audience

The day was finally upon us. With the headmaster accompanying us, our group of four knelt in the audience chamber. We were to meet His Majesty the King. I kept my head down and stared at the floor, waiting with much distress for the minutes to pass by.

Aaah, I’m so nervous. Just let this end already!

I swallowed, my throat parched, and kept my eyes fixed on the floor, looking for some kind of distraction, but it was too clean for there to be any kind of distraction...

“Please raise your heads, everyone,” a man called out to us.

Feeling like my heart could burst out of my chest, I stiffened in place, but I managed to slowly raise my head so as to not come across as disrespectful.

I’m sorry, but I was just too nervous to raise my head quickly. I didn’t mean to look pretentious, I swear!

Sitting on an elevated throne in front of us was His Majesty the King, Gilbert Eas Dalford, or as I called him in my mind, the skirt chaser king.

He’s more of a dapper older man than I’d imagined, but after all the stories I’ve heard, looks aren’t going to change my mind too much... Plus, I’m too nervous to care about that... Such rude thoughts were crossing my mind in the presence of royalty.

“Oho ho... You’re all young ladies with promising prospects, I see. That Reifus, hiding this from me with a straight face,” the king murmured as he looked over us, especially the girls.

I felt myself tense up.

“Your Majesty...” The queen, seated next to him, smiled the kind of cold smile that didn’t extend to her eyes. That made me tense up even harder.

“A-Ahem!” The king cleared his throat, menaced by the queen’s glare. “Your recent achievements were quite impressive. I would very much like to reward your efforts, but, my, my, what reward would do?”

I got the distinct feeling the king was trying to dispel the tense atmosphere hanging over us, but if he was, it wasn’t really working.

Aaah, I don’t really care what you’re offering, just get this over with... I wished to see this audience end as soon as possible.

Making that silent wish was all I could really do, and that only made me get progressively more desperate.

Please, just don’t say anything strange, Your Majesty. Pleaaaaaase! I begged, fixing my eyes on the queen as she regarded us with polite smiles.

I was panicking so hard because the day prior, Reifus had come to tell me about the matter of the reward. What he told me had made my blood freeze over: apparently, His Majesty wanted to make all three of us, the girls, into the prince’s fiancées!

When I had asked the prince about Sacher’s reward, apparently the king had made a noncommittal remark to the tune of “Well, we’ll just give him something nice,” which inspired the queen to beat him up a little...which made the king sulk and leave addressing the situation for later.

Really, is this kingdom going to be okay? Shouldn’t the queen be ruling it instead? I held back a sigh as I looked at our poor excuse for a king and then glanced over at the headmaster.

The other three did the same, turning their eyes hopefully to the only adult among the four of us.

Please, you pervy headmaster, you’re our only hope!

“Respectfully, Your Majesty, if I could have permission to speak?” he spoke to the king reverently.

It was a clear deviation from the goofy headmaster I saw get scolded by the

grand masters in his office, and that made my opinion of him improve somewhat.

“E-Erm, y-yes, you may speak,” the king said.

We hung our heads again, letting the headmaster handle this matter.

“Your Majesty, they are still children and students. A reward would be—”

We had spoken to the headmaster ahead of time and made it clear we weren’t interested in any rewards.

“Hmm, but be that as it may, they did save the queen from brigands and that monster. I think that alone warrants enga—” the king said in a very light tone, only to be cut off.

“Your Majesty...” the queen said, her voice very cold and throbbing with bloodlust.

I glanced up, noticing she’d somehow snapped the fan she was holding in half. Incidentally, my father, Ferdid, was present for this event as the marshal, and he was likewise regarding the king with wrathful eyes.

Yikes, this is scary. Is His Majesty trying to get himself killed? Is he really that stupid? And uh, actually, is it okay for father to act like this in front of the king?

“Erm, huh!” The king sweated profusely, feeling murderous intent projected at him from two different directions. “Well, jokes aside, if there’s anything you wish for, do speak up! I’ll accommodate any request that’s within my power.”

Huh, I guess it’s fine. I guess father acting that way around him isn’t unusual?

Breathing a sigh of relief, I glanced at my friends, who were glancing at each other too. With our hopes that the headmaster would dissuade the king dashed, we had to resort to plan B. Since I was a duke’s daughter, I had the most authority in the group, so they looked to me to speak on their behalf.

Aww, do I really have to say it? I wish the headmaster would have been able to talk him out of it...

The possibility that this would happen was one we’d discussed beforehand, so it wasn’t unexpected, but I’d certainly hoped it wouldn’t come to this. I recited the lines I’d practiced beforehand.

Calm down, Mary! Calm down! Keep your wits about you!

I took a deep breath and ordered myself to relax, with the lines I'd have to recite filling my mind. But then...

"Lady Mary, what's wrong?"

"Eep!"

Magiluka used communication magic to speak directly into my mind. Before we'd entered the audience chamber, I'd convinced Magiluka to make a communication magic contract with me.

"S-Sorry, I've got my hands full calming myself down right now!"

"Huh? Stop spouting nonsense and just tell him what we agreed on."

With her urging me, I took another deep breath, and resolving to put the "Mary" in "Hail Mary," I parted my lips.

"Your Majesty, may I have permission to speak?" I asked, the last word coming out a bit high-pitched, much to my dismay.

"Mm, you have my permission," the king said, and all eyes in the room were on me.

That made me tense up more than ever before. I lost all composure, and my brain went completely blank.

Oh, no. I totally forgot my line...

My attempt at a Hail Mary ended up being more of a Fail Mary.

"Lady Mary!" Magiluka urged me, noticing that I'd frozen up.

Aaaaah! Let's just goooo!

"Y-Your Majesty!"

"Yes."

"G-Give us money, please!"

Silence hung over the room. I remembered, somewhere in the back of my mind, that we talked about funds for the academy, and so I blurted out the word "money" without really thinking about it.

“L-Lady Mary? You got the line wrong... Y-You were supposed to explain we need funds for the academy’s facilities...”

Magiluka’s bewildered rebuke made me realize that I’d just said something terribly wrong, and I finally remembered what my original line was.

“Ah, erm, pardon me, Your Majesty! I didn’t explain myself well enough. Hmm, I mean for the academy! The academy’s operating funds!” I said, gradually recalling my lines one by one. “We, erm, we’d like to ask for capital investment in the academy’s, err, facilities, so as to ensure a better academic environment! We’re students, after all, and our role and responsibility is to learn, so we wish to improve our learning environment.”

Aaah, I’m done for! My dignity as a duke’s daughter is done foooooor!

Unable to raise my head from shame and despair, I stared at the floor, mortified. But then, the sound of laughter broke the silence.

“Aha ha ha!” His Majesty laughed out. “Ha ha, why, I was taken aback by what you said first. Aah, you do have guts. Just what I’d expect from Ferdid’s daughter!”

The king was looking at my father as he replied, but with the sound of my heart thumping in my ears, I wasn’t in any state to care about that.

“Mmm, so you speak not for yourself, but rather, you unflinchingly think of the future of all students in the academy. What a novel, proud idea! Very well. I will have your request granted.”

H-Huh?

I didn’t quite understand the situation, but while I was trembling in shame, the king seemed to have moved the conversation along. A few of the grown-ups around us clapped, convinced with my explanation.

I kind of feel like he’s decided to interpret what I said however he pleases, but I’ll just accept that I didn’t dig myself into a deeper hole and keep my mouth shut. It’s better than having my dignity as a duke’s daughter ruined.

I was a bit concerned about how the people in the palace thought of me, but just the fact I wasn’t completely doomed was a relief. And so, the audience

ended with me not totally sure how things ended up the way they did, and we were allowed to retire to the waiting room.

Less than an hour later, as I was preparing to head back home, one of the queen's maids walked in as we parted ways with the headmaster and beckoned us to follow her.

"Say, do you have any idea what's going on? Why is Her Majesty calling for us?" I whispered to Magiluka.

"I haven't heard anything about this, no. I wonder what she wants from us?" she replied quizzically.

I tried asking the others, but they all had the same answer. Before long, we arrived at a certain room. The maid knocked on the door to inform the people on the other side of our arrival, to which someone said "Come in" from inside the room. We were ushered into the room, confused.

There, we found Reifus and the queen, as well as an unfamiliar gentleman. We bowed before the queen, and the gentleman walked over to us and took off his hat, revealing a pair of horns growing from his head.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am a messenger from the Relirex Kingdom," he introduced himself.

Oh, gosh. It's one thing after another, isn't it?

I immediately got the distinct feeling this man was going to say something that would make life harder for me.

3. That's Just a Pretense, Right?

"A messenger from the Relirex Kingdom?" Magiluka asked, as I was too stunned to respond.

"Yes, correct. That said, this is an informal visit, so I'd like to apologize for my sudden arrival," the messenger replied. "There is much to say, so for the time being, take a seat."

He urged us to the sofa, and we did as he said and sat on it.

“What can we do for you, Sir Messenger?” Magiluka asked once we were all seated.

“Well, you see, I came to deliver an invitation Her Highness, our princess, wishes to extend to your group,” the messenger said, producing four envelopes sealed with wax.

“Invitations? What for, if I may ask?” Magiluka asked as she eyed the envelope suspiciously.

I accepted the envelope and turned a pleading look at Her Majesty, hoping she could arrange for us to be exempt from whatever this was. Seeing this, the queen smiled uncomfortably and said, “This is all informal, so don’t disclose this to anyone.”

She then looked around at each of us, stressing that this is important.

No, if this is something we can’t disclose, keep us out of it, please! Ugh, I wish I could tell her that...

“You see,” the queen continued, “I’ll spare you the details, but the kingdom’s mages investigated the monster that attacked the festival. With the help of the demons, we were able to discover scant vestiges of Liberal Materia being used —”

“Liberal Materia?!” Magiluka exclaimed in alarm. “But using that is the greatest taboo in the kingdom!”

Realizing she just cut off the queen, Magiluka panicked, apologized for her misconduct, and fell silent. But no one blamed her. I’d heard of Liberal Materia in the academy’s lectures before—it was a forbidden tool used for summoning rituals.

There was a historical event where the use of this tool had resulted in the death of many people. Unlike usual summoning rituals, Liberal Materia offered up living beings (or rather, their mana) as a catalyst to summon unknown creatures. It was an inhumane item that required sacrifices.

The greater and stronger the creature being summoned, the greater the

sacrifice it required. I remembered hearing about the number of lives lost during that incident. It made me shudder in my seat. It'd become an illegal taboo to use Liberal Materia in the present-day Aldian Kingdom, making it very difficult to obtain it within our country. It also meant the palace would likely hear about any case of them being sold.

So that's what was used on Magiluka back there?

I trembled and unconsciously gripped Magiluka's hand, confirming its warmth. Magiluka was momentarily surprised by my action but, after looking at me, realized what was on my mind. She smiled softly and placed one hand on my own.

"This implies another country's involvement in the attack," the queen said. "And seeing as the attackers wielded such a powerful item, it's highly likely that the Einholst Papacy was behind this."

The Einholst Papacy—a religious country located northward of the Aldian Kingdom. It was a small country, but its influence across the world was vast since it was the center of the most commonly worshipped faith in this world. The churches of the Aldian Kingdom were technically devoted to that same faith, but the popedom regarded the Relirex Kingdom as a foe to be eliminated. The history books spoke of Einholst of Light, which opposed Relirex of the Dark.

Aldia was nestled right between the Einholst Papacy and the Dark Isle, which got our kingdom involved in this dispute.

"Why do you think the Papacy is involved this time?" Magiluka asked.

"Because they were the ones who originally created the Liberal Materia," the queen replied. "When it was used, what appeared was a creature similar to the angels of myth, which matched one of the Papacy's ancient rites. Acolytes would sacrifice humans or other living beings, or even offer up their own bodies, to their god to manifest angels. This is how their pious believers resisted for many years. Of course, since this rite is abhorred the world over, the Papacy doesn't openly admit to using it to save face, but it doesn't strictly forbid its use either. I can't imagine another country would have access to that powerful rite..."

"So, you think it's likely the target this time was the princess, who came to

our country without any guards?” Magiluka asked.

“That’s possible, yes.” The queen nodded with a strained smile. “But, well, the Papacy’s higher-ups dislike me a great deal too. They probably hoped to kill two birds with one stone this time.”

A nervous air hung over us. As it turned out, the queen’s moniker of The God Spear Dancer was given to her because she resolved some incident related to the Papacy. Put simply, the popedom had planned a second holy war to march on the Relirex Kingdom, not unlike the Crusaders from my past life. But an alliance between Aldia and Relirex, led by the queen, pushed them back.

Incidentally, the first Holy War, which took place a long time ago, was a major conflict that involved many countries, but the fighting supposedly was stemmed by the involvement of the Argent Knight—though the validity of this story was questionable. In any case, as a result of that conflict, the surrounding countries weren’t willing to get involved in any other holy wars.

“Still, we have no decisive proof of this, so we can’t complain to them...” the queen said. “But either way, we want you to protect Emilia going forward. It was her idea, you see... And so, as part of her official thanks to you as the princess of Relirex, she’s invited you over. But that said, since her visit to the academy was incognito, these invitations aren’t official. And oddly enough, the academy will soon begin a prolonged vacation, so when that happens... You understand?”

The queen tried to explain this as jovially as she could, but her words trailed off as she approached the end of her speech, and she punctuated it with a sigh.

No, that’s definitely a pretense, right? An excuse to justify us getting invited to Relirex. And what’s with this perfect timing? Only God could have made things turn out like this! What are you doing, God?!

I hung my head as I griped internally.

“The details should be in the letters you got. We’ll come greet you in the coming days,” the messenger said with a sympathizing look.

He then got to his feet and left the room. We tiredly watched him leave, and I felt sympathy toward him too.

I guess Emilia insisting on this meant a lot of people on Relirex's side had to scramble to make this happen. And if we don't go, these people did it all for nothing...

I stared at the letter in my hands and sighed.

4. So, This Is a Vacation!

The next day, it was decided we would go to the Relirex Kingdom. I was pretty excited, in my own way.

"Say, Tutte, how many yen do these snacks cost? And do bananas count as snacks?" I asked as I sipped on tea in the garden as always.

"'Yen'? 'Bananas'? I'm not sure what you're talking about, Lady Mary, but you seem excited."

"I mean, thinking about this whole thing again, we're basically going on a trip abroad, right? This is a trip... No, a school trip! Wait, no, I guess I'm not going there with my class per se... Well, anyway, this is my first vacation! How would I not be over the roof? I never went on vacation in my past life!"

All my anxiety from the day prior was completely forgotten. After sleeping on the idea, I realized that this was effectively my first vacation ever, and at that point, there was no restraining my good mood.

"Yes, this would be your first trip to another country. But I will say I didn't think you'd be going to the demon kingdom..." Tutte said, markedly more pensive and morose than I was.

I understand how she feels. I mean, it's the demon kingdom... Even if they're allied with Aldia and we have trade relations with them, most people see them as a strange, unknown race of monsters. Pretty high level, as travel destinations go...

"Still, it might be my first time, but I'm not going alone, and we'll have a leader, a tour guide, and guards to keep us safe, so we just need to follow instructions. It'll be easy peasy!"

The grown-ups had planned our trip meticulously. Miss Iks was to be in

charge of the trip, Sir Klaus would join us to ensure we're safe, and the Relirex Kingdom was to dispatch a tour guide. All we had to do was follow the grown-ups and enjoy the VIP treatment, so I was pretty optimistic about this trip.

Before long, my friends showed up in preparation for the trip.

"Where are you hoping to go on this trip, Safina?" I asked, hoping to share the excitement.

"Huh? Trip? Hm, I guess you could think of it that way..." Safina looked bewildered for a moment and then crossed her fingers pensively. "Well, um... I suppose I'd like to go on a ship. I've never been on a ship before."

"Oh, a ship! Now I'm looking forward to riding one too," Sacher said, cutting into our exchange.

Relirex was an island nation, and since there were no airplanes in this world, getting there required a boat ride.

"A ship, huh...?" I mused. "That's a first for me too. I've never been on a sailboat, like in Middle Ages Europe."

"Middle ages you-rop'?" Safina and Sacher asked, looking at me dubiously.

"H-H-H-How about you, Magiluka?" I said, forcibly changing the topic.

"Me? Well, I'm very curious about the Relirex Kingdom's historical architecture!" Magiluka said, her eyes twinkling dreamily. "Their race is a magical civilization that's quite different from ours, so I'd love to study their culture."

"So you're the type to stay in the museum past closing hours, huh?" I murmured dryly.

"Speaking of which, there's a place I need to stop by for personal business," Magiluka noted.

"Huh? Really? Where's that?" I pressed her for details curiously. *What kind of personal business could she have in the demons' kingdom?*

"My grandfather asked...or well, it was more like he was pestering me tearfully to see if it's possible to have the items that were damaged during the attack on the Academy Festival repaired," Magiluka answered, looking a bit

apologetic.

“Oh, those relic-class items...” I recalled Magiluka’s gauntlet and Sacher’s shield. “Wait, does this mean they were made in Relirex?”

“Yes, most of the magical tools used in our country were either made by elven or demon magus smiths.”

Magus smiths were a type of craftsmen who, unlike ordinary blacksmiths, carefully and meticulously incorporated magical formulas into their creation process, forging magical tools and magic items. In our human society, the general perception was that elven magus smiths were the ones who created the kind of magic items we use in our day-to-day lives, while demon magus smiths were the ones who forge weapons and other items useful for war.

“And the relic-class items we used were forged by one particular magus smith from that kingdom,” Magiluka continued. “Apparently, within the Relirex kingdom, they’re known as the greatest smith.”

The greatest demon smith... Sounds like someone who’d make swords or spears and the like.

“Can we really meet someone that important?” Safina asked, torn between surprise and concern.

“No, I don’t know anyone who could get me in touch with them, so it all hinges on if I can even make it happen. But with them being so famous, I thought maybe we could find out where they live if we ask around. Also, there’s the possibility the Relirex Kingdom will ask us if there’s anything they could provide us as thanks for our help during the attack. Well, at least my grandfather seems to hope they do...” She murmured that last bit, half in exasperation.

“But that said, what are you looking forward to doing there, Lady Mary?” Magiluka turned the conversation to me next.

“Huh? Me?” I pointed at myself, realizing I hadn’t really thought of anything in particular.

Hmm, I was so excited about just going on vacation... I guess I’m looking forward to all of it! But I did want to come up with something specific. What am

I looking forward to the most...? Hmm. Maybe I shouldn't think too hard about it and just say whatever comes to mind!

I closed my eyes in a pensive gesture and spoke the first idea that popped in my head. "Their food..."

The other three stared at me with chilling silence. Only the chirping of the birds could be heard as an inexplicable atmosphere hung over us. My eyes shot open as I realized that I'd just embarrassed myself.

"Ah! No, I, um, you see! I was just wondering, academically speaking, what do demons eat? I didn't mean that all I wanted was to eat their food! The question just popped in my head!" I defended myself, making wavy, vague hand gestures all the while. But everyone just looked at me with very soft, concerned eyes.

Stop looking at me like thaaaat! I swear, I'm not a glutton!

"Heh heh," Magiluka chuckled, maybe pitching in to back my excuse out of pity. "Yes, what do demons eat, I wonder? Understanding a race's cuisine is a gateway to their culture and history. I'll admit I'm curious about that too."

"Y-Yes, exactly!" I nodded vigorously, trying to move away from this topic.

"Oh, come on, we all know you just want to ea— Ow!" Sacher said, trying to bring it up again, only for me to stomp on his foot under the table.

Apparently, Safina and Magiluka stirred as well, implying all three of us had stomped or kicked him at the same time.

Oh, my. Even Safina's gotten ruthless around him. That's good!

"Anyway, this trip is going to be so much fun!" I said, ignoring Sacher, who was lying on the table, pained.

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it!"

"Me as well."

And so, with Sacher silenced and bruised, us girls continued sipping on our tea. And indeed, a few days later, the long academy vacation began, and the day of our departure for the Relirex Kingdom was upon us.

5. Rock, Paper, Scissors

The large carriage rattled as it took us toward a port town. I, Safina, Magiluka, Sacher, and the prince all sat in our usual order. I thought just the four of us would be going, but the prince joined us on this trip in an informal capacity. This was something Sacher was very happy about.

“I thought going on this trip as the only man surrounded by the queen and her lieutenants was going to get me killed. Thanks, Prince!”

As it turned out, this boy wasn’t at all excited about going on a trip with us girls. *No appreciation for the harem situation in that tone, hmph.* Incidentally, when he said “queen,” I looked at Magiluka, while everyone else looked at me, but either way, we all came to our own answers as to whom he’d meant.

“So, the plan is that when we reach the port, we stay at an inn for the night and board the ship tomorrow, yes?” Reifus asked as the carriage jolted.

Magiluka and I were seated at his sides, and Sacher and Safina were seated on the opposite bench.

“Indeed, Your Highness,” Magiluka said.

“I hear the port town has an abundance of fresh fish. I look forward to trying their fish cuisine,” the prince said expectantly.

“Did you hear that, Lady Mary?” Sacher snickered and directed a teasing look at me. “I bet you’re looking forward to trying the food.”

He’s bringing that up again... I glared at him peevishly.

“Safina, smite him,” I asked, since I couldn’t get up to bonk him in the carriage.

“Huh?!” Safina was confused by my sudden order, and looked between me and Sacher. “Ah, erm...”

“See, Lady Mary? You’re the queen here,” Magiluka mumbled.

I stiffened up and then glanced out the window like none of this had ever happened.

“Now, now,” Reifus tried to soothe us. “Speaking of the port town, we’re to

meet our guide from the Relirex Kingdom there.”

The guide, huh? I wonder who it'll be. It's not going to be her, is it...?

Overcome with this grim premonition, I glanced out the window again, this time expectantly. The port town was drawing closer.

“Well met, you lot! We greet you!”

I had to suppress the urge to fall to the ground on my hands and knees and hang my head despondently.

Upon arriving at the port town, we approached our inn where we were greeted by *her*. All I could do was meet her beaming grin with a dry smile.

Oh, no no no, Princess, you're greeting us too early. You were supposed to greet us when we reached the island. We're still on Aldian soil.

The prince and the others likely had the same thought as me, because they all stiffened for a moment.

“You’ve convened with us surprisingly early. I was under the impression you were supposed to meet us after we arrived,” Reifus said with a smile, immediately regaining his composure.

He must be used to handling her...

“Mmhmm!” Emilia puffed up her chest. “That was the plan at first, but we couldn’t wait, so we boarded a ship to come meet you here!”

The person behind her, likely her attendant, sighed tiredly.

“We set sail tomorrow, so for now, let’s head for the inn,” our guide said apologetically. “I’ll escort you there tomorrow morning.”

Reifus nodded calmly, and our group entered the inn.

“Ooh, s-so this is an inn! It’s so novel!” I exclaimed. I’d only seen fantasy-setting inns in manga and anime, but this room slightly matched my image of an inn’s room. I say “slightly” because it was much more fancy than I’d imagined. This was probably the most expensive room in the inn.

“So, who uses each bed?!” I looked expectantly at Safina and Magiluka, who

followed me into the room. We could have all gotten our own rooms, but I insisted (rather loudly) that the three of us should all sleep in the same room. *A slumber party! Girl talk into the night!*

Safina looked around the room in amazement, oblivious to my plans. Magiluka remained cool as ever and sat on a sofa, relaxed.

“Hey, are you two listening to me?” I asked feverishly.

“Oh, um. I’ll do whatever you two decide,” Safina said.

“I don’t mind you picking your bed first, Lady Mary,” Magiluka replied indifferently.

“Oh, come on, that’s no fun! Right, let’s decide it with rock, paper, scissors!” I decided, huffing eagerly.

Rock, paper, scissors is the only correct way to decide which spot everyone gets! Or at least, that’s what TV taught me. However, the other two looked at me with question marks floating over their heads.

“What do rocks, papers, and scissors have to do with this, Lady Mary?” Magiluka asked.

“Huh? You don’t know rock, paper, scissors?” I quipped back, surprised. I hadn’t considered that people in this world wouldn’t know about this basic game.

“No. Miss Safina, do you happen to know?” Magiluka turned to Safina.

“No, I don’t.” She shook her head.

I gave them a simple explanation of the rules of rock, paper, scissors. But I then got ambushed by a very simple truth: explaining the logic of rock, paper, scissors was a lot harder than I expected...

“I think I mostly understand, but why does paper beat rock?” Magiluka asked pensively.

“I mean, like I said, rock beats scissors because scissors can’t cut through rock, scissors beat paper because they can cut through paper, and paper beats rock because it wraps around the rock, so—”

“That’s what I don’t understand. Why does paper win by wrapping around the rock?” She cut into my explanation.

Huh? Why is that, really? I felt her question shake my sense of logic.

“E-Erm, well, that’s, uh...” I looked up at the ceiling. I’d never doubted the logic behind it before. “W-Well, that’s just the rules! It’s just how the game works.”

I settled for this forceful answer.

“Hoh hoh, that’s an interesting game you speak of!”

A fourth person cut into our conversation, and we turned to look at the speaker. Emilia, who had settled into our room like she was naturally part of the group, looked at us with a delighted expression.

“Princess Emilia, when did you get in here?” I asked, staring at her in amazement.

“Mm? We entered at the same time you did. Did you not notice?” she replied casually.

Such terrifying, casual stealth! Is she actually really outgoing? She’s just there like it’s a matter of fact that she belongs, and we just let her blend in without really thinking about it... Or maybe she’s just really hard to spot...? No, no, that can’t be it...

While the other two girls reacted to Emilia’s presence with humble but casual friendliness, I was aghast at the ease with which she’d mixed into our group.

“What are you doing here, Your Highness? Did you come to deliver some kind of message?” Magiluka asked.

Despite Emilia’s insistence that we didn’t need to humble ourselves, Magiluka remained very formal around her as she asked the question that was burning in all our minds.

“Mm, not really?” Emilia shrugged. “We were merely curious about what it would be like to sleep aboard a ship, and we wanted to sleep in the same room as you as well, so we decided to come over.”

I was baffled at how whimsical this princess was.

“So, you will play this rock, paper, scissors game, and whoever wins gets the right to pick their bed first, yes? We do love competitions. We accept your challenge!” Emilia said willfully, an indomitable smile on her lips.

Feeling like we were somehow roped into this, we had no choice but to play rock, paper, scissors with her.

We then played a few dozen rounds of rock, paper, scissors. And we kept going, and going, and going...

“Gaaaah!” Emilia thrust her clenched fist into the air in frustration. “Why did we lose first again?! Why, we are supposed to be invincible!”

I sighed tiredly.

“Again! We demand another rematch! This time we will emerge victorious!” Emilia said enthusiastically.

That day, I learned that Emilia was actually really bad at rock, paper, scissors... I basically beat her repeatedly.

God, you didn't have to make me invincible at rock, paper, scissors too...

Sore loser that she was, Emilia had no intention of ending this rock, paper, scissors tournament until she won, and eventually we'd lost track of what we were even playing it for.

“Listen, you two, this time for sure let's let Her Highness win so we can end this game. Even if it means losing on purpose,” I whispered as I huddled together with Magiluka and Safina.

“You say that like it's so simple, but we can't tell what Her Highness is going to do. She picks her moves at random,” Magiluka whispered back.

“Even when we agree to pick the same move, she'll lose to all three of us at once. I don't know what else we can do,” Safina whined.

We'd really tried all sorts of ideas to lose on purpose and end this game. At this point, we were impressed by Emilia's talent of always losing in rock, paper, scissors. But even so, I implored the other two to keep going.

“Don’t give up. It’s only game over once you give in,” I said, recalling a motivational line from my past life.

“Yes, but ending the game is what we’re trying to achieve...” Magiluka remarked dryly.

“An-y-way, this time we’re losing. For sure!” I insisted.

And so, we went into another match of rock, paper, scissors.

“Okay, this time we are going to win!” Emilia said energetically. “Rock, paper...!”

We threw out our hands, praying to God to deliver us from this never-ending cycle.

“Scissors!”

But, sure enough, I won again.

God, work with me here. I don’t need to be invincible in this too!

Magiluka and Safina glared at me reproachfully, and I could only look away uncomfortably.

We kept on playing, with no signs of Emilia getting any closer to winning a single match. The princess was on the verge of tears when Tutte came in to call us for dinner, which resulted in an inconclusive ending to the tournament.

When Tutte came into the room...she was like the goddess of salvation...

6. Set Sail!

The next morning, I looked up at the sailing ship before us with my heart flutter. *So, this is a sailing ship! It’s so cool... I can’t believe we get to go on a boat ride.*

While I looked up in amazement and Safina had frozen up next to me, Sacher watched the ship’s crew work on loading supplies.

“Heh heh heh! What do you think?! This is our country’s largest sailing ship! Impressive, isn’t it?!” Emilia said proudly as we stared like country bumpkins. “It’s an excellent vessel capable of making a trip that would otherwise be

several days long in just half a day!”

“Awww, we’re just going to spend one night on the ship? I was looking forward to the voyage...” I whined.

I was very much influenced by Emilia’s friendliness, so my tone became casual and I let my disappointment show. But then I realized what I did and started apologizing profusely. “I-I’m sorry!”

“No, do not let it bother you. We appreciate your frankness!” Emilia cackled. “We demons are not as occupied with rigid ceremony as you humans are.” With that said, the princess went toward the ship.

“I’d expect no less of you, Lady Mary. To have gotten so familiar with the princess already... Truly, you’re a ruler at heart,” Magiluka mused.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you talking about? What ruler at heart? Don’t say dangerous things like that. I’m just an ordinary...noble lady... Uh...”

I objected to her terrifying utterance at once, only to realize my insistence that I’m an ordinary noble lady came across as a needlessly specific denial and attracted suspicious eyes.

“What’s the matter? We set sail soon. Hurry up and board, you lot!” Emilia, who had hurried onto the ship and chatted with the captain, called out to us.

I hurriedly walked onto the ship, taking care not to run. *Ooh! I’m actually boarding a ship!*

Contrary to the elegance of my steps, I was very much cheering on the inside, and I was suppressing my bubbling excitement as I boarded the vessel. Unfortunately, I walked so fast that everyone else ended up behind me, and I couldn’t tell what faces my friends were making. I was so buzzing with expectation that I was beyond caring for that.

All right! The first ship voyage of my life begins!

A few hours after we set sail, I took a breather in my cabin before happily hurrying over to the ship’s deck. I walked over to a corner where I wouldn’t get in the crew’s way and appreciated the view.

"I-It's the sea... Tutte, look, we're out at sea!"

"That we are, Lady Mary. The sea really is vast... Ah, don't lean over like that, Lady Mary! It's dangerous!"

A blue sea that stretched as far as the eye could see... The distantly visible horizon... The breeze, thick with the scent of salt... We truly were at sea, our large sailing ship gliding over the waves. I felt like I was in a scene from a movie.

I'd never experienced anything like this in my past life, so I was very much on cloud nine, so much so that I leaned over the railing, which made a startled Tutte scold me.

"Oh, don't worry," I told her energetically as she tried to tug me back. "Come on, Safina, you take a look...too?"

I turned to look at Safina, who was supposed to be behind me, only to find she was much further back than I expected.

"Safina? Oh, and you too, Magiluka? What's wrong, you two? Come on, take a look." I gestured at the two of them to come over.

They were standing stock-still near the hatch at the center of the deck leading down to the cabins, with Safina clinging to Magiluka as if for dear life.

"W-We're fine right here, thank you," Magiluka stammered. "Isn't the view lovely, Miss Safina?"

"Y-Yes, Lady Magiluka!" Safina squeaked.

They both looked awfully pale.

"Huh? What, are you two seasick?"

"No, we're not seasick. Isn't that right, Miss Safina?"

"Yes, thankfully..."

Apparently, they weren't feeling ill, but that made me doubt why they wouldn't come to the edge of the ship.

"Then come over here! It's a lovely view," I said. "You can see all the way to the bottom of the ship from here. The deck's really high up!"

Mm? It's high up? I paused in realization.

I looked down from the deck, gazing at the water's surface. It really was much higher than I'd initially realized, and seeing this gave me the sensation that the sea was drawing me in.

Oh, they're afraid of heights... Wait, they feel it even here?

"Don't worry, it's not that tall." I assured them. "You'll get used to this height in no time."

"B-But, what if we fall...?" Safina said in a thin, jittery voice.

Like I'd thought, they were afraid of falling, and indeed, the ship did rock every now and then, so I could understand how it might come across as scary.

I let go of the railing and spread out my arms to show that I was absolutely fine. "Oh, don't worry, you won't fall over that easily—"

"Are you having fun, you lot?!" Emilia burst onto the scene and pushed me, of all things.

"Whoaaaaa!" I screeched as I staggered.

Then, at what could only be considered perfect comedic timing, the ship chose that particular moment to rock hard. I nearly fell off the deck—

"Lady Mary!" Tutte clung to me reflexively, keeping me from falling.

"Y-Your Highness, that was dangerous!" I blustered, my heart still thumping fast.

"Well, as you can see, being on deck is not entirely safe, so you would do well to not play here," Emilia said unapologetically.

"The only reason it wasn't safe is because you had to do that!" I argued back.

"I see you're all having fun." The prince approached us with a pleasant smile.

Sacher was following close behind him, pale as a sheet. Seeing the prince approach made us all stand on ceremony, and I regained my composure. I looked to Sacher curiously, noting his less-than-ideal complexion.

"What is it, Sir Sacher? You look under the weather. Are you scared of heights too?"

"You know that's not it..." He denied my insinuation, his face very pale.

“He’s just slightly seasick,” the prince said with a bothered expression.

“Oh, dear. I thought he was the sturdiest of you lot, but he’s weaker than he looks,” Emilia said, exasperated. “These ladies all look fine.”

Perhaps feeling like he’d taken a blow to his masculine pride, Sacher frowned.

“...Look, unlike Lady Mary and her group, I’m a bit more delicate,” he mumbled grumpily.

We all froze up.

“Oh, is that right?” Emilia took his words at face value and looked at us.

“Oho ho, that’s not true, right, everyone?” I brought a hand to my lips and directed a freezing glare at Sacher.

Sacher hid behind the prince’s back. Realizing that Sacher’s wanting a shield was why he’d ended up having the prince come along, I turned to Magiluka and Safina, who nodded firmly.

“Yes, indeed, Lady Mary is quite delicate. Don’t you think so, Miss Safina?” Magiluka said matter-of-factly.

“Yes— Huh? Hm?” Safina said and then paused in realization.

It took me a minute to fully understand what Sacher had said back there.

“Wait, Magiluka.” I glared at her. “He said ‘Lady Mary and her group.’ He didn’t just mean me.”

Magiluka twiddled her fingers and looked the other way.

“Come, come, Magiluka. You and I need to have a good talk, and I know just the place. It has a very good view.” I grabbed Magiluka by the shoulders and started dragging her toward the bow.

“I-I was just joking! Lady Mary, I’m sorry! Don’t look at me with death in your eyes!” she apologized tearfully.

“Delicate, eh? We see...” Emilia nodded to herself sagely, apparently coming to her own conclusions from watching us.

What’s with that look? I’m delicate in my own way, really.

I let go of Magiluka and cracked a forced, apologetic smile, unable to meet Emilia's assured gaze.

That night, Safina, Magiluka, and, for some reason, Emilia all shared a cabin with me.

I probably shouldn't even remark about it anymore and just accept she's part of the group.

"Aah... I still can't believe we'll be arriving at the Dark Isle tomorrow..." Magiluka whispered as she peered out the cabin's small window.

"Heh heh heh, is our kingdom's shipbuilding technology not impressive?" Emilia puffed up with pride.

"It is... I don't know much about a sailing ship's structure, but this ship's speed is consistent," I said, relying on my incomplete knowledge. "Sailing ships are affected by the wind, no? Is this ship moving using some other power source?"

"W-Well, that's, erm, a state secret!" Emilia suddenly turned flustered. "Yes, a state secret. We cannot speak of it."

It was a big change from how enthusiastic she was when it came to talking about her country earlier. That made it clear that the ship really was drawing on some other power source to move, and she wasn't keen on touching on the matter.

"It has been a fast voyage, though." Safina changed the topic, hoping to change the awkward atmosphere.

"A voyage, huh... Come to think of it, there's a lot of events that pop up on ships..." I mused. *In video games, that is.*

"That's the first I'm hearing of that." Magiluka, who was seated on the opposite bed, leaned in curiously. "What kind of events?"

"Well, you see. When you travel by sea, a pirate ship can attack..." I raised a finger, starting to count the scenarios. "Or maybe you run into a ghost ship... Or maybe a sea monster attacks..."

For some reason, the other three girls fell silent.

“Oh, goodness, what’s gotten into you three? It’s just fantasies in my head, you know. Pies in the sky. That wouldn’t actually—”

But then, my words were cut off with a loud, rumbling thud, and the ship erupted into noise.

I wasn’t making requests, God! I wasn’t trying to jinx it!

I shook my hand dismissively to the girls as I complained to God on the inside.

7. Oh Gosh, a Double?!

“Your Highness, this is an emergency!” I heard someone call out and knock on the door.

“Come in! What is the matter?!” Emilia called out.

One of the crew members opened the door to our cabin. They were visibly short of breath.

“My apologies, Your Highness! What seems to be a pirate ship is approaching us!”

A pirate ship... Okay, so that’s what I jinxed...

“What?! Our ships can easily shake off any pirate vessel!”

“Well, you see, the kr—” the crewman nearly said something, but Emilia silenced him with a glare. “The power source at the bottom of the ship is grumbling, and won’t operate properly...”

A what now? Is there something we’re not supposed to know about loaded on this ship?

The curious thought crossed my mind, but I chose to ignore it for the time being and watch the conversation.

“Pah, what a useless k...p-power source,” Emilia murmured bitterly. “For all the expensive bai—fuel it demands, it refuses to work properly. Very well, we shall take to the deck. You lot wait here.”

Saying this, she made to leave us behind. Hearing that I didn’t have to get involved in this was good news for me, but at the same time, I was both curious

and confused by how little I understood about this situation. But then the ship rocked hard again, and the noise and screaming grew even louder.

“Your Highness! I have a report!” Another crewman hurried over, slamming against the wall as the ship lurched but hanging on with a hand against the wall.

“What is it now?!” Emilia said, staggering where she stood.

“The aforementioned ship is a pirate ship, but we’ve discovered it’s also a haunted ship!”

Hearing this, everyone shuddered, and then turned their eyes to me.

Oh, come on, you can’t pin the blame here on me! I said ghost ship, not a haunted ship... Though I guess it’s kind of the same thing... Gaaah, I didn’t expect to double-jinx us!

“A haunted ship... A ship used by ghosts and the undead,” Emilia said pensively. “To think that we ran into something that rare. Still, this is trouble... Can anyone among the crew use holy magic?”

“No, Your Highness!” the crewman replied.

“Ugh, we cannot use holy magic either...” Emilia said bitterly. “But if we try to use fire magic to burn the undead away, it could set fire to our own ship. This is troublesome...”

I assumed that, as was cliché, demons were considered darkness incarnate and couldn’t use divine-based purifying magic. As I watched Emilia grit her teeth at her wit’s end, I swallowed nervously.

“Demons can’t use holy magic, right? Since you’re beings of the darkness,” I asked.

“Mm? No, we can use it. But having a demon use purifying magic goes against our personal sense of aesthetics as a demon, so we have never learned it.” Emilia gave this honestly anticlimactic revelation that made me hang my head.

“Hm... It might not be my place to say it, but I think ghosts and the like can be repelled using simple light spells,” Magiluka said.

“Oho ho, now this is beneficial information,” Emilia replied, impressed. “However, we are surprised you know that.”

“Let’s just say I got that bit of advice from a reliable source...” Magiluka said, leaving out that said reliable source was a certain problematic instructor of ours from the academy who’d inadvertently taught us about it.

Not that I don’t understand why...

“Also, Lady Mary can use holy magic, right?” Magiluka looked at me.

“Oh, yes, you’re right.” I brought my hands together in agreement. Since the last time I’d used holy magic had been a big blunder on my behalf, I’d filed the memory away in the “dark past” folder in a corner of my mind and willingly forgotten about it. But then, I got a bad feeling and my head moved to Emilia, who smirked viciously at me.

“Well now, is that right? Well then, Mary, come with me. We must attend to this emergency,” she said.

“I-I don’t mind, but what exactly am I expected to help you with?” I asked with a very tense smile.

“That we will figure out once we get there!” Emilia said recklessly, grabbing me by the shoulder and bolting straight out of the room.

“Wait, we can’t play it by ear like that!” I screeched as she picked me up like a sack and ran off.

“’Tis an emergency! We charge!”

Demons, as it turned out, had superhuman strength. It did make me appreciate how strong Her Majesty the Queen must have been to have Emilia so whipped and helpless...

“W-Wait, hold on! At least let me change out of these clothes!” I shouted as she carried me off, realizing I was still in my nightgown.

“We haven’t time for that, ’tis an emergency! Onward!”

“Nooooooooo!”

While my nightgown wasn’t entirely improper, I was still ashamed to show myself in such thin clothing. And so, as Emilia sped me away, my scream trailed off after us, echoing through the cabin...

The ship's deck was in a state of chaos. A few undead had boarded our ship, and ghosts were flying about. Looking out to sea, I spotted a sailing ship that looked like it could crumble away at any moment. Sir Klaus and Miss Iks were on the deck, fighting off the departed invaders. They didn't seem to be having much trouble, but no matter how many times they cut down the undead, they got back up.

"Go forth, Mary! Blast these undead away! We shall keep you safe!" Emilia lowered me to the deck and started bossing me around.

"Where do I start, though...?" I gave Emilia a peevish glance, annoyed at her haphazard planning as I fixed my disheveled nightgown. "Turn Undead is a spell that works on a fixed location, and its range isn't that big..."

"Why, banish every single one of them!" Emilia howled, none too apologetic.

"Yeah, figures..." I sighed and looked around the deck with a weary smile.

For the time being, I held up my hand toward whichever undead were closest and in sight.

"Oh, whatever! Turn Undeaaaaaad!" I chanted the words of power, and a magic circle deployed under the undead in front of me.

Light spilled out of the circle, and when it touched the undead, they crumbled away with a howl.

"That was holy magic! Ah, Lady Mary?" Sir Klaus seemed to notice what I did and turned to look at me, surprised by my attire.

"Don't look this way, Sir Klaus!" I shouted, hiding behind Emilia, who didn't mind being seen in a nightgown.

"Good, Mary! Next we go that way!" Emilia drew toward me and picked me up again.

"I said stop carrying me around like that! And let me get changed!" I shouted as she dragged me away. *Of all places, she took us somewhere with lots of people...*

After that, we moved all over the deck, smiting down the undead that

appeared around the ship, and Emilia turned her eyes to the haunted pirate ship.

“Now that we’ve swept them up, we must strike at the source, Mary!”

“I’m begging you, let me go back to my cabin and get changed! I’ll be unfit for marriage after this...” I sobbed, covering my face with my hands.

“Rest assured! You were seen alongside us, and with that as comparison, no one would care for your stumpy body!” Emilia gave me a jolly thumbs-up.

“Don’t call me stumpy! I’ll have you know I’ve matured a great deal!” I snapped at her, forgetting I was talking to a princess.

“Now, let us charge the enemy vessel!” Emilia picked me up and jumped, spreading her wings.

“Why won’t you listen to meeeee?!” I moaned.

Emilia ignored my shouting and easily hopped from our ship to the ghost ship, my voice echoing feebly over the waves. At that point, it dawned on me that I was perfectly capable of shaking her off. I’d gotten so used to hiding my strength that I’d started acting passively by default. But by the time I realized it, it was already too late...

8. Oh God, a Triple?!

Emilia touched down on the haunted ship’s deck, carrying me in her arms. Like it had looked from afar, the haunted ship appeared to be crumbling. It felt like I could end up falling through the floor if I stepped in the wrong place. And as we stood on the deck, the undead shambled in our direction and surrounded us.

“They’ve gathered upon us like flies! Do it, Mary!”

“Yeah, yeah... Turn Undead...” I chanted unenthusiastically.

My spell lit up, mercilessly destroying the undead. Normally, firing so many holy magic spells would exhaust one’s mana and knock the caster unconscious. But I simply kept purifying them, unaware of that. Thankfully, demons having large mana reserves meant Emilia’s understanding of magic was nothing like a

human's, so she didn't suspect a thing.

Thanks to my purification spamming, the deck of the ship soon quieted down, but the look on Emilia's face as she scanned our surroundings wasn't victorious, but rather suspicious. It was like she was looking for something.

"What's wrong, Your Highness? All the undead are taken care of."

"This is odd..." she said cautiously. "Just who is helming this haunted ship? Even with everyone on deck eliminated, this vessel is still pursuing our ship."

Hearing this, I looked around too. She was right: the ship was still moving even with no one to helm it. It was like the ship was moving with a will of its own...

"Do you think the ship might be rowing itself?" I suggested wearily.

"No, that should not be possible. There might still be someone around here..." Emilia replied, looking around cautiously.

As if to answer our doubts, the haunted ship suddenly lurched. I grabbed onto the closest object I could find so as to not get thrown out. Something rose up from the water with a large splash.

"Wh-What's that?!" Emilia shouted.

A drizzle of seawater rained down on us. As I stood there, now slightly soggy, I looked up, transfixed, at the moonlit mass rising from the water's surface. Emilia didn't seem to quite understand what it was and looked at the ship's hull.

"Y-Your Highness... That's..." I pointed at the water, my finger trembling.

Emilia looked at where I was pointing and turned speechless. A tentacle belonging to a giant squid (it seemed?) was bursting out of the water. Several more squid tentacles appeared around the haunted ship, surrounding us and wiggling nastily. The limbs were much larger than those of any squid I knew of, and the sight made my thoughts freeze up.

"I-It's a kraken!" Emilia screamed.

Hearing this rebooted my thoughts, allowing me to get a grasp on the situation, but just then, one of the squid legs swung down at the deck.

Don't tell me I actually triple-jinxed our trip!

The tentacle bashed into the deck, shaking the ship violently. Apparently, the kraken couldn't see us and was simply swinging blindly in our general direction. Its limb swept across the deck, trying to hit anything on it. On closer inspection, I could tell the tentacle was rotten.

"A kraken zombie!" Emilia complained to me as she flew about, avoiding the kraken's tentacle. "Why, if that isn't the rarest of rare sea creatures! Gah, it's because you said all those weird things that this happened! We demand you take responsibility for this!"

"Don't pin this on me! These are false charges!" I called out to Emilia in a casual tone, too occupied with running away to care.

The reason I was so panicked was so obvious it hardly needed mentioning; a giant tentacle was chasing me. It being rotten only made it worse.

I am not getting caught by that thing! No way, no how!

It was the worst combination possible: a girl in a wet, drenched gown and a gigantic rotting tentacle. It reminded me of the mandrake incident, when giant slimy tendrils chased me around the academy, but I obviously didn't have time to linger on those memories in this situation.

Do I, like...have some affinity to tentacles? If so, I'm going to have to ask you to sever that particular connection, God.

"So, this creature is controlling the haunted ship from below," Emilia concluded.

"What's a kraken doing with a haunted ship?!" I shouted.

"How would we know? You would be better off asking the kraken!"

We kept bickering like children as we fled from the tentacle.

"Anyway! This is an undead creature! Smite it with your holy magic!" Emilia shouted into my ear.

"Turn Undead is a fixed spell!" I shouted back into her ear with a frown. "It's applied to a fixed location! It can't hit a target that's slithering and moving around like that! Besides, I have to hit the monster itself, not its appendage!"

Your Highness, you need to get the kraken out of the water and hold it in place!”

“We shan’t touch something that disgusting!”

“Well, I don’t want to touch it either!”

We kept arguing as we weaved and dodged, avoiding the zombie kraken. Perhaps growing annoyed with us, the arm swung directly down at us. We just barely dodged it bashing into us, but as it hit the deck, it spurted out sticky mucus that splashed over the surroundings.

“Eeeew, this is repulsive!” I rubbed my arms upon seeing the repugnant sight, screwing up my face in disgust.

Just the thought of that arm touching me grossed me out to no end.

“W-W-W-W-Well, in that case, we will simply burn it to ash along with the entire ship! Mwa ha ha ha!” Emilia started laughing maniacally, perhaps finally caving under the pressure of this disgusting sight.

On closer inspection, I realized a bit of the mucus actually ended up hitting her.

Aww, she didn’t dodge it and it got on her... My condolences... I grieved for her internally.

“Calm down, Your Highness!” I called out to her. “What if you burn this ship and it decides to ram against our ship?! Use an explosive spell instead!”

“Ooh!” Emilia clapped, snapping back to sanity at the sound of my advice. “A fine idea! We’ll blow it up along with this ship, then!”

With that shout, Emilia held her hands overhead. A large magic circle deployed around her. It took a while for it to activate, which implied it was a very powerful spell. Realizing this, I started panicking.

“W-Wait, hold on! I need to run for cover!”

“Take this! Fifth-order sp—”

But then, Emilia suddenly vanished from my field of vision, just like Magiluka had when the slime nabbed her away. Stricken with something between a

premonition and morbid curiosity, I looked up.

Wavering in the moonlight was Emilia, coiled up by the kraken's tentacle, which was swinging to and fro. She looked like her soul had all but left her body.

I mean, yeah, you'd get caught if you just stood there!

"Burst!" I fired an explosive spell.

The spell blasted the tentacle holding Emilia, making it slacken its hold and drop her onto the boat. I heard her hit the deck with a sticky thud. Apparently, the mucus around her broke her fall...though I wasn't sure if I could call it a blessing in disguise.

"Your Highness!" I hurried over to Emilia, who lay there with her eyes blank and lifeless.

I was stricken speechless by this terrible sight. I could understand how she felt. She was in a state of shock, having gone through every girl's nightmare, so it only made sense she'd shut the world away to escape. But now wasn't the time for escapism—we were in the middle of combat. If she stayed down here, she'd just get caught again. Thus, I sadly decided to try to rouse her.

"Princess, I don't want to touch you, so if you're not getting up, I'll have to leave you behind."

"Could you not spare a kind word in our time of grief, you heartless fiend?!"

This demon just called me a fiend. Nonetheless, credit where it's due, Emilia did come to her senses right away.

"Eew, just stay away from me. You're all drippy..." I mercilessly took a step back as Emilia got to her feet.

Emilia glared at me reproachfully, but soon changed her target to the sea.

"Aargh, at this point, anything goes!" Emilia shook off her fear and shouted at the writhing tentacle. "Nothing scares us anymore, so hit us with all you've got, you overinflated squid! We shall crush you to bits!"

I very nearly let out a few tears, less out of admiration and more out of sympathy. Perhaps reacting to Emilia's words, the tentacle swung down at her at once. This time, the final battle was about to begin—

Bwooosh!

But then, just as I tensed up, several other large tentacles burst out of the water's surface with a splash—but not from around the ghost ship, but instead, our ship.

Huh? What?

9. Mr. Kra and Little Miss Ken

Squid legs burst out of the water around our ship. They looked much healthier and more animated than the zombie kraken's, so it seemed like it was a normal, living kraken. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Wait, why am I relieved?! A kraken's still a monster! I asked myself in a panicked manner.

"Aaah! It got out of its cage!" Emilia screamed, looking at our ship.

Unlike my surprise, her reaction gave the impression she knew the kraken was there all along.

"You fools! Who said you're allowed to release it?!" Emilia angrily walked over to the end of the haunted ship's deck and shouted at the other ship.

"We're sorry, Your Highness!" someone—likely the captain—shouted from our ship. "It started rampaging, and we thought it might sink the whole ship! We had to let it out!"

I could recognize that voice as the captain's, but since it'd been a while since they'd shown me around the ship, I couldn't be quite sure.

"Hmm. We cannot fault you for that, then," Emilia concluded with a frown.

"Release it? 'Rampaging'? 'Sink the whole ship'? What are you talking about?" I glared at Emilia suspiciously.

She jolted with a squeak and looked the other way, seeking to escape my gaze.

"Don't tell me...the ship we've been riding on was being towed by a kraken the whole time. You did mention bait, and there was something about a cage."

Each time I mentioned something she said, Emilia jolted again, nonverbally answering my question. I was probably right. That wasn't the problem right now, though. What I wanted to know was...

"No, you must understand! We had the kraken's consent!" Emilia started spitting out excuses. "We made it a proper contract, never overworked it, and offered it three meals a day and an afternoon nap. This is all aboveboard, clean business!"

"That's not what's bothering me!" I snapped at her.

Demon management politics wasn't my concern—what bothered me was that the kraken showed up like this. Still, this was the most flustered I'd seen Emilia all day, so I figured it must be a delicate topic.

What does she take me for? Well, given the way she reacted, I guess something like this must have happened to her before, but I won't ask about it right now.

She did say one thing I couldn't overlook, however. "Wait, you said you had the kraken's consent? You can talk to the kraken?"

Hearing my question, Emilia regained her composure and puffed up proudly. "Of course! Unlike you humans, demons such as us are a finer breed. Many demons can speak to monsters. Even we can understand a few words."

"Then is there any way you can talk this zombie into leaving us alone?" I pointed at the decaying tentacles, which for whatever reason were just standing there wavering. "And the kraken that just emerged too," I added, pointing at the live kraken's tentacles.

"Hmph! We said we can understand a few words, not hold a conversation!" Emilia said boastfully.

"Erm... Weird flex, but okay?"

Our fruitless conversation ended when the sea surged up with a splash that made our ship lurch. I grabbed onto whatever was closest to me to stay on my feet, and I looked out to sea. A squid was emerging from the water, its head half exposed—the zombie kraken. Its tentacles, which were above the water, began wiggling and producing eerie wet noises.

“Wh-What is this?!” Emilia called out in alarm for some reason.

“E-Erm... I’m just throwing a guess here, but are those wet noises supposed to be the kraken talking?” I asked, a bit grossed out.

“Mmhmm, indeed!” Emilia nodded and looked at the zombie kraken. I did the same.

The zombie kraken wasn’t looking at the haunted ship at all. It had its attention fixed on our ship—and I could only speculate, but from what I could tell, it wasn’t our ship itself that had caught its eye, but rather the tentacles around it.

“So, what is it saying?” I asked, giving in to my curiosity. I approached Emilia and tugged on her sleeve pesteringly, demanding to know. *Can you blame me for being curious? It feels like there’s some deep lore at play here!*

“Wiggle, wiggle... Wiggle, wiggle...” the zombie kraken began.

““Oooh, those lithe, beautiful legs, those suction cups that seem to draw one in...”” Emilia translated the kraken’s words in a theatric, overacted manner.

““There is no doubting it. You are my younger sister...” We think!”

“Wiggle, wiggle... Wiggle...” the living kraken replied.

““I would never fail to recognize that wiggling! You are my brother dearest...” Perhaps!” Emilia narrated the live kraken’s words enthusiastically. She was really into it. Made hand gestures and everything.

Based on that, my conclusion was that the zombie kraken was the living kraken’s older brother. Why did Emilia seem so unsure of what she was saying, though? Were they saying something she didn’t want to tell me? I could only guess.

“Mmm, the names of those krakens are difficult to parse in human tongue,” Emilia grumbled, lamenting her inability to pronounce the words of the inhuman and squidly. “If we could just produce those wiggling noises ourselves —”

“No, it wouldn’t help because I don’t speak tentacle.” I cut her off. “Can’t we call them something simple? Like, the big brother kraken will be Mr. Kra, and

the sister kraken can be Little Miss Ken?”

“Nay, we cannot refer to them with such primitive names! We will find some way to produce those s— Ooooh!” She got cut off as the ship lurched again.

“Let’s try to meet each other halfway here, all right? You really don’t have to act all-knowing at a time like this,” I told her, trying to keep her focused on the matter at hand.

“H-Hmm...” Emilia eventually gave up.

“Wiggle wiggle wiggle, wiggle...”

““Mr. Kra, brother dearest, it has been thirty years since you went missing! Finally, we meet again! But why do you look so sickly and rotted?””

“Wiggle wiggle, wiggle, wiggle...”

““I’m so sorry, Miss Ken... After parting ways with the family, I ended up fighting this pirate ship and perishing alongside it. As I sank to the depths, I thought of nothing but meeting you one more time! That desire mingled with the pirate ship, turning me into this hideous form you see now.””

“Wiggle wiggle!”

““Oh no! Brother dearest!”” As she translated the squelching and wiggling of the two krakens’ tentacles, Emilia performed what could only be described as heartfelt, tear-jerking acting. She was so oddly, uncharacteristically good at it, I felt ill at ease even pointing it out.

“Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle, wiggle, wiggle...”

““I had heard rumors of a pirate ship and a kraken, and its characteristics sounded much like you, brother. Believing it might be you, I accepted work towing this ship so I could secretly go looking for you—”” Emilia cut off her passionate acting and glared at the kraken. “Aaaah! So that’s why! We thought you were going off course for some reason! So it’s your fault we ran into this ship!”

I tried to soothe Emilia, prompting her to continue.

“Wiggle wiggle...”

“Work? So you were working... I was under the impression they had you captured—” Emilia then trailed off and shouted at the zombie kraken. “Aaah! So this whole mess is your fault, Mr. Kra!”

At this point, I was getting tired of having to calm her down and started considering just letting her bluster at the two krakens.

“Come now, Your Highness, they’re saying something. Keep up the interpretation.”

“Wiggle wiggle wiggle...”

“...Either way, I’m relieved to have met you, Miss Ken. I have no more lingering regrets. There is a sorcerer capable of holy magic here, so perhaps this is fate.”

“Wiggle wiggle, wiggle wiggle?!”

“Brother dearest, what are you saying?” Emilia said, going about her translation much more indifferently this time. Still, I could appreciate her being devoted enough to stick to the task anyway.

More importantly, the conversation was swinging in a very dark direction. When Emilia had mentioned the “sorcerer capable of holy magic,” I winced.

“Wiggle wiggle wiggle!”

“Now, come forth, sorcerer! I have no more regrets! Sublimate and purify me!” Emilia translated, and in time with her command (maybe?), the zombie kraken swung a tentacle at me.

“What it’s doing isn’t reflecting what you’re saying!” I complained, beginning to doubt the accuracy of Emilia’s translation.

“How rude! Our translation is flawless. He is attacking you so as to get you to purify him. See? The tentacle is only chasing you.”

She was right; the zombie kraken wasn’t even looking at her, and its tentacles were going after me.

“This again?! Why do tentacles keep chasing me?!” I shouted as I bolted around the ship’s deck. Since it had no intention to kill me, its attacks lacked their earlier intensity. It was only trying to startle me.

“Your Highness! I’ll purify it if it wants, so just tell it to settle down!”

“We would very much like to do so, but... Curses, we cannot utter those wiggling noises!” Emilia clenched her fist in bitter frustration.

Somebody! Anybody, calm this kraken down! I cried out to the heavens, lacking the courage to come face to face with those rotten tentacles.

“Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle!”

But just then, another tentacle—one belonging to Miss Ken—appeared and reached out to the zombified tentacle and coiled around it. She was clearly trying to stop Mr. Kra. I looked at Emilia, expecting an explanation.

“‘Brother dearest, please stop...’ is what she’s saying,” Emilia translated.

Oh, such touching affection between siblings... Or that’s what I’d say, but it honestly looks like something out of a monster flick.

With our ship and the haunted ship between them, the two krakens were locked in what looked like a grappling battle. Each time they thrashed, they kicked up waves that splashed over the decks and shook the two vessels. As salty water washed over the deck—and consequently, splashed over me—I could only laugh dryly at the events unfolding before me.

It feels like this situation is getting more chaotic by the minute...

“Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle!”

“‘Let go, Miss Ken! You’ll get hurt too!’”

“Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle!”

“‘No, brother dearest! We’ve finally found each other again! I refuse to say goodbye so soon!’” Emilia graciously translated the monsters’ words even as she struggled to remain upright on the rocking ship.

“Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle, wiggle!”

“‘Miss Ken, I am no longer the handsome, dashing big brother you remember! That kraken died thirty years ago. What you see now is a handsome, dashing rotten monster—’ Do not call yourself handsome and dashing! Have you no concept of humility?!” Emilia snapped mid-interpretation.

I indifferently watched her call him out. At this point, I honestly didn't care which way this went, I just wanted to be done with it. But at the same time, I couldn't find it in me to just cut into their conversation and cast Turn Undead on him without warning.

"Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle!"

"That's not true! You haven't changed since those days, and you'll always be a Prince Charming to me!"

"Wiggle, wiggle!"

"Miss Ken!"

"Wiggle, wiggle!"

"Mr. Kra!"

The two sea monsters clashed, the waves they produced rocking the ships. To those two, they were tearfully embracing, but from my perspective, I was standing a short distance away from a natural catastrophe.

"Aaaah, I'm falling! I'm gonna fall over!" I shouted as the ghost ship began to keel over.

Maybe it was simply too old and battered to take this kind of punishment, but the ghost ship tilted and was beginning to slip under the water.

"Mary, forget all of this and just do it!" Emilia said as she grabbed onto me and carried me up into the air.

"But they're having a moment, I can't just ruin it—"

"We said just do it! We can't carry you for that long!"

"Oh, then, um, I'll just handle myself. Levitation!" I chanted.

It'd completely slipped my mind in all this commotion, but I finally remembered I could do that. Plus, I hadn't practiced flying in a while, making it easy to forget about it. *I mean, you know. It's like having wings but never using them in your day-to-day, so you end up falling into a trap hole anyway.* Making that excuse to myself, I let go of Emilia and flew away before looking down to watch this battle/makeout session between the two squids.

“Wait, what are they saying right now?” I asked roughly, overcome with a very unpleasant premonition.

““Miss Ken, my cute and lovely baby sister!’ ‘Oh no, brother dearest, that’s just obvious! ♪ Everyone’s watching, so don’t say things like that! It’s embarrassing!” Emilia translated their exchange, her eyes turning gradually colder.

She then looked at me with a vicious smile, stuck out a thumb, and moved it horizontally in a slash-like motion over her throat.

“Do it, Mary!”

“Roger that! Turn Undeaaaaaad!”

And so, with any tender feelings I’d had utterly spoiled, I actively ruined their touching moment.

The battle was at an end. I looked on as Mr. Kra turned into particles of light and vanished into the air, and Miss Ken tragically reached out a single tentacle toward the sky.

““Aah, Mr. Kra, brother of mine. You will not die, for you will live on in my heart, brother dearest,” Emilia translated the kraken’s words without a hint of emotion.

I felt exhaustion wash over me, sighed, and slowly levitated back to the ship. With the zombie kraken destroyed, the haunted ship crumbled away.

I swear, those pirates just had to pick a fight with a kraken and get us in trouble later down the line.

We landed on the deck, where the ship’s crew surrounded us and started praising our performance. I could only smile awkwardly, overwhelmed by their enthusiasm. In the midst of all this, I spotted Tutte, who was making her way through the crew members in an attempt to reach my side.

“Tutte, you’re safe!” I said, relieved.

“Oh, Lady Mary! Take this! Hurry, you must!” Tutte waved at me, unable to move through the wall of muscular sailors, and tried to hand something to me.

“Tutte?” I asked dubiously. The fight was over, so why was she panicking?

“Lady Mary, hurry up and put this on! Down, look down!”

“Down?”

I looked down as she said, and then froze up. My gown was wet with water, making it transparent, and it was quite disheveled to boot. The moment I realized it, my face went red.

“Noooooooo! Don’t look at me!” I squealed.

“Behold, Mary!” Emilia said, looking even worse than I was but seemingly not minding at all. “The sun rises on our victory! What a glorious sight!”

She grabbed me by the hand and dragged me over to the ship’s bow. The sun rising on the horizon was indeed beautiful—to an infuriating degree, with its rays shining over me.

“Tutte, help meeeeeee!” I ran away from Emilia, red in the face as I turned to my maid for help.

10. The Dark Isle!

Half a day after the haunted ship incident, I had locked myself alone in a storeroom at the bottom of the ship to sulk. That said, Tutte was there with me. Perhaps understanding how I felt, everyone was kind enough to leave me be.

“Lady Mary, we’ve almost arrived at the Dark Isle. Isn’t it about time you recovered?”

“No...”

I sat hugging my knees and facing the wall. I buried my face in my lap, refusing to budge.

“Lady Mary, you’re a duke’s daughter. You can’t keep sulking here! Please, pull yourself together, and let’s go outside!”

“No, no, no!” I curled up where I sat as Tutte tried to drag me out.

Tutte wasn’t going to beat me in brute strength, and I didn’t budge one bit. I couldn’t show myself after that shameful display. How would I look everyone in

the eye? And the more time passed by, the more I lost my nerve.

Before long, Tutte let go of me, breathing heavily, and I curled up like a turtle.

“I suppose you leave me no choice,” Tutte said, apparently giving up.

She turned around and made to walk back up to the cabins. She left, and with me all alone in the dim, silent storeroom, I felt a sense of loneliness wash over me. I started regretting my childish tantrum, raised my head, and gazed at the exit. But much to my surprise, Tutte suddenly walked back in.

Seeing her filled me with relief, but at the same time, I felt embarrassed and once again curled up. I then heard Tutte approach and stop next to me. Suddenly, an exceptionally sweet aroma filled my nostrils. I recognized this smell—candy. I sniffed the air.

“Come here, over here... Come on, don’t be afraid...”

I glanced to my side and spotted Tutte dangling candy in my direction like she was luring a wild animal over.

“Do I look like a street cat?!” I snapped at Tutte, annoyed, and drew closer to her. Nonetheless, I snatched the candy from her hands and stuffed my cheeks gluttonously with it.

“Lady Mary, everyone’s worried about you. Come, let’s go,” Tutte said, looking as relieved as if she’d successfully placated a pet into coming over.

I sighed. This did give me a reason to stop acting stubborn, so I decided to change my attitude.

“Right... Fine, I’ll try to behave. You said we’re almost at the Dark Isle? Considering what it’s called, it’s probably some spooky place covered in black clouds and thunder.”

“I don’t know, honestly. I’ve never been there either.”

As we both imagined what the Dark Isle must be like, we heard the ship become noisy. Apparently, the island was in sight. Discarding my moodiness, I made way for the deck to get my first look at this new land.

Now, let’s take our first look at the creepy island!

But what I saw when I looked at the island took my breath away. The Dark Isle was awash in brilliant, bright sunlight. The blue, clear sea washed against the pristine white sands of the beach, and the water was filled with pretty corals and fish which shone with every color of the rainbow.

This is a tropical island! A resort! Why do they call this place “dark”?!

“Hmm? Why the odd expression?” Emilia looked at me dubiously as I was aghast at how much of a scam the island’s name turned out to be.

“How is this place dark?! This is a tropical paradise!” I was so surprised I ended up speaking my mind.

“Did the name ‘Dark Isle’ make you expect something different?” Emilia asked back. “To begin with, it was you humans who decided to call it by that name.”

“E-Erm, well, I suppose... Sorry for saying that.” I apologized, realizing I’d simply accepted what I was told while not assuming it might be biased.

“It needn’t bother you. Be at ease and enjoy your time on our island.” Emilia grinned as we walked off toward the ship’s crew.

I was positively impressed with Emilia. She could be a bit stupid at times, and she didn’t always listen to what other people were saying, but at the same time, she was very broad-minded.

After seeing Emilia off, I shifted gears and took in the sight of the southern island that was, for whatever reason, called The Dark Isle. From afar, it looked like Hawaii or Guam.

I guess I can let myself get excited for this! Tropical islands rock!

An hour later, we finally began disembarking. We walked down to the shore according to the crew’s instructions, touching dry land for the first time in a while. Since we’d ended up arriving later than expected, the sun was already dipping into the horizon, but that in and of itself produced a gorgeous view I couldn’t look away from.

I looked up at an arch with a horizontal banner with the words “Welcome to the Dark Isle!” on it, which made me once again question what kind of identity

the Dark Isle was trying to cultivate. With that thought in mind, we entered the Dark Isle and took our first steps into the Relirex Kingdom.

There was no checkpoint to stamp a passport in sight, so I simply decided to let the grown-ups handle the bureaucracy. Some part of me was disappointed no one was here to ask “What is the purpose of your visit?” so I could gleefully announce I was here for tourism.

Then again, I'd probably be too tense to answer anyway, so it's fine...

We were gathered in one place, where we were told to wait. I could only look around tensely, my mouth hanging open. Wherever I looked, demons were walking by. Humans were the overwhelming minority in this land.

Th-This is a foreign country, after all... Ooh, I'm getting nervous now!

“Well, it took a while to get here, but we can finally board a carriage and head for our villa.” Emilia returned to escort us, apparently having finished handling assorted matters.

It was at this point that I recalled that our reason for this trip wasn't tourism. Even though she'd been in our country incognito at the time, we did save the country's princess, and we were brought here to be thanked for that. “Huh? You mean we're not going to the capital?” I asked.

“After that run-in with the haunted ship, we arrived late and it's getting dark. If we head for the capital now, we will arrive in the middle of the night, so let's begin our sightseeing tomorrow.”

With the very person who invited us now telling me we were here for tourism, I concluded the stated reason for the invitation was just an excuse and decided not to think anymore about it. *What else can I expect from Princess Emilia? Yeah, that makes sense.*

“But another sudden change of plans...?” I said reproachfully. “The grown-ups are going to have to work hard to adjust our schedule...”

“Aha ha, you needn't worry yourself with that. This port town is a fine place. We won't be here for long, but let us enjoy our time here!” Emilia cackled.

“Right... Well, the beach here really is pretty. I wish I'd had a swimsuit

made..." I said, fantasizing about the ideal trip to a tropical beach.

"A swimsuit?" Emilia cocked her head. "Oh, you mean clothes that don't become see-through even in the water. I think they're being sold around here, so you could buy such clothes, should you need them."

"Huh? Really?! Yaaay! Getting to swim around here sounds great. I love the Dark Isle!" I said, grabbing Emilia's hands with my eyes glittering excitedly at this piece of wonderful news.

"Hmm... Well, you can decide that once we reach the villa..." Emilia said, a bit put-off by my enthusiasm, but I didn't care. In my mind, I was a hard worker and God had decided to reward me with this trip, so I looked up to the sky gratefully.

It was then that I noticed that the rest of my friends were staring curiously at Emilia and me, who were still holding hands.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You two have gotten awfully close all of a sudden," Magiluka replied. "Did something happen?"

"Well..." I sighed. "Let's just say she put me through a great deal of trouble. It was a real mess... And then..." I directed a serene smile at Emilia, let go of her hands, and looked up to the sky. "And that's that."

"What are you talking about?! That just makes us more curious!" Emilia chided me, but I decided not to say any more than that.

"Come on, let's get on the carriage!" I changed the topic, grabbing Magiluka's and Safina's hands and pulling them along.

"H-Hey! We said we are curious! What changed your attitude?!" Emilia hurried after us.

Sacher and Reifus simply exchanged awkward smiles and followed us, but I pretended I didn't see that.

11. Now, Behold!

Everything was dark when we arrived at a cape a short distance out of the port town. As one might expect from a villa belonging to the island's princess, the premises were quite vast. The carriage stopped near the front door, and as we disembarked, several maids greeted us. As one of the maids approached Emilia, I froze up.

The maid had no horns on her head, but a pair of twitching furry ears, and I could see a long, fluffy tail trailing behind her, emerging from her skirt.

She was a beastman—or, more precisely, a catfolk.



While the Relirex Kingdom's interactions with mankind were limited, it enjoyed a wide variety of cultural exchange with the demi-humans—in other words, the beastmen, elves, and dwarves. I knew that, but I hadn't expected to run into a cat-eared maid right away.

Aaaaah, cat eaaaars! Real, fluffy cat ears!

While I stood there elegantly, I was very much taken by surprise and stared at her excitedly. My fingers twitched, longing to touch the fluffy tail and ears.

"L-Lady Mary... Stop looking at her like a carnivorous animal eyeing prey..." Tutte whispered at me anxiously, to which I tried to restrain my impatience.

"D-Don't be rude. Who are you calling an animal?" I whispered back at her, stung.

"We arrived late. How go the preparations?" Emilia asked.

"Everything is prepared." The cat-eared maid bowed.

I cut off my exchange with Tutte and listened in, only to be disappointed.

"Agh! What a waste! She'd be perfect if she ended all her sentences with 'meow'..." I whispered unintentionally.

"You just said that aloud, Lady Mary. You should keep things like that to yourself," my dependable maid warned me.

I slapped a hand over my mouth and looked around to check if anyone heard me, but everyone looked too distracted to care. My eyes then met the cat-eared maid. Her ears twitched gently, and for some reason she smiled at me.

Sh-She didn't hear me, did she? I returned an awkward smile and looked away.

"Allow us to introduce you. This is our personal maid, Sufia." Emilia turned her eyes to Sufia. "Though she may look young, she has been in our service for a long time. Should you need anything, you may use her however you please."

She did indeed look young, like a woman in her early twenties, and she had the sharpness of a mature lady in her eyes. But her cat ears made her overall impression come across as adorable. Beastmen were also long-lived races. Their

life spans weren't as long as the demons, elves, or dwarves, but they still lived longer than humans did, and they retained their peak physical maturity for longer while being slower to age. I could only envy that, honestly.

"I'm Sufia," the maid said with an elegant curtsy. "Thank you for putting up with our mischievous princess for s— Nghaaaaa!"

Her words cut off, giving way to a feline shriek. Looking at Emilia, I could see her grabbing Sufia's tail and kneading it tightly.

"Y-Your Highness! M-My tail is sensitive! How many times have I asked you not to touch it without permission?"

"That is because you were saying cheeky things," Emilia replied peevishly.

"If anyone is being cheeky, it's you, Your Highness!" Sufia glared at her. "You never consider how you might be troubling people when you call them ov— Whoa!"

Sufia hopped back, wary of Emilia catching her by the tail again. She moved elegantly, with feline gracefulness and flexibility, and it was also very clear she was used to dodging Emilia's grasp. These kinds of exchanges were probably quite routine around here. And sure enough, everyone around them were simply sighing in exasperation.

Wow, demon society is much more laid-back than ours...

I could only envy the way the two of them interacted, and then watched Tutte. Noticing my eyes, Tutte regarded me with a strained smile.

"Grr, always annoyingly nimble, you are..." Emilia averted her face from her in a sulking manner. "But very well. Show them to their rooms. And then serve dinner."

"As you wish. Come, everyone, this way." Sufia led us away. "We've prepared rooms for all of you, meow. Take your time to rest after your trip here, meow. Once dinner is prepared, we will show you to the dining room, meow."

Hmm?

For some reason, with Emilia away, Sufia actually started appending "meow" to the end of her sentences. I was confused by this sudden change, and

everyone else looked taken aback by her strange manner of speaking. But then, I realized something and felt all the color drain from my face.

“What might be the matter, meow?” Sufia noticed my change of expression and turned to me with a smile.

“E-Erm, the way you’re talking...”

“Yes.” The cat-eared maid beamed at me. “I heard you mention that ending my sentences with ‘meow’ would be preferable, so I acted as such, meow. What do you think, meow? Does it answer your expectations, meow?”

She was clearly getting more used to using “meow” as time went on. What terrifying adaptability...

She heard me! I grabbed my head, cringing, while everyone else glared at me with a “You again?” sort of look. They regarded me with much the same lethargy as the demons earlier who’d watched Emilia bicker with Sufia.

This is what they mean when they say one man’s fault is another’s lesson, I guess... “I’m sorry, you don’t have to speak like that.” I took back my previous statement.

“Really? That’s a shame. It seems to come to me instinctually, for some reason,” Sufia said, reverting back to normal speech.

Relieved that I was able to rectify the situation, I let her lead me to my room.

I relaxed in my room with Tutte for a time until Sufia came to tell us dinner was served. Only us, the students, were heading down the hall—none of the grown-ups were anywhere to be seen. As Sufia led us there, I thought to myself optimistically that they must still be somewhere in the villa, so we weren’t in any danger.

We walked down the hall before stopping in front of a set of double doors, where Emilia was waiting for us.

“Heh heh heh, you’re all here, we see!” Emilia smirked confidently. “Let our banquet begin, then. Everyone, behold!”

She turned to her servants, who opened the doors. Past them, we were

greeted by a large hall. A glittering chandelier hung above the hall's beautiful fixtures. A long table set with chairs was in the center of the room.

But before I could voice my amazement—

“Welcome to the Relirex Kingdom!” a dandy voice boomed through the dining hall.

We all looked in the direction of the voice in surprise, our gazes settling on a man waiting for us in the center of the room, striking a very weird pose.

Confused by this sight, my thoughts shut down. The problem wasn't his apparent middle age, but rather it was his appearance. He had two large horns growing from his head, as well as a crown. He was dressed in a crimson undercoat and a fancy cloak lined with fur. His skin under the undercoat was a tanned-brown shade.

In other words, yes—the man was standing there in nothing but his undergarments and cloak. And he was standing there striking a pose and flexing his muscles, his body glittering with oil.

Oh, I know this. This is a bodybuilder pose. I guess it's a thing in this world too...

That idle thought crossed my mind as I stared at him with lightless eyes, but then, the doors to the hall were slammed shut, blocking him from sight. The one to slam the doors was Emilia.

“Not that!” she said desperately, pressing her back against the doors. “That is not what you were supposed to behold! We meant the dining hall and the many dishes there. We did not expect that. Please spare us a minute, for we will banish that muscle brain from the room!”

The old man silently opened the doors and stepped through them.

“‘Muscle brain’...” the man said in a bashful gesture, his face still glittering with oil. “Oh, to hear our daughter rain such praise on us. We might just blush!”

I'm only guessing, but this is probably Emilia's father. Which means that this is the king of this country, the Dark Lord.

Realizing this mind-numbing truth, I looked away from the oiled-up, bashful

old man.

12. The Dark Lord Appears

And so...

“F-Father, what are you doing here? Why are you not in the capital?” Emilia asked, looking terribly flustered. “We thought this matter was a complete secret...”

Wait, when she said this would be an incognito trip, she meant she kept it a secret from her family too?!

“You are naive, Emilia, to think you can keep secrets from us. You will never be able to, so long as I have these muscles!” the Dark Lord declared grandly, striking another pose.

I bit my lip, restraining the urge to say, “That’s not how it works!”

“A-As impressive as ever, father...” Emilia said, swallowing nervously.

I looked at Emilia, who’d just accepted her father’s crazy reasoning like it made sense somehow, with pitying eyes. The others were looking at her the same way, likely thinking the same thing as me...with the exception of one Solos class master, who for whatever reason was as shocked as Emilia.

“Ahem, Princess Emilia.” Reifus cleared his throat, prompting her to move the conversation along and introduce us.

“Ah, yes. Pardon us for losing our composure.” Emilia pulled herself back together. Thankfully, her princess’s dignity allowed her to recover quickly enough. “Everyone, this is our father and ruler of this kingdom, King Vram Relirex.”

“Hngh, no need to be so formal,” the king said, striking another pose. “Nngh, welcome to our kingdom!”

He kept changing poses, and the sheer shock of what he was doing was very much keeping anything he was saying from entering my head. We stared at him, shocked, although one member of our group looked up at him in admiration...

“No need to stand in the hall and talk though. Come in and take a seat. Any guests of my daughter are also guests of my muscular self!” the Dark Lord said with a jovial voice.

“Oh hoh. So this is where you were,” a cold voice cut into his words.

The voice hit our backs like a frozen gale, sending a shiver down our spines. The Dark Lord’s expression froze over, and for some reason, Emilia too stood stock-still.

I looked behind me fearfully, finding that a woman was standing there, her arms crossed. She had long, dark-violet hair that extended down to her legs, except its tips were pinkish in color, just like Emilia’s hair. She wore a dress that fit her perfectly and accentuated her curvaceous body, and just the intensity of her gaze made me believe this was the queen. She truly had the air of a ruler about her. At least, more so than a certain man prancing around in his undergarments...

“A-Ah, elder sister... What are you doing here? I thought my presence here was top secret,” the Dark Lord said, mimicking what Emilia had told him just moments ago. He was sweating profusely and visibly tense.

“You’re much too green, stupid brother. You’re ten million years too young to be keeping secrets from me.”

I blinked in amazement as I watched this repeat of the same exchange from earlier. In fact, I felt like I’d been shocked for most of the time I’d spent in this hallway.

“You left my darling Belle in the capital, troubled and alone, and for what? For you to make an embarrassment of yourself in front of foreign guests...?” she asked in a chilly voice as she approached us.

It felt like with each step she took, the air was growing colder around her. And this wasn’t a metaphor; the air really was getting colder, and as proof, the ground under her was freezing over. The Dark Lord was sweating even more profusely, and his legs were starting to shake.

I couldn’t tell which of them was the real ruler. And for some reason, Emilia was reacting the same way. The woman walked over in front of her, and

suddenly, her aura of penetrating cold disappeared as she bowed toward us guests elegantly like a lady.

“A good day to you. I go by Elizabeth. Aldian Prince Reifus and his companions, you have my apologies for this shameful display. With my apologies, would you please enter the hall and wait for a short moment? This will not take long.”

When she said those last five words, her demeanor regained that aura of chilling cold. Unable to protest, we were all ushered into the dining hall by Sufia. I certainly wasn't going to argue with that woman.

Elizabeth was a demon charged with the Relirex Kingdom's matters of diplomacy, and she was known among mankind as the Ice-Blooded Witch. I'd learned about her in the academy, but this was my first time seeing her in the flesh. Still, as far as the Aldian Kingdom was concerned, she was more well-known than the Dark Lord himself.

Incidentally, the “Belle” she'd mentioned earlier was short for Belletochka, the Dark Lord's wife and the queen of Relirex.

“Then, we too shall go in...” Emilia made to follow us. “Father, auntie, we are off...”

“Not so fast, Emilia.” Elizabeth grabbed Emilia by the head. “Queen Ilysha sent me her regards and told me of what happened. All those things you did while I wasn't looking... You've made quite a mess of things, haven't you?”

“N-No, e-erm, w-we just... Aaaaah!”

The maids closed the doors behind us, cutting off Emilia's scream. After that, we could hear Emilia shouting for help and the Dark Lord crying for forgiveness. I looked away from the door, actively trying not to imagine the horrors on the other side.

After a while, Emilia returned from whatever she'd been subjected to, looking incredibly crestfallen and tired. Lady Elizabeth, meanwhile, dragged the Dark Lord back to the capital.

Why did he even come here...?

After that astonishing opening act ended, our buffet party finally began.

“Ah, it’s all over... Our freedom is at an end... We shall spend our life living like a caged bird...every day, watched over by that terrifying aunt...”

Instead of enjoying the fun party, a forlorn Emilia sat in a chair at the end of the room, her legs to one side and head leaning languidly against the cold wall. Her clothes were still covered in frost in a few spots, which was quite concerning in its own way.

Seeing such a usually cheerful girl act so depressed made me want to cheer her up somehow, so I decided to call out to her and get her out of her funk.

“Your Highness... You don’t need to be that pessimis—” I approached her.

But then, suddenly, Emilia got to her feet like nothing happened. “Well, enough of that. We should enjoy the evening party. Eat and drink as your heart desires, you lot!” she said, looking enthusiastically at the cocktail table.

“What do you mean, ‘enough of that’?! That’s a crazy one-eighty, you know that?!” I jabbed at her, so taken aback I’d stopped caring about decorum.

“Oh, and it might be late to say so, but auntie did put her foot down about it, so... You did well to resolve that incident. You have our thanks,” Emilia said.

It really was late to say it, given we’d been invited here precisely as thanks for it. I looked around at my friends, and after we exchanged exasperated smiles, we all bowed.

“Good, we’ve done our dues! Now, let us feast and drink, you lot! Wa ha ha!”

“Don’t ‘Wa ha ha’ in public, Emilia. It’s improper,” a voice snapped at her, making Emilia freeze up again.



“A-Auntie, what are you doing here...? D-Did you not leave with father...?” Emilia asked, standing upright and very stiff.

“Hmm? What, am I not allowed to be here?” Elizabeth asked, narrowing her eyes.

“N-No... That is not the case... It is not...”

Maybe I was imagining it, but I got the distinct impression Elizabeth’s eyes were glinting red. *Honestly, she’s scary even from a bystander’s perspective. She’s the real deal—a woman with the dignity of a queen.*

After that, the party went on without a hitch thanks to Elizabeth’s presence. I got to eat lots of tasty food. I’d been curious about what kind of culinary culture the demons had, but it turned out to be very normal. Well, except for their focus on marine food, but I could understand that was just part and parcel of them being a tropical island.

I’m just glad they don’t cook bugs or other strange things.

With that relieving thought, I enjoyed my food, but then noticed something—namely, the way Elizabeth was acting. She appeared very dignified and confident and chatted with the adults, but at every chance she drew closer, checking up on us. I didn’t much mind, since checking on your guests wasn’t unusual, but whenever she was done interacting with a grown-up, she ended up clinging to us. She was especially clingy around Safina, who was currently tense and trembling like a startled fawn.

Scary-looking ladies like this are surprisingly...

“Lady Elizabeth really loves small, cute, fluffy things, doesn’t she?”

I recklessly spoke my thoughts at the worst possible moment, within earshot of her. The prince and Magiluka looked at me in alarm as I slapped my hands over my mouth. I fearfully looked at Elizabeth, only to find her frozen in place.

“Oooh, what is it, auntie? Is she right? We haven’t seen you freeze up like that in a long while. Is the feared Ice-Blooded Witch in fact a maiden who appreciates the cute and petite? Is your room lined with cute plushies and frilly decorations?” Emilia taunted Elizabeth in a way that definitely felt like she was

kicking a hornet's nest.

"Silence." Elizabeth spoke with a chilling, icy voice before catching Emilia in her iron grip again.

"Agh, oww oww oww oww oww! So she was right! She was exactly right! Aha ha ha ha! Auntie and plushies, what a terrifying combination! Aha ha ha ha!" Emilia kept taunting Lady Elizabeth in spite of the painful, ever-tightening vise grip squashing her head, desperate to vent out her grudges against her aunt.

Lady Elizabeth dragged Emilia across the room and approached the door. The maids opened the door with perfect timing, and Elizabeth tossed her niece out of the room like a duffel bag. Elizabeth then faced the door and unleashed a blizzard-like ice spell at Emilia.

"Ughaaaaa, stop iiiit! Curse you, auntie! Resorting to lethal force is unfaiiiir!"

Demons really are built different. She'll probably be fine, given her spell resistance, but as ways of shutting her up go, it's a bit excessive.

The maids elegantly closed the doors, silencing Emilia as she screamed in vain. I could only look on with a feigned laugh, a bit taken aback by the fact this country's royalty was being treated like this.

Elizabeth then returned to us nonchalantly, like nothing had happened. "Pardon, I didn't hear you. Did you say something?" she asked, stopping in front of me.

"N-No, nothing!" I replied with a high-pitched squeak, shaking my head rapidly. I had no other choice but to do so.

"Setting that aside, you've quite the discerning eye, capable of seeing through others after only a brief interaction." She was whispering so only I could hear her. "Come to think of it, I recall hearing you were the first to spot the assailants during the festival. Heh heh, consider my curiosity piqued."

She punctuated this by narrowing her eyes and bringing a hand to her mouth, smiling.

Oh, no no no, I just mentioned the kind of tropes I saw in stories in my past life, that's all. I didn't have any proof. Really, don't praise me like that! Don't

look at me like a dominatrix that just spotted prey! I'm scared!

While everyone else was stunned by how Emilia was very much thrown out of the room, I was scared for different reasons altogether. This is truly what they mean by “silence is golden.”

13. It's the Sea!!!

The next morning, while we were having breakfast, the door swung open, and Emilia stepped inside confidently.

“Pardon the delay, you lot!”

Talk about being excitable first thing in the morning... I thought to myself sarcastically as I silently ate the dessert that'd been served with the meal.

“Why so energetic so early in the morning, Princess Emilia?” Reifus asked, a bit cautious about getting caught up in something silly.

“We picked clothes similar to the swimsuits Mary told us about!” Emilia looked at me, eyes glinting. “Come! Have your pick!”

“Wow, really?! Yay!” I exclaimed gleefully and looked up at her.

I immediately realized what I'd said was quite improper, but with swimsuits on the line, I was beyond caring.

“Swim...suits?” Magiluka pursed her lips elegantly next to me. “Well, if you prepared it for us, Your Highness, I suppose we'll head to the room and look.”

We all agreed to her idea and left the table once we were done eating. I wanted to have some more to eat, but I decided to leave anyway so as to not look like a glutton. We headed to the specified room, where the maids of the villa had prepared several types of swimsuits. The boys were in another room, of course.

“By the way, what kind of swimsuit did you have in mind, Lady Mary?” Magiluka asked suspiciously, glancing at the clothes we were offered.

I couldn't fault her for being anxious, since all the swimsuits on display were very skimpy, some of them even looking like underwear. I'd never worn

swimsuits in my past life, to say nothing of bikinis or high-leg type swimsuits. I had to wonder how the demons were aware of the existence of swimsuits...

“You come up with some interesting ideas, Mary,” Emilia said, nodding in satisfaction as she looked at the swimsuits. “We never would have come up with the idea of making clothes like this.” But then, she turned to look at me like she recalled something. “That said, we could not find anything like the outfit you drew for Magiluka. We had to have that one made from scratch.”

Upon saying that, she held out a drawing I’d made. She’d asked me what swimsuit would suit Magiluka, so I’d drawn her a picture...and the moment she showed it off, I felt the blood drain from my face.

“H-Hey, stop that! That was just a prank! I told you to get rid of it!”

“Oooh, so Lady Mary drew this with me in mind?” Magiluka drew closer, her curiosity piqued.

I hurriedly tried to hide the drawing, but Magiluka leaned in from behind me, looked at it, then froze from shock...because the design I’d drawn was a micro bikini.

Magiluka probably imagined wearing the finished product when she saw it, considering her face flushed immediately like a steamed tomato. She glared at me, boiling with anger, and I averted my gaze from her.

“L-Lady Mary, were you planning on having me wear th-that shameful getup...? I’d struggle to even call that clothing!” Magiluka protested, tears in her eyes.



“C-Calm down, Magiluka. It was just a joke, really! I wasn’t thinking of having you wear that!” I stepped away from her apologetically.

“Oh, you weren’t?” Emilia asked. “But we did go to the trouble of having it made. Very well, then as the one who came up with the idea, you should wear it, Mary. Since it’s mostly string, adjusting the size should be easy enough!” Emilia proposed something absolutely absurd.

She showed off the micro bikini I had drafted, and I instantly imagined myself in it.

If I wear that thing, the embarrassment will kill me!

“I’m sorry! I apologize! Anything but that!” I got on my hands and knees, begging for forgiveness.

The sandy dunes glistened as the sun shone down upon them. The beautiful blue sea likewise glimmered, refracting the rays of bright sunlight. We were in a quiet place enclosed by rocks, and no one else but us was around. In other words—we’d arrived at a private beach.

Standing upon the white sands, I took a deep breath and shouted the mandatory line into the horizon:

“It’s the sea!”

Seeing me shout, my friends each commented.

“It certainly is!” Safina said.

“It is, indeed, the sea,” Magiluka agreed.

“What’s gotten into you, Lady Mary? Have you lost it?” Sacher bluntly remarked.

“Now, now...” Reifus chided him.

I ignored them, too satisfied to care.

My heart tells me to shout it out!

We were currently dressed in something close to the swimsuits I knew from

my past life. With them living by the sea, the demons seemed to have a sense of fashion akin to what I knew, because surprisingly enough, they'd had shirts, bras, and short pants similar to the two-piece swimming suits I'd had in mind. It only took a bit of tweaking to make them work. I wore a pareu over my swimsuit, while Magiluka had a skirt and Safina wore a one-piece.

I'd invited Tutte to put on a swimsuit and come swimming with us too, but she'd simply said something strange to the tune of "Looking at you is enough of a reward to me," instead choosing to stand behind us in full uniform.

Emilia seemed to very much like the swimsuit I'd drawn and was working toward having it realized. And while I, as the one who'd drawn it, may not have been in any position to say it, I had to wonder if that was acceptable. I could only hope it wouldn't end up causing some kind of commotion...

With the boys' swimsuits, I didn't think too hard about it, so theirs were above-the-knee pants tied with strings, with short-sleeved, unbuttoned shirts as their tops.

"You look lovely, you three. So much so that I'm not sure where to look," the prince complimented us nonchalantly.

Sacher looked restless, unsure how to look at us either. Seeing him act like this made me want to tease him a little, but if he actually ended up ogling us, I had every intention of poking him in the eyes, so I decided not to provoke him needlessly. It would be cruel and unusual to do so.

"Let's swim! Ah, but we should stretch before we do!" I said energetically and ran off on my own.

"Swim...? Lady Mary, you can swim?" Magiluka called out to me as I stretched merrily.

Her question made me stop mid-stretch, and then, I fell with my hands and knees to the sand. *Right... Come to think of it, I've never learned how to swim... Not even in my past life.*

I did know the crawl and the breaststroke, but I'd never actually tried them, so I was anxious. What's more, I wasn't sure I could properly restrain myself in the water too. What if I tried to stroke and ended up kicking up a wave or

something...? I wasn't sure I wanted to find out.

Aaaah, why didn't I practice beforehand?!

"In fact... Everyone who can swim, please raise your hand," I requested. I looked around expectantly at my friends.

Everyone looked at each other, and none of them raised their hand. So, for the time being, rather than swim, we decided to dip in the water.

"Chaaaaaaaarge!" I called out yet another trademark word as I ran into the water, swashing water around. "Aha ha ha! Whoa!"

When the water was deep enough to reach my knees, I slid on the sand and fell into the water with a splash.

"Are you all right, Lady Mary?!" I heard someone shout as I bobbed my head out of the water.

I could see Safina hurrying over in my direction, wading through the water much more slowly than I did. It was a good thing no one was nearby, because they'd have noticed how effortlessly I'd moved despite the water resistance compared to her.

That was close. I pushed too hard against the water. So that's how slow I should be moving... Right, I need to relax. I'm a normal girl. A normal girl! I analyzed the situation calmly as I looked at Safina. I'm a girl who learns from her mistakes.

"I swear, Lady Mary, you get carried away so easily," Magiluka grumbled as she walked into the water too.

"Aha ha, sorry. It's my first time going into the sea, so I just... Uhh..."

I got to my feet, apologizing, and got my first good look at Magiluka's overdeveloped body.

Staaaaaaaaare.

"Hm? What is it?" Magiluka asked, noticing my gaze.

"Gaaaah! I get jealous every time I look at them! Damn it all!" I scooped up some seawater and splashed it at Magiluka, frustrated.

But while I'd expected to scoop up a bit of water at her, resulting in a splash and a friendly "Oh, it's cold! I'll get you!" out of her, instead I ended up splashing more water than expected, which knocked Magiluka onto her backside.

"Bwha!"

"Oh, sorry, Magiluka!" I apologized.

Ghaaa, get a grip! Restrain your strength! Restrain it! I scolded myself for getting carried away. I thought I was a girl who learns from her mistakes...but did I just prove myself wrong?

"Wa ha ha ha!" A very excited Emilia dived straight at me. "Here we come!"

"Gah!"

I took her head-on tackle, and since I was so focused on restraining myself, I'd gone completely limp. I took no damage, but I ended up getting pushed back by Emilia's rush and plopping into the ocean along with her.

"Pfhaa!" I spat out water as I surfaced, complaining as Emilia pulled away from me. "What are you doing, Your Highness?! You made me swallow salt water!"

"Aaah, you have our apologies... You just looked like you were having so much fun, we thought we would join in..." Emilia apologized with an innocent smile.

But then I spotted Magiluka and Safina behind her, looking at me in surprise.

"Lady Mary, top! Your top!" Magiluka said for some reason, her face very red.

Safina looked around in jittery alarm. They were both very flustered, like they'd completely forgotten about my prank from a moment ago.

Huh? Why does this remind me of something? I thought as I looked up.

"N-No, not that kind of top! Down, look down!"

"Down?" I looked down at my body, and then realized.

Oh, right. This. It's like what happened on the ship's deck earlier...

My swimsuit's top had come undone during all the frolicking about I did, and just as I looked, the clothing fell away from my body in slow motion.

My scream echoed throughout the beach.



14. A Fateful Encounter?

After we went swimming in the morning, we got on a carriage that took us to a certain destination. The magus smith Magiluka was looking for to fix the magic items she'd brought was fortunately living a short distance from the villa.

After the incident at the beach, I had no idea how to look at the rest of my friends, so I hung my head and remained silent. I was later told the boys weren't looking because the grown-ups were talking to them, which was a relief. Still, after what'd happened, I had trouble getting my nerves in order.

"Dammit..." I grumbled, looking moodily out the window. "I thought Magiluka was the designated sexy character... Why do things like that keep happening to me?"

"That's the first I've heard of being designated anything," Magiluka said very coldly. "I'm afraid I'll need to have you fill me in on this, Lady Mary. In detail."

"Now, now." The prince, who sat between me and Magiluka, tried to calm us. "Lady Mary, I'd appreciate it if you could cheer up."

Before long, the carriage stopped in its tracks. It seemed we would have to go by foot for the rest of the way. We got off the carriage and entered a forest, with Emilia guiding us.

"Ooh, it looks like a jungle," I said, looking around curiously. Thankfully, there was a paved road, making it easy to walk, but it wasn't wide enough for the carriage to drive through.

"Don't get separated," Emilia warned me as I straggled behind. "There are monsters in the woods. It'll be trouble if you get attacked."

"'Attacked'? Shouldn't we be fine since demons can talk to monsters?" I asked.

"Hmph. Dialogue is only possible with creatures that have some degree of intellect. But the foolish monsters that live here are sadly below that standard."

"The magus smith lives in such a dangerous place?" Magiluka joined our conversation.

“Mmhmm. Girtz is quite the reclusive old man and hates interacting with others,” Emilia explained with a nod. “Thus he chose to live here, where he would not be disturbed. He’s an eccentric old kook, for certain. But his skills are guaranteed. They call Girtz the greatest magus smith for a reason.”

Emilia puffed up as she said that, like she was speaking about herself. And indeed, since the person in question hated interacting with others, it was possible he wouldn’t agree to listen to us if a large group approached him. And so, Emilia and us students were the only ones heading for his house, and the grown-ups were waiting near the carriage.

“Apropos of nothing, why do I have to lug all this stuff?” Sacher, who was walking at the back of the group, grumbled as I looked around to see if I could spot any unusual animals in the trees. He was carrying all the broken magic items, and their overall weight was quite considerable.

“That’s because heavy lifting is a gentleman’s duty, no?” I said, looking to Magiluka and Safina for agreement.

The prince was a gentleman too, but having him handle heavy lifting was out of the question. I wasn’t going to risk a death scene over *lèse-majesté*...

“But you can handle the heavy lifting, Lady Mary,” Sacher protested like this was a natural thing to suggest.

“Hey, stop that. Don’t count me among the men,” I chided him.

“Whaaat?”

“Don’t ‘whaaat’ me, mister.”

“We’re counting on you, Sacher,” Magiluka said casually. “And didn’t you mention you wanted some training? You can think of this as weight lifting.”

“Right!” Sacher fell for it. “I guess I can think of it that way! Right, I’ll try!” At that, he walked ahead cheerily, and we could only see him off with a smile.

“...Simpleminded, isn’t he?” I noted.

“...Very,” Magiluka concurred coldly.

“Aha ha...” Safina laughed dryly at our vicious exchange.

Before long, the trees opened into a forest clearing, where we found a house made of wood. With the canopy of shrubbery cleared away, sunlight shone on the house, making for a mystical sight.

“Here we are.” Emilia turned around to face us. “This is the workshop of Girtz, our kingdom’s greatest magus smith.”

I looked at the house from afar. It was smaller and simpler-looking than I was expecting for such a famous craftsman. I was imagining something closer to Deodora’s workshop in Aldia, and this was a letdown by comparison.

“Girtz pulled away from the trade ten or so years ago and now lives alone in retirement,” Emilia appended, perhaps sensing my apprehension.

So he’s already retired... This explains the size of the house, then.

“Is that right...?” Magiluka asked, looking at the house with a hint of concern. “I hope he agrees to repair our items, then.”

It was up to him, in other words, so if Mr. Girtz decided he wasn’t going to accept any work, we couldn’t force him.

“For now, let us enter the house. We can talk to Girtz then,” Emilia said.

She then knocked on the door, calling to the person inside.

“Heeey, Girtz! It is we, the prettiest princess of Relirex, the great Emilia! We have come to visit you!”

Sheesh. Try for some modesty, will you? Calling yourself pretty... Where do you get that confidence? And what if someone thinks I’m like you because we hang out together?

I looked on as Emilia knocked on the door, torn between concern and amazement. But then we heard someone on the other side of the door, at which point Emilia stopped knocking and stepped back.

The door swung open. I tensed up, wondering what the old recluse would be like. *What if he tells us kids to get off his lawn?* Swallowing nervously, I watched him step out the door.

He stood slightly taller than us, and he looked at us with pretty green eyes. He looked just like—



A fox! This isn't an old man—it's a foxfolk beastman lady!

Emilia stared at her too, apparently surprised by her appearance as well. Clearly, this wasn't the person Emilia was talking about. The fox lady said nothing, simply looking at us, and I noted that she was quite expressionless. For a good few seconds, we simply stared at each other in silence.

"...Oh. Hello, Your Highness." The fox lady bowed her head, like she'd just remembered who she was speaking to. Her tone was very flat and emotionless, but even so, her words were enough to snap Emilia out of her shock.

"Ah, um... We came here to see Girtz... Who might you be?" Emilia asked, confused.

"...I am Fifi. Girtz's apprentice." The fox—Fifi—replied with as few words and as little emotion as possible.

Even in Emilia's presence, Fifi didn't seem to change her attitude any. I had to wonder if this was just how she acted naturally. Either way, her introduction did give us a better understanding of the situation. Old man Girtz didn't turn into a young fox girl, but rather, she was his apprentice.

"I-Indeed? I haven't seen Girtz in decades, so I was quite surprised... Where is the old man, then?"

"...My master is gone. He's immersing himself in dreams," Fifi said, breaking the sad news to us.

I glanced at Magiluka, who whispered a morose "That's life, I suppose..." Emilia, however, wasn't satisfied with this answer after coming all the way here.

"He's gone? When will he be coming back, then?"

"...Unknown."

"Then call him back."

"...I cannot."

"Aaargh! What is he doing? Where is he right now?"

"...Unknown. I have no information as to where he is or what he's doing."

"How long has it been since he left, then?"

“...He hasn’t been back for two years.”

Fifi answered Emilia’s questions curtly with her blank, emotionless expression. With each answer, our hope to have Girtz fix the items seemed to get further and further out of reach. But I had to wonder if it made sense of his disciple to not know where he was or what he was doing for over two years. But then again, maybe beastmen and demons had a different perception of time than humans.

“...What is your business?” Fifi asked.

“Oh, right. These lot have relic-class magic items made by Girtz that require fixing. But if he’s gone—” Emilia’s shoulders sank in resignation.

“...Mm. I can fix them,” Fifi said, expressionless as ever. We all stared at her in amazement.

“...If it’s possible to repair them, I will,” she continued. “I have been asked to repair many items.” She moved out of the doorway and beckoned us inside.

Relic-class items were considered so rare because they couldn’t be recreated by another craftsman, but despite this, she said she could repair them. If this was true, this meant Fifi was Mr. Girtz’s equal as a craftsman, if not his superior. Of course, if she really was capable of it, we didn’t mind who did it. It was certainly better than returning empty-handed.

She led us into a spacious room, perhaps her workshop, where she had Sacher place the weapons on a large table. But her expression remained blank, so I couldn’t tell if she was surprised by the damage they’d taken.

“...I’ll check them. Give me a moment.”

Fifi began silently examining the items. With nothing to do, I looked around as a way of whiling away the time. It was then that I noticed that there were items lying around all over the room. I got the feeling that talking to her while she worked might be terribly impolite of me, but my curiosity got the better of me.

“Say, did you make these items?” I asked.

“Mmhmm... I made them. If you’re interested, take a look,” Fifi replied, sensing my emotions.

With her permission, I approached the items, and everyone followed me. I picked up one of the items lying around and examined it curiously. It looked like a pair of shackles.

“What does this do?”

Without looking annoyed at me interrupting her work (or so I think—her expression was still blank), Fifi looked at the item I was holding and replied, returning her eyes to the broken items. “...That’s a magic item that represses the mana of anyone wearing it.”

Hearing this made my heart skip a beat.

An item that represses one’s power?!

Swallowing nervously, I gazed fixedly at this wonderful item that was all I could ever ask for.

15. Fateful Means Dangerous

After inspecting the broken weapons, Fifi concluded that they were all just barely fixable. Magus smiths are manufacturers, meaning they couldn’t reassemble something that’s missing, but thankfully, the damage these items had taken was still within the realm of what she could reasonably repair. Hearing this, Magiluka sighed in relief.

“...But I will say, I’ve never seen Master’s work this badly damaged before. I’m curious as to what you were fighting.”

Magiluka and Sacher instantly turned to look at me.

“What are you looking at me for?! It got broken when we were fighting that monster!” I corrected them before they caused any misunderstandings.

“Well, about that. It’s a bit of a problematic issue, so we can’t speak openly of it. We hope that’s clear enough.” Emilia scratched her cheek with a mixed expression.

This could potentially balloon into an international affair, and it involved the use of a taboo item, so I could understand why she couldn’t openly talk about it. Fifi realized the situation, nodded, and didn’t ask any further.

She said the repair work would take a while and took the items off our hands for the time being, and we decided that Emilia would deliver the items back to Magiluka once they were done. With the talks over, Fifi was left alone, and I excitedly approached her to discuss the item I had previously asked her about.

Maybe, just maybe... Oh, no point caring about appearances here!

“Excuse me. About this item, you said it represses the mana of anyone wearing it?” I asked, actively keeping my voice down from excitement.

I didn’t want the others to notice and gather around me. Thankfully, Magiluka, Emilia, and Reifus were all speaking about the item delivery, and Sacher was limp and tired. Safina was examining other items, giving me the chance to ask about this discreetly.

“...This. My master was once asked by a village mayor to make an item to capture a criminal, and I imitated it. Theoretically, it should restrain one’s mana down to the levels of an average person... Hopefully.”

It seemed Fifi became much more talkative when her items were the topic of discussion. Her explanation made my heart dance with excitement. *All right! With this item, I can class-change to an average, normal person!*

“...Do you want to try it on?” Fifi asked, noticing me stare at the item with rapt attention.

“Huh? May I?”

“...Yes. I was hoping for a test subject.”

“Huh? So you’re saying no one’s ever used this thing?”

“...Yes. Testing magic items is highly dangerous. There’s no telling what might happen to the test subject, so no one agrees to take part. But you’ll be fine. Theoretically, this item should work. I’ve tried it on animals before, and it never failed to activate.”

Everything she said sounded very anxiety-inducing, making my excitement take a nosedive.

Still, if I can get the normal life I’ve always wanted, I’ll lunge at any chance I get!

“C-Can I try it on for a bit?”

“...Go ahead. It’s strange that you’d want to shackle yourself, though. Ah... But, well, I suppose it takes all kinds to make a world...”

“I’m not sure what kind of conclusions you’ve come to, but you’re probably wrong. Please don’t make assumptions,” I said, feeling like her interpretation could go down undesirable directions.

“...Hmm. Understood.”

Fifi approached me and prepared the shackles. I watched her work, impatience overwhelming me.

Oh, this is making my heart throb like crazy. I-Is this love? Wait, no, calm down. Don’t tense up and start thinking weird things!

I took deep breaths as Fifi opened the shackles and brought them to me. It would look quite strange if I put them on with everyone else watching, so I casually took Fifi out of the room, and she followed me without question.

As we stood in the corner of the corridor, the fateful moment was finally upon me.

“Then, um, please,” I urged her.

“...Mm. Hold out your hands.”

“Y-Yesh!” I squeaked nervously, slurring my words as I held out my hands.

She placed the shackles, which were very fancy and had jewels embedded in them, on my wrists.

Please, God! Seal my power!

With that weird prayer in mind, I watched in suspense as the shackles clasped over my wrists.

“...There you go. They’re on. Now, activate.”

Fifi let go of the shackles, and the jewels on them started shining. While the glowing spectacle of it all was quite promising, I realized that the way I looked right now was, objectively speaking, quite unseemly. I looked like a young lady cuffed by fancy shackles.

This is...one of those scenes, right? When the evil lady is put to justice and gets carried off to a prison tower... Not that I'm sure I've ever seen a scene like that before.

"...How is it?" Fifi asked, the look on her expressionless face probably being the closest she could get to a curious gaze.

"...Well, if I had to say, I feel like a villainess lady who's about to be incarcerated..." I said plainly.

Fifi looked confused at my explanation, but honestly, I was starting to question if the shackles were working at all. Nothing felt different. If anything, I felt like looking at myself shackled was dealing me more emotional damage than any kind of physical strain...

"What's a villainess, Lady Mary?" Someone who wasn't Fifi called out to me from behind.

"Whoaaa!" I screeched, jolting up.

I turned on my heels to find that Safina had approached, concern showing on her face. I made to hide my hands behind my back, but then the shackles effortlessly snapped in two and clattered noisily to the floor.

"Hmm? Did you drop something?" Safina asked in confusion and looked down.

"Oho ho ho, don't mind that, Safina. Did you need me for something?" I spoke with a very stiff smile, sweating bullets.

I peered into Safina's face, stopping her from looking down as I kicked the broken shackles away. I realized this was a pretty rough way of handling something after I effectively broke someone else's things, but I was too nervous to spare it anything more than an apologetic thought.

"It's not that I needed you for anything right now. I was just wondering where the two of you went."

"O-Oh, sorry about that. I just needed to have a private word with Miss Fifi is all. Could you tell everyone we'll be back once we're done talking?"

Apparently, me just leaving without a word had driven Safina to worry. In

hindsight, maybe I'd have been better off saying Fifi and I would be stepping away first, but it was too late for that now. I could only try to shoo her away diplomatically and see her off with a stiff smile on my face.

And so, it was just me and Fifi again.

"...It broke," Fifi said concisely.

"I'm so sorry!" I fell on my hands and knees and bowed my head, knowing this gesture didn't mean much in this world.

"...This is strange." Fifi picked up the broken shackles and examined it fixedly. "Theoretically, most adventurers would be sealed, their power reduced to less than an average civilian's. Someone bound by the shackles shouldn't be able to break it... So how?"

I broke into a cold sweat as I listened to her analysis.

Aaah, my fateful encounter fell apart within seconds. What a cruel world... And now I've gotten myself into trouble. How am I going to talk my way out of this?

"...Well, in the end it was all just theoretical... I suppose. I didn't have enough data," Fifi said, coming to this conclusion on her own.

I breathed out in relief.

"...Let's try a stronger sealing tool, then."

"Huh? You have more?" I immediately latched onto her words.

"...Yes, one that can seal even the Dark Lord's power... Theoretically speaking."

That was a very dangerous statement, but I pretended like I didn't hear it and decided to pin my hopes on another fateful encounter.

"I'd love to try it!" I'm a woman who doesn't learn from her mistakes.

"...You want to be chained up that badly...? Ah, erm, okay. I guess to each his own..." Fifi once again jumped to conclusions about me.

"Again, you're getting the wrong idea! I'm not into things like this!" I hurriedly corrected her.

“Mm... Follow me.” Fifi walked off, and I followed her.

We entered the back of the house, where I found a staircase leading down into a basement. We walked down the stairs, where Fifi stopped in front of a thick door and turned to look at me.

“...It’s in here. Come in.”

I swallowed nervously and carefully opened the heavy door. The room behind the door was dark, with only the light spilling through the door illuminating it. At the back of the room I found the item in question.

It was very large, and it was an object my meager knowledge couldn’t describe, but it was clearly a contraption meant to keep one’s entire body fully restrained. And one thing was painfully obvious—it was the kind of object an innocent maiden like me should never come in contact with.

“...Let’s start testing,” Fifi said.

“As if!” I snapped at her, my voice echoing through the basement.

With this, my expectations were painfully dashed. I’d have been pleased with a compact, fashionable trinket that could restrain my powers, but... It seemed I had no choice but to pray the magic item industry would make strides to accommodate my needs...

16. More Guests

“...Someone else is coming to visit.”

Fifi said this as soon as we got out of the basement, her large ears twitching. Her keen beastman ears likely picked up on the sound. I followed her to the door, impressed by her sense of hearing. Fifi instantly opened the door without a second thought.

Was she like that when she opened the door to us too? If so, it seems a bit careless of her...

I stepped away, fearing something might happen, but when the door opened, I found there were familiar faces standing there. Namely, Sufia and Tutte.

“Huh? Tutte, Miss Sufia, weren’t you waiting by the carriage?” I asked in surprise, standing behind Fifi. Fifi herself remained as expressionless as ever, looking over the two maids.

“Our apologies for the sudden visit.” Sufia bowed respectfully. “Her Highness was late to return, so I came to check she didn’t make some kind of blunder again.”

Fifi nodded, satisfied with the explanation.

She was slow to return, so she assumed Her Highness caused trouble...? Again...?

I sighed, a bit taken aback, as Fifi invited the two inside. Tutte assumed her usual spot behind me.

“...My Lady, did you find any useful items?” Tutte whispered to me. My maid, familiar with me as she was, had predicted my actions perfectly.

“There was an item for sealing powers, but I crushed it...”

“...You never disappoint, Lady Mary.”

“What does that mean?” I gave her a peevish sidelong glance.

Tutte looked the other way, saying nothing, and took a step away from me. But then, I heard a loud crashing sound—the sound of something metallic falling, coming from inside the house. I tensed up—but the other two beastmen girls didn’t seem to react the same way. Fifi was...well, as expressionless as ever, but Sufia sighed for some reason.

I followed the two of them, baffled, and returned to the room where everyone else was. We entered to find Emilia swinging around a sword without permission while Sacher tried to catch her. Safina and Magiluka hurriedly tried to put away the scattered items, while the prince watched on, looking very bothered by the whole affair.

Aha ha ha... So this is what she meant by “again.”

“Ooooh, this is amazing!” Emilia said enthusiastically, blind to our presence. “For how light it is, it’s quite tough. And its blade has a sharpness unique to items made by magus smiths!”

“Ahem!” Sufia cleared her throat loudly. “Princess, no ‘This is amazings’ from you.”

“Ooh, Sufia! Did you come to pick us up?”

“Well, yes, I did, but first, explain what you’re doing, Your Highness.”

“Is it not obvious? I’m examining the items...” Emilia put down the sword and looked around the room.

It was then that she realized that the room was so cluttered one would think a burglar had ransacked the place.

This princess pulled out every item in sight and didn’t bother putting them back...

“I will have to question the others about this spectacle and report it to Lady Elizabeth,” Sufia said with a grin.

The moment she heard Elizabeth’s name, all the color drained from Emilia’s face.

Yeah, she’s probably going to get terribly scolded. Or, well, she’ll be lucky to get away with just a scolding. She’ll probably taste an iron fist or some magical retribution...

Recalling how Lady Elizabeth had treated Emilia during the evening party, I could only crack a strained smile. Coming to the same conclusion as me, Emilia put the sword away and approached Sufia.

“N-Not that! Anything but that! She will put us to sleep in a frozen casket!”

“You reap what you sow, Your Highness.”

“Are you not our maid?! Do as we say!”

“Lady Elizabeth ordered me to keep an eye on you and report accordingly, Princess.”

“You devil! Fiend! Whose side are you on?!”

“Lady Elizabeth’s.”

“Gaaah! We cannot believe you have the nerve to say that!”

For how merciless this exchange may have seemed, it did speak to how long they'd known each other, and it came across as banter in its own way. Some part of me just wrote it off as how things went in the Relirex Kingdom and concluded I shouldn't think about it too hard.

More importantly, their exchange made me concerned about a personal matter, and so I snuck a weary glance at Tutte, who stood behind me.

"...You're on my side, right?"

"Yes, of course!" Tutte replied instantly, beaming at me.

"Tutteeeeeeee!" I forgot where I was and hugged my maid, rather hard at that.

"Nnnngh... L-Lady Mary... I'm, dying, gonna, die... Calm down... Please... And learn your lesson...for...once...!" Tutte squeaked as I wrung her out in my embrace.

I hurriedly let her go, but then, the clear tingling of a bell filled the room.

"Huh? What?" I looked around, supporting a very deflated Tutte in my arms.

We all tensed up, looking to Fifi for answers. Her expression was as blank as ever, but also somewhat alert. "...This is the alarm for when monsters invade the area... But that's impossible..." Fifi said.

She hurriedly looked out the nearby window, and we all followed suit. Indeed, a few wolflike monsters emerged from the nearby woods.

"...This is strange," Fifi whispered. "There are magic items in place meant to ward off monsters here."

"Maybe the magic tools aren't operating right now?" Magiluka suggested.

"That shouldn't be possible. If that were the case, I'd have gotten an alert, just like now. But even when they work, they don't completely ward the monsters off. Something could work to draw them in and overpower the warding effect. But animals lacking in intelligence shouldn't have a reason to come through it..."

Listening in on their exchange, I suddenly spotted a pair of eyes on me. I looked ahead in a direction none of the others were looking. It was too far away to properly recognize, but standing among the wolf monsters was what looked

like a large, beautiful snow leopard.

But the next moment, the leopard vanished back into the woods. The wolves howled and began running toward the house.

“Hmph! Mere mutts do not scare us, no matter how many of them there may be. We shall go and teach them a lesson!” Emilia walked to the front door in high spirits.

As we watched her go, we all exchanged looks, unsure what to do.

“Hmm, Fifi, do you happen to be very strong in a fight?” I asked an odd question, hoping to lighten up the situation. “There’s this cliché where the strongest smith actually used to be the strongest swordsman...”

Everyone looked at me, baffled.

“...I don’t know about any clichés,” Fifi replied. “I’m just an ordinary magus smith, and I’m not particularly strong in a fight. My only other expertise is doing house chores. Want to see me do the laundry?”

What she was lacking in combat ability, she apparently made up for in girl power. Equipped with this useless information, I turned to watch Emilia once more.

“So, what do we do? Move in to help her?” our team’s barbarian asked excitedly.

“We don’t have any weapons, Sacher.” Magiluka glared at him coldly. “Besides, Miss Iks and the others probably heard the howling and are hurrying over to protect His Highness. We just need to sit still.”

“...There’s plenty of weapons here.” Fifi made an unexpected suggestion. “It’s an emergency. Pick whichever you’d like.”

“What, really?! Great!” Sacher gleefully started picking out a sword.

Is this what I think it is? A situation where I have to interfere too?

“Now, everyone, settle down.” Sufia tried to calm us down. “I’m sure Princess Emilia can handle those monsters on her own. After all, the *only* thing she’s good for is combat.”

Unlike us, she didn't seem tense at all. In fact, her smile almost seemed exaggerated. I had to once again marvel at how this country seemed to treat its princess very crudely.

"I'll pour you some tea. Where's the kitchen?"

The maid even suggested leisurely teatime in the midst of a monster attack. But it did work—I somehow calmed down and almost forgot there were monsters approaching the house.

"...Mm. I'll show you the way." Fifi led Sufia to the kitchen, and Tutte followed them to help.

Outside, I could hear Emilia laughing grandly, which further convinced me everything was fine.

Oh, right, I should ask Tutte to get me a sturdy cup. I wouldn't want to smash my teacup... I told everyone I had something to tell Tutte and left the room with a smile that left no place for argument.

I remembered where the kitchen was from when Fifi showed me to the basement earlier. But when I reached it, just as I was about to open the door, I froze up.

Before me stood a group of people in black hoods, their faces covered. Lying on the floor was Fifi, and they were just about to pick up Tutte and Sufia. But the moment I realized what'd happened, I felt a strong blow to the back of my head. My consciousness slipped...

As if!

17. My Dear...

"Ghaa!" I heard a muffled voice next to me.

It was probably the person who'd attacked me. He cradled his right arm with his left, writhing in agony.

Looks like a fracture. My condolences, kidnapper man.

With this thought, I looked around. Three of the suspicious figures stood in

the small kitchen, looking at their wounded comrade's plight with surprise.

"...Be...careful... Bandits..." Fifi, who lay face down a short distance away, warned me despite facing the other way.

Thank goodness she's alive. But why isn't she moving?

While conscious, Fifi wasn't budging. I was surprised to realize she couldn't move for some reason.

"Ha, now she can't move either!"

I looked at the man who broke his hand trying to hit the back of my head. He put a collar around my neck, his fractured hand dangling uselessly.

Oh, so they're using a magic item to keep people from moving. That explains why Fifi can't move...but given that she can speak, she can at least breathe.

I confirmed the sensation of the collar on my neck without touching it. *Yeah, it doesn't work at all!* I wasn't sure if I should have been happy about that overall, but given the situation, I was grateful to God for being thorough.

"Now, as planned, we'll take the maids away—" the man that put the collar on me said.

"Excuse me?!" I exclaimed and gave him a perfect straight punch with my right hand, hitting him straight in the center of his body.

I pretty much did it out of reflex, acting to eliminate the person who'd said those terrible words. They were trying to take my dear Tutte away.

Anyone who tries to take Tutte away from me is an enemy of mine!

I grabbed the collar with my right hand, crushing it, tearing it off, and throwing it to the ground. The bandits backed away from me in shock. I could only see one of them, and I spotted his eyes flicking to the back door. The two other bandits made a sprint for the door, but before they could get there, I stood in front of it, striking a pose.

I was in no condition to restrain my power at this point. From their perspective, it must have looked like I'd teleported over.

"Wh-What was that...?"

“Be careful. She’s a sorcerer.”

The men (I assumed they were men based on their voices) whispered as they backed away, assuming my movements were due to magic.

“Let go of the maids, and I won’t beat you black and blue. Oh, and just in case you have any funny ideas about using them as human shields, I’ll snap your limbs like twigs before you know it.”

I was so awash with emotion I couldn’t even begin to imagine what kind of look I had on my face. All at once, I was overcome with the elation of being able to move my body better than ever before, the feeling of superiority from forcing my foes to yield, the anger of seeing someone try to abduct someone dear to me, and my panic at potentially losing someone precious.

“Don’t get on your high horse, little girl!”

One of the men, who wasn’t carrying either of the maids, threw something at me that hit my shoulder with a tinkling sound. I looked at where it landed, ran a finger over it, and confirmed nothing was out of the ordinary. Then I spotted a broken knife on the floor, its tip shattered.

“So? What’ll it be?” I asked them like nothing had happened.

“Sh-She’s a monster...” I keenly heard the man who threw the knife make this rude remark.

“Who’re you calling a monster?!” I charged the man and socked him in the stomach, momentarily knocking him into the air.

The bandit, a grown adult, soared as high as he could go, his back hitting the ceiling. As he fell down, I avoided his falling body and looked at another bandit.

“So, do you want to give me your answer now?” I asked casually.

“Just give her one of the maids and we’ll use that opening to run,” the bandit whispered to his ally.

“Don’t be stupid! We don’t know which one she wants!”

Which one I want? I want both of them back. Wait, so are they here to kidnap Tutte or Sufia? I guess they don’t know either.

I decided to figure this out later and just defeat the intruders first. The moment I made to move in on them, one of them either noticed it or moved on reflex, but either way, he threw Sufia over to me. Since she wasn't resisting, I assumed she'd been put to sleep, meaning she couldn't brace herself to take the fall.

I caught Sufia in my arms, and the intruders used that moment to bolt out the back door with Tutte in their arms. That moment passed by in slow motion in my mind.

They're taking Tutte away...

I felt goose bumps cover my body. The chill froze over my thoughts and my sense of reason, and I had no idea what I was doing next.

"Lady Mary, it's all right! Just stop!"

The next thing I knew, her shouting reached my ears. I felt her embrace me from behind, and her warmth returned reason to my blinded mind. Lying in front of me was one of the men, worn out and languid.

...Huh? What just happened?

I looked down at my hands, unable to catch up with what'd taken place while I was out of it. My fists were terribly filthy. I moved my eyes back to the fallen man, still dazed. Lying around him were crushed weapons, which he'd likely carried on his person. He'd tried to fight me off, but none of his weapons had worked. He was probably terrified.

His face was so swollen I couldn't recognize what he looked like anymore, and he had snot and tears streaming down his cheeks and chin. His limbs were slightly bent—apparently, I'd unconsciously made good on my earlier promise.

The man groaned through a mouth of broken teeth. Realizing he was still alive, my thoughts stirred once more.

"Did you come to, Lady Mary?" Tutte asked in relief, finally breaking her embrace. It seemed she was trying to pull me away.

Huh... So my memory snapped, and while I was out of it, I beat this man into a bloody pulp...? Huh? I think I read something like this online in my past life...

Wait, is this like...I went berserk?!

I felt myself go red up to my ears and fell to my knees.

“L-Lady Mary? What’s wrong?” Tutte asked me, surprised.

But I ignored her and curled up on the ground. *Gaaaaah! I can’t believe I actually went crazy like some kid who had his game account canceled! Nooo! This is so embarrassing!*

In my shame, I covered my hands with my face and rolled around. “Aaah, I’m so embarrassed! Aaaah!”

A girl was rolling around and writhing in shame in front of a beaten, broken man. It probably made for quite the surreal image, but I was in no state to care.

“Keep it together, Lady Mary. I don’t know what embarrassed you so much, but calm yourself!” Tutte stopped me midroll, pulled me up, and dangled me.

When I saw her face in between the fingers covering my eyes, I felt another feeling fill me up. Relief. She was nearly taken away, but there she was with me now. The relief washed away my shame.

“Tutteeeeee!” I bawled, lowering my hands and hugging her.

“Lady Mary!”

“Thank goodness you’re saaaafe!”

They’d failed to take her away. Tutte was still there with me. Realizing how relieved I was, I cried like a baby.

“Lady Mary... I’m fine. So please, um, let go... R-Restrain yourself... I keep telling you, your hugs...might kill meeee...”

In my joy, my hug turned into a bear hug that started wringing Tutte out.

“O-Oh, sorry! I was just so happy...”

I let go of Tutte, and her head tilted over limply, like her soul had just been squeezed out of her body. “Aaaah! Tutte, hang ooon!” I started shaking her in a hurry.

Once she came to her senses, I stopped shaking her. But then I heard the bushes rustle. I reflexively hid Tutte behind my back and turned my eyes to the

source of the noise. Standing there was a leopard. Based on what I knew from my past life, it looked like a snow leopard, as it had white fur with black specks. But it was twice as large as any leopard I knew.

The leopard approached the still unconscious man and glanced at me.

I think I saw it when the monsters showed up too...

“What, are you with them?” I reflexively asked the leopard, only realizing how stupid I must have looked for talking to a giant cat.

“No, but he’s helpless right now.”

“The leopard just talked!” I shouted hysterically.

18. I Am Not Going Crazy!

My shout made the leopard step away in surprise, but then she sidled over to me.

“Y-You... You understand what I’m saying?” I heard the voice again.

The way she talked felt similar to communication magic. I nodded slowly, still half in doubt. The leopard gracefully hopped over and landed in front of me. Her soft white fur with its black spots looked temptingly fluffy, and I was greatly driven to touch it, but she was far too large for that to be a realistic idea—she was big enough that I figured she’d be able to sprint effortlessly even if I hopped on her back.

The leopard’s eyes glinted as she brought the tip of her nose to me. For how scary she looked, there was something mystical and majestic about her. I could only stare at her, frozen up in surprise.

“Really? Can you really understand what I’m saying?”

“Y-Yes... Involuntarily, though...”

For a moment silence hung between us, followed by...

“All riiiiiiight! I’ve finally found someone who can listen to my complaints! It took so long! Too long!”



“Huh?” When I saw the leopard rejoice, my caution dissipated, and I could only stare at her, baffled.

“Come on, please listen to me! Those guys don’t know how to treat a leopard!”

The leopard started complaining to me like I was her best friend, and I could only stare at her in slack-jawed disbelief.

How did she make all that mystical majesty go away in, like, ten seconds? I feel cheated for being impressed with her at first.

“Wait, hold on! I can’t keep up! Who are you, anyway?”

“Oh, right! Sorry about that. It’s just been so long since I could talk to someone... It must have been years. Back then, I—”

“You’re getting off track,” I cut the leopard off before she went off on another tangent.

“Oh, sorry. So, uh, what were we talking about?”

“I asked about who you are!”

“Oh, right. I’m, erm... I’m...a leopard?”

“I can see that! And why was that a question? Besides, leopards can’t be that big! You must be a demon beast or a monster!” I pointed at her, losing my temper at this repetitive conversation and raising my voice.

“Oh, that’s rude. Don’t lump me in with the common monster, would you? I’m no demon beast. I’m a respectable divine beast.” The self-proclaimed divine beast huffed proudly.

“Oh, really?” I replied dryly. “So, what is a respectable divine beast doing riling up the local monster population?”

“I’m not doing this because I want to, you know.” The leopard hung her head dejectedly. *“I’m bound by an ancient contract that’s forcing me to order the monsters around.”*

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I apologized, feeling pity for the creature. “I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t know.”

“If it weren’t for that terrible contract, I’d be a free leopard...”

“I’ll tell you now: I can’t help you. I’m not from this country,” I said quickly, sensing the conversation was heading in an ominous direction.

“Huh? Well, you say that, but I’m not originally from this country either.”

“Huh? What do you mean—”

“Lady Mary, the others are approaching,” Tutte interrupted me in an uncharacteristic manner.

I looked around attentively, and indeed, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching. The unit waiting outside the woods likely came over, and considering I couldn’t hear the wolf monsters anymore, I could only assume Emilia had either beaten them or made them retreat. Either way, the emergency was winding down.

“Aww, I wanted to talk more... What a pity. I’ll have to retreat...” The large leopard flattened her ears in disappointment.

I faced the creature, hoping to glean whatever information I could from her. “We don’t have much time. Tell me, who are you? What are you trying to achieve?”

“Well, that’s...classified information, so I can’t tell you.”

“What are you, a time traveler?!” I snapped at the leopard, which made even the animal look at me in surprise. But then, she gradually became embarrassed and hung her head.

“I only ask for one thing. Save my sister...”

The words grew more distant, like the wind was snatching them away, and when I raised my head to look, the large leopard was nowhere to be seen. The man I’d beat up was gone too. The leopard must have taken him along.

Good... I don’t think I could have explained that away. Oh, but maybe I could say I let him get away to gather more information... Hmm, well, either way, the danger is gone. That’s good. Yes, let’s go with that.

I stared blankly at the woods for a moment.

“Lady Mary!”

Tutte hurried over to me, and I turned around to greet her with a smile, only for her to throw her arms around me in a hug.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Tutte?” I froze up, taken aback.

“Did you hit your head, Lady Mary?! Oh, yes, you were more durable than that... Did you go crazy, perhaps? Or have all your rambunctious high jinks finally caught up to you and damaged your mind?”

“H-Hey, cut that out. Are you trying to make me angry?” I peeled Tutte off me and glared at her, but she looked at me with genuinely concerned eyes. I felt my anger die down. She...wasn’t joking.

But wait, if she’s not joking, what does she mean? And come to think of it, Tutte didn’t sound like herself a moment ago, interrupting me like that... Huh?

“What’s wrong, Tutte?”

“I mean, you were staring at that big leopard and talking to yourself. I know demons can speak to monsters, so I thought you were just trying to talk to it because you thought it’d be nice. But the longer you went on, the more pitiful you looked...”

“W-Wait, Tutte, wait! You couldn’t hear that leopard? She had a woman’s voice!”

“Lady Mary...” Tears built up in Tutte’s eyes and she hugged me again. “If anything’s weighing on your heart, I can help you. I’d listen to any complaints, so don’t bottle it all up...”

I peeled her off me again, starting to seriously panic.

“No, no, no, stop acting like I’m going crazy from a nervous breakdown or something! She talked! Really, that leopard talked to me!” Once again, my hysteric screaming echoed through the woods.

19. There’s No Detective Here

Leaving the aftermath of the attack on the house to Emilia, we linked up with

Miss Iks and the grown-ups. As a witness, they called me to an intelligence-gathering meeting to get debriefed.

Miss Iks and the grown-ups had left to handle the monster attack, so they had little information on the bandit attack. The monster attack clearly felt like it'd been meant to keep them away. Emilia had also only faced the monsters, so the two maids, Fifi, and I were the only ones who'd run into the human assailants. However, Tutte and Sufia had been put to sleep as soon as they entered the room, and Fifi's attempts to resist had ended when the restraining item was placed on her, after which she'd been pressed against the floor. She hadn't been in any state to properly grasp the situation. So, naturally, all eyes were on me—I'd fought the bandits and even managed to get two of them captured.

Incidentally, the men had been tied up and hauled away to be questioned, but since they were apparently trained professionals, it seemed likely they'd be tight-lipped. However, they would be brought before Elizabeth, who was still in the villa for some reason.

The Ice-Blooded Witch is still here?

According to Emilia, "Auntie can get anyone to talk. She can be quite brutal..." I wasn't sure what "brutal" entailed, and I'd decided not to ask.

Anyway, to put the story back on track, all eyes were on me, but rather than being nervous, I was sulking instead—and the reason for my sour mood was something that'd happened shortly before that.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! A leopard?! Leopards cannot speak! What, did you see us demons speak to the demonic beasts and decide to compete with us? How adorable, Mary!"

I told Emilia about the snow leopard thing I'd seen, hoping she might help me clear up Tutte's misunderstanding, but she only laughed in my face. I angrily went red in the face.

"I told you already, she wasn't a normal leopard!" I protested, turning teary-eyed. "She was, erm, a very pretty leopard! And she called herself a divine beast!"

“‘A divine beast’?” Emilia parroted me, wiping away tears of laughter.

“That’s right. *Divine!*” I replied with a smile, hoping this might clarify things.

Emilia, however, simply put a comforting hand on my shoulder with a pitying look on her face. “Mary... Divine beasts cannot speak.”

“You’re lying! She did too talk!” I protested again, once again turning teary-eyed. “She even whined and asked me to listen to her complaints!”

“Lady Mary, of all the legends I’ve heard of divine beasts, none of them mention one speaking,” Magiluka said, further driving me into a corner.

I hung my head, afraid to see her expression.

“You must be tired or something, Lady Mary,” Sacher said, pitying me for once. “Let’s head back and rest.”

Hearing him be so cautious around me just dealt even more mental damage to me.

Stop iiiit! How dumb do I have to look to have the village idiot pity me?!

I was growing more and more resentful of the fact no one seemed to believe me, and I was about ready to throw a tantrum.

“B-But legends are just legends, and maybe there were people who talked to divine beasts before and no one knows about it,” Safina suggested, unable to endure watching everyone disagree with me for much longer.

I turned to look at her right away. At that moment, Safina looked downright angelic, and I immediately ran up to her and pulled her into a hug. I was that happy to have someone side with me. “Safinaaaaa! Oh, Safina, you’re my one ally in this cold, uncaring world!”

“Aaah! Uh, I, um...! Lady Maaaary!” She wriggled flusteredly in my embrace like a puppy.

“Hmm. Perhaps it’s possible,” Reifus said pensively. “Just as monsters can speak with demons, perhaps divine beasts can speak with those affiliated with the gods. I do recall mother telling me that the Einholst Papacy had ancient legends of a so-called ‘holy woman’ working in service to the gods. If Lady Mary could speak to a divine beast, it’s possible she’s one of these holy women.”

Apparently, Reifus believed me. Everyone else muttered a slow “Hmm, really...” at his theory. I couldn’t rejoice at him agreeing with me though.

I’m happy you believe me, Your Highness, but I can’t say I like that interpretation, so let’s say that’s not the case, okay?

“A holy woman...? I see. You did mention that this divine beast wasn’t from this country, right, Lady Mary?” Magiluka asked.

I nodded, unsure as to what she was getting at.

“A divine beast being in the demons’ domain would be unnatural,” Emilia agreed. “We can only assume some country smuggled it into our borders. It might be related to those attackers, since they apparently weren’t demons.”

Emilia was right—those bandits I beat up didn’t have horns like demons do, nor did they have animal ears like the beastmen. They were humans. At the same time, I was relieved that Emilia steered the conversation away from the theory I was some kind of holy woman, but...

“In any case... Mary, a holy woman?” Emilia eyed me suspiciously.

“The holy woman of legends was beloved by god and the people,” Sacher piped in. “She was graced with majesty and mercy, and she was a dignified leader to the people, I think?” As he explained this, he looked at me quizzically.

“Wh-What?” I asked suspiciously, hiding behind Safina.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! As if!”

Both he and Emilia laughed out loud. And while I was happy that they denied the possibility, I also trembled with shame.

“Don’t laugh at me!” I screeched at them, red up to my ears.

And that was how I’d ended up sulking.

“Please cheer up already, Lady Mary,” Magiluka told me diffidently.

It did serve to cheer me up a little, but at the same time, I was filled with determination. *I’m going to find that so-called divine beast, drag her out for everyone to see, and have her talk to everyone! I’ll prove that I am not crazy!*

But as I looked at everyone, my heart full of resolve, I recalled what happened during the attack. The men were covered in black and I couldn't see their faces, but I knew one thing for sure.

"Those people didn't talk about the princess or Lord Reifus. I don't think they were trying to go after royalty."

That was likely the first thing on everyone's minds, so I immediately addressed that possibility.

"Do you think they were after the greatest magus smith, or perhaps his apprentice?" Magiluka asked.

"...No, I don't think so," Fifi said. "Master isn't here, so they would have just left once they'd confirmed he's not at home. And me being his student isn't common knowledge. What's more, they just put the collar on me and left me there. They weren't trying to abduct me."

"Yeah... They were clearly going after Tutte and Sufia," I finished Fifi's explanation.

Silence hung over the room. Everyone's surprise was clear—why would bandits go after a couple of maids?

Not that their reasons matter. Anyone who tries to take Tutte from me is going to pay with broken teeth.

I glanced at Tutte, who smiled back at me. Just seeing that put my heart at ease for some reason.

"Come to think of it, they mentioned not knowing which one to take," I whispered, recalling what the men said when they tossed Sufia at me. "Did they just need a maid, without caring about who it was..? No, if that were the case, they wouldn't have had to go to the trouble of coming all the way out here to do it."

"Maybe they wanted to abduct a maid working in this house?" Magiluka suggested.

"...There are no maids working here." Fifi shook her head. "I handle all the housework. I pretty much forced my way in here and insisted my master take

me as his pupil. And since he was very bad with handling chores, I took advantage of that and handled all the housework for him, watching his techniques in the meantime. I practiced in secret, learned by watching, and once I made my own work, he accepted me as his apprentice.”

As interesting as that story was, it did mean we weren’t any closer to figuring out what the bandits wanted.

“Hmm, none of this makes sense...” Emilia grumbled. “Ah, perhaps they acted out of blind love? Sufia, did you do something to those men? Confess your sins now, and we will forgive you.”

“Unlike you, Your Highness, I have committed no sins I need to confess,” Sufia said curtly.

“Oho ho ho, you do have a tongue on you, eh heh heh. Then we shall look into your private affairs!”

“Eh heh heh, very well. In that case, we shall tell Lady Elizabeth about all the matters you specified are to remain undisclosed.”

In stark contrast to my warm relationship with Tutte, the princess and her maid both seemed to be free to say whatever came to mind to each other. I could once again only shrug it off as just how things worked in the Relirex Kingdom.

“Hmm... Then, did Mary’s maid do something to tempt them?” Emilia pondered aloud.

“She did no such thing! Please don’t make such shameful accusations!” I protested, raising my voice in an unladylike manner out of sheer reflex.

“W-We know! We just considered bringing it up, is all. No need to react like that. Good grief, you do cherish your maid a great deal...” Emilia apologized, overwhelmed by my shouting.

I hung my head shamefully. I glanced over at Tutte, who was also blushing in embarrassment.

“Oh, come to think of it...” Sufia tapped her fist on her palm, like she’d just recalled something. “There was one time when a gentleman tried to approach

me while I was out shopping.”

“What? We are not here to listen to you brag about your popularity with men!” Emilia said in disinterest.

“Was he human?” I pushed past her and urged Sufia to go on, desperate for information that would help me track the leopard down.

“No, he was a demon. Apparently, he was an artist and wanted me to model for him, but I politely turned him down.”

Yeah, okay, this case is going nowhere. Someone get a detective!

I dropped my shoulders in despair, wishing a master detective would come out of nowhere to help us.

“Well, once we return to the villa, we’re sure we’ll find auntie has squeezed all the information out of them. No need for us to waste our time thinking here,” Emilia said, throwing in the towel.

That much was true, but while I was relieved that we didn’t need to think about this any longer, I was also a little concerned.

In murder dramas on TV, whenever the group goes to ask someone else, a second victim always turns up.

But with that thought in mind, we all made our way back to Emilia’s villa.

20. A Declaration of Intent!

On the way back to the villa, we ran into another incident. We were on an empty forest trail, with curtains of trees on both sides. Our carriage ground to a stop, and the demon coachman stepped down from the vehicle to check the problem. I glanced out the window, and it didn’t seem like there was any major issue.

The reason we were so tense, then, was because the carriage carrying the bandits we’d apprehended had ground to a halt too, and standing in front of it was an unfamiliar carriage surrounded by armed soldiers.

Emilia walked over with a few soldiers in tow, demanding an explanation. I

considered going out as well, but Magiluka stopped me. Her glance made me stay put.

Before long, there was a knock on our carriage's door. I opened it, and Emilia entered our carriage.

"It seems the soldiers guarding the prisoner carriage were slain. The bandits undid their bonds and killed them," she said.

"They undid their bonds? But how?" Reifus asked.

"We do not know. Those weren't shackles one could easily undo... In fact, it's almost impossible to free oneself. One would need someone else to free them."

"Maybe they had conspirators that came to help them?" the prince suggested.

"No. The attackers are dead too."

Disturbingly enough, my plot expectations had been met to an appalling degree, and a serial tragedy had occurred. I watched as the prince continued his back-and-forth with Emilia, impressed that royalty could keep their cool at times like these.

"What does this mean? Is that other carriage related to this?"

"It is indeed. That carriage belongs to Mayor Dabzal...that is, the mayor of the area surrounding the port city. The mayor's soldiers slew the bandits as they were being taken away."

"A mayor, coming to the middle of the woods...? But why kill them?"

"Hmm. He says that upon hearing we were attacked, he brought his soldiers over here..." Emilia began explaining.

According to what she'd heard, as the mayor's soldiers made their way here, they ran into the carriage carrying the bandits. As Emilia's soldiers explained the situation, the tied-up criminals freed themselves, took Emilia's soldiers by surprise, and killed them. As the bandits tried to make their escape, the mayor's soldiers elected to kill them over letting them get away.

Once she finished the explanation, Emilia leaned against the backrest and looked up at the ceiling, like the whole story didn't add up.

“Is something bothering you, Princess Emilia?” Reifus asked, speaking for us all.

“We do not know how the bandits freed themselves. Let us assume they used some tool to do so. They then used that opening to kill our soldiers, only to be disposed of by Dabzal’s men. Is the crime scene not too clean for that? There was a battle to the death there—would there not be more signs of struggle and fighting? Looking around, it would seem our soldiers were killed without fighting back... Something feels off.”

Emilia looked up at the ceiling with a bitter expression, but then we heard another knock on the carriage door.

“Your Highness, Mayor Dabzal says he would like to greet your group...” Sufia said from outside the carriage.

Emilia looked at the prince, who nodded wordlessly.

“We shall come out in just a moment,” Emilia said and opened the door.

She was the first to come out, and we all followed her one by one.

“My, Your Highness. I’m quite ashamed to have to greet you in a place like this, but I would nevertheless be remiss to fail to do so. Thank you for understanding.”

I’d imagined the mayor would be a corpulent man, but much to my surprise, he turned out to be slender and toned. Dabzal was a bespectacled middle-aged man with horns growing out of his silky black hair. His facial features, however, gave me a bad first impression. Something about him just struck me as fishy for a reason I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

After bowing his head to Emilia, Dabzal looked over at us appraisingly. Something about his gaze seemed cowardly, but maybe I was just imagining things.

“And these are your guests, I gather?”

“Yes. Their visit here is not a formal one, so we will not introduce them.” Emilia stood in front of us, like she was trying to hide us behind her back.

“Thank you for coming from afar to visit our kingdom. I am Dabzal, mayor of

the port town.” Dabzal bowed respectfully.

Given his position, I assumed he knew who we were even without being told. Especially Reifus...

“Incidentally, Dabzal, you seem to know who the criminals were.”

“...Yes, well, the city harbors many a stowaway. My men were surveilling this particular group as part of an investigation. For those criminals to so foolishly attack Your Highness was truly beyond my expectations, however. I deeply apologize for not being there to react in time.”

“And? Who were they?”

“...A small, pathetic group that was driven out of the human countries and hired to go after you, Your Highness.”

“‘Hired’? Do you know who hired them?”

“Sadly, I’m still looking into that, so I don’t have a clear answer yet. But I will find out within the coming days, and they will come to regret targeting you, Princess Emilia.”

They’re after the princess? I cocked my head suspiciously. *That wasn’t the impression I got... Is he lying to us?*

There was something I was more curious about, though, so I spoke up, despite knowing it would be rude of me to do so.

“Umm... Excuse me for speaking up. I know I’m not related to this...” I began.

Emilia and the others all looked at me in surprise. Dabzal alone looked at me composedly, and then moved his eyes back to Emilia.

“What?” Emilia asked me, granting me permission to speak.

“Mayor Dabzal, was there a leopard among that group?”

Emilia directed an exasperated, pitying look at me, as if to ask “You’re still on about that?” I ignored her, though, and noticed that Dabzal’s expression twitched for a moment.

“A...leopard? Hmm... I haven’t gotten any reports about a monster like that.”

Dabzal then said he would finish handling things here and that we should

return to the villa. He elegantly walked off.

“...Mary, are you serious about looking for that leopard?” Emilia asked me, looking fed up with me. “There are no leopards in this area... And you didn’t explain yourself well enough. Your question must have only confused him.”

But that made something click for me. *An animal, lack of explanation... I said “leopard,” but he said “monster.” He didn’t assume it was a normal leopard or a beastman leopard. He heard “leopard,” and his first association was “monster.” So he knew that I was talking about that big snow leopard instead of a normal animal? Hmm, this is suspicious...*

As I finished pondering over this, I followed everyone back to the carriage.

“I’ve decided. I’m going to go look for that mythical beast.”

Once we returned to the villa, I declared my intentions to Reifus, Magiluka, Safina, and Sacher. They stared at me in disbelief before exchanging tired smiles.

“I’m curious as to why they wanted to kidnap a maid, but right now, I want to find that leopard.”

“You really don’t have to act so indignant about that.” Magiluka tried to placate me, but I wasn’t going to budge on the matter—I’d realized something.

“I mean, yeah, I want to prove I wasn’t imagining things, but... Before she left, she asked me to save her sister. There’s another leopard like that one, and since she asked me to save her, it must mean she’s been caught too. I can’t just ignore this...”

That’s a good reason. But also, I’m going to show them I’m not crazy! That’s the top priority here!

My intentions may have seemed righteous, but it must be said: people’s true intentions and the front they put up might not always match.

“But do you even have the first idea where to look?” Magiluka asked me, a bit exasperated.

“Well, that mayor strikes me as suspicious. I think he knows something...”

I told my friends about my suspicions regarding the mayor and asked for their opinion. Magiluka and Reifus fell quiet, mulling the matter over. I knew I could count on them. Sacher, on the other hand, didn't even pretend to be thinking and started pumping weights. I ignored him. Safina wasn't very good at cerebral matters, so she soon gave up on thinking and looked around, waiting for the others to speak up.

"Hmm... Now that you mention it, I did think his attitude was a little off," Reifus said. "The way he handled the attack was too swift. I realize the princess was in danger, but as far as I've seen, this country seems to regard their princess in a very cru...erm, hands-off approach. Plus, he wasn't acting alone this time. He had soldiers in tow. He called the bandits a 'small, pathetic group,' yet despite knowing there were only a few of them, he had a lot of soldiers with him. And that was despite our soldiers being around too..."

Did the prince almost say "crude"? I guess everyone else thinks so too. I latched onto this part of his explanation.

"What's more, when the princess explained the situation to him, he completely ignored the part about her getting attacked by monsters. I didn't realize it then, but that forest should be protected by magic items that make monster attacks a very rare occurrence. Since he governs this entire area, he should have surely reacted to news about monsters attacking someone in the woods. It's unnatural that he didn't. But far be it from me to say that he's related to this case."

"This is all just hypothetical," Magiluka said. "So, what do we do? You're not suggesting we sneak into his home and search it, are you? We can't do that."

"H-H-Hold on, Magiluka," I said, flustered by the rash suggestion. "When you word it like that, it sounds like you and Sir Reifus are going to help me look."

"It's not just what it sounds like, it's what I'm saying," Magiluka said like it was a given. "Well, putting aside if we'll actually find anything."

"True." Reifus nodded.

"I don't really understand, but I'll help you, Lady Mary," Safina agreed.

A warm, fuzzy feeling filled my heart.

“Ah, me too!” the village idiot piped in halfway through a set of push-ups. Honestly, at this point, I was moved even by that.

Oh, you’re such good friends...

“Everyone...!” I was about to say, but then...

“Hmm, what are you all talking about? It sounds risky.”

Pretty, willowy fingers crept up on me from behind, cupping my chin. I froze up in surprise, with all the warm fuzziness from earlier making way for a chill surging down my spine.

I don’t have to look. I know this chill, I know this pressure. It’s the witch...!

Everyone else also stiffened in surprise, which implied no one had noticed her approach. *How did she creep up on me?* Deciding to discard that question for now, I turned around, my neck creaking like a rusted tin doll. And sure enough, standing behind me was Emilia’s aunt, Lady Elizabeth.

“A-Aaah, Lady Elizabeth, this is... Erm...” I stammered, my eyes darting as I tried to come up with an excuse.

“You see, the local mayor sent you an invitation as an apology for the local trouble you experienced. It’s a dinner invitation, apparently. What do you say?”

This very convenient development came at just the right time. Lady Elizabeth wagged an envelope in front of us teasingly, and I was staring at it like a starved dog eyeing a drumstick. With a thin smile befitting a dominatrix, Lady Elizabeth handed me the letter and leaned in to whisper into my ear.

“Be careful. The leopard you’re talking about might be a mythical beast that’s been employed by the Papacy behind the scenes for years. Which would mean you’ll be going up against...”

Her whisper gave me chills, and what she said made me look at her in alarm. After giving me the letter, she brought a finger to her lips and winked. She seemed to have stressed the words “behind the scenes,” meaning this wasn’t information that was readily available to the public.

How much does she know? I mean, if you know everything, fix this yourself!

Seeing me pout, Lady Elizabeth narrowed her eyes and left the room

elegantly, an amused expression on her face. Emilia then entered the room in her place.

“What’s wrong, Mary? Why are you making a face like a puffer fish?”

“I am not making a face like a puffer fish!” I retorted at her casual question, forgetting I was speaking to royalty again.

Gaaah, we had a detective all this time in Lady Elizabeth! Not that she seems inclined to work much... What kind of mystery story is this?! Deep down, I lamented the fact the detective we had this time was incredibly negligent...

21. Being Played like a Fiddle

“Now, you lot, we come bearing good news. We have information on the louts that tried to abduct the maids!” Emilia declared this confidently the moment she sat down.

More curious, however, was the fact Fifi was standing behind her.

Huh? What’s she doing out of her workshop, and here of all places?

Emilia noticed me looking at Fifi and glanced at her too. “Hmm? Oh, you’re curious about Fifi,” she said. “We had her come with us since she’s related to this case.”

“What do you mean?” the prince asked, representing all of us.

“We do not know much about magic items, but Fifi said there was something odd about the magic items the bandits used.”

“But I thought it wasn’t possible to investigate the items because Mayor Dabzal retrieved them when he disposed of the bandits?”

Like Reifus said, the bandits’ corpses and belongings had all been recovered by Dabzal’s men.

“Mmhmm, but we used our authority to force an investigation, and we had Fifi accompany us. That’s when she discovered something unusual.”

With that said, we all looked at Fifi.

“...The magic item that was used to restrain me was missing.”

“When our soldiers captured those men, they stuffed all their items into a sack, but Dabzal said the sack wasn’t there when he checked their belongings. However, we know the binding shackles should be in the mayor’s possession—after the binding shackle was broken when Fifi removed it, she handed it to the soldiers because she wanted to examine it later. Sufia witnessed this happen as well, so it’s odd that it’s disappeared.”

Emilia’s explanation made it clear why Fifi was so bothered by the binding shackle. Magic items like this were only made in the Relirex Kingdom, since having items like that circulate in the other kingdoms was asking for trouble. Indeed, if binding shackles that could completely keep people from moving were commonly used, it wouldn’t merely be a boon for catching criminals, but also a danger used by evildoers.

Thankfully, magic items made by most magus smiths were only capable of making people go numb, and smiths capable of making binding shackles that could perfectly paralyze a victim were very rare even with Relirex. That meant that any items with such a perfect, potent effect were rigorously managed by the kingdom—yet the bandits used these precious items, which then vanished without a trace. It was incredibly suspicious.

“However, we were thankfully able to recover one of the binding shackles those hoodlums used, whole and unbroken. That is to say, the ones used to bind Fifi in place!”

Once Emilia said this, Fifi placed them on the table.

Oh, I had one of these put on me too, but I shattered it.

I nearly said that aloud, but I was able to cover my mouth at the last second and look the other way while everyone was focused on the magic item that’d been placed before them.

“Didn’t you say something about the binding shackle breaking when Fifi removed it? And it was missing from the bag too.” The prince repeated what we’d been told earlier.

“...Right. I wasn’t wholly conscious when it happened, but when I came to, I found that Lady Mary had left me where I was and went outside. I found another binding shackle nearby, which had been broken before they’d managed

to put it on her, and it was just lying there. That's when I realized that Lady Mary had probably left it there as a valuable clue to be hidden away. So, when Miss Sufia woke up, I had her take the binding shackle off me and hid mine away. Then, when the soldiers turned up, I had her hand over the broken binding shackle and say that mine broke when she took it off me."

Everyone let out an "Ooh" at Fifi's vague explanation. I could only smile stiffly. After all, it'd been cruel of me to just leave Fifi behind, but I'd been too occupied with Tutte being taken away to care. I'd thrown the binding shackle away without really thinking about it, and it'd just happened to land next to Fifi. It was, in retrospect, extremely inappropriate of me, and I couldn't say anything in my defense.

"I-It was all your quick thinking, Fifi. I didn't do anything. But forget that. What about the shackle?" I moved the conversation along.

"...It is very well-made. It's capable of perfectly constricting their victim and keeping them from moving. No average smith could make this. Since it's not broken, I could see the structure of their mana circuitry, and I identified a familiar...unique knack to how it was made."

Fifi spoke more eloquently than usual, and then said with a very expressionless face, "...My master made it."

We all fell silent at her words.

"If the currently missing magus smith Girtz made it, does this mean he's involved in this case too?" Magiluka joined the conversation.

"...That could be. But it's an old binding shackle. Master always included an item's creation date in its serial number, and based on that, I gather that this was made before he went missing."

I recalled the binding shackles I broke the other day, the ones Fifi had made. I remembered what she said back then.

"Fifi, you said Girtz made binding shackles because the village mayor ordered them, right?" I asked.

Fifi nodded, and Emilia smirked.

“Auntie told us that the binding shackles in the mayor’s possession are shaped differently... However, if what Fifi says is true, they must be the same on the inside.”

“And if there are any binding shackles missing at the mayor’s place, it’s possible he sold some off on the black market,” Magiluka added.

“Mmhmm.” Emilia nodded with a smug expression. “Auntie said he doesn’t seem to be missing any magic shackles. We had Fifi come with us to investigate his stock, however, and she said a few of the shackles had been replaced by ones made by another smith. When we told auntie this, she just walked off without a word.”

I decided to speak up and mention something that was on my mind. “Umm... Princess, can I ask something?”

“Yes?”

“You mentioned your auntie earlier, but doesn’t this mean you’ve basically been doing and speaking everything in Lady Elizabeth’s name?”

“H-Huh? We suppose we have. We did not notice it until now...”

Lady Elizabeth’s been playing you like a fiddle. Scary... I shouldn’t get involved with that witch...

Moving on from that digression, what Emilia was saying *did* cast more suspicion on the mayor. Still, the big question remained: Why do all that? *Everything points to the possibility the mayor used the leopard and the bandits to kidnap the maids. But what for? Por qué?*

“But that does not matter,” Emilia carried on. “As for what we do next, auntie showed us a list of all the magus smiths in the port town, and upon seeing it, Fifi discovered something suspicious.”

See, there you go again. Being played by your aunt.

Everyone looked at Fifi, but I couldn’t help but feel shocked at how easily Emilia was being played here. What Lady Elizabeth was doing was exceptionally meticulous and basically constituted manipulation.

“...Uh, before I became master’s apprentice, I tried to barge into other magus

smiths' houses and seek tutelage. I tried watching and imitating their techniques in my own way, but they just turned me down and said they have nothing to teach me. I then tried asking the few magus smiths that lived in the area around the city, but they all said the same thing... I still don't understand why..."

We all cracked strained smiles at her pondering. She was probably a genius magus smith who was able to easily reproduce what was painstaking work for the others. It was probably heartbreaking for them to admit that she was better than they were...

"...But anyway, one of the magus smiths that turned me away made items with spells that were very similar to the forgery shackles I saw. As far as I know, that magus smith works exclusively for a certain company..."

"Auntie said that this company is small and their products are not particularly eye-catching, but despite that, they're hiring more and more workers. She asked around, and while there's no positive proof, some people have reported the mayor's people working with them."

At this point I decided to just ignore every mention of the word "auntie." After all, all this conveniently obtained information made it clear that a lot of preliminary research had gone into this.

"With all that in mind, we are considering storming in there now." The princess made this very reckless statement in a manner most nonchalant.

We could probably get away with calling it an inspection, but I don't think they'll let us in if we just storm in no questions asked, Princess.

"But we just got an invitation to dinner," Magiluka said. "We need to prepare for that too. I don't think we'll have time to do both."

"Indeed. So we thought we could split up into two groups," Emilia responded instantly. It was so instant, in fact, that I had no doubt in mind as to who had given her that idea.

"The prince will have to participate in the dinner party. We shall place Magiluka and Sacher as his escorts. We, too, shall participate, since we cannot leave our guests and not come along, after all. The rest shall be the other

group.”

“Hmm...” Safina reservedly raised a doubt. “I understand me going, but Lady Mary is a duke’s daughter. Wouldn’t her coming along cause potential problems?”

“Heh heh heh... We have a plan for that, as well. We shall tell Dabzal that despite Mary pretending to be fine at first, she was careless enough to develop a fever from the stress, and she became bedridden.”

“Hey, that’s slander! At least say I bravely tried to keep up a strong front or something!” I protested against Emilia’s rude excuse. *That wording makes it seem like I’m a careless imbecile or something.*

“But either way, that shall be how we split up.”

“Grr... I don’t like it, but fine.” I ended up acquiescing. “The other team will be Safina, Tutte, Miss Fifi, and me, along with Miss Iks. But most of us are foreigners—won’t it look strange for us to go around investigating?” After all, none of us were demons.

“Worry not!” Emilia gave me a thumbs-up. “For whatever reason, auntie has decided to come with you. And you can take Sufia too! She will handle auntie for you, so you can rest easy.”

Having Lady Elizabeth did resolve the lack of demon presence in our group, but the thought of working alongside her made a shiver run down my spine. I also had the distinct impression Emilia attached Sufia to Lady Elizabeth to shake off her constant chaperone. Maybe it was just my own scheming nature that made me consider that possibility, but sadly, I couldn’t come up with a better plan than her.

Oooh, this is bad! At this rate, the witch is going to play me like a fiddle too!

But even as I agonized over what was to come, the talks kept progressing, and before long, it was time to start our operation.

Interlude Part 1

A middle-aged man was walking down the meticulously polished marble corridor of his mansion. He passed by various furnishings and fixtures of this hallway on his way to his destination; although some were hallmark Relirexian decor, many of the items had clearly come from abroad, suggesting the man regularly dealt with foreign countries. Despite the eclectic origins of his possessions, their arrangement was fashionable and charming—painstakingly so, such that it was obvious they were the belongings of a man who could charitably be called methodical, and less charitably, extremely particular and hard to please.

Indeed, this was the home of Mayor Dabzal, who had been appointed by the Dark Lord to govern a certain coastal town.

As soon as Dabzal had entered the chamber he'd been headed toward, a butler approached him to whisper in his ear. "Lord Dabzal, your usual guest awaits you in your office."

Dabzal's confident expression contorted in displeasure. "As always, don't let anyone else in. Also, how go the preparations for the dinner party?"

"Yes, sir. And while it was on very short notice, I believe we'll make it..."

Having confirmed this, Dabzal left the butler behind and made his way to his office.

Dabzal maintained a cleanly swept office, in keeping with his meticulous nature—an attention to detail which had, somehow, failed to prevent the blunder he presently found himself dealing with. Just thinking about it made him feel like his entrails were about to boil over with shame and anger.

"I see you're in a poor mood! ♪"

Dabzal's feelings of displeasure had only resulted in a momentary twitch of his facial features, yet the man sitting in his office sipping tea seemed to have noticed it. This man, despite his youthful looks and cherubic tone of voice, had a menacing mien. He didn't have a demon's horns or a beastman's fluffy ears—he was a human, one whose demeanor was far and away more suspicious and

untrustworthy than Dabzal could ever manage.

Perhaps what was most strikingly dubious about the youth was his outfit. Alongside his flippant tone and lopsided smirk, he was donning the dignified garb of a priest. And regardless of his manner, for someone of his young age to be high-ranking clergy was all the more unnatural...

Indeed, the personage inhabiting the office defied all expectations: the young man, clearly high-ranking clergy in the Einholst Papacy, was elegantly sipping tea in the room of a demon, a race said to be opposed to mankind, and he was there with Dabzal's permission.

"Of course I'm in a poor mood!" Dabzal uncharacteristically flared up, angered by the youth's calm attitude. "Are you trying to dash the plan I've worked on for years?! If the Annihilation Corps heard of this, they wouldn't believe it!"

"Now, now, no need to shout the name of a confidential group. You'd be in trouble if someone overheard you, no?" the youth said, sipping his tea again like none of this disturbed him—also as an indication of his confidence that no one could have possibly overheard them.

Dabzal wasn't a foolish demon. He knew that there was no point in getting angry now. He pretended to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose to give himself a moment to switch gears, aware that now was the time to plan his next move.

"What was that attack all about? It wasn't part of the plan," Dabzal complained as he took a seat opposite the sofa the young clergy was occupying. "All you did was make the princess suspect me of silencing witnesses and destroying evidence... The princess is one thing—I can cook up plenty of lies to throw her off—but not the one pulling her strings! What if that woman makes her move?"

The princess Dabzal mentioned was Emilia, and the one "pulling her strings" was Lady Elizabeth. He'd spent years playing the part of a capable, good-hearted mayor to make sure he didn't draw the slightest bit of suspicion from her, but since this incident had required him to forcibly clean up the situation, it was possible it'd driven a crack into her trust in him. And even though it may

have only been a tiny crack, for Dabzal and his methodical tendencies, allowing even something that small was intolerable. He didn't want to have a single risk factor in his plans.

"Yeah, sorry about that," the youth said dismissively. "The old man threw a tantrum, you see. He said something stupid about needing to negotiate with the princess's maid, so we ended up having to pause our work as planned. I figured I'd get him to quiet down by having a go at snatching the maid the moment we heard she'd ventured out."

"But why do something as stupid as use those valuable items?!"

The sheer recklessness of the plan made Dabzal lose his temper and raise his voice. He then paused, took a deep breath, and tried to calm himself.

"Well, those restraining shackles were just too useful. I couldn't help but use them. After all, we don't have anyone who can make something like that on our side."

"Only the old smith can make shackles of that quality. You have to be careful!" Dabzal said, once again pushing his glasses up as he glared at the youth.

"Yes, yes." The young clergyman didn't seem the slightest bit daunted, spinning his empty teacup around on his finger. "But I didn't expect I would fail in my task. Were there any other powerful demons in that workshop aside from the princess?"

"As far as I know, no. All the skilled demons were outside. But there were a few of the princess's guests in the workshop. They're in Relirex on an unofficial visit, so I don't know the details, but apparently, the princess invited them here on a whim. I didn't think it would get in the way of our plans..."

While Dabzal spoke bitterly, clenching a fist reproachfully, the young clergyman kept playing with the cup.

"That so? And who are those guests?"

"I already know the identity of one of them. It's the Aldian Kingdom's first prince."

That answer seemed to surprise the youth, who stopped rotating his cup and placed it back on the table. His expression instantly shifted from relaxed to fascinated. “Ooh, the prince, you say? He was there during the operation in the Altolia Academy too.”

“I heard the prince organized some experimental new school event...and because the queen came to spectate, you got involved.”

“Well, it ended in failure. That prince might be more capable than we know.” The flippant youth shrugged in a tired manner.

Dabzal couldn't mask his surprise at this gesture. “I've heard the prince took after the current king and was a foolish womanizer. Are the rumors wrong?” he asked.

Being both a trading port and the entrance to the Dark Isle, Dabzal's port town's position made it ideal for gathering intel from other countries...however, the wealth of information actually ended up being a problem. Having too many sources made it easy to lose sight of the most current information.

Dabzal had gathered a lot of information on the Aldian queen, down to the most inconsequential rumors, but he didn't think the prince would be pretending to be a fool.

“Who's to say? As far as I know, he did take after the king, but he'd apparently changed somewhat slightly before enrolling in the academy. Based on the reports of those observing the progress of the festival, its security system was well organized and swift on a scale never before seen, making it difficult to gather any information. Apparently, one of the prince's subordinates was in charge of that. Their security was so capable that even our Divine Miracle ended in failure. When I heard that, well, I was speechless.”

The youth cackled, but Dabzal, on the other hand, became quite pensive. Dabzal had been careless. He hadn't imagined the princess would bring such a crafty man onto the island. For all he knew, there could have been some other unit lying in wait somewhere and keeping watch over the prince's person.

It was then that Dabzal recalled what had happened when he'd questioned one of the Papacy's assailants from the attack on the workshop. The man had been beaten and bruised when the leopard had brought him back, and he

murmured something incomprehensible before passing out.

“That silver girl almost killed me.”

And indeed, Dabzal had met a girl with silver hair among the prince’s group...but she was an adorable, frail, and dainty-looking young lady. What’s more, the princess later told him the shock of the incident had made that girl break into a fever and become bedridden. A maiden that frail couldn’t possibly scare a burly, adult warrior into losing his nerve like that, could she?

“Either way, the fact remains we must act swiftly.” Dabzal banished that strange thought from his mind and focused on the task at hand. “I’ll be hosting a dinner party to stall them. You’ll have to hide elsewhere in the meantime.”

“Oh, what a bother.” The youth looked at the mayor with a very fed-up expression. “Really, I doubt they’d find me that quickly.”

“The princess was looking into the binding shackles quite stubbornly. It would take a true genius magus smith to be able to tell which smith made those shackles. I’d know if she had a smith that famous working with her, so I have a hard time believing she’d figure anything out. However, one of the items is missing, which does bother me. There’s a chance she’ll realize something is wrong, so we can’t be too cautious. All it would take is one suspicious point for her to connect the situation back to us, and your plan would be exposed. I’m asking you to leave for now for both our sakes.”

“Fine, fine, I will.”

The youth got to his feet and idly walked toward the entrance.

“Oh, right.” He turned his head to Dabzal before leaving. “If one of you sinful ones should get in my way, no matter who they may be, you don’t mind if I smite them down in the name of God, do you? Looking at your sort...makes me want to cleave you up. And having to restrain myself like that, it’s both stressful and a breach of faith against God, you know?”

There was madness in his voice, more so than one would ever expect a clergyman to have. Even Dabzal felt a shiver of horror run through him, completely overriding any anger he’d felt so far. However, the ghastly face accompanying the young clergyman’s foreboding words dissipated after but a

moment, reverting to his flippant smile before he proceeded to leave the room.

However, neither of them knew that the witch had already made her play at this point. Nor did they know that she was backed by the silver-haired girl Dabzal had laughed off, as well as a master magus smith he'd never known about...

Chapter 2: Long Academy Vacation Arc Part 2

1. Whatever Could That Be?

Gazing out the window, I saw the people walking along the port town's streets tense up. After all, a carriage with the Relirex royal family's coat of arms was passing them by, and they had no idea who was riding inside it. They could only swallow nervously and watch.

The Ice-Blooded Witch wasn't feared only abroad—she was a relentless woman, merciless even to her own family and subjects. As the onlookers watched her carriage roll along, an accompanying pall of dread hanging over their heads, they couldn't help but wonder what she was up to. As for what that was...

“Ooooh, Safina, you're so fluffy and cuuuute. ♪”

With her cold expression completely absent, Lady Elizabeth had her arms around Safina, who was seated next to her. She was patting her adoringly like a pet, wearing an ecstatic expression unlike anything I'd seen on her face before. It was a stark, dissonant contrast from the terrified staring I saw out of the carriage's window.

I was the only one sitting across from them. Maybe Lady Elizabeth felt comfortable enough to act this way because she knew I'd seen her true nature; since she felt no need to hide it from me, she could simply let everything show, if you will.

Safina was being hugged, caressed, and nuzzled on, and had long since gone past being stiff as a board and tense out of her mind—she was currently effectively unconscious. After spending time with Reifus, Safina had gotten used to being around royalty and was becoming capable of holding a conversation in the prince's presence...but this was probably out of her league. Lady Elizabeth's onslaught was clearly enough to OHKO her.

Safina seemed so pitiful I couldn't stand to look at her. *Okay, I should try*

talking. Maybe that'll get Safina to wake up. I decided to ask the question that was burning in my mind.

“Can I ask you something, Lady Elizabeth?”

“Hmm? What is it?” Lady Elizabeth instantly asked back, like she'd been expecting me to speak up right about now, and freed Safina from her grasp.

“What's your angle here? What are you trying to achieve by manipulating Her Highness like that?” I asked, implicitly stating that I would not be a pawn in her game.

I was pleased to find that I'd been able to say that without my voice turning nervous or flustered—though honestly, after watching her gush over Safina for minutes on end, any sense of nervousness I might have harbored toward this lady had all but disappeared.

“Heh heh. I see. So, you tried to improve my mood so you could ask me this question... And you did it this way so your friend wouldn't listen in on us. I'm not sure if this counts as you being kind or cruel to her...but I can appreciate girls like you.”

Lady Elizabeth looked like all of this made sense for her, somehow, and, after checking that Safina was indeed unconscious, fixed her posture and crossed her legs. With this dignified attitude, her faint smile, and her overall beauty, she gave off a sense of menacing pressure.

It was a world of difference from her attitude just moments ago. The one looking at me now wasn't a nice auntie gushing over something cute, but the Ice-Blooded Witch that struck fear and terror into everyone around her.

Uh, wait, maybe I was wrong to not be nervous anymore. This overpowering dignity is scaaaaary!

“To say I'm 'manipulating' her sounds awfully incriminating. All I did was give my stupid niece some sage advice,” she said and hugged Safina again, as if to say the conversation was over.

“...B-But you're surprisingly well-prepared, though.”

Despite dreading what she might do to me if I said the wrong thing, I decided

to oppose this evil empress with her thin smirk.

You have to do it, Mary! For Safina's sake!

"Heh heh, well, I was prepared, but I didn't expect I'd use Emilia to do it. If anything, I have to ask, what's *your* angle? What are *you* trying to achieve with all this scheming?"

"Huh...?" I cocked my head, puzzled by her suddenly twisting the conversation against me.

"I've heard reports of what happened during the incident... When the monsters attacked, you let my niece handle them and went to the back door on your own, like you knew something was going to happen. And you even captured them alive... I've heard you made some big achievements over at your academy. You won the martial arts tournament, swiftly picked up on your magic studies, learned how to use holy magic on your own, innovated the academy festival... You're very skilled, White Princess. Or perhaps I should call you the Argent Knight?"

I became speechless. The conversation had suddenly veered way off course, and I couldn't keep up with what she was saying. However, while the latter part of what she'd said eluded me, when I realized just how ominous the first half of her claims was, I couldn't utter a single word.

"And Sufia told me what happened. You predicted what was going to happen and left Fifi shackled, which helped her hide the item. She was the only one left there, restrained, along with one broken item. No one would have suspected a thing—not on our side nor the enemy's..."

I remained silent.

"The report also mentioned that you and Fifi were sneaking around and talking about something. Was that when you realized Fifi's talent for discerning the inner workings of magic items? Even I hadn't known about that at the time. Is that why you hid the item? Honestly, your actions pushed my plans along by leaps and bounds."

I continued to watch her, my breath held.

"Just how much of this did you plan?" Lady Elizabeth asked, her smile thin and

her eyes glinting.

“...I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I said eventually.

All I could keep up with was that she’d mentioned my grades, and everything past that had exceeded my wildest imagination. Truly, I may have done all the actions she mentioned, but I hadn’t intended for any of it to happen. Thus, my answer was an honest one.

“Heh heh, I like that. The way you make it seem like you’re completely oblivious... Perfect acting. I can see why Ilysha is so taken with you. Yes, absolutely lovely.”

No, no, no, this isn’t acting or anything! I’m being serious! Totally, one hundred percent serious! Don’t get the wrong idea! Aaah, didn’t something like this happen to me before? Oh, no, I don’t really understand what she wants, but if I don’t change her mind now, things are going to go south for me!

I wanted to make excuses, but just then, the carriage ground to a halt. The time for chitchat had come to a ruthless end. The carriage jerking as it stopped made Safina twitch and wake up.

“Now, let’s get going, shall we?” Lady Elizabeth brought her face close to me and then whispered, “I’m expecting great things from you, Mary.”

I froze up wordlessly, feeling a chill run down my spine. Oh no. She’s definitely getting the wrong idea. The way this is going, she’s going to drag me into something. At worst, she might even find out about my powers...and if that happens, I’m finished. I have to get away from her somehow!

With that terrifying thought in mind, I followed Lady Elizabeth out of the carriage alongside Safina. The area we entered was in a state of uproar. After all, the Ice-Blooded Witch just came in for a visit, so it made sense everyone would freeze up in panic. A flustered man stepped out of the building and introduced himself as the firm’s president.

I stood a short distance away, so as to not get in the way, and looked around. It looked like a perfectly ordinary, unassuming company, except for the fact that they seemed somewhat understaffed. I heard they’d been hiring more employees, but if they had, they were nowhere to be seen.

No, more importantly, I need to find some way to get away from Lady Elizabeth. Some excuse to investigate separately...

But then, like the heavens had answered my prayers, Sufia, who was standing behind us, suddenly gasped, and I spotted her looking in another direction.

“What? What’s wrong?” I asked, jumping at this chance for a distraction.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing major.” Sufia shook her head.

“It could be something very important for me. Speak up, please,” I insisted.

I knew what I said made no sense, but I was that desperate to split up with Lady Elizabeth so I wouldn’t end up tipping her off about my powers. I was going to capitalize on every chance I could find to get away from her.

“It’s just, do you remember how I mentioned an artist who approached me earlier? I just spotted him leaving this company.”

Yeah, this has nothing to do with why we’re here. But that sounds good! I’ll go with that.

I instantly jumped into action.

“Miss Sufia, which way did the artist go?”

“Hmm?” Sufia looked surprised, clearly not expecting I’d latch onto this topic.

“He went that way.”

She pointed in another direction.

“Right, well, this makes me curious... Lady Elizabeth, what Miss Sufia just said feels off to me. I’ll go investigate it. I’ll be going now so I don’t end up losing sight of the man!”

Using the ancient, surefire technique of “I’m in a hurry, gotta go, buh-bye now!” I grabbed Sufia’s and Safina’s hands and hurriedly led them away. As for Fifi...I unfortunately had to leave her with Lady Elizabeth.

“...Are you sure you should let her go?” I heard Fifi ask her.

“Yes. Let’s let her do as she pleases... Heh heh,” Lady Elizabeth replied with an ominous smile that made me pause for a moment.

I soon concluded this couldn’t mean much, however. I’d made this decision on

a whim, and it had nothing to do with the incident we were investigating.

“Lady Mary, not that way. They went down this passage.” Sufia pointed me in the right direction.

“Huh? O-Oh, right, sorry.”

Still, I was able to break away from Lady Elizabeth, and we’re going after someone that has nothing to do with this. And hey, if Lady Elizabeth becomes disappointed with me and decides I’m not interesting after all, that’s all the better!

Hiding a conniving smile, I went down the road Sufia indicated and followed the artist.

2. What Is Art?

Before long, we were sitting in a trendy open café with the artist and sipping on some tea.

How did this happen, you may ask? Well, I ended up taking a quick turn in the road, where I ran into the artist, who happened to have stopped in his tracks. Me bumping into him sent him flying a few meters back before he hit the ground. We couldn’t ignore what’d happened to him, so we moved in to help him, which got us discovered.

He didn’t notice I was the one who’d bumped into him, and he didn’t quite realize what’d happened to him. Thankfully, he wasn’t injured, and there was no one else in the street at the time, so no one saw me.

Safina and Sufia, who would have been witnesses to what’d happened, didn’t see it because when I ran around the corner, Tutte stopped for some reason, pointed in the other direction and asked, “Huh? What’s that?” That distracted them, so they hadn’t seen the moment I’d bumped into the man. By the time they’d turned to look, we were both already sitting on the ground.

Seriously, I’ve got a good maid looking after me. But the fact she’d assumed me turning the corner could mean I’d screw up somehow... I should scold her later.

But one way or another, we'd ended up helping him, which naturally meant he'd spotted Sufia behind me, and he kept badgering her to sit down with him for a talk...

I think I might be bad at tailing people. Maybe.

With that self-deprecating thought in mind, I watched the artist continue his passionate pleas to Sufia. Apparently, his name was Toya, and he seemed to be fairly famous around these parts. He had multiple art pieces on display, and they were being sold for high sums. My only reaction was to be mildly impressed, but poor Sufia ended up getting under a lot of pressure with him begging her to model for him. She occasionally directed a glance at me, silently asking that I do something about him.

I'm so sorry I got you caught up in this...but it's about time we get back. Lady Elizabeth should be done by now.

Finishing up the tea I ordered, I was about to cut into their conversation and let Toya know we had to leave, but...

"So, you see, I've been looking for a new art style, a new way of expressing myself. I've been locked up in my room, trying to find some novel new idea, and finally, I made a breakthrough!" Toya said excitedly before placing a bundle of papers—his sketchbook—on the table.

I wanted to refuse to engage with it, but my curiosity got the better of me, so I ended up looking anyway. What I saw there stunned me—drawn in the sketchbook was a young demon woman dressed in very light clothing.

What truly stunned me was the drawing itself. The woman wasn't striking a pose; she was simply standing upright, and there was no background. In place of any background, there were detailed sketches of each of the woman's body parts. Her every individual finger, her nails, eyes, ears, the way her hair grew, her armpits, ankles, the way her horns grew... The rims of the sketch were densely lined with these inset drawings.

Okay, this is pretty horrifying. He looks like a nice, honest person, but what would drive him to draw something like this?!

While I was stunned, Safina wobbled like she might pass out from shock next

to me, and Tutte hurriedly moved in to catch her. And since she was being asked to model for him, Sufia went beyond just creeped out to outright pale with fear.

“What do you say?! This is my newest work!” Toya asked gleefully.

I felt my smile turn tense and nervous. I couldn’t tell him to his face that his art gave the impression he was some kind of axe murderer.

“I-It’s very...idiosyncratic.” I picked my words carefully. “You’ll have to pardon me for not having more to say. I’m a bit unfamiliar with the arts, oho ho ho.”

I did learn a bit about art during my education as a noble lady, but this was far too novel and new for me. And looking at how repulsed Sufia was, I had to guess this wasn’t a case of this style being uniquely popular in this country. I did find myself wondering how Emilia would react to it, though...

“Oh, no good...” Toya said dejectedly, disappointed by my reaction. “Grandpa Gir showered me with praise about it, though...”

“Grandpa Gir?” I asked, curious but the sudden name.

“Oh, don’t you know?” Toya asked, smiling again. “My grandfather is called Girtz. I don’t really know much about magus smiths, but apparently, he’s a very famous one. He mentioned needing an artist, and ended up coming to me for help.”

The four of us stared at Toya for a moment, and then exchanged looks.

Well, would you look at that. We ran into information on Girtz from an unexpected source... Ah! Oh no. Now Lady Elizabeth is going to think I planned this. No, wait, we don’t know for sure that Girtz is involved with this. Maybe he’s got nothing to do with this!

So I told myself, but I couldn’t very well act like I didn’t hear what Toya had said, so I carried the conversation along.

“Um, if you don’t mind me asking, is Mr. Girtz interested in your art?”

“Oh, yes. When he looked at my art, he went ‘This is what I was looking for!’ But he said he wanted me to draw my models with the full-body sketch and detail drawings separated. I find doing so to not be very artistically compelling,

but I was just glad someone was interested in my art, so I agreed to do as he requested. He said he wanted my next model to be a young beastman maid... Ah. Was I supposed to keep that part secret?"

By the time he said that, Toya realized he was probably supposed to keep quiet about the details of his work.

Well, too late for that. A bit careless of him, no?

"So, you approached Sufia for that?" I pressed the question, realizing I was talking to someone with a loose tongue.

"Yes! When I saw her in town, I realized this was who I needed, so I drew a sketch of her, showed it to Grandpa Gir, and he agreed that this was who we needed!" Toya replied cheerfully.

Sufia, however, reacted badly—her tail stood on end from fear, and she held her arms around her chest, trembling.

Yeah, this is terrifying. Crazy, even. I can understand how you feel... And I mean, what's Girtz doing leaving behind his apprentice for this? But after hearing this much, we have to go and meet Girtz now...

"Excuse me, but from what you just said, it sounds like you're not doing this on your own, but because Mr. Girtz asked you, right? You showed him your sketches, which he approved, and you invited Miss Sufia over at his request."

"Huh? Ah, yes, that was the sequence of events." Toya nodded, looking confused at the sudden change in topic.

"In that case, do you have the authority to discuss her modeling fee, time commitment fee, and any additional fees or compensations for her doing modeling work for you, as well as the authority to schedule the time and date when she would model for you?" I asked him, maintaining a cordial smile.

"Huh? N-No, um, now that you mention it, I...I suppose I'd have to ask gramps about all that..."

"In that case, I think it'd be best if we discussed those matters with the client," I concluded with a smile.

"Well, yes, but Grandpa Gir is preoccupied and is refusing to see anyone..."

“Well, if the client isn’t going to make a show of their good faith, I’m afraid we can’t trust you. It’s a very interesting offer, and we could consider it given certain arrangements, but I’m afraid we can’t agree to it as things stand... Oh, it’s a pity, but we’ll have to ask you not to approach her anymore...”

I pushed things along like I was talking about my maid and not Emilia’s, effectively lying by making it seem like I was in any position to decide Sufia’s fate here. I had to act fast so as to not give Toya the time to think things through.

I made to get up from my seat. “N-No, w-wait!” Toya called for me to stop. “F-Fine, I’ll take you to see Grandpa Girtz. He’s the one requesting this work, so I could convince him to see you.”

“...Oh. Well, that’s good to hear.”

I basically pulled a twist on the tried-and-true pattern of “If they insist they need to talk to their boss to make a decision, have them bring their boss over.” But once I paused to think about it, I realized I’d been playing a pretty dangerous game here. Sufia was likely famous for being the princess’s maid, so he could just as well have called my bluff and asked me, “And who are you supposed to be, exactly?”

Thankfully, I’d been able to pressure Toya into making a reckless choice. He was such a sheltered artist that he was ignorant of the ways of the world, and this could have possibly been the first time he’d had to handle negotiations like this. I honestly didn’t expect things to go this well, and once I’d left his sight, I cracked a thin, witchlike smile to myself.

“...Lady Mary, you really are cut from the same cloth as Lady Elizabeth,” Sufia commented dryly as she looked at me from the side. “At this point, I must conclude Her Highness is the most naive girl in this group.”

I instantly became speechless. Being compared to Lady Elizabeth was all sorts of uncomfortable, but being lumped in with Emilia was insulting in its own way, and after a moment of brewing in gloom, I returned to my natural expression.

What does she mean, I “really am” like her?

But before I could question Sufia about that, Toya seemed to have regained

his cheer. "I'll escort you to Grandpa Gir, then!" he said, getting to his feet and putting his sketchbook into his bag.

Miss Iks showed up, apparently having been watching over us from afar. I explained the situation and asked her to contact Lady Elizabeth and let her know where we'll be. She sent a soldier to do so and decided to join us in case something dangerous happened, and she gave Safina her katana, just in case.

Huh? But what about me?

I was baffled that Miss Iks didn't give me my weapon too, but then Tutte leaned in and whispered into my ear.

"I have your sword, Lady Mary. I thought that someone else carrying it could make people question what it's made out of."

"Oh, Tutte..." I was moved by my capable maid. "How would I even get through life without you? So, where did you put it?"

"Inside the carriage."

"Then what's the point?!"

"I'm sorry, Lady Mary. I just didn't know we'd need it right now..."

"You could have just given it to me back in the carriage."

"Well, I kept quiet about it because I thought you would definitely pull something if you had it with you."

"Hey, hold on. That was rude." I glared at her, but she simply looked back at me peevishly.

"Can you say for certain nothing would've happened?"

"I cannot!" I threw in the towel right away.

"You two get along so well, Lady Mary and Miss Tutte. You're like sisters." Sufia giggled, looking at our comedic back-and-forth.

Tutte and I looked at each other, and then hung our heads awkwardly.

"A-Anyway, let's depart! Mr. Toya, would you show us the way?" I asked, paying our bill at the café. I then made to walk off, but then...

“Uh, it’s the other way...” Toya pointed out uncomfortably.

Once I realized I’d just walked into a clichéd situation, I stopped in my tracks, going red up to my ears.

And so, having gained information on Girtz from an unexpected source, I made my way to meet the old magus smith.

3. We’ve Arrived

As expected, Toya took us in the opposite direction from the firm we’d arrived at with Lady Elizabeth.

At this point, if I went back to the firm and said I already found Girtz or something, Lady Elizabeth would be less impressed and lose interest in me.

And so, I followed Toya, frustrated that nothing seemed to go the way I wanted. But as we did, I became curious about the route we were taking there. For some reason, we weren’t going along main streets, but through back alleys, and we were moving further away from the active part of town. Everything was beginning to look terribly samey, and I wasn’t sure I’d be able to find my way back on my own.

“Once you get away from the city center, everything looks rather dreary, winding, and empty...” I whispered, looking around.

Sufia graciously offered an explanation. “This area used to be part of the port town, but when Mayor Dabzal executed an urban reform plan suggested by Lady Elizabeth, the place became harder to live in, and many of the residents migrated away. Now the area is a shadow of what it used to be, and it’s mostly slum neighborhoods and abandoned homes.”

While the explanation made sense, I had to wonder why he was taking us here.

“So the people living here...” I whispered.

“Well, that would be people with special circumstances...” Sufia replied.

Sensing the implication in her words, Miss Iks, who was walking at the back of our group, started looking around more cautiously. Just as I began becoming

suspicious myself, a group of large men stood in front of Toya, blocking his path.

“Heh heh heh, hey there, bro. I see you’re walking around with some fine company. I’m sure you can’t handle this many ladies on your own. Mind sharing some of ’em with us?”

And like it was on demand, the most clichéd thugs imaginable showed up.

“Wh-Wh-Who are you?!” Toya asked in a panic.

His flustered reaction, coupled with how the men were clearly trying to intimidate him, implied he wasn’t in on this. It really looked like we’d just walked into the single most hackneyed situation.

But we’ve got Miss Iks and Safina here, who are both armed. And there’s me...who isn’t armed, but I’ve got magic, so I’ll be fine. I’d honestly rather they stay away from me, because I don’t know if I’ll be able to restrain myself.

But as I was thinking, the situation progressed. The thugs moved in on us with a cry of “Get ’em!” and for some reason went for me.

“Why does everyone keep chasing me in every situation?!” I shouted as I backed away from them.

“Well, that’s because you’re the cutest and you’d fetch the best price if they sold you off,” Tutte chimed in.

“Oh, is that why? That’s flattering... I mean, no! Fire Ball!”

I threw a fireball at their feet, scattering flames over the ground and making them stop in their tracks.

“Sh-She’s a sorcerer!” The thugs looked alarmed.

Wait, why are they surprised I can use magic?

As I grumbled inwardly, the situation resolved itself. The men turned their backs to Miss Iks, which was a bad idea, because she instantly moved in to beat them up.

“Nice decoy, Regalia.” Miss Iks praised me after making short work of the thugs. “Good thinking on your feet there. You kept their attention fixed on you, and thanks to that, everything went as planned.”

I had to wonder how she knew they would focus on me, and decided to ask. Maybe there was some kind of brilliant strategy involved.

“Hmm, why did they all come right at me?” I asked.

“Huh? Well, that’s because you weren’t armed and were just standing there, looking like a weak, spoiled young lady. That was some good acting on your side. Well, that and you do look like you’d fetch the highest price if they sold you off.”

Yeah, okay, no brilliant strategy here! And you just copied Tutte for that last reason! Did they get startled at me using magic because they thought I was some vacuous rich girl?! I mean, yeah, I was lost in thought, but I didn’t look that blank-headed, right?! Right...? I thought to myself, stricken with grief.

“Hm, where’s Mr. Toya?” Safina looked around restlessly.

Indeed, he was nowhere to be seen. *He didn’t run off somewhere, did he? Was he really in league with the thugs?* But just as I began suspecting him, Sufia pointed in a certain direction, her expression fed up.

“I was watching him the whole time. He panicked, ran off, bumped his head into the wall, and passed out over there.”

Yeah, okay, he wasn’t in cahoots with them! I came to my verdict about the idiot lying limply on the ground.

“He took us to a pretty dangerous area, though,” Miss Iks said. “Some of those thugs were humans too. Do stowaways gather easily in places like this? Anyway, what do we do with these people? We can’t just leave them here.”

She approached Toya carefully and woke him up. She then tied up the thugs and decided to hand them over to the city guard. In the meantime, we were to stay where we were and wait for her return.

“But if it takes too long, the sun’s going to set. And I’m pretty sure this place will get even more risky once it’s dark out.” I objected to Miss Iks’s idea. It felt like us hanging around here at night would be like sheep walking through a wolf den (the thugs being the sheep and me being the wolf).

Who knows what might happen here at night. It’s scary.

“V-Very well, then I’ll give you the map Grandpa Gir gave me,” Toya offered. “He’d been moving around from place to place, so he had a stranger deliver this to me in secret.” He handed over a map and a scribbled piece of paper.

“Are you sure we can have this?”

“The letter said not to share the map with anyone, but since you have the model he wants to hire, you should be fine. Please, take it. Grandpa Gir should see you so long as you have this paper.”

Everything seemed perfect on our side, but I really got the feeling Mr. Girtz wanted his whereabouts to remain secret.

Are you sure sharing information with a guy who just leaks information to anyone he meets is wise, Mr. Girtz? Feels like you’re getting the wrong person for this job here. Besides, why are you skulking around all secretly like that if you just want a model for a painting? I can’t help but feel like there’s something else at play here.

Looking at Toya’s carefree behavior made me carefree in turn, so I agreed to take the map.

“Then I will watch over the thugs until Mr. Toya returns with the guards,” Miss Iks instructed us. “Regalia, you and your group take the map and go ahead.”

With that, we walked off on our own. We all watched Toya leave in the opposite direction, and once he was gone, we made our way to our destination. We had Sufia use the map since, unlike us, she was familiar with the area. *This isn’t because I’m suspected of being bad with directions. That isn’t why!* I repeated this important fact to myself twice over.

After walking for a while, Sufia started speaking tiredly as she squinted at the map.

“This is...a very poorly drawn map with very bad handwriting. It almost feels encrypted.”

“Really? Apparently, Girtz drew it,” I said and peered at the map.

Yeah, even a little kid could draw a better map. Whoever drew this can’t draw

or write to save their lives.

“...Say, Miss Sufia, are you sure we’re going the right way?” I asked anxiously.

“It should be fine. I do have the area’s layout memorized, so I’m comparing the map with what I know.”

Sufia saying this was very encouraging, but I had to wonder why she’d memorized this area’s layout.

“Why are you so familiar with this place?” I yielded to my curiosity and voiced my doubt.

“Whenever Princess Emilia slips away and causes trouble, she flees to this part of town to escape Lady Elizabeth’s wrath. I have to come here often to bring her out of hiding, so I ended up memorizing this place,” Sufia explained with a dazzling smile.

I could see the weariness behind her smile, though, and could only quietly identify with the hardships of her job.

“It just occurred to me...” Sufia suddenly said as she led us.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Toya said he got this map today, yes?”

“He did,” I confirmed, recalling what he’d said.

“How is he going to get there himself without the map?” Sufia said, stopping in her tracks.

I did the same, stopping where I stood, and an awkward air hung between us. He’d handed over the map so naturally that I hadn’t realized it in the moment, but that was a good question. I felt myself break into a cold sweat.

“I-I’m sure he’s memorized the map, or it’s somewhere he knows?” I said by way of wishful thinking, trying to calm Miss Sufia just as much as I was trying to convince myself.

But then I thought back to Toya’s bubbly, smile and empty-minded attitude. *Not likely... He totally looks like he just didn’t think it through.*

“Well, I hope so, because if he can’t find the place, Miss Iks won’t be able to

get there either..." Sufia said, and the realization she was right made me go pale.

He'd handed over the map so confidently, and he'd probably assumed Miss Iks knew where to go, as well.

"I-It's fine... I think... I mean, he's a painter, maybe he copied the map!" I suggested.

"I hope so," Sufia said and continued walking.

I prayed that Toya was well-prepared for this, but I couldn't shake off the feeling we'd just lost Miss Iks's support.

After walking for a while, Sufia stopped and turned to look at me.

"Is this the place?" I asked, looking at the dead end wall standing in front of us.

We stared blankly at the wall, but I was actually sure we'd found the right place because I could see part of the wall looked hazy. *Here it is again, obfuscation magic. Or maybe it's illusion magic this time? Everyone always goes for this when they need to hide something.*

But though I could tell the place had had a spell placed on it, explaining how I could tell was terribly annoying. I wasn't sure I could make up an excuse about how I'd figured it out.

So, how am I going to explain it away...? I mean, just the fact the entrance is hidden makes it look super suspicious. Maybe we shouldn't go in...

If Girtz were just living in secret somewhere it'd have been one thing, but going as far as using magic to make the place undetectable made me wary to check it out. What was the finest magus smith in Relirex doing under such secrecy? And yet, he was also letting that blabbermouth Toya hang outside and potentially spill his secret. The whole thing was starting to feel terribly mismatched.

To begin with, if Toya came here, he wouldn't recognize there's an entrance here. What are you going to do then, Grandpa Gir?

But then I remembered something else Toya said that felt off. *He mentioned something about the paper... Did he mean...?*

“Sufia, can you hold the map against the wall?”

“Hm? Like this?” Sufia asked, acceding to my seemingly random suggestion.

But nothing happened!

Aaaargh, you crazy old kook! What are we supposed to do?!

I became embarrassed at having my idea amount to nothing after I’d suggested it so confidently, and I complained to Girtz in my mind.

“Nothing happened,” Safina said apologetically.

Hearing this, I decided to resort to drastic measures.

“Give me the map. I’ll try it.”

I took the map from Sufia and stepped up to the spot where the wall turned hazy. Silence hung in the air as the other three stared at me, and I took a deep breath, calming myself from the embarrassment.

I then slammed the paper hard against the wall. But the moment my hand touched the wall, I alone could hear the sound of something shattering, and the illusion of the wall cleared, revealing an entrance on the other side.

“Oooh!” the other three exclaimed and clapped.

“Wow, Lady Mary! I knew we could count on you,” Safina praised me.

“I see, so that paper had a spell cast on it to undo obfuscation magic,” Sufia concluded. “I guess I must have put it on the wrong spot, and the spell didn’t trigger. Very impressive, Lady Mary.”

“I was surprised, though,” Tutte said, seeing through my ruse. “For a moment, I thought you got angry and decided to smash the wa—”

She swallowed her words at the last moment. Still, I couldn’t overlook this and pulled Tutte toward me, brought her to a corner of the wall and started tickling her at high speed all over. To her, it must have felt like I was simultaneously tickling her everywhere.

“Eeek! L-Lady, Mary... I-I’m, s-s-s-shorry, aha ha ha! P-Please, stop...” she

laughed and cried harder than I've ever seen before.

She'd been half-right, and I had ended up getting angry at the whole situation, and with her being a big help to me, I always felt bad about bullying her too hard, so I let her go. Or at least, that was my excuse. In truth, my common sense was alarming me that tickling her devilishly like this was about to unlock some strange proclivity in my mind best left untapped.



“Whoa... You almost awakened some terrible creature inside me, Tutte...”

“Th-Then don’t...do that, please...”

Safina and Sufia were examining the entrance I’d uncovered, so they didn’t really notice Tutte and me frolicking in our own little world. By the time they looked at us again, they saw me, standing there alarmed as I just narrowly avoided some kind of dark awakening, and Tutte, who was sagging against the wall, thoroughly tickled into submission.

But either way, with this, the way was open before us. We were about to meet the greatest magus smith in Relirex, Girtz. I pulled myself together and triumphantly made my way to the entrance.

4. This Isn’t What I Expected

Since the place was hidden with magic, I felt awkward just walking in conspicuously, so I snuck inside while making sure no one was watching. The others followed my example and did the same for some reason.

The premises felt much more lived-in than the other dilapidated buildings we’d seen in the area thus far. We could hear voices from somewhere inside, which made it even clearer. I listened in carefully, and the voices sounded very busy. It sounded like something heavy was being hauled into a warehouse-like building—the place we came in from was apparently a back entrance.

I get the feeling we could have just walked in, but at this point, we may as well commit to the bit and sneak so we don’t get caught. Plus, we can’t exactly announce we’re here after walking through the back door. That would just look weird.

“Everyone looks very busy here,” Sufia whispered, likely inspired by us sneaking around.

Yeah, we’re completely in sneak mode here.

“All right. Let’s quietly approach Mr. Girtz so as to not disturb their work,” I suggested, half-exasperated with the situation and myself, and everyone nodded.

“By the way, do you even know what Mr. Girtz looks like?” Sufia asked.

“Of course not.” I’d never met him before, after all. “I’m counting on you here, Sufia.”

“You say that, but I haven’t met him either... His works are famous, but he’s never shown himself in public.”

“But, the princess did know him, right? Since you work for her, I thought you’d know him too.”

“As shameful as it is to admit it, Her Highness tends to sneak out and do as she pleases, and she often gives me the slip.”

Well, we’re screwed!

Realizing that none of us knew who Girtz was made me want to just give up on the matter altogether. *Perhaps the best idea would be to just accept the problems it might bring and show ourselves to persuade someone to help us. Thankfully, we’re all women, so the people here likely won’t be too wary of us...hopefully. That said, the best person to persuade people here would probably be me...*

Safina was too timid to hold a proper conversation with a stranger. Tutte and Sufia were maids, which would enable them to present themselves as messengers, but I wasn’t sure that would be wise. In the end, me being a duke’s daughter likely gave me the best social position for the task.

Well, sitting here and thinking about it won’t get us anywhere. Time to put my womanly pride on the line! Let’s go! I braced myself and prepared to step out of the trees.

“...We finally found you.”

“Eeeeeek!” I screeched upon hearing that voice behind me.

I wheeled around and spotted someone who shouldn’t have been there—Fifi.

“M-Miss Fifi, what are you doing here?” I asked, hushing my voice. At this point, it was clear that we were sneaking here.

Fifi began explaining the course of events with an expressionless face. “...Lady Elizabeth went to the firm, but she was too late. They’d already carried

something away. But since they didn't think we'd be onto them so soon, they weren't able to mask their tracks. A soldier came over saying you might find my master here, so I came here with Lady Elizabeth's permission."

But that didn't answer one question—how did she manage to get here? We never told her where we'd gone.

"But how did you find this place?"

"...Um, Lady Elizabeth lent me this." Fifi took out a small, bug-like monster similar to a scarab beetle. It had a string tied to it.

"What does this do?" I asked, confused.

"...This is a male. It accurately tracks its female mate by tracing its pheromones."

"Wow," I hummed, impressed, and eyed the monster curiously. "So you used this monster's trait to have the male lead you here?"

Safina backed away—she was probably grossed out by bugs—but I didn't mind it.

"Wait, hold on. Didn't you run into Miss Iks on the way back? Why isn't she with you?"

"...I did. She said she was waiting for some man called Toya. She did ask me to place waymarks where I was going, so I did. She should find her way here no problem."

Ah, looks like Miss Iks eventually did realize that he didn't know how to get here. Ugh, honestly, it feels likely Toya won't even find his way back to Miss Iks at this rate...

While that did answer one of my questions, I gave up on the idea of Miss Iks coming to our aid.

"Thank you. Also, I understand how this bug monster works, but I don't have its female on me. Do any of you?" I looked at the others.

I didn't recall having a bug placed on me, and everyone else shook their heads too.

“...No, you do have it. Or rather, you were made to carry it,” Fifi said something rather terrifying and looked at Safina.

“Huh? M-Me?” Safina pointed at herself, surprised.

“...Mm, you should have something like a little brooch somewhere on your clothes,” Fifi replied.

We had Safina stand still as I searched her, and indeed, I found a small brooch-like thing pinned to her clothes in a hard-to-see spot.

“There it is...but when did this—” I started saying, but then I realized what happened. Fifi said Elizabeth had given her the bug, which means she must have been the one to put the female on Safina. And the one time she would have been able to put it on Safina without being noticed must have been when she’d been hugging her nonstop in the carriage.

So all that gushing over her was to hide this...?

At this point, I had to start suspecting there was a fishy angle behind every single action Lady Elizabeth took.

Th-That person, she... She couldn’t have predicted I’d voluntarily stray away from her...and that Safina would definitely stick with me...

Her meticulous prediction abilities left me both impressed and frightened. Some instinctive part of me warned me that I mustn’t make an enemy out of Lady Elizabeth. If that were to happen, she’d instantly read through my secret and use it to extort me.

“Lady Mary?” Tutte asked, noticing the alarm in my eyes. I simply answered with a strained smile.

“That’s really impressive,” Safina said, examining the object. “But that’s a brooch, isn’t it? It’s not a female bug monster. Why did the male follow it?”

That was a good question. Looking closely, I saw it had a small receptacle of some sort at its center, but it wasn’t large enough to contain a female bug.

“...This brooch has female pheromones injected into it.” Fifi cleared up the issue. “...The bug was crushed and mixed with medicine to increase its potency, then injected into the brooch’s vessel. This monster’s pheromones remain

active for a few days after it dies.”

We all stared at the brooch pinned onto Safina with abject horror.

“Nooooo!” Safina screamed and threw away the brooch containing the gruesome remains of one female bug monster.

Needless to say, the people nearby heard her scream.

Ah, at this point, getting caught and explaining what happened might be easier...

Safina may have unintentionally moved up our schedule by enabling us to talk to the people here and work things out. As I considered what I should say, Fifi grabbed my arm and started running. Everyone followed us.

“A-Ah, wait, hold on. Where are we going?”

“...We can’t get discovered here. It’s dangerous. Let’s go elsewhere.”

“Why? We’re not up to any mischief. I mean, we did go in without permission from the back entrance, but we can just apologize for that.”

“...Lady Elizabeth gave me a warning. She said we must remain undetected, or the worst possible conclusion will happen.”

Fifi said that with a blank expression, but her tone didn’t sound like she was joking. And if Lady Elizabeth said so, I was inclined to believe her. Even if we weren’t up to no good, there was no guarantee *they* weren’t up to no good.

“She’s right. They went as far as to use magic to hide the entrance,” Sufia said sternly. “Thinking about it simply, if they discover us, they could decide to kill us. And even if they wouldn’t go that far, those thugs could still do something terrible to us...”

“But we just came here to meet Girtz...” I argued.

“...Maybe they don’t want anyone to see master.”

Being beastmen, Sufia and Fifi might have keenly sensed something we couldn’t. They were oddly on edge. Fifi’s swift decision-making kept us from being spotted, but it did alert the guards that someone might have been around.

When I spotted the man who came to check on the spot we'd been occupying moments ago, I was startled.

It's him.

A man covered from head to foot in black was looking around the area we were hiding in. The dangerous atmosphere he gave off was likely what Fifi and Sufia had reacted to. I realized that this was a truly close call—if we'd have stepped out with a smile on our faces, things really would have stumbled down the worst-case scenario, and we would have possibly gotten ourselves killed.

Of course, they'd have had to contend with me, and I wouldn't have let them do that, but still. Staying hidden and acting in secret was the best way to go about this.

But this means Girtz is definitely connected to these thugs. I mean, it's possible they caught him to force him to work or something, but...if that's the case, why did he request Toya to make that drawing? Toya's totally free. If he was in cahoots with these guys, he wouldn't hand us a map to their hideout.

Ah, maybe the thugs told him not to give it to anyone? But he totally did. Does that mean Toya's unrelated to them?

Everything felt so messy that I couldn't quite get my thoughts in order. But I did understand one thing—Mr. Girtz was supporting these dangerous people's evil endeavors. Of course, I had no proof that what they were doing was wrong, but given that they'd sicced monsters on my friends and tried to abduct Tutte, I wasn't inclined to believe they were nice people.

I turned my eyes to Fifi. Given that her teacher might be complicit in these things, I was wondering how she felt as his apprentice. She was expressionless, making it impossible to see what she was feeling, but this surely would have discouraged her.

"Fifi... We don't know for sure that Girtz is willingly siding with them..." I tried to say this, even though I knew it made for little comfort.

Fifi turned to look at me. "...Master *is* siding with them. But I think he doesn't know about the attack on the workshop. All he wants is to create his works, and he leaves all the groundwork and material gathering to others. He's an irritating

old man who makes outrageous demands of others. I intend to smack him when I find him.”

She wasn’t discouraged—if anything, she seemed outright angry. Given how indifferent she was to all this, handling this kind of nonsense must have been an everyday affair to her.

Assuming she’s right about him, why do all the demons I know cause so much trouble for other people?

The list of demons I knew personally was a narrow one. Emilia, the Dark Lord, Lady Elizabeth, and Toya. Each of them was strange in their own way. Girtz himself seemed to be teetering on the line between genius and eccentric, to the point where I couldn’t hope to guess at what he’s thinking. And considering that Fifi said she wants to smack him, I had to start asking myself if he went into hiding not because he was up to something dangerous, but rather because he was scared of her.

“...Oh, and I almost forgot. Have this.” Fifi took something she was carrying on her back and handed it to me. My sword.

For a second, I hesitated to take it. Her handing it to me meant she knew this was my weapon, and a magus smith like Fifi surely knew what it was made out of. She likely thought it made no sense for a swordsman to use such a blade.

“E-Erm, where did you get this?” I asked.

“On the way here, I was told your weapon was in the carriage, so I brought it over.”

I realized some people must know that this embarrassing-looking Legendary Sword (Cringe) was my weapon—be it my family’s squires or attendants. They must have told Fifi. I wasn’t sure if I should be happy about that or not.

“Thanks for going to the trouble of bringing it over.”

“...Sure. It’s made of special material, isn’t it?” Fifi instantly brought up the topic I was wary of, making me instantly tense up.

“W-Well, it’s a one of a kind sword made by Deodora, the finest smith in my kingdom,” I said, trying to paint the sword as special for other reasons.

“...Ooh, so it’s a Deodora work. That explains the fine craftsmanship. But there’s one thing I’m still curious about.”

“Wh-What?”

“Its material aside, why would a sorcerer like you use something that looks like a legendary sword as your staff? Is that just your personal taste?”

Fifi’s idea somehow felt very insulting to me, and I was tempted to deny it on the spot, but I decided to restrain myself.

“W-Well, that’s... Yes, that’s just my taste, my sense of aesthetics... Aha ha...”

Fifi didn’t know I was both a warrior and a sorcerer. She’d been shackled and held face down during the attack incident, so she’d only heard snippets of the conversation and hadn’t seen my altercation with the bandits. The bandits had shouted about me being a sorcerer, so she’d made that assumption. At this point, I decided to just go along with her misunderstanding if it would keep her from doubting the reasons behind my sword too much.

I figured we’d just go over to Girtz’s place, say I want to negotiate with him, and have him come out, but somehow things became really messy... What’s the deal, God?

Ah, but the leopard I’m looking for should be with these thugs, right? I’m sure you picked up on my intentions and guided me here to find her! Yeah, let’s go with that. Thanks, God!

As I made to follow everyone else, I looked up to the sky and thanked God, interpreting things in the way that suited my interest.

5. The Teacher and Apprentice Reunite

After sneaking inside, we hid behind a pile of stacked wooden crates and looked around. The place was more boisterous than I’d imagined, with all the people around being too busy to really notice anything around them. I could tell from the outside, but this was a large warehouse of sorts, with all manner of things being carried in.

“...That looks like a set of weapons. And those are raw materials for making

something..." Fifi commentated as she looked around.

Apparently, they couldn't be bothered to keep the crates they brought in shut, and we could see swords and other weapons contained within. They were all placed in one corner of the warehouse, so all the crates around them must have contained weapons too.

Other crates being carried inside had preserved rations, medical supplies, assorted living wares, and raw materials for building something.

"Are all those crates weapons? And all those building materials... What are they trying to construct?" I asked.

"Who's to say?" Sufia replied as she peered ahead. "There's all these materials here, but no one's actually using them for anything."

I was getting the feeling I was looking at something I shouldn't be witnessing, which made me want to leave at once. But then, in the midst of all the work, a group of men covered in black gathered in the warehouse. I turned to look at them and could keenly hear what they were saying.

"So, what was the trouble at the back entrance all about?"

"There wasn't anyone there, but the spell hiding the way in was undone. Someone almost certainly made it inside."

So they're the ones who cast that spell. Maybe Girtz didn't know the spell was there and thought it was a normal back entrance.

"What?! The spell's been undone?! What kind of high-ranking sorcerer could do that? Don't tell me that witch sent someone...!" one of the black-covered men murmured bitterly.

Said witch must have been Lady Elizabeth, and apparently, undoing that spell was supposed to be really difficult. I decided to actively ignore the fact they'd just said that.

"The timing's too perfect. It only makes sense to suspect that. From what I can tell, the spell wasn't undone too long ago, so it's highly likely they're still inside. I set a trap to ensure no one can get through the back entrance anymore."

“Dammit, I didn’t think she’d make her move this quickly. If the captain’s orders came any later, we’d have gotten caught.”

“The captain?”

“He delayed the carriages for all the supplies that would cause trouble if discovered, and he went on his own to lure the witch away. He might be fighting her as we speak.”

“Well, he’s very eager to cut into demon flesh, so I’m sure he’s satisfied. Besides, the captain’s about the only one who can match that witch. But are you sure leaving behind the divine beast they entrusted us with was the right idea?”

“I mean, that leopard isn’t going to obey our commands without the item the captain has.”

The men talked among themselves in a nervous manner, and I was able to catch onto fascinating information from their conversation.

So that leopard really was a divine beast, and she might be here. Plus, Lady Elizabeth’s up to some pretty dangerous business... I’m glad I didn’t stay there!

“Either way, for now we have to take detours to keep the witch from spotting us and move the supplies here from that firm. We’ll have to hurry up and get the ships ready.”

“But how? How did the witch figure out that firm is connected with us so quickly? Everything’s gone smoothly until now, so what happened?”

The men looked baffled.

That’s because Fifi could recognize the items you used to bind us when you attacked, and Lady Elizabeth looked into that firm beforehand. I silently answered their question.

“Don’t tell me that old geezer’s at fault! Come to think of it, he did say all of a sudden he had to introduce a painter to keep the plan going, and that he wanted to negotiate with Princess Emilia’s maid or something. You don’t think him doing all those things on his own leaked information to her?!”

“No, we’ve always had someone keeping an eye on him. He hasn’t left the

premises the whole time. If anything, he's been shutting himself in so long I'm not even sure what to make of it anymore..."

"I looked into the painter and had him tailed, but he's got nothing to do with the witch. He really is just an ordinary demon. I had a fake firm of ours negotiate and keep an eye on him. He shouldn't be able to get any information connecting to us."

Oh! So that's why everything felt so confusing. Girtz was acting completely separately from these thugs, and Toya's a complete outsider. These guys were who Girtz was so wary of. Still, I guess Girtz was why the thugs went after Sufia instead of Emilia herself... He'll be paying for that.

"But the captain simply dumped all the work of snatching the maid on us because he didn't feel like doing it, and the attack failed. Everything started falling apart after that..."

Oh, you're closing in on the answer! And I guess they weren't working on Girtz's instructions after all...

"Dammit! We shouldn't have gotten the damn geezer involved!" One of the men got angry all of a sudden and stomped off somewhere like he'd made up his mind.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To question the geezer. You guys find the intruders! We can't afford to have the witch hear about this place. And have the others load the ships! Hurry, we can't afford to make any more mistakes. If this becomes a repeat of what happened in Aldia, the captain or that man might—"

With that said, the men split up.

Great timing. Let's follow that guy. He'll lead us to Girtz—he's so irritated he won't notice us.

I looked at the others. They were all so focused on looking around warily that they hadn't heard the men's conversation. Their eyes all fixed on me, realizing I was looking at them. I silently made hand signs, signaling to quietly follow that man.

They all cocked their heads, puzzled.

Tch. Spies always use these hand signs in movies and stuff. I thought it'd be cool, but I just embarrassed myself... Well, it's not like I really know much about hand signals anyway... I'd only relied on this superficial information in the heat of the moment and out of what I can only call youthful indiscretion.

Oh, I could just use communication magic for this. But I guess it's too late to set that up now... I'll have to do it later.

"...Let's stay hidden and follow that man," I said in a whisper, swallowing my shame.

Everyone nodded silently, and we got moving. The man stomped toward a distant corner of the warehouse. There was nothing there at first glance, but he started fiddling with the wall, implying a secret door was hidden there. I waited for the door to open and looked at Safina, signaling for her to move in and attack. She noticed my gaze and looked back.

Once again, gripped by the situation, I made a hand signal, but this time she understood me and nodded.

Oh, she looks kind of happy. I guess my original hand sign worked this time around.

While I was lost in my thoughts, the man finished fiddling with the wall. The floor in front of him slid away with a heavy grinding sound, revealing a downward staircase.

At that moment, Safina and I sprinted forward and, as I specified, attacked the man from both sides.

"Huh?!"

The man was taken by surprise on top of being as upset as he was. He couldn't keep up with our ambush, and we easily subdued him with a pincer attack. We then carefully descended the staircase, and thankfully, there were no guards stationed there.

I was wondering what we were supposed to do with the man we'd knocked out, but Fifi and Sufia easily carried him down with us. *I guess beastmen have*

more basic stamina and brute strength than humans do. Sufia had also taken a rope the man had and used it to skillfully tie him up.

“You look used to this,” I noted.

“I often need to tie Her Highness up so I can hand her over to Lady Elizabeth,” Sufia explained with a casual smile.

Seriously, this country treats its princess way too crudely. I’m starting to feel bad for Emilia... But I guess she has it coming.

I looked around and confirmed the place was safe. Compared to all the work above, this place was quiet and deserted—their operation must have been in dire straits to make them have to organize their people like this.

This was our chance.

The underground cellar was relatively spacious, but it wasn’t particularly winding. One could very well call it a storage cellar, with doors leading to multiple rooms. I decided to give up on hand signs and form a communication magic contract with Safina while I had the chance. I drew a magic circle on the ground, and the two of us conducted the contract.

“*How’s this?*” I asked in my mind.

“*Yes, I can hear you.*” Safina’s voice echoed in my head.

With this, we were prepared.

All right, so, if Girtz and the leopard are here, where would they put them? Raising our voices and calling them would be dangerous...

If we were to shout, it would echo, and who knows who it could lure out. But while I was trying to figure out what to do next, Fifi actively moved things along.

“...I can smell master. Over here.”

Unsurprisingly, beastmen had a keen sense of smell. Without a better idea of how to go about this, I looked around to make sure no one was approaching and followed Fifi. It didn’t take long for Fifi to stop in front of one of the doors. It appeared we’d reached our destination.

Safina and I tensed up, unsure of what we would find beyond the door.

Ugh, at times like these, I wish I'd learned detection magic like characters in the books and anime I watched in my past life had. Well, I guess I don't know if that kind of magic exists in this world...and I guess convenient magic like that would be reserved to high-order spells, which would make it difficult to learn.

After reflecting on my past failures, I'd stopped looking up spells outside of the ones we learned in the academy so as to not draw needless attention toward myself—but then I ran into times like these, where a certain spell would be not just handy, but a clear solution to a problem.

“...Don't worry. I smell one person inside the room,” Fifi assured me.

“Yes, and as far as I can hear, the noise inside the room implies there's only one person inside too.” Sufia nodded.

I put my trust in the beastmen's natural talents and placed my hand on the door. It opened with a creak—thankfully, it hadn't been locked. But since it wasn't used much, the hinges were rusted, and the creaking was quite loud.

Someone inside the room stirred upon hearing the creaking.

“Who's there?! First you transfer me all of a sudden, then you neglect me, and now you won't even let me have some tea in peace?!”

The one who shouted angrily at the door was an old demon man. His angry complaining gave me a pretty good impression of what kind of person he must be. He seemed very stubborn and selfish, the kind of person who works people around him to the bone and causes everyone a great deal of grief and concern.

“Mm? Who are you? You're a new face,” he said with a pompous—if dubious—tone, noticing that I wasn't one of the usual thugs. “Are you a new employee here? Make me some fresh tea then! I'm too busy working!”

With that said, he turned his back like he'd lost interest in me and faced his work table again. Taken aback by his attitude, I made to say something, but once Fifi passed me by, I fell quiet in shock. She was as expressionless as ever, but her face now gave off a sense of chilling coldness.

“...I found you, master.” She'd said it in a whisper, but it was enough to make Girtz jerk. He hopped out of his seat and turned around to look at us, all his arrogance from earlier turning to nervous trembling.

“F-F-F-Fifi... Wh-What are you doing here? Didn’t you see my letter? I said not to go looking for me.”

“...A lot happened. The situation’s changed, and I can’t ignore you anymore.”

For some reason, Fifi’s fists were clenched and crackling, and the old man was backing away from her nervously. I got the feeling I understood how the relationship between this master and apprentice worked. When she said she was going to smack him, she meant it.

“Th-There are extenuating circumstances at play here. F-Factors you cannot understand!”

“No excuses!” Fifi shouted uncharacteristically and swung her fist in an uppercut into his stomach.

“Gaaah!” Girtz groaned as he bent forward.

She did iiiit! No mercy right off the bat! Is she the kind of girl who’s really scary when she gets mad?

The Relirex Kingdom’s greatest magus smith sank to the floor, twitching, without a shred of dignity to him.

“U-Ugh... I-I’m sorry I...caused you trouble...” Girtz groaned out, still twitching.

Apparently satisfied with his apology, Fifi regained her usual expressionless face and returned to my side.

Huh, what? Is she basically telling me to handle the rest? I thought this would be a tearful reunion between an apprentice and the teacher she hasn’t seen in years...but I guess not?

For a moment, I mulled over what to do, but to begin with, we didn’t have time to waste here.

“So, you’re the magus smith Girtz, right?” I said. “I’m Mary Regalia. There’s much we need to ask you, but for the time being, we need to get out of here.”

Girtz, who’d finally recovered from the blow, had his eyes fixed on someone else. Needless to say, his eyes were transfixed on Sufia, who was standing behind me. The moment he’d laid eyes on her, I could hear her swallow

nervously.

“Ooooh! Those cat eeeeeears! They’re just like what I saw in the sketch!”

He pushed past me and approached Sufia with such intensity that it was hard to believe he’d keeled over from a punch not one minute ago.

Hey, listen to me, old man! I grumbled, offended that he’d not only ignored me but had nearly bumped into me.

“Oooh, good, this is perfect! Not quite as plump as I’d have liked, but we can adjust for that! Aaah, where’s Toya?! I need him to handle the design, now!” he ranted excitedly, leering at Sufia and even stroking her tail.

He looked like nothing but a perverted old man, and Sufia went teary-eyed, her thoughts shutting down from the shock.

“...Tch, I suppose that wasn’t enough to teach him a lesson,” Fifi murmured, fed up. “Miss Safina, if you wouldn’t mind?”

As it turned out, Fifi had asked Safina to do something beforehand.

“Huh? Ah, yes... Um, I’m sorry!” Safina apologized and sheepishly poked the hilt of her katana into Girtz’s flank. Quite forcefully, of course...

“Guh!” The old man sank to the floor again.

This time had done the trick, apparently, because he didn’t instantly recover.

I’m, uh, of two minds about this. I feel like what we’re doing here isn’t right on a fundamental level... What with us beating up an old man...

The atmosphere became very strange as I looked up to the ceiling, wondering what to do about this eccentric kook of an old man.

6. What Is He Talking About?

“...Let’s go home, master,” Fifi told Girtz, who was once again twitching on the floor.

The old man heavily sat up.

He recovered already! Demons are amazing... I was impressed by this

unimportant tidbit.

“I shan’t!” Girtz sat cross-legged on the spot, refusing to budge. “I will remain here and pursue my inspiration! This place is good to me. I am fed three times a day, they serve my every need, and no one nags me! Anything I need to work, they provide! The budget is never an issue! This is paradise!”

He spread out his hands, his expression radiant as he explained how this place was a dream come true for him.

Whoa, he’s done for. At this rate, he’ll let them trick him into making anything, and he’ll end up creating something really dangerous.

“Uh, may I say something?” I said, unable to stay out of their exchange.

“Who are you, squirt?” He looked at me dubiously. “If you’re a servant, get me some t— Ghaaaa!”

“‘Squirt’?!” As I was about to lose my patience at him both for forgetting I’d just introduced myself to him and for calling me a “squirt,” Tutte grabbed me from behind, pulling me back.

However, Fifi walked over and stomped on his face. The way she remained expressionless as she did so was what made it scary. She’d looked so calm and collected for as long as I’d known her, so her severe approach toward her teacher made me forget my own anger.

“...So, what now, Lady Mary?” Fifi moved the conversation along.

“Um, ah, right. You said you want to stay here, Mr. Girtz, but do you really know what the people you’re working for are up to? Why are you even working here to begin with?”

I brought up the key issue, which we somehow seemed to keep forgetting with how off track we’d gotten.

“Huh? Do I know who these people are?” Girtz moved Fifi’s foot away, leaving a footprint on his face, and scoffed at me. “I have no idea, and frankly, I don’t care. They give me the perfect work environment and that’s all that matters. Don’t be stupid, girl.”

What he was saying was absurd, and why did he have to be condescending?

Gosh, I want to smack him so hard...

I clenched my sword with my fist, trembling in anger, but Tutte lay her hands over mine, whispering in my ear to bear with it. I could understand why Fifi was so belligerent about him—having to put up with this every day would exhaust anyone’s patience, but Fifi had somehow been able to overcome that.

Looking at the others, I could see that on the other side of the room, Sufia was doing much the same, trying to stop Safina, who was about to draw her katana with empty, lightless eyes. She was mumbling something to herself nonstop, and seeing it scared me, which helped return me to my senses.

“Nngh, I went too far. I apologize.” Girtz shrunk in fear at Safina’s bloodlust and apologized. “But, like I said, I have no idea what those people are doing. I’ve shut myself away down here and focused on my research the whole time, so I haven’t the foggiest about what’s going on!”

“Ah, I see. So, who introduced you to them? Or did they approach you on their own?” I continued interrogating him, though I didn’t expect much.

“Who do you think approached me? Dabzal the mayor, who else?! He introduced me to them and requested I do work for him.” Girtz dropped a bombshell revelation, and I froze up.

I had a feeling this might be the case, but wow, I guess the mayor really is involved... Wait, Reifus and the others are at his dinner party! Are they going to be all right there?

The realization my friends were right in the middle of the enemy’s lair made me tense up.

“...Master, what are you making here?” Fifi, who had approached his work table and examined the papers there, asked.

“Mm? What was it again? It wasn’t important to me... Oh, right, they called it the ‘extra-large annihilation magus engine’ or something!”

Hearing Girtz nonchalantly say something that sounded so blatantly dangerous made me look up and sigh, overwhelmed.

God, why are you giving talent to people like him?

“But that’s nothing but a prototype for me to realize my true ambition. Put simply, it’s incomplete work. It’s far too big to move, and there isn’t enough mana to power it. Plus, they kept rushing me to finish it already, so I cut a lot of corners making it. Dabzal doesn’t know any of that though—I demonstrated that the individual parts work properly to make him think everything’s fine, and since it’s impossible to test something that large in secret, I bet he still hasn’t noticed since I only delivered him the finished product a month ago! Bwa ha ha ha!” Girtz topped off his explanation with loud laughter.

Delivering incomplete work...? That’s fraud! Well, I guess that’s good for us?

“Um, do you know what he was trying to do by having you make that weapon? Did he do it to maintain the city’s peace?” Safina asked.

“I don’t know! But if he brought that thing out to defend the city, it’d end up destroying everything in the process.”

I looked up to the heavens reproachfully again. “Then why would he do that?” I wondered aloud.

“Isn’t it obvious? So he can seize control of the port town and then head for the capital.” The unexpected voice of a young man answered my question.

We all turned around to look at the source of the voice, alarmed. I moved in front of Tutte to shield her as I gazed at the door, where a youth dressed in a priest’s garb stood, looking at us with amused eyes.

Ugh, we were so distracted by Girtz’s craziness that we ended up overstaying our welcome here. But I didn’t hear him come in at all... Who is this guy? A priest?

Though he was dressed like a priest, his clothes were slightly different from the Aldian priests I knew. Plus, he looked much too young and vulgar to be an ascetic monk.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I don’t intend to introduce myself, and I’m not expecting you to introduce yourselves either. We exist in the shadows, as it were, so we have no need for names. Besides, you and I will never meet again...” The youth smiled, the air about him belligerent and hostile.

Well, I don't exactly feel driven to get your name and be your friend, so I don't mind if you remain anonymous.

“Oh, but you were in the middle of a talk, weren't you? Just don't do anything silly.” The priest produced a blade that was slightly longer than a dagger from his pocket and aimed it at Sufia, who was looking at the door, alarmed. “Now then, you got off track. You mentioned the engine was incomplete? That's no good. You should do your work properly.”

The blade fixed on Sufia slowly drew closer to her.

“Stop! That girl is an important model to fulfill my ambitions! Treat her carefully, whelp!”

He may have thought he was objecting to him bravely, but the truth was that Girtz just said something very inappropriate, and I had to restrain the urge to lash out at him for it. The young man, however, didn't seem to have my patience.

“Aha ha ha! Everyone thinks they can boss me around...but the only one who can give me orders is the great one. Don't talk down to me, you filthy demon cur!”

The youth charged at Girtz, his flippant smirk giving way to an enraged expression. Fifi pushed Girtz out of the way, moving in to take the blow for him. I was relieved to see that, when all was said and done, she loved her teacher.

The youth's blade clashed with my sword, producing a loud clanging sound that reverberated throughout the room. Safina didn't need me to say anything; she drew her sword using iai jutsu from the other side of the man from me, slashing at him. However, he hopped back in at the last second, forming distance from us before stepping out of the room.

A priest can't possibly move that quickly... Oh, I get it, he must be one of the thugs in black but disguised as a priest.

Since most of my combat experience at this point was only against non-humanoid monsters, I wasn't keen enough to properly gauge a human's abilities. Everyone looked about the same to me, and his first blow felt about as skilled as Sacher to me—but apparently, that hadn't been the case at all.

I used the opening to bolt out of the room and enter the more spacious basement area. The room was too cramped and occupied by everyone else, which made it difficult for me to fight. With this, I could easily move to a spot where none of the others would be in my striking range, and at worst, they could close the door to defend themselves from our clash.

“Wow! Color me impressed. A dainty girl like you, blocking my strike,” the youth boasted jestingly, drawing a second sword.

A dual-blade user... In video games, dual-wielders had short attack ranges. I hated how they'd never even make it to the monsters before they got attacked themselves... Irrelevant information crossed my mind.

“Silver...” the youth muttered. “Right, they did say there was someone like that among the Aldian prince’s sycophants. So it was you.”

“So what if I am...?”

I latched onto his talkative nature and coaxed him to keep talking while I was trying to figure out how to keep the others safe.

“Eh heh heh, who’d have thought the evening party Dabzal arranged to stall the prince would end up stalling him instead? With him having to host the prince, he was unable to act even after he heard the witch showed up at the firm. To think his own plan bit him in the backside... What a joke. But weren’t you supposed to be sick in bed or something? Did you make up that lie so you could move in secret?”

I only half-listened to the cackling youth’s spiel as I gazed back. The damn old man, as oblivious to the atmosphere as ever, tried to inspect Sufia for any wounds or blemishes. The others had to move in to pull him away from her.

What are you doing, you perverted old man?! Read the room, why don’t you?!

“And speaking of that fever, you were the one who beat back that raid, weren’t you? I didn’t believe it when I read the report, but now that I’ve tested your mettle, I can see it happening. Not many can block my attacks.”

“Is that right...?” I replied vaguely, more occupied with making sure my friends were fine.

“I was watching you from the shadows when you showed up at the firm. You gave me a bit of a scare when you found the hideout this quickly though. That foxfolk beastman girl with you can identify the inner workings of items, right? I was shocked when she exposed the firm...but that did explain everything. Dabzal did say one of the binding shackles was missing... You must have taken it, anticipating that Dabzal would get in your way.”

“...Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.”

What the priest said sounded familiar, but I was still focused on glancing back at the old man’s shenanigans.

“Ignoring you when you left the witch’s side was a blunder on my behalf. I didn’t think you’d zero in on that insignificant painter like that. Did he have something to do with you finding out about this place?”

That question actually drew my attention and made me react. “Girtz drew a map.”

“Oh, so he sent it to the painter with a letter... I hear that painter is actually a highly regarded artist by the Aldian nobility. And you look like a noble, so I guess that’s how you knew him. The witch might not have been connected to him, but you were... Aha ha ha! So that’s what happened! Our plan was starting to fall apart as early as that, didn’t it?!”

The youth laughed like it’d all clicked into place for him, and at that point I already had my concentration fixed squarely on him.

“When did you get involved in this, hmm? At this point, everything’s starting to look suspicious. Did you realize what was happening and use the painter to get in touch with Girtz and twist the situation in your favor? That would explain Girtz coming up with that crazy demand about wanting the maid. You had him do this to make us act and produce a trail of evidence for you. Or did the witch call you over to resolve this incident and have you come in as a guest of the princess? In the end, I guess we focused so much on evading the witch we didn’t consider other threats.”

“...What?”

I got the feeling the priest was basically making up strange explanations at

this point, which spurred me to take what he said more seriously.

“Heh heh heh, and we fell for it, hook, line, and sinker, giving you the opening you needed to expose us. You even used the witch to start digging around and scare us into moving Girtz to another hideout. Then you had Girtz expose the hideout by sending a letter to the painter and came here while the witch was stalling me... Aha ha ha! So that’s what happened. With all that in mind, him sabotaging the engine was probably your idea too... How fearsome. The witch or the Aldian prince wasn’t the threat we should have been wary of. It was you all along!”

“Erm... What are you talking about?” I blinked, not following his convoluted explanation.

“Heh heh, just how many people did you manipulate from behind the scenes with that oblivious act of yours? You are dangerous. An obstacle to His Grace. So I will eliminate you here!”

Wait, I’m not pretending! I really don’t understand what you want! How many times is this going to happen? How many times will everyone get carried away with their theorycrafting when I didn’t do anything?!

“Come forth, divine beast!”

The man took out a small, sturdy, fancy-looking container that reminded me of a jewelry box. Once he shouted those words, one of the doors in the basement opened with a creak, and from inside it stepped out the snow leopard I saw the other day. She walked out, slowly and lethargically, and gave a lackadaisical yawn. No impact, no menace, no suspense.

I mean, if you’re gonna be some lofty divine beast, you may as well act the part! Commit to the bit! Like, I don’t know, use your forelegs to kick the door open or something! You look like you were snoozing until just now! Get your act together!

7. Two-on-Two Battles Are Our Speciality

The large leopard approached me sluggishly.

“Oh, that’s the leopard you told us about, Lady Mary... So there really was a

leopard,” Safina whispered.

I glanced back and saw that Sufia, Safina, and Fifi had used a rope they’d found somewhere to tie Girtz up, so they could evacuate this place at any given moment. I then moved my eyes forward again, fixing my gaze on the youth and the leopard. It didn’t look like he was going to let us get away.

“Heh heh heh, are you shocked?” The youth flashed an unnerving smile. “This is one of the divine powers bequeathed to me by His Grace.”

Divine...? So Lady Elizabeth was right—that leopard is from the Papacy. I guess this guy works for the Papacy too... Oh, this is going to be trouble.

My expression tensed up as I realized this situation was going in a very bad direction for me, but by contrast...

“Oh hey, how are you doing? You found this place really quickly. I’m impressed,” the leopard said lazily.

I chose to ignore her. Looking around, it didn’t look like anyone was fazed by the leopard having just talked, which, given how much her lackadaisical tone went against the tense atmosphere hanging over the room, I’d have expected someone to react in at least some way.

I’m probably the only one who can hear her talking... Even this guy can’t hear her, and he’s the one ordering her around. If I respond, everyone’s going to think I’m crazy again, and I don’t really have time to explain right now. I’ll tell the others later, but for now, I’ll just ignore her.

I actively made sure not to make eye contact with the leopard and instead stood at the ready, glaring at the man. Looking a bit surprised at how I didn’t flinch at the sight of this challenge, the youth flashed a smirk at me and stood at the ready too.

“Heh heh heh, you’re actually going to fight. You have impressive nerve. I suppose using a divine beast against a child like you comes across as immature of me, but I’m doing it for His Grace’s sake. I have to make sure you’re dealt with.”

“Hey, are you listening to me? Oh, come on, don’t ignore me! Helloooo?”

Gaaaah, I'm trying to stay tense for this! Stop interrupting me, you noise pollution!

"Now, prepare yourself."

The youth's words marked the start of a suspenseful battle—

"I know you can hear me, you washboard!"

"What did you just call me?! I'll have you know my puberty is just getting started! How rude!" I pointed at the leopard and hollered.

Everyone went quiet, an awkward air hanging over the room. Even the youth was staring at me with baffled eyes. My only option was to try to laugh it off.

"...A-Ahem. Don't mind me, carry on. Oho ho ho."

"...V-Very well! I won't let your erratic behavior throw me off-balance." The youth was able to recover and resume the tense atmosphere, which I was grateful for, but then he gave an order I didn't appreciate as much. "Now, go on, divine beast! Dispose of her!"

"Uh, yeah, sorry about this," the leopard said (or thought, I guess?) and started sprinting at me.

But then, I heard Safina issue a warning using communication magic. *"Lady Mary! Some of those men dressed in black are coming down here!"*

"Safina, you keep the others safe!" I instructed her, my eyes still fixed forward. *"I'm sure Miss Iks and the others are going to show up soon, so just hold your ground until then!"*

"U-Understood!"

"Okaaaay, here comes a forepaw attack!" the leopard's voice cut into Safina's communication magic.

The way she talks really is a lot like communication magic. I wish I could change stations in my head though...

As I idly complained to myself, the leopard stood upright then stomped her forelegs on the ground like she was trying to crush me, but since I knew beforehand what she was going to do, I effortlessly dodged her.

“Good! Press the attack!” The youth egged the leopard on, then... “You too, dispose of all of them! Spare only the old man!” ...he issued orders to the black-covered men who had come down the stairs.

Hearing this, I glanced back. There were too many men racing down the stairs, closing in on our group, and Safina couldn’t stop all of them.

Do I go over and try to help them?

“Divine beast! Use that technique to finish her off!” the youth said mercilessly as I wavered.

“Okay, I’ll take a few seconds to unleash the attack, so use that time to make a dash at the people going down the stairs!” the leopard said, much to my surprise.

I reflexively followed her advice and bolted away.

“Running won’t help you! Unleash the attack!” the youth howled.

To him, it probably looked like I was fleeing because the situation had swung in the leopard’s favor. The leopard braced her feet like she was about to roar, but she continued to tell me what she was going to do next.

“Here I go! The shock wave’s going to be pretty strong, so jump up to dodge it. I’ll try to get it to hit them too, so you handle the rest!”

I had no idea what she was going to do next, but I had no choice but to comply.

“Safina! The leopard’s going to use some kind of shock wave to silence the men! I have to jump and avoid it, so you make sure the priest man doesn’t get in my way, please!” I instructed Safina, left with no choice but to rely on her.

And then...

“Howling Blaaaaaaast!”

The leopard’s voice overlapped with her roar, unleashing a shock wave of sound at me. I jumped into the air, dodging the attack. The attack’s range was wider than expected, and I really only dodged it by the very skin of my teeth. *Is this some spell unique to the divine beast?*

As I'd been told, the shock waves hit the thugs behind me, who hadn't seen it coming and took the brunt of the attack head-on. They were blown away, hit the wall, and instantly knocked out.

Just like that, the reinforcements coming from above were dealt with.

"Got you!" The youth lunged at me, noticing I was distracted.

"Stop!" Safina jumped, crossing paths with him in midair.

"Tch..." The youth landed and stepped back. "You're lucky little ladies, you know that? The divine beast's roar ended up hitting them too... Why are they always so useless?"

The two of us stepped back too, taking our distance from him.

"Lady Mary, what was that just now?" Safina asked me, baffled by my orders earlier.

"Safina..." I told her using magic, so as to not be heard. *"It might be hard to believe, but the leopard's on our side."*

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'll check why."

"What are you doing?!" I shouted, my eyes fixed on the leopard, knowing only she would understand what I mean.

"What am I doing...? What are you talking about?" The youth naturally didn't understand what I meant and thought I was just talking crazy, but I ignored it.

"Huh? Didn't I tell you? I'm not going to fight you. Besides, my...um...feral instincts? Yeah, that! They're telling me not to pick a fight with you because it's hopeless."

In the end, for all her attitude issues, this was still a divine beast, and her instincts could sense my power.

The griffin was like that back in the academy too... Animal instinct is pretty fearsome.

"Then why are you attacking me?! You're just making things harder!" I raised my voice.

I knew I looked like I was completely bonkers, but given the situation, I couldn't let that bother me. Baffled by my words, the youth scoffed at me.

"Well, it's because of the box he has. So long as he has it, I have to do what he says. My clan has to obey whoever holds that box, and we can't hurt them either... Come on, can't you, like, do something about it?"

I recalled the small, hard box the youth had taken out.

So, he's using that to control her... People who worship the gods use a box to force a divine creature to obey? You can't make this up.

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"It's pretty simple. You need to open the box and free my ancestor's words of power from within it. My ancestor lent the Papacy his help many years ago, and they twisted his words and put the part that suited their needs into that box. Because of that, my clan was bound by that pact. Please! I can't touch the box!"

Seriously...? Grown-ups with power are always devious like that, huh?

"And you're not going to fight for him without explicit orders, right?" I said, glancing at the youth.

The leopard, who was behind him, responded by making a very unpleasant face and spitting in disgust. It was quite telling.

"Would you stop shouting like some kind of raving lunatic?!" The youth lost his temper at me ruining the atmosphere and throwing him off track. "You tick me off! I thought you were dangerous, but I guess you're just a crazy girl!"

"Safina, use attack E2 on him! Do it fast so he can't issue orders to the divine beast!"

"B-But what if the divine beast decides to attack?"

"It won't, believe me! We just need to beat this man!"

"...All right! Here I go, Lady Mary!" Safina said after pausing for thought.

It was time for the coordination attack we'd developed back in the Academy Festival to finally see the light of day in full force. Safina faced our opponent with a serious expression and slowly approached him, her sword still sheathed.

“Hah! You won’t even draw your sword! This is why fighting children is easy!”

Despite having seen her draw her sword before, the youth didn’t know about iai jutsu. And maybe he was just underestimating Safina because she was a child. After all, my swordsmanship was just me swinging my sword with brute force—but in terms of pure skill, Safina was leagues above me.

“Diiiiiiiie!” The youth swung at Safina, who crouched to avoid his attack and then stomped where she stood to gather her strength.

“Draw!”

“Wh-What? What’s this technique?!”

Faced with Safina’s iai jutsu once again, the youth couldn’t mask his surprise. Her sword slashed at him like a flash of light. Its overwhelming speed forced the youth to block the attack and step back.

“Fire Ball!” I fired a spell at him, not giving him a chance to recover.

“You’re a sorcerer?!” the youth exclaimed, shocked yet again.

As Safina crouched to draw her sword once more, my fireball flew cleanly past her and hit the youth.

“Impossible! How did you plan for this?!”

“Attack pattern F, from the right!” I ordered Safina.

The youth was taken aback by our flurry of attacks, unsure if we’d planned this or if it was just coincidence. He crossed his swords in front of him, shielding himself from the fireballs, but doing so made him stop in his tracks.

“Draw!”

“Fire Ball!”

Safina drew her sword again, moving to his right as he backed away from us and slashing at him in a flash again. At the same time, I moved to his left and fired another fireball, catching him in a pincer maneuver.

“Tch! Cheeky little...!” The youth cursed under his breath as he used one of his twin swords to block Safina’s flash and the other to slash through my fireball.

“Attack pattern D! Quick!” I ordered Safina and instantly chanted my spell. “Earth Wall times four!” I slammed my hands against the floor, chanting the words of power. Walls of earth surged up from the ground, boxing the youth in from every direction.

“What?!” Awash with rage, the young priest jumped, spinning his body to slash through the walls at once. “How can this girl have this much mana?! Even high-ranking sorcerers can’t perform this much magic... Blast it all!”

But his jump left him defenseless in midair, and only once his field of vision cleared did he notice someone was jumping above him.

“Tch?! This was your plan?!” The youth’s eyes widened in anger and surprise.

“Spinning Slash!”

With her body perpendicular to the floor in midair, Safina dived down in a diagonal spin. Using the energy of the fall to speed up her spin, she cut into her opponent!



But despite this, the youth was able to twist his body at the last second to avoid a direct hit. However, the slash still ran across his chest, cutting away the box and sending it flying. His clothes were apparently what's called a magic mantle, enchanted with defensive magic that protected him from a fatal injury.

The youth scrambled to pick up the box, but the leopard loitering lazily nearby whipped her tail, blocking his hand.

"Blast! Out of my way, you nuisance!"

"Oh, oopsie!"

She couldn't actively harm him, but that didn't mean she couldn't passively get in his way. It was a nice bit of help. The youth might not have realized it, but this wasn't a two-on-two battle, but a three on one fight in my favor.

The youth panicked at dropping his precious box and got annoyed at not being able to pick it up properly, which went on to cloud his judgment. I capitalized on this chance.

"Special C, then connect to the finishing move!"

I drew toward the youth, holding my sword out in a thrusting position. He realized it with a moment to spare, just barely dodging my thrust. However, his eyes were fixed on the tip of my sword—which was exactly what I needed.

"Light!" I chanted. A flash of searing light erupted from the tip of my sword, instantly blinding him.

"Gah! My eyes!"

The youth shielded his eyes in pain, but he nonetheless maintained enough awareness to keep distance between Safina and me. However—

"Accel Boost!"

Safina had already prepared her acceleration magic, and that momentary blindness was more than enough time for us to act.

"Damn you!" he howled. "You think you can mock me with this chicanery?! You're mere girls! How can you use these unknown techniques and fire spells nonstop?!"

“Nine Blade!”

“Accelerate!”

We shouted as we swung our swords. Safina used her relic-class item to further speed up.

“What are you doing, divine beast?! Protect m—”

My words of power unleashed five slashing spells at him. Once his sight returned to him, the youth instantly saw the spells approaching him and grimaced, becoming speechless. And, as has become habit by now, I said my catchphrase.

“It’s all over.”

“Those words... You can’t be...the Argent—”

“Cross!” Safina dived at him, accelerated by her spells, and slashed at him four times—producing nine consecutive slashes.

The sound of wind pressure and metallic clanging filled the room. Safina landed, followed by the man hitting the ground a good distance away, tattered and slashed. Like I’d noticed earlier, the man’s priest garb was a magic mantle, making it more sturdy than most equipment, but even this was torn up now.

Our attack had sent him flying back and tumbling on the ground. He’d apparently chanted a defensive spell in the last second, but even that’d been easily shattered by our combination attack.

Oh, drat. I guess our combination attack is actually really dangerous...

I looked at the youth lying on the ground. He groaned in pain once, but he made no signs of getting up. He wasn’t dead...for now, at least.

“Wow, wow! You two are amazing!” The leopard stood on her hind legs and brought her forelegs together in something akin to a strange clapping.

Safina stared at the unusual sight in shock, but it did serve to undo her feeling of tension. She wasn’t on guard anymore.

I picked up the box from the floor and examined it curiously.

“Come on, hurry up and open it!” The leopard excitedly rushed me.

But looking at the box made me realize something very unfortunate.

“This box is locked. Do you know where the key is?”

“Huh?” The leopard stiffened at my merciless statement. *“He didn’t look like he had a key. Did he leave the key back at our home country? N-Nooo...!”*

The leopard hung her head, her hopes for freedom dashed. Safina, still oblivious to our conversation, sensed the leopard’s sadness and hesitated over whether to comfort her.

Safina’s such a good girl. Even when something strange she can’t understand is in front of her, when she sees it getting sad, her first instinct is to comfort it.

I smiled at this heartwarming part of Safina’s personality and changed my attitude.

“Hmm. I guess we could just break it? I mean, we could just crack it open, right?”

I hid behind the leopard, where the others wouldn’t see me, and swung up my right hand with the intent of chopping the thing.

“Aha ha ha, if you could just break that thing, I wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with—” the leopard said dryly.

“Hiyah!” I swung down and chopped at it with my hand.

Snap!

Amazingly enough, the sturdy-looking box easily split in half. The leopard stared at the broken box in blank amazement. As she looked on with an honestly amusing expression, I picked up the box and showed it off.

“There, it’s broken. Did those words of power escape the box now?”

“...I, um, I can’t tell. W-Wait, just... Just wait...”

The leopard tottered over to the unconscious youth and gingerly lifted her paw and punched him. Her cat punch cleanly hit the man.

“Oooh! I hit him! I can hit him!” the leopard said gleefully, continuing to rain punches on the man.

“Just don’t get carried away. We don’t want him to die,” I said as I threw away

the box, no longer interested in it.

“Thank you, silver girl!” The leopard hurried over and threw herself on me in what she probably thought was a hug. Thankfully, I wasn’t nearly frail enough to get flattened under the creature, so I let her do as she pleased and brushed her fluffy whipping tail away.

“My name’s Mary. And don’t cling to me like that—you’re too big.”

“Oh, right, Mary! What about my little sister? I asked you to help her, remember?”

“Your sister? Oh, I forgot about that.”

“Tch, good-for-nothing.”

“Did you just click your tongue at me?! I just saved you! Don’t call me good-for-nothing!”

But as I continued my back-and-forth with the leopard, Tutte approached me fearfully.

“Uh, Lady Mary...”

“Ah, Tut...te...?” I turned to look at her, realizing she was holding back tears.

Oh, this again. I guess all that shouting I did during the battle must have looked like I was talking to myself...

“Lady Mary, we must send you to the physician when we get back! I’m sure this is some kind of nervous breakdown!” Tutte hugged me tearfully.

“For the one-thousandth time, I am not sick in the head! The leopard really is talking to me!” I shouted, trying to resolve her clear misunderstanding.

“Wow, Mary, you’re sick in the head? That sounds terrible!” the leopard said obliviously.

“This is all your fault!” I snapped back at her.

“...Wait,” Fifi said. “We shouldn’t jump to conclusions and assume she’s gone crazy. Looking at it objectively, the way the leopard is acting seems to match what Lady Mary is saying. It’s worth checking.”

Yes! I cheered to myself, relieved to get support from this unexpected ally.

Now I can show everyone I'm not crazy!

I looked at my fox-eared savior with eyes full of expectation.

8. The Misunderstanding Is Resolved, but the Problem Is...

"U-Um, everyone, should you be that close to it?" Sufia asked, standing a short distance away.

It was her words that made me realize everyone else here (barring Girtz, who was still knocked out) was approaching me. Behind me was the large snow leopard.

"Don't worry, Miss Sufia," I said. "Didn't you see her smacking the man earlier? This leopard's on our side."

"That's right. I'm usually very gentle, so I wouldn't attack you. I could start licking everyone, if you'd like?"

"Please don't. You'll just scare them." I turned around, cutting into her suggestion.

"Um, are you sure it's all right?" Sufia approached me, her eyes fixed on me as she actively tried not to look at the leopard.

"By 'all right,' do you mean the leopard, or my sanity?" I asked peevishly.

Sufia's eyes darted around for a moment before she changed the topic. "...A-Anyway, Miss Fifi, what did you mean by 'worth checking'?"

I would have said something about that, but I was curious about what Fifi meant by "checking" too, so I let her move the conversation along.

"...Well. For the sake of argument, let's assume Lady Mary really can speak to the leopard."

"I really can talk to her! Don't assume it just for the sake of argument!" I snapped.

But realizing I was getting in the way of the conversation, I cleared my throat and fell silent.

"...Anyway, we can experiment to see if they really can communicate. First,

we'll have her and the leopard stand back-to-back so they can't see each other, then take a few steps forward."

I did as she suggested, turning my back to the leopard and taking a few steps. I could hear footsteps behind me, implying the leopard had done the same.

"Just in case, let's blindfold Lady Mary. Miss Tutte, if you could?"

"Ah, yes. Lady Mary, excuse me."

Tutte followed Fifi's instructions and placed her hands over my eyes like we were playing peekaboo.

"And what next?" I spurred her to go on, my vision obscured.

"...I will show the leopard a number, which it will read out to you. If you get the right number three times, it should prove you two are capable of communicating somehow."

Oh, so basically a game of telephone.

"...Incidentally, can leopards understand numbers?" Fifi asked.

"How rude! Of course I can," the leopard replied, discouraged.

But no one heard her, of course.

"She says she can," I replied in her place.

To me, it felt like this on its own proved I could understand what the leopard was saying, but the others needed me to go ahead with this to be convinced.

"Oh, right, Safina, you should get away from the rest and face the same direction as me," I said. "We still have the communication magic pact. We don't want the others to think you leaked information to me, after all."

"Ah, yes, understood," I heard Safina say and run over.

With this, we were ready.

"...First question, then," Fifi said.

I heard her scribbling over paper. She was probably doing it in hiding so only she and the leopard would be able to see it.

"Hm... 1547."

"1547," I recited.

"...Correct."

"Ooooh!" I heard the others clap.

"...Second question, then."

"46586732."

"4658... H-Hold on, you're going too fast! And there's too many numbers!"

"Oh, come on, you can't even recite some numbers? Are you stupid, Lady Mary?"

"I'm not stupid! You're just bad at communicating—"

"Focus on the experiment." Fifi scolded us for getting sidetracked.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry..."

I knew she could be scary when she got really mad.

"Hmm... 4658..."

"4658," I recited the first half.

"6732."

"6732."

"...Correct," Fifi said.

"Ooooooh!" Everyone clapped again, louder than last time.

"...Last question."

"584758698309586."

"Wait, slow down! That's too many numbers! Say it slower!"

"Oh, sorry, sorry. I'm just teasing you."

"Come on, be serious about this. My mental health is being questioned here," I whispered at the leopard with a low, annoyed voice.

"Okay, okay. Um, 58475..."

“58475.”

“86983.”

“86983.”

“09586.”

“09586.”

“...Correct. Given that she could read this many numbers accurately, I can only assume Lady Mary can communicate with the leopard by some means.”

Fifi’s conclusion made me nearly jump for joy. I felt like a defendant on trial who’d just been ruled innocent. Not that I’d ever been put on trial...

“I’m sorry, Lady Mary.” Tutte pulled her hand away from mine. “I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“Ah, it’s fine, it doesn’t bother me...” I turned to look at her with a smile, only to be shocked by what I saw.

Tutte was kneeling on the ground, prostrating herself like Magiluka and I had when we’d accidentally spoken foul of Reifus.

“T-Tutte, what are you doing?!” I said, alarmed.

“In my concern for you, I doubted your words. I’m so sorry, Lady Mary! Forgive me!”

Come to think of it, I was the one who taught Tutte what prostrating means. Remembering this and seeing her apologize tearfully made any anger I might have had for her go away.

“Raise your head, Tutte. You were worried for me in your own way, even if it was misguided. Someone else might have laughed at me for looking crazy, but you always worried about me. Thank you.”

“Lady Maaaary!” Tutte looked up at me, her face streaked with tears.

She truly regretted her actions, and while it might have been rude to feel this way, it did make me happy. After all, my maid cared this much for me...

“Oh, what a touching story! You’ll make me cry too!”

The leopard approached us, moved, and when Tutte got to her feet, the leopard licked her cheek.

“Eeek!” Tutte froze up in fear.

“St-Stop it, you’re scaring poor Tutte! Don’t just go around doing things like that without warning!” I pulled Tutte into a hug and shielded her from the leopard, shooing her away with my hand.

The leopard walked away from us, a bit sulky.

“...We’ve established Lady Mary can communicate with the leopard, but we still don’t know why she alone can do that.” Fifi walked over to us, looking pensive.

She’s right. We still don’t know why I can speak to her.

“Lady Mary, you said you can hear its voice, but how exactly do you hear it?”

“How do I hear her...? Well, I guess I hear her voice in my head. Kind of like communication magic.”

“Well, of course you’d hear it in your head. I’m using telepathy, which is a more advanced form of communication magic.” The leopard cut into our conversation boastfully.

“The leopard said she’s using telepathy, a more advanced kind of communication magic,” I told Fifi.

“...Telepathy,” Fifi said, her blank expression making it impossible to tell if she was surprised or not. “I remember reading a book on it. It said that it’s a lost, mystical form of magic that, unlike communication magic, isn’t directed at a particular individual. It allows one to communicate with any species.”

Apparently, the leopard used some pretty impressive magic.

“You said it would enable it to talk to anyone, but we can’t hear it.” Sufia realized the contradiction in Fifi’s words.

“Yes, me being a fearsome divine beast means there are limitations placed on me. I mean, divine beasts have this...well...divine air to them, right? So I can’t just chat with everyone.”

Yes, I can imagine if everyone could hear how lackadaisical your tone is, your dignity as a divine beast would go out the window.

“She says it’s because divine beasts have limitations,” I communicated her words to the others.

“Right! In my case, I can only speak to purebred humans.”

“It says it can only speak to purebred humans.”

“...In other words, demi-human races like elves and demons can’t hear her.”

Fifi and Sufia cast their eyes down, disappointed. I recalled Emilia saying that divine beasts can’t speak, and I realized this was probably why she thought so.

“On top of that, it has to be someone who can use magic of the fifth order or above!”

“And they need to be able to use magic of the f—” I nearly repeated her words verbatim before clamping up in realization.

Everyone looked at me with puzzled eyes.

Okay, no, this is bad, this is really bad. I can’t tell them the truth, but if I don’t explain myself, it won’t answer why Tutte and Safina can’t hear the leopard. I could say it’s a matter of how much mana one has... Ugh, but then if Magiluka ends up meeting the leopard and can’t hear her either, I’ll be in trouble again...

“Hey, come with me for a second.” I motioned for the leopard to approach and walked away from the others. Even though only I could hear her, I was too used to moving away from the group when I had to speak in secret.

“Is there another reason? Some other reason a human would be able to hear you?”

“Another reason? Oh! Right, there was an exception, a case where I’d be able to talk to someone regardless of anyone else.”

“And that would be?”

“A holy woman acknowledged by God! Either a holy woman or a hero.”

“Holy woman?!” I raised my voice at her unexpected answer, and everyone looked at me with surprise. “Aha ha, sorry about that... Oho ho ho...”

“...She definitely just said ‘holy woman,’” I heard Fifi whisper to the rest, her fox ears twitching.

Ugh, these beastmen and their hearing. I have to keep saying this is a mana issue, after all. Ugh, why am I the only one who can hear it? It’s like I somehow got locked into her radio frequency—wait, frequency?

This moment of divine inspiration gave me the excuse I needed.

“Everyone, it turns out you need high mana to hear her, but also only some people can hear the frequency of her telepathy. Some people can tune into that frequency and some can’t, and I just happen to have the right levels of mana and be compatible with her frequency too.”

I felt bad about lying, but between “I can cast spells of the fifth order and above” and “Only a holy woman can hear it,” this felt much more mundane and easy to swallow.

It’s the perfect excuse! I’d give myself a pat on the back for it! I cheered in my mind.

But despite my high expectations, everyone stared at me with baffled expressions.

“...Lady Mary,” Fifi said expressionlessly.

“Yes?”

“...What’s a free-kwen-see?”

You don’t understand that much?!

I realized that the excuse I’d come up with was based on a modern scientific concept they wouldn’t understand. I hung my head despondently for a moment. That said, despite using the word, I didn’t really know much about how frequencies work either.

“...That sounds like a very fascinating word. Could you explain?”

Gaaah, why do craftsmen have to have all this intellectual curiosity?! Ugh, can’t she just roll with my explanation? But I guess her curiosity did help prove I’m not crazy...

Fifi drew close to me curiously, and I could only meet her with a stiff, nervous smile, sweating bullets. But then—

“Forget that! Be careful!” Girtz hopped out of the room, still tied up. “That man is getting away! The fool is heading for the room where I store my masterpiece!”

Great, now’s my chance to give this conversation the slip! Thanks, old man! Thanks, God!

I looked around, only seeing this as a chance to get away, but then I spotted the youth from earlier walking away unsteadily. I was surprised he could still move, but then I realized that he was dressed like a priest, implying he was from the Papacy. He could likely use healing magic. There were also empty bottles littered around his feet—likely healing potions.

Nevertheless, he was still critically wounded, so he’d essentially gone from being on death’s door to just being severely injured. He couldn’t put up a fight anymore.

“What do you mean by your ‘masterpiece,’ Girtz?!” I asked.

“I mean my best work! I made the prototype for Dabzal and combined it with my research to make the masterpiece. It’s my once-in-a-lifetime undertaking, my greatest work!”

The greatest work of the unrivaled magus smith who’d made multiple relic-class weapons and items, based on a gigantic destruction weapon. It sounded really, really bad. Safina and I took off after the youth and made it into the room about half a minute after he had.

The room was littered with wreckage from experiments, half-made devices, a whole lot of research papers and pictures...and in the middle of the room was a large box, with the youth standing in front of it.

“Heh, ha ha ha! Is this it?! Is this Girtz’s masterpiece, the culmination of his research into magical weaponry?! Hee hee hee! Yes, with this, I can kill them all!”

The youth laughed like a madman gazing into the box’s interior with bloodshot eyes. He then thrust his hands into the box and pulled out its

contents.

Silence hung over us all. What the man had pulled out looked like a person's head (I figured?), like a poorly drawn portrait in three-dimensional form. It was terrifying. But one thing was immediately clear; this wasn't a weapon of any kind. It was completely and utterly useless.

"...Wh-What is this?"

The youth, who had dragged himself beaten and bruised to get to this room, found that all he had to show for it was this weird head-like object. I couldn't blame him for being stunned. The youth threw the piece of junk in his hands away and started sifting through the interior of the box again, but everything he took out of it was likewise assorted body parts.

"...It can't be," the youth whispered and wobbled over to another nearby crate.

He looked into that crate, trembling, likely seeing its contents were much the same as the other one.

"Wh-What is this...? *This* is...the culmination of the greatest magus smith's craft...?! Hah, ha ha ha..."

He took out a deformed hand, shaped like something a small child might scribble. Laughing dryly, he fumbled back until his back hit the wall, at which point he fell over limply.

Ah, I think I'm starting to figure this out...

After I confirmed the youth had truly lost the will to fight, I looked to Fifi and asked her to bring in the man behind it all. I asked Sufia to restrain the youth. His eyes were completely blank as she tied his hands behind his back then carried him out of the room. Fifi entered in her place, bringing Girtz, who was tied up, and dropped him in front of me.

"All right, Mr. Girtz." I crossed my arms sternly and imposingly and looked up at the bundled-up old man. "Would you care to explain why you left Fifi behind and decided to work with these men, as well as what you were making here?"

"L-Like I said, Dabzal asked me to build a large..."

“Enough smoke and mirrors. Tell us what you were really doing here.”

Losing all the intensity he'd had when I first spoke to him, the old man looked away from me and cowered. Whatever it was he'd been doing, he didn't want to talk about. I walked over to the crate the youth was rummaging through earlier and pulled out one of the pieces of junk inside it.

“This is pretty warped, but looking at it reeeeeeal close, it looks like a face,” I said, beating around the bush for dramatic effect, which made Girtz jolt. “And over here there's some documents written in ugly handwriting, but it looks to me like they say ‘How to use mythrill ore to simulate skin that's semipermanently soft and supple.’”

I waved one of the papers I picked up in front of him as I read it out. Girtz jolted again.

“...Master. You got everyone involved in this over what you were creating. What were you trying to make?” Fifi asked, holding Girtz's bundled-up, tied-up frame from both sides and gazing directly into his face.

The fact she was completely expressionless just made it scarier, and Girtz broke into a nervous sweat as his eyes darted around in a panic.

“...Master,” Fifi once again said, a bit more heavily.

“I-I tried to make a golem using magus smith craft!” The old man snapped under the pressure and confessed.

“A golem?”

“Y-Yes! Golems, like the ones sorcerers make using magic circles and imagination and mana! I thought I could make one using my magus smith techniques! And if I could, it would last longer than one made with magic. It was a lofty work that would have left its mark upon history!”

I couldn't argue with that. Only sorcerers could create golems at present, and they required mana to maintain, meaning they were fundamentally disposable. But if he could use craftsmanship to create one, they'd effectively be like robots in my past life. If so, it really would be impressive, lofty work, but I had my doubts about the old man's motives.

“Mr. Girtz... What kind of golem were you making?”

I realized that all the papers scattered around were Toya’s drawings. Drawings of a young beastman woman’s...body parts.

“W-Well, just...a golem. Nothing more and nothing less.”

“You said you made the gigantic destruction weapon as a prototype for your masterpiece, and that this golem was your masterpiece as a magus smith, right? But it was incomplete work, so you had to discard it. Just what was this once-in-a-lifetime masterpiece you’ve been so fixated on making?”

I waved Toya’s illustrations in front of Girtz. Safina and Sufia, who stood nearby, looked at me with impressed eyes and said things like, “So impressive, Lady Mary,” and “You do take after Lady Elizabeth.” I tried to pretend like I didn’t hear that last one.

“Master... What are you trying to hide even after everything that’s happened?” Fifi said, gripping the old magus smith even harder.

I could hear ominous crackling sounds, and Girtz went very pale in panic before giving up.

“...Cat ears! I wanted to make a golem of my ideal cat-eared maid!”

Girtz’s confession echoed through the room.

This was it. This was the solution to the big conspiracy that’d gotten so much of the demon political world caught up in it. This was the great magus smith Girtz’s once-in-a-lifetime, greatest masterpiece...

9. Maybe We Shouldn’t Have Solved This Mystery...

For several seconds, silence hung over the room. I could see Sufia, who had just returned to the room, inch slowly back toward the door.

I, erm, I can understand why she feels this way. I’d feel threatened in her shoes too.

“Uh... For what purpose?” I asked.

I had a feeling I already knew the answer why, but him admitting that he did it

so he could have a cat-eared maid was something I couldn't overlook.

"It's all her! All her fault!" Girtz shouted, and, much to my surprise, pointed at Fifi. "That day, she forced her way into my home and asked to be my apprentice. She said she'll study while taking care of the house, and I, well, I agreed since I thought it'd be useful to have someone around to do the chores. B-But...that was the start of a tragedy..."

Girtz lowered his voice to accompany his story's suddenly going in an oddly serious direction...although taking him seriously was a bit of a tall ask given that he was currently tied up like a caterpillar in a cocoon.

"What did *you* do...?" I asked Fifi, a bit exasperated.

"...I don't know," she replied, baffled.

"You... You... Of all things, you..." Girtz looked at Fifi, his voice trembling.

The intensity of his emotion really made it feel like she'd done something terrible to him, so I held my breath nervously and waited for him to end his story.

"Y-You took care of the house in a maid outfiiiiit!" Girtz shouted.

My held breath gave way to a tired sigh. I turned to look at Fifi, hoping to hear her side of the story. Noticing my gaze, she understood what I wanted to ask and began explaining.

"...Like I told you before, before I entered master's tutelage, I studied under other craftsmen. When I did, I found people were more receptive to me helping around the house when I was in a maid outfit, so I made a habit of putting one on when I did the chores. So, I had a maid outfit on when I helped master with his chores. Is there a problem?"

"I don't think so. There's no law saying only maids can wear maid outfits..." I said, looking to Sufia for confirmation. "There's no law like that here in Relirex, is there?"

She simply shook her head, trying to make herself as unnoticeable as possible.

S-Sorry for talking to you right now!

"There's a huge problem!" Girtz shouted angrily. "That fluffy, frilly, pretty

outfit! Those twitching soft animal ears! The tail peeking through the skirt! The harmony with the maid outfit, it brings upon the temptation of an angel...no, of a devil, a devil, I saaaay!”

As the old man spoke ardently, like he’d experienced something unknown and amazing, I could only glare cold daggers at him.

“Imagine me having to endure days of that! I couldn’t focus on my work. My mind was so corrupted it could no longer think of the magic circuitry the finest weapons would need. Then, suddenly, I realized Fifi’s talents, and it was like I’d been granted divine guidance: I could retire, leave my developmental work to Fifi, and just live under her care!”

At this point, Girtz paused and took a few deep breaths to collect himself.

“But then! You went ahead and fooled me as the devil does! The moment you became my apprentice, you stopped wearing the maid uniform!” Girtz raised his voice and leveled this most baffling complaint at Fifi. I had to wonder if getting this worked up wasn’t dangerous for a man his age.

For the time being, I turned my eyes to Fifi. “...Once I became your apprentice, I focused on working as a magus smith. I couldn’t work in a maid’s uniform, and I didn’t need to have the uniform on to do chores. So I ended up not putting it on.”

I couldn’t object with this reasoning.

“Aha ha ha... Yes, indeed,” the old man said. “But I did not give up—I *could not* give up on the idea of an animal-eared maid!”

“If you’re that adamant about it, couldn’t you have just hired a maid?” I asked. “I mean, you’re the greatest magus smith in the country, right? It doesn’t make sense that you wouldn’t have money saved up.”

“...He has money saved up, yes.” Our nonproductive, good-for-nothing exchange was set to continue.

“Haah, this is why girls like you are foolish... When men taste sweet mead, they always seek the finest, most ideal mead possible!”

Between him dissing me and saying something incomprehensible about men

and mead, I looked at Fifi with disgusted eyes. She shook her head, signifying it didn't make any more sense to her.

"I came to realize something!" Girtz declared. "Looking for the right person would be a drag, and having to communicate would be a drag. In light of these facts, I determined it would behoove me to simply create what I want from scratch with my own two hands! And that's when the idea occurred to me: a golem! A golem would do whatever I say, and I could sculpt it in whatever form I wished!"

The tied-up old man continued his spiel, almost oblivious to the fact we were there. "But I soon ran into a problem. Only sorcerers can make golems! And even if they were to make a golem that looks perfectly human, no sorcerer I know of would be able to maintain such a golem for long!"

Yeah, I mean, what sorcerer would risk their life for something that niche...? But then I recalled a certain undead-obsessed instructor and a group of slime aficionado sorcerers I'd run into, and I concluded that maybe it wasn't all that far-fetched.

"But I didn't give up! It was the first time the desire to create burned so intensely in my heart."

You were more excited about that than all the relic-class items you created...? I grumbled to myself, so as to not interrupt his spiel.

"And then, I got the idea," he continued. "Like I said, making golems is a difficult task for magus smiths! To allow for the necessary experimentation, I needed vast funds, a wealth of raw materials, and proper facilities!"

"Oh, so that's why you started working with the mayor..." I sighed, carelessly finishing his sentence.

"Precisely. He was very interested in my golem plan, and he happily provided funds and materials. But he set a condition."

"And that was making the annihilation magus engine."

"Yes, indeed. But that was trifling to me, so I agreed. It made for good practice, after all."

As Girtz admitted to something very dangerous, I started seriously considering that maybe we'd all have been better off if this crazy old kook never made anything at all.

"So, I've spent the last few years hiding under the mayor's orders as I worked away. One thing led to another, and I ended up delivering the incomplete prototype to shut him up. He's still letting me stay here since I lied and told him I'll be making something even better, and that's given me the opportunity to focus on my main project, but I've run into a major wall on that front."

"Yes, yes, what kind of wall?" I asked, twirling a hair around my finger curtly.

"I have no artistic inclination. I'd never realized it until now!"

Recalling Girtz's unsightly drawings and all the weirdly shaped objects littering the place, I could see what he meant. *Yeah, no artistic inclinations...or, rather, no sense for art. The heavens didn't give him any talent for art. Good call on that one, God.* After thanking God, I looked at Girtz.

In general, a magus smith's work has a blacksmith's work as its foundation. To that end, the work of a magus smith doesn't necessarily require any aesthetic sensibility. Unfortunately, this means that for an ambition like Girtz's, where the magus smith wishes to put their whole heart on display in their creation, it's typically not feasible to leave the work to another person. Even if the typical magus smith were to find a skilled blacksmith to actualize their ideas, said magus smith's lack of understanding of the arts would prevent them from effectively communicating their desires. These unfortunate circumstances are most likely what led to the heap of junk Girtz had left in his wake.

"But what about the annihilation magus engine?" I asked.

"In that case, I didn't make it so it would be a perfect replica of the human form. I just put a head, hands, and legs on a torso without caring much about what it looks like."

I'm almost curious to see how ugly it looks, I thought rudely.

"Let's get back on track," Girtz insisted. "I have the ideal creation firmly in mind, but I couldn't so much as draw a picture of it, so I couldn't continue working on my masterpiece."

“Oh, so that’s why you came to Toya for help.” That explained why Toya, who was unrelated to this whole affair, had become involved.

“Aye. I’d relied on a few artists before him, but the drawings they brought had poses that hide certain parts, or the background got in the way. However, his unique drawings were perfect as schematics! I had him draw multiple animal-eared maids, and then I found it! The one closest to my ideal!”

Girtz stared ardently at Sufia, who hid behind Safina, her fur standing on end and a chill clearly running down her spine.

“What do you want to do with him?” I asked Fifi and pointed at him, leaving the choice to her since she was his apprentice. “We could hand him over to the soldiers when Miss Iks gets here.”

“...I say we explain the situation to Lady Elizabeth and have her consider the extenuating circumstances.”

As we mercilessly decided the old man’s fate, we started hearing noise from the upper floors. Apparently, Miss Iks had arrived with the cavalry.

Phew. It was pretty troublesome, but looks like we’ve resolved this. All’s well that ends well. I patted down my chest in relief and left the room.

I spotted Miss Iks hurrying down the stairs. She looked quite flustered, so I decided to tell her we’d already solved the mystery.

“Miss Iks, we already—”

“Everyone, prepare to evacuate!” Miss Iks called out. “A gigantic object appeared next to the mayor’s estate, and reports say it’s starting to move!”

I instantly pieced together what she meant and glared at Girtz.

“Why is it moving?! Wasn’t it incomplete and immobile?! Our friends are in that estate!”

“I-I don’t know. There shouldn’t have been a mana source capable of moving that thing. Theoretically speaking, it shouldn’t be possible to get it to move—”

But then, Girtz trailed off like he realized something about the giant object, and his features washed over with surprise.

It seemed this incident wasn't over yet.

Interlude Part 2

A few hours earlier, while Mary's group was making their way to Girtz's whereabouts, Dabzal's evening party began. A fancy chandelier cast its light over the hall in his estate. Since Emilia, tomboy that she was, hated formal events, it was made into a buffet party, which went a great deal toward ensuring she didn't instantly leave the event.

Normally, Dabzal would have been relieved by this, but not this time. He wanted this evening party to end as soon as possible because as soon as he'd finished greeting the guests, he got a sudden written message...

"The witch is investigating that firm."

Dabzal panicked. He'd assumed the firm would be exposed in the near future, but things were going faster than he'd expected, and it was taking all his effort to keep his anxiety from showing in his behavior.

On the other hand, he couldn't have Emilia and her entourage leave too soon either. There were already suspicions of his relationship to the firm. If he were to recklessly give out instructions while Mary and her group were headed that way, his panic could lead to him exposing himself. There was also the incident with Mary and the divine beast to consider.

Since this was an informal dinner party, there were few guests, and most of the demons were busy greeting Emilia. This meant the other three were relatively free to act and keep an eye on Dabzal's actions. Conversely, Dabzal was hoping to use the time Emilia spent on greeting the other guests to get a grasp on the situation and come up with a countermeasure.

But contrary to his expectations, Emilia turned out to be very bad with these formal affairs, and quickly wrapped up her conversations with all the demons who approached her. Emilia and her friends seemed well aware of that the whole time too, which didn't give Dabzal a moment to spare.

"What's the matter, Mayor Dabzal? You look quite anxious," Reifus said.

Maybe his eyes were darting around too much, as the foreign prince seemed to have caught on to his mental state. Dabzal had to restrain the urge to click

his tongue. This was the biggest interruption to his plans at the moment—Prince Reifus, who had been showing interest in this country’s culture.

Dabzal couldn’t be rude to him given his position, but the prince seemed to be very adept at keeping Dabzal involved in his conversations, and at times dragged him into conversations with the other guests. Dabzal had to admit the prince was skilled at this, and he began regretting having looked down on him beforehand. The Aldian prince certainly did not take after his father—he must have only been pretending to do so to hide his fangs, since he took after his formidable mother, the queen.

Dabzal thought back to the series of failures he’d experienced over the last few days, and he struggled to restrain his anger. Why did he have to host a party during such a crisis? He’d come up with this plan to stall for time, but the only impression he got now was that the prince had ended up using it against him.

“Ah, no, I’m just concerned that Princess Emilia might cause trouble again...against my better judgment, of course,” Dabzal replied. “My apologies.”

“Oh, no, I can relate.”

Dabzal and the prince smiled wryly as they discussed the mischievous princess. Dabzal’s words didn’t reflect his true feelings, of course—in fact, he would have preferred if Emilia *did* cause trouble because it would allow him to speed things along and end the party sooner.

“Your Highness, Lord Dabzal, may I have a moment?” Magiluka approached them, her blonde hair bouncing with every step. She looked a bit unwell.

“What is it?” Dabzal asked.

“My apologies, but I feel a bit under the weather. Would you mind if I excused myself?” Magiluka asked apologetically.

This was the windfall Dabzal had been waiting for. He happily agreed.

“My, pardon me for not noticing you were feeling unwell... Allow me to show you to a lounge room,” he said, offering his hand to Magiluka.

Normally, one of his maids would have stepped up to the task, but he

certainly wasn't doing this out of concern for the girl. All he wanted was an excuse to leave.

"I see," Reifus cut into their exchange. "Then, Sacher, you escort her too."

"Yes, Your Highness," the boy nodded.

And so, Dabzal was able to leave the hall. He took the two to a nearby lounge room and had a maid there tend to them. He bowed in a gentlemanly manner, restraining his desire to hurry up and run, and left the room.

Dabzal then went to his office instead of returning to the party hall.

"Is he gone?" Magiluka asked.

"Yeah, based on his footsteps, he went the opposite direction from the party," Sacher replied, pressing his ear against the door.

As the maid moved in to tend to the unwell young lady, she was surprised to see the girl moving around like she was absolutely fine. She even joined Sacher as he peered outside the room.

"Oh, goodness, I'm fine now. You can go back." Magiluka smiled at the maid and had her leave.

"So, what next?" Sacher asked once the maid had vacated the room.

"As far as I could tell, he was quite shaken up and his attention was fixed elsewhere, like he was occupied thinking about something else. It's possible he got a report that Lady Mary's group are heading for the firm. He might be trying to hide any evidence that's left here."

"Should I go after him? Do you know where he went?" Sacher asked.

"Don't lump me in with an idiot like you. I memorized the map of the place Lady Elizabeth showed me."

"Yeah, yeah, we're all so blessed that you're this smart..."

Magiluka got out of her seat and walked past Sacher to the hallway. He followed her. They moved quickly, but they tried to keep their footsteps silent. Magiluka referenced the map she'd memorized and went straight for places

where Dabzal could hide his work, and generally any nearby rooms he could work in.

Before long, they spotted Dabzal walking ahead of them. “There he is,” she whispered, hiding behind a corner.

“You’re impressive, you know that? You might be more capable than Lady Mary.”

“I’m sure she’d have done better than me. It wouldn’t have taken her as long.”

Mary would have likely objected to Magiluka’s assertion were she there to hear it. Dabzal, meanwhile, didn’t notice them at all. Since he’d been so cautious so far, finally being free to act made him careless as he entered his office.

“I believe that’s his office. We can’t exactly force our way in there...”

“What do we do? Eavesdrop?”

“Don’t bother.” A voice cut into their conversation from behind. “That room has a soundproofing spell cast on it. He’s so thorough it comes across as suspicious, we say.”

“Ah!” the two exclaimed in a whisper and then slapped a hand over their mouths.

“P-Princess Emilia! What are you doing here? Didn’t I ask you to take care of things at the party?”

“We got the feeling it would be more fun here, so we let the prince handle things there,” Emilia replied.

Magiluka covered her eyes with a hand in an exasperated manner and looked up to the ceiling. She could only imagine her kingdom’s prince and how perplexed he must be feeling.

“Sacher, escort her back, please,” Magiluka said.

“Worry not, we asked Sir Klaus to stay at the prince’s side. What’s more, we received a message from auntie. She said she’s currently putting the screws on the magus smiths in the firm since them using those restraining items is akin to

embezzling the kingdom's property. It won't be long before the kingdom's soldiers storm this place too. Still, most of the people were away from the company. Apparently, they moved their base of operations elsewhere."

"R-Really...?"

Magiluka figured that if the kingdom's knights were coming, that was all the more reason to have the princess stay put, but since she was surprised by how quickly the princess had acted in this situation, she kept that thought to herself. Elizabeth likely wasn't trusting Emilia blindly, however; she'd simply had the princess follow her instructions to the letter.

"But there is good news," Emilia carried on. "Auntie managed to chase down a carriage holding some of Dabzal's contraband. The people inside got away, but auntie was able to see they weren't demons, which basically confirms the theory that he's running an operation with foreigners. That settles that, we suppose. Also, apparently, while auntie was dealing with the carriage, Mary's group discovered their base of operations and infiltrated it. It seems like Girtz is in their base too. We swear, how did they achieve this much?"

Magiluka and Sacher exchanged looks and cracked sarcastic smiles.

"See? She's much more capable..." Magiluka said.

"Lady Mary really is impressive," Sacher nodded.

"Oh, it seems someone stepped outside..." Emilia keenly spotted someone leaving the room "Is that a butler? He's holding something... A bird with a letter attached to it?"

"All right, Sufia, quickly—" Emilia started saying, then trailed off with realization. "Oh, barnacles. We forgot she's with auntie. What a useless maid, never there when we need her..."

She was the one who'd sent her alongside Mary, but Magiluka and Sacher decided to leave that unsaid.

"If that's some kind of message to send to that firm, we can't let him send it."

"Indeed. We will use our royal prerogative to inspect its contents, then," Emilia declared, then walked over to the butler.

“Princess, wait—” Magiluka said, leaving Sacher to watch over the door as she hurried after her.

Emilia turned the corner and was already upon the butler, with her hand resting on his shoulder in a friendly manner.

“You are Dabzal’s butler, no? You seem busy.”

“Oh, Princess Emili—”

“Mind Break.” Emilia cut him off and chanted the words of power, upon which a magic circle appeared under the butler. He went limp and crumbled where he stood.

Mind Break was a spell that rendered its victims unconscious, but due to the fixed location of its magic circle and a requirement for the user to touch the target, it was relatively tricky to use. Also, since it only worked on targets whose sorceries had an inferior rank to the user’s own, it didn’t see much use in Aldia despite being known there.

As a sorcerer, Magiluka looked on in both awe and curiosity at the magic the demons were capable of. She was very much interested in learning this kind of spell. But then, the realization dawned on her.

“Your Highness, was this what you meant by royal prerogative?”

“Indeed! We resorted to force, but we will be able to elude punishment. Royal prerogative!” Emilia said with a thumbs-up.

Magiluka could only sigh tiredly. That most certainly was not what royal prerogative typically meant—Magiluka swallowed a retort as Emilia snatched the letter out of the butler’s limp hands and opened it without a second thought.

“As expected, it *is* a secret message addressed to that firm... This should serve as good evidence, mweh heh heh.”

While this certainly didn’t feel anything like what royalty should act like...Magiluka couldn’t help but be impressed with how proactive she was compared to the human nobility, who largely preferred to foist responsibilities onto each other. She then shook her head, deciding now wasn’t the time to

think about that.

“Incidentally, Your Highness, are you sure using magic in this mansion was safe? It wouldn’t tip off security, would it?”

“Well, we demons don’t typically have those kinds of security systems. High-ranking demons have the kind of special ability or intuition that lets them spot magic being used, so anyone on that level would notice magic being used in the vicinity.”

“Then, wouldn’t Mayor Dabzal notice the spell you cast just now?” Magiluka asked.

“Ah...” Emilia froze up in realization.

The two hurried back to Sacher’s side.

“Sacher, did the mayor do something?” Magiluka asked at once.

“Hmm? No one’s left the room since the butler came out. Why are you back, though? Weren’t you following the butler?”

“That’s already dealt with. It is strange he is not coming out, though...” Emilia said in a surprisingly pensive manner..

“Of course no one would come out—I don’t sense anyone inside the room. I did sense someone there earlier though...” Sacher nonchalantly said something very chilling.

Magiluka looked up tiredly again, surprised that Mary was ever able to keep these two under control. Of course, Mary would have violently denied it if she had been here...

“That must mean there’s some kind of escape passage inside the room. I imagine the mayor would have had that kind of preparation in place,” Magiluka pointed out.

“What?! Blast, so he had that kind of card up his sleeve... Very well. Follow us as we storm in, comrades!”

Emilia bolted ahead and reached to open the door to the office. But in a predictable twist, the door was anticlimactically locked.

“He locked the door, the crafty villain! Very well, Sacher. Bust the door open!”

“Sure!” Sacher got to his feet and faced the door in the heat of the moment, but soon pulled himself back together. “Wait, no, I can’t! What are you saying, Princess?”

“Gah, you gutless fool! How about you say that only once you’ve fractured your shoulder?!”

Emilia, too, said some rather chilling things without a second thought.

“Very well, time to use my royal prerogative again! Burst!” Emilia recklessly blasted the door with a spell.

Sacher hopped out of the way as the explosive spell blew the door to the office off its hinges. The blast was loud enough to draw attention, and they instantly heard the mayor’s soldiers hurry over.

But God seemed to have sided with Magiluka’s group, because suddenly, there was noise coming from outside the mansion. Magiluka peeked out the window and spotted carriages and squads of soldiers flying the Relirex royal family flag gathering outside the estate. Some of them had already entered the mansion and started subduing anyone who resisted. The mayor’s soldiers stopped in their tracks and looked outside as well, unsure as to what to do.

Emilia ignored the soldiers and entered the office. The room was littered with the remains of the blasted door, and the shock waves of the spell had scattered the room’s contents every which way. But just like Sacher had said, Dabzal was nowhere to be seen.

Magiluka had to wonder what would have happened if Sacher had been wrong and Dabzal had happened to be near the door when Emilia had cast the spell, but that *would* have made him easier to catch...

Realizing she was starting to come around to the princess’s way of thinking, Magiluka quickly corrected herself and retracted the latter part of that thought process. After all, there was no guarantee Dabzal would have survived the spell. Seeing Emilia shrug off the spells Elizabeth flung at her as punishment made Magiluka lean toward thinking demons were maybe more resistant to magic, but it was perfectly possible it was Emilia’s abilities as princess that let her

survive Elizabeth's wrath.

"Tch! He did get away, the slippery snake!" Emilia cursed.

Magiluka walked past her and started examining the room. Looking over the organized bookshelf at the back of the room, she found an unusual gap between some of the shelves. Maybe Dabzal had simply neglected to notice it when he'd hurried to leave, but the bookshelves being so meticulously sorted made the gap between those two shelves oddly conspicuous.

"Your Highness, isn't that bookshelf a bit susp—"

"Buuuuuurst!" Emilia cast the spell on reflex, blasting the bookshelf to bits before Magiluka had a chance to finish that sentence.

Magiluka was starting to understand why everyone around this princess treated her with such relative disregard. But regardless of that, the bookshelf was blown away, revealing a passage behind it. This was likely the secret passage Dabzal had used.

"Your Highness... Can't you be a bit more careful?" Magiluka said, fed up.

"All's well that ends well!" Emilia grinned and gave a thumbs-up before giving another order. "Sacher! I permit you to bear arms. Draw your sword!"

The secret passage led underground. The place was quite clean, making it hard to believe it was used for the first time today—Magiluka suspected it was used often. As the three walked down the passage, the place was lit up, implying Dabzal had passed through here.

"Hold on." Sacher, who led the group, suddenly stopped them with a stern expression. "I hear something strange."

"Something strange?"

The two girls listened carefully, and they did hear what sounded like scratching noises.

"Please don't use any more magic, Your Highness," Magiluka preemptively warned Emilia. "I'd much rather not be buried alive here because the ceiling caved in."

They approached the source of the noise and found a single door. That door in particular seemed thicker and sturdier than the others. Whatever was behind the door was making the scratching noises.

“What do we—” Magiluka said cautiously, but...

“Who’s there?! Who’s scratching at the door like that?!” Emilia called out and opened the door recklessly.

Oh, goodness, I’ve had enough of this princess! Magiluka thought to herself, very much fed up.

The door opened in the direction of the hall, so whoever was scratching on the other side wasn’t hit in the face by it. Relieved by this, Magiluka watched Emilia enter the room. The room was quite barren and empty, and there wasn’t anyone inside.

“Oh, it’s empty?” Emilia wondered.

“So it seems— Aaaaaah!” Magiluka tried to reply, but she screeched when she felt some kind of breath against her legs.

She looked down in a panic and spotted a fluffy, adorable snow leopard cub at her feet. The two of them stared at it silently as it sniffed at her feet and then directed its small, stubby paws at her. The white, fluffy feline, with its dotted fur, moved a bit closer and then sniffed at her again.

“What’s wrong, you two—” Sacher asked, surprised by how the two girls froze up, only to be cut off by Magiluka.

“What is this?! What is this adorable little creature!” she exclaimed excitedly.

“What? It’s a baby leopard, can’t you see?” Sacher retorted, missing the point, but Magiluka ignored him.

She kneeled down and reached her hand out to the cub, motioning it slowly so as to coax it to come closer. The leopard cub brought its nose to her fingertips and started licking them. It seemed quite used to being around people. Unable to withstand its adorableness any longer, Magiluka reached out and started patting its soft fur. The cub didn’t resist, and in fact, it started rubbing itself against her hand.

“Hah! What is this adorable creature?!” Emilia reacted in much the same way.

“It’s a baby leopard...” Sacher retorted tiredly again, only to be ignored a second time.

But the moment Emilia reached out to touch the cub, it slipped away and hid behind Magiluka’s feet.

“Oh, goodness, it seems it doesn’t like you, Your Hi...” Magiluka said this, half in jest, but paused upon seeing Emilia’s face cloud over in despair. The princess looked like she might cry from the shock. “Y-Your Highness, I don’t think this little one is here out of choice. The mayor must be holding it captive here, which is why it’s wary of demons. I’m sure it doesn’t dislike you for personal reasons!” Magiluka hurriedly came up with an excuse to spare her emotions out of pity.

“R-Really? In that case, damn you, Dabzal! You will pay!” Emilia said, encouraged by Magiluka’s words.

They looked around. The room was quite barren and only had the bare minimum of fixtures. What’s more, there was what looked to be a barrier spell applied to the door.

“So this is it! This is why the cub hates us!” Emilia said and cast a canceling spell to destroy the barrier.

A magic circle appeared in midair, then shattered noisily.

“Now you should be fine!” Emilia smugly turned to face the cub, which only backed away from her more, startled by the noise of the barrier shattering.

Magiluka patted the cub, soothing it, and picked it up. The cub clung to her, and its adorableness made Magiluka wish she could take it home and raise it—but she was aware she had to restrain these feelings for now.

“Princess Emilia, please calm yourself and be more restrained. The little one is frightened.”

“U-Ugh, p-pardon. We didn’t mean to startle you... We only wanted to eliminate the trouble plaguing you. Forgive us...”

Looking unusually meek and remorseful, Emilia approached the leopard cub

in Magiluka's hands. Perhaps sensing her feelings, the cub hopped from Magiluka's arms and into Emilia's. Emilia caught it, surprised, and gazed into its buttony eyes.

"Ooh... You forgive us?"

The cub licked the tip of her nose in response. This was enough to make Emilia's cheeks flush over, and her discouraged expression turned cheerful.

"T-Too cute! Goodness, what is this? We absolutely must take it home and raise it!"

"Th-That's not fair, Princess! I want to take it too—"

"Heeeey, you two, you're forgetting what we're here for," Sacher chimed in, looking at the two girls fighting over the cub with exasperated eyes.

"Oh, right you are! Leaving this adorable little thing locked up in this dank, filthy place... You will pay dearly, Dabzal!" Emilia clenched her fist angrily.

"Um, Princess, you're forgetting our reason for coming here..." Magiluka whispered as she put down the cub.

Meanwhile, Dabzal sensed the dispel magic Emilia had used, and he also realized someone was heading his way. Earlier, he'd also sensed the unconsciousness spell used near his office. He imagined only Emilia could be so brazen about using magic—in theory, however, no matter how unpredictable the girl may have been, he did not believe she would have knocked out someone's butler for no reason. In theory...

But why, then, did she do something so reckless? Dabzal came up with his conclusion soon enough: it was because the situation had called for her to resort to force...

When he looked out the window and saw soldiers approaching with the banner of the royal family, he reflexively escaped through his underground passage. If he'd have stayed in his office and watched things unfold, the princess would have had him apprehended.

"No, I didn't run. I just decided to speed things up a little and take my secret

weapon on a test run...”

With his eyes fixed on the symbol of absolute power before him, Dabzal regained his composure. In truth, he was looking into a spacious, dimly lit chamber, one only just bright enough to discern one’s immediate surroundings, whose furthest reaches were much too tenebrous to perceive—but Dabzal knew perfectly well what lay under the veil of darkness, so being unable to see it gave him no pause.

As he advanced into the room, he heard three sets of footsteps approaching him through the silence. Dabzal turned around and greeted his guests with a confident smile.

“We finally found you, Dabzal!”

As expected, one visitor was Emilia...but much to his surprise, two of the Aldian visitors were there with her too. He’d expected her to bring a company of soldiers instead, so this was a bit anticlimactic. What’s more, Emilia was hugging that despicable creature in her arms—she must have found some way to take the rebellious, aggressive beast out of its barrier cage. The leopard, for its part, hissed upon spotting Dabzal.

“My, my, if it isn’t Her Highness. I’m honored to see you come all the way to such a place,” Dabzal offered complacently, in his gentlemanly manner.

“Being confident, are you not, Dabzal? The army already has you surrounded for counts of embezzlement of kingdom property and equipment, collusion with a foreign power, and black market dealings. Surrender yourself peacefully.”

Since he was so composed despite having been cornered, Emilia started reading out his charges. Dabzal, however...

“That much...? Heh heh heh heh...” He covered his face with a hand and started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Emilia asked suspiciously.

“It’s been five years.”

“Huh?”

“Five years ago, they approached me with this plan, and I’ve been working on

it in secret ever since. Everything was going well, and we were days away from carrying everything out... Tell me, Your Highness, did I somehow fail to hide it from Lady Elizabeth?"

"Far be it for us to say. If nothing else, you did well to feign ignorance in front of auntie. If you want to ask how this happened, you should ask Mary. You can think of her as the one who sprung this into motion."

"Mary? I recall someone like that being among your group. That silver-haired girl..."

Suddenly, Dabzal realized who he really should have been wary of. The reports he got mentioned something about that silver-haired girl. So, she was the one who had thrown his plans out of order, and she'd only entered the picture a few days ago...

If Mary herself was there, she wouldn't have understood what they were talking about and would have gone "Huh? What?" but she was sadly absent from this conversation.

Dabzal was beyond feeling surprised and simply started laughing thinking about his oversight. "Ha ha ha ha! I see. It's a shame she isn't here, then. She would have doubtless liked to witness the finest creation of the greatest magus smith, Girtz: the annihilation magus engine you see before you!" Dabzal spread out his hands and declared grandly.

"The annihilation magus engine?!" Emilia echoed the name in surprise.

"Indeed! The large annihilation magus engine I had built to seize this city when the Papacy launch their attack!"

In his excitement, Dabzal became talkative and exposed a detail he was better off leaving unsaid.

"The Papacy?!" Emilia said, but then she felt the cub in her arms start to struggle to free itself in an attempt to pounce at Dabzal. "Ah, st-stop that! Settle down, you! We're in the middle of an important talk!"

The adorable cub hissed menacingly as it tried to worm its way out of Emilia's grasp. The atmosphere in the room became quite odd. Realizing she couldn't soothe the cub, Emilia handed it over to Sacher. She let him hold it rather than

Magiluka because the cub was quite strong, and she wasn't confident Magiluka would be able to manage.

Dabzal pushed up his glasses as he watched their exchange, a bit baffled. To him, his big moment was being spoiled.

"Why bring the divine beast cub here...?" Dabzal whispered in annoyance.

"Huh? So this is a divine beast?" Magiluka asked, hearing his whisper. "So, this must be the younger sister whom the divine beast Lady Mary mentioned asked her to save."

"Mary again...?" Dabzal furrowed his brows unpleasantly. Even the young priest didn't know Dabzal kept the other divine beast down here. This was one of the contingency plans he had set up, so how did that Mary girl find out about the other divine beast?

Of course, Dabzal was unaware that Mary had heard about it from the first divine beast...

"She discovered the divine beast so soon... How fearsome," he thought aloud. "This girl might be more fearsome than Lady Elizabeth. She's a risk to my future plans..."

Once again regaining his composure, Dabzal approached the large object behind him. There was a round circle gouged into the ground that contained the object, making it difficult to gauge how large it was from afar. Dabzal walked into what was possibly the object's torso, where some kind of device sat exposed.

"But very well. We're short on time, so I will show you! My annihilation weapon!"

Dabzal took out some kind of activation key from his pocket, inserted it into the device, and twisted it. And after a few moments of silence...nothing.

"Nothing happened...?" Emilia whispered, looking around wearily, and then she saw Dabzal's expression twisting into panic.

"Why? Why isn't it activating?!" Dabzal shouted and started checking the device. Unsure of what was happening, the three merely watched Dabzal

struggle, not moving in to stop him. “Wh-What’s this?!” he shouted, startling the three and at last prompting them to act.

He clutched some kind of device with trembling hands, discovering that some of the wires dangling from below it only extended halfway through the object. They didn’t seem to have been torn off or cut, but rather like this was their original length.

“Heh heh heh... It seems the old man duped you, Dabzal,” Emilia said victoriously despite not really understanding the situation.

“Blast it all!” Dabzal howled, realizing Emilia was right. “That egoistic old maaaaan! I poured all these funds and materials into his work, and he does this?!”

He bashed the device into the floor in his rage, a blood vessel sticking out in his forehead. His scream echoed through the room as he scratched at his own chest in his rage, unable to calm himself.

As Dabzal went out of control, Emilia moved in to use her magic to incapacitate him. Magiluka assumed that at worst, Sacher could help her, and if the need called for it, they could stall for time until the invading soldiers arrived. Thus, Magiluka simply watched Dabzal...and then felt a chill run down her spine.

He was smiling. He gripped his chest, looking like he’d realized his chance to turn things around, his eyes glinting with madness behind his glasses.

“Your Highness, subdue the mayor now!” Magiluka called out in alarm.

As a foreign country’s noble lady, Magiluka had no authority to order a princess around, but she had a feeling they needed to stop Dabzal right then and there.

“Force Down Field!”

But sooner than Emilia could react to Magiluka’s words, Dabzal chanted words of power to attack the trio. The air around them distorted, and Magiluka and Sacher fell to their knees, as though something were pressing down on them from above.

“Th-The air...?” Magiluka groaned, trying to grasp the situation. “Demons are capable of magic this powerful...?”

“You sneaky villain! Break Spellfield!” Emilia, the only one unperturbed by the spell, exclaimed, making the magic pop like a balloon.

The difference between Emilia’s and Dabzal’s magical ranks was evident, as Dabzal’s spells were being deflected and disabled left and right. This was a magical duel between demons; as Magiluka watched all these unfamiliar spells being thrown around, she came to realize just how behind she—no, how behind all of the Aldian Kingdom was when it came to magic.

“Accel Boost!” Dabzal chanted.

The next moment, Dabzal was nowhere to be seen, and Emilia, who’d been confident she wouldn’t lose to him in a battle of magic, had lost sight of the old demon.

“Air Bullet!” Dabzal suddenly reappeared and fired a bullet of condensed air at Sacher at point-blank range.

“Body Protect!” Sacher chanted a spell to protect himself—but as he did, Dabzal reached out and grabbed the leopard cub by the scruff of its neck, prying it out of Sacher’s grasp before blasting the boy into the wall.

“Sacher!” Magiluka called out and hurried over to him. Meanwhile, having lost interest in Sacher, Dabzal looked down at the cub.

“Damn, I guess using just any weapon I could find wasn’t good enough...” Sacher cursed under his breath as he got to his feet.

Earlier, with Emilia’s permission, Sacher had taken one of the weapons decorating the room. His swift use of defensive magic did minimize the damage he took, but his sword nonetheless ended up snapping—Dabzal’s spell was clearly quite powerful.

“Oh, so you actually blocked it on reflex. That’s impressive judgment. I swear, all of the prince’s retainers are so talented... But it’s fine, now that I have this,” Dabzal said, walking away while holding the cub by the scruff of its neck like it was something very filthy. The cub thrashed in his grasp in an attempt to free itself, but to no avail.

“Let go of the little one, Dabzal!” Emilia shouted.

Dabzal directed a surprised glance at her.

“Goodness me. I’d assumed you’d simply reduce me and the divine beast to ashes without a second thought... I suppose you’re more merciful than you look, Your Highness. Quite gutless of you.” Dabzal laughed sarcastically, and Emilia gritted her teeth bitterly.

“Now then, I’ll put this creature to good use. Aha ha ha! Luck is on my side. God has handed me the thing I need to get out of this situation. And I’m brilliant enough to know how to use it!”

Dabzal walked toward the device and turned around, taking a crystal out of his pocket. Upon realizing what he was holding, Magiluka froze up in terror—she remembered how just recently, that very item had nearly claimed her own life.

“Liberal Materia?!” Emilia called out in a rage. “Dabzal, you foul imbecile! This item is forbidden in Relirex! Just possessing it is grounds for a death sentence! How dare you bring this cursed item into our land?!”

“The Einholst Papacy gave it to you, correct?” Magiluka asked, standing in front of the princess to keep her from doing anything reckless.

“Heh, a fine guess. And I will commend you for remaining calm at a time like this. I envy the prince for having such dependable people at his side.”

Seeing Magiluka’s exchange with Dabzal seemed to have cooled Emilia’s head somewhat—she regained her calm to an extent, though there was still some anger in her features. Magiluka knew the history that agitated the demon princess so much.

In the past, Liberal Materia had claimed many sacrifices, and the majority of them were demons. Since they possessed more mana than other races, demons were frequently abducted and subjected to experiments with this forbidden item. As such, demonkind, and in turn, Emilia, held an intense loathing for this abominable crystal.

“Dabzal...” Emilia said hatefully. “Not only did you collude with the Papacy, you even have this terrible thing. You’re a disgrace to demonkind! Be ashamed

of yourself!”

“It’s royalty like you who should be ashamed of themselves, Princess,” Dabzal retorted, growing angrier the more he spoke. “You lost to the Argent Knight, a mere *human*, and made an alliance with his lowly race. You’re nothing but gutless cowards who’ve dragged glorious demonkind’s dignity through the mud! My interests are simply aligned with the Papacy!”

Despite calling Emilia and the royal family cowards for allying with the humans, Dabzal seemed to not notice the contradiction that he, too, was siding with humans. Upon realizing this, Emilia knew there was only one explanation—what he’d just said wasn’t an idea he’d come up with on his own, but rather one someone else put into his head.

“‘Glorious demonkind’...? ‘Lowly humans’...? Dabzal, you imbecile, when did you become like this? If nothing else, we demons do not hold such discriminatory thoughts toward other races. We suppose...you must have been cajoled by someone from another country, you poor fool,” Emilia scoffed at him like he was terribly pitiful despite him supposedly having the upper hand.

“Sh-Shut up!” Dabzal roared at her, red in the face, making it clear Emilia hit the bull’s-eye. “You’re all making a fool out of me, but I will become king next! She told me I was worthy! That’s why I received this item, a Divine Miracle with the power of God, to surpass even the Dark Lord!”

With that said, he held up the cub and the crystal.

“Now, Liberal Materia, show me your miracles! I offer up this divine beast as sacrifice! Power my annihilation magus engine!”

The crystal lit up in response to Dabzal’s shouting, its glow lighting up the dark room in a blinding flash.

10. You Call That a Good Name?

I let the grown-ups handle the rest and slipped out of the now noisy warehouse. Once we got outside, Sufia led us to a spot with a good view, and we looked out over the city. Thankfully, the spot was high and far from the city center, giving us a full view of town.

That's when I saw it, illuminated by moonlight—a mass different from any of the houses in one corner of the city. I couldn't quite see what it was from afar, but it stood out like a sore thumb even from a distance.

That's probably where the mayor's manor is. And that must be the annihilation magus engine! Is everyone there safe?

"Miss Iks, what about Sir Reifus and the others?!" I turned to Miss Iks, who instructed the soldiers to act.

"The report I received was that once the royal family soldiers stormed the manor, he left alongside Sir Klaus! But Futurulica, Elexiel, and Princess Emilia went missing. That gigantic thing might have something to do with that. Anyway, you kids stay here!" After saying this, Miss Iks turned back to the soldiers and took charge of the situation.

N-No... I hope everyone's safe. They're not around that weapon, are they?

I had a very bad feeling I couldn't shake off, and I was itching to do something...and there was someone else who was just as fidgety as I was. I didn't know why, but the large divine beast who had been following me around ever since I'd broken the box was quite shaken.

"O-O-Oh no, Mary, what do we do?! I've been sensing my sister's presence, but it's been getting weaker for a while now!" She rubbed her large head against my face, pestering me. Thanks to that, all I could see was leopard fur.

"B-Back away, you're too close." I shooed her away with a shake of the hand, and she pulled away from me. "So, which direction do you sense your little sister in?"

I didn't particularly want to ask that, since I got the feeling the answer was obvious, but I did anyway. The leopard raised a foreleg and pointed in a very humanlike manner at a certain direction—toward where the gigantic weapon was.

It was then that a heavy thud shook the land. Just as the leopard pointed at the weapon, I could see a large explosion near it, but then some kind of wall formed that stopped the blast from affecting the weapon.

"That's explosive magic!" Sufia shouted in alarm. "And a spell of that class... It

must be Her Highness. Don't tell me she's..."

Emilia's trying to fight it off. For now, I have to confirm she's fine. Plus, Magiluka should be with her too...

Learning my friends could be there made me all the more concerned. I was too anxious to stay put here. But how were we supposed to leave? Running straight there via the shortest distance possible sounded like the best possible option, but right now the town was in a state of panic. Me bolting through the city during the chaos would end up with people getting hurt.

"We can't just stay here! Let's go, Mary!" the leopard implored me. Then, possessed by what I could only believe was insanity, she closed her jaws on my clothes and threw me into the air.

"Ah! Hold on! What are you doing?! Waiiiiiiit—" I screamed in complaint as I went flying. I braced for impact, but then I unexpectedly landed on something soft and fluffy.

"Lady Maryyyy!" I heard Tutte call out to me, her voice receding like I was moving further away from her.

Yes, that's right—I was currently sitting on the back of the divine beast, which was racing majestically across the moonlit sky.

Wh-What? What just happened? A maiden riding on the back of a mythical beast...? Am I supposed to be some kind of holy woman?!

"Why are you taking me with you?! I never agreed to this!" I shouted at the beast.

"I mean, you're worried about your friends too, right? So if I'm going down, I'm taking you with me!"

"Hey. That first part was fine, but that second half?" I glared at the leopard and landed some small, harmless punches on her back.

Still, once I stopped and thought it through, I realized this actually wasn't a bad turn of events. This made for a fast way of getting there, and with the beast being so big, people looking from below wouldn't see me. Besides, the leopard left much more of an impression than I did. Even if someone did notice me, I

could just feign ignorance.

If this goes well, everyone will just remember the divine beast, and I'll blend into the background... Perfect.

"Are you all right, Lady Mary?!" a voice suddenly shouted inside my head.

"Aaaagh!" I screamed out, startled.

It was Safina's voice.

"What's gotten into you? Making weird noises like that," the leopard asked me—also telepathically.

"Who are you calling weird?! That's rude!" I complained through my communication magic, accidentally getting my wires crossed.

"Huh? What are you talking about, Lady Mary?" Safina asked, baffled.

Seriously, it really feels like I'm fiddling with frequencies on a radio here...

"Never mind. I'm fine, Safina. I'm riding the divine beast over to the annihilation magus engine."

"I see... Be careful!"

"You watch yourself too."

I ended my communication with Safina and turned my eyes to our target, which was growing closer and bigger.

"Say, can't you, like, run headfirst into the annihilation weapon?" I asked.

"We need to get a grasp on the situation first... And would you stop calling me 'hey' and 'you'? Can't you call me something more appropriate?"

"That's a pretty weird time to start caring about that, but sure. So, what's your name?"

"Well, my name is classified information..."

"You're the one who brought it up!" I said, angrily tugging on her fur.

It made the leopard stop in mid-flight and adjust her bearings.

"Ow, ow! I mean, it was my ancestor carelessly revealing their true name that got our clan bound by that spell. So, you see, I have to use a fake name."

“And you want me to come up with it?”

“Yeah! I mean, it’d be embarrassing if I came up with a weird name, you know?”

Saying that naming the leopard was inappropriate during this emergency would be an understatement, but I did understand what she meant. Plus, her not having a name really was troublesome. I paused for thought. Even if it was a pseudonym, it was my first time actually naming something, so I figured it would be best to put thought into it and come up with something good.

“Well, since you’ve got white fur with specks, let’s call you White Speck!”

“That sounds kind of silly.”

“Well, if you’re going to talk back, maybe I’ll just call you Blabbercat.”

“Wow, Mary, I guess you’re terrible at coming up with names.” The leopard looked at me with an expression that was clearly fed up.

I stared back at her wordlessly. Silence hung over us for a bit.

“You asked me to do it! If you’re gonna complain, do it yourself!” I shouted and started tugging on her fur again.

“Oooow! No violence! Mary, I think you’re just overthinking it. Now, try again, and this time, don’t think too hard about it.”

Why are we doing this in the middle of a citywide catastrophe again?

I realized that we really didn’t have time to be fooling around like this, so I decided to just go with something simple.

“Fine. You’re a snow leopard, so let’s call you Snow. If you’ve got a problem with that, come up with a name on your own!”

“Snow, huh? It’s got a pretty ring to it, and it’s better than White Speck and Blabbercat. Yeah, let’s go with Snow.”

Pleased with the name, the leopard—Snow—resumed her race across the sky. On the way there, a good distance from the weapon, I spotted a large plaza where Reifus, Sir Klaus, and a mix of demon soldiers and Aldian soldiers were helping evacuate the civilians to safety. I leaned forward and called out to

Snow.

“Snow, stop right here!”

“Whoa! Don’t shout in my ear. What happened?” Snow stopped in midair and turned her head to look at me.

“Ah, sorry. Just land for now. The prince is over there.”

“The prince? You mean the blond boy?” Snow looked down at the group. *“Oh, gosh, he’s dreamy!”* she exclaimed excitedly and landed.

Dreamy...? You’re a leopard, you know. You should be attracted to male leopards instead. I grumbled to myself as we began our descent.

“Sir Reifus! Sir Klaus!” I called out as I approached them.

The prince heard me but couldn’t see me, and he started looking around curiously.

“Look up, Sir Reifus,” I said.

Everyone looked up, including the fleeing demon citizens. Because everyone looked at us, the people vacated the spot Snow was landing in, forming an open space around us. Snow touched down lightly in front of the prince, and everyone started whispering restlessly. I could only imagine seeing a giant leopard fly through the sky and land like this would be surprising. Sir Klaus and the soldiers stood on guard too. This made me instantly regret my decision.

“Everyone, put your weapons away! This is Lady Mary who’s riding this creature! She’s on our side!” Reifus called out, spotting me on her back and calling everyone to step down.

“Sir Reifus, I heard you’d evacuated. Why are you here?” I asked.

“The people are panicking, and someone needs to gather everyone and guide them to safety. As the prince of an allied country, I decided to help, and when I told the Great Witch, she said she had her hands full and reluctantly let me handle it. Aha ha...” The prince punctuated his explanation with strained laughter.

“Reluctantly?” I asked. *Why would she be reluctant about an offer for help?*

“Well, it wasn’t my intent, but apparently, she didn’t like the idea of owing Aldia a debt of gratitude. Especially since I was royalty visiting here incognito... Put simply, it’s very complicated from a diplomatic point of view.” Reifus smiled and offered a light chuckle...one that seemed more like a sigh. This was a side of the prince I hadn’t seen much before. Being royalty came with its own complications, apparently.

However...

“Oh, goodness, that’s a prince for you. You just approach things in a way others don’t. Handsome and smart—imagine that. Tee hee. You look more dashing the more I look at you...” Snow gushed while wagging her tail slowly and hiding her mouth with a paw in what was perhaps a feline version of a coquettish, upturned glance.

“You do know you’re a leopard, right? Plus, you’re being discourteous in front of a prince.” I smacked the leopard lightly over the head.

This made the prince and everyone around me stare at me in surprise, at which point I realized how weird that must have looked.

Gah! Fifi proved I wasn’t crazy, but these people weren’t there for it. Now everyone’s going to think I have a screw loose again...

“Ah, erm, where’s Princess Emilia?” I asked, trying to nonchalantly nudge the conversation back on track.

“I haven’t seen her since the dinner party, but I believe she’s attacking that gigantic object,” Reifus answered, seemingly unbothered by the sudden change in topic. “She lured it in the opposite direction from us, and thanks to that, no one has gotten hurt. But I’m worried since Magiluka and Sacher should be with her too...”

“Well, I’ll go get the other two out of harm’s way,” I said.

“Yes, please do. The witch told us to wait a while and then evacuate to the hill over there.” Reifus pointed in the direction Snow and I came from.

So, where Safina and the others are? I guess that place does work, since there’s plenty of weapons, food, and medical supplies there. That must be what Lady Elizabeth is going for.

“Very well. Sir Reifus, please don’t do anything dangerous.”

“Are you done talking? Then let’s go,” Snow said and levitated again.

Everyone around us let out a surprised “Ooooooh!” upon seeing us lift off.

“Compared to what you’re doing right now, this isn’t dangerous in the slightest,” Reifus said with a smile. “I’m counting on you.”

“Thank you. Sir Klaus, take care of Sir Reifus!”

“Understood!” Sir Klaus nodded. “But Lady Mary, is this leopard the divine beast you mentioned?”

“Yes! Some things happened, but she’s on our side now. Let’s go, Snow!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

At my call, Snow sprinted up into the night sky again. Spurred by the impressive sight and Sir Klaus’s mention of the word “divine beast,” all the people in the area looked at us as we left and murmured something. I couldn’t quite hear what they were saying, but on close inspection, it looked like some of the people were praying.

Th-They must be shocked from seeing Snow. I mean, they heard she’s a divine beast and decided to pray to her! I’m just an afterthought here, yep, unrelated! I don’t stand out! I, do, not, stand, out!

I panicked and insistently told myself this over and over again.

11. I’m Sorry...

We finally reached a distance where we could clearly see the annihilation magus engine. It looked much more creepy than I’d imagined. Its central part—its torso, so to speak—looked like it was made up of several human top-halves connected to each other at an angle. It had several large, oddly elongated and distorted arms extending the top of its torso. Its bottom half was likewise supported by multiple sets of distorted hands and legs.

As we came closer, I could see it had multiple heads grafted onto its torso as well, with multiple eyeballs attached to each of them that spun in their sockets,

taking in their surroundings. It looked overall mechanical, but it had a certain organic likeness to it that made it eerie. It wasn't just the eyeballs—the arms had globs of fleshy muscle tissue sticking out of them too.

Girtz's design sense is terrible. It really feels like he just stuck things together haphazardly. How can this thing even move? It makes no sense.

I rubbed my arms, grossed out, and looked around. The area was mostly in ruins, and I couldn't imagine how the mayor's manor had looked before the place was ruined. Thankfully, I didn't see any people in the area. Everyone must have run away by now.

"Ooh, is that you, Mary?!" I heard a voice call out to me from above.

I looked up from the disgusting weapon, looking for the source of the voice, and soon I discovered a familiar orange-haired demon flying above me.

"Princess! Snow, carry me over to where that demon is!"

"Okay!"

Snow floated up to where Emilia was flying, and as I approached, I realized she was flying while carrying two people.

"Sir Sacher! Magilukaaa!"

Sacher was holding on to Emilia's hand, and Magiluka was grabbing Sacher's hand. Seeing Magiluka, although she was very pale and tired, filled me with relief.

"We were nearly at our limit. We can only carry two people for so long, but we lacked the time to find somewhere to let them land without being found by that thing. Your timing is impeccable, Mary. Take these two over there and evacuate. We will hold this monster off."

"All right. Can you do that, Snow?"

"I could, but I won't be able to move very well with three people on my back. If I end up having to fight in that state, I'll probably drop you."

"That's fine for now. Let's evacuate to a safe spot. Princess, put the two of them here."

Emilia lowered the two of them onto Snow's back, and once they settled onto her back, she suddenly looked puzzled.

"Is this a larger version of the adorable leopard divine beast we met?"

"You met my baby sister?!" Snow instantly turned to face Emilia, which got in the way of me managing to place the other two on her back.

"Bad Snow, bad! We can talk about that later! First we need to get them to safety!"

"But my baby sisteeer!"

"I understand how you feel, but let's focus on the task ahead, shall we?" I said, patting her soothingly on the back. "We can't exactly have a proper conversation right now."

"All right," Snow said, calming down and allowing Emilia to lower the two onto her back.

"Mary, who are you talking to?" Emilia asked, looking at me with pitying eyes. "Have you gotten to the point of being unable to tell reality apart from delusion —"

"No! Enough! I've already proven I'm not crazy!" I shouted back at Emilia as Snow started flying away. "I can talk to this divine beast, Snow! Ask Fifi for the details!"

"R-Really? Hmm, well, we can clarify that later. We'll keep this monster weapon distracted, so you three get to safety!" Emilia said, now unburdened by the weight of my two friends, and we sped off toward the annihilation magus engine.

"Wow, Lady Mary, you actually *can* talk to the divine beast," Sacher said, impressed, as he lay Magiluka down on Snow's back.

"Oh, right, Magiluka! What's wrong? Talk to me!" I said, looking at Magiluka, who lay languid with her eyes closed.

"Don't worry, Lady Mary. The princess said Magiluka's just a little tired because she overused her magic," Sacher explained. "Well, that, and she's afraid of heights, so she's feeling queasy."

Either way, Magiluka wasn't in any danger. Come to think of it, I did remember her being afraid of heights...

"What happened?" I asked Sacher. "I thought that weapon wasn't supposed to move."

"You knew it wasn't supposed to be able to move? That's pretty impressive, Lady Mary. What everyone says is true—you really do know everything."

He was under the wrong impression again, but I wasn't going to insist on correcting him in this situation.

"What about my sister, Mary?" Snow asked, butting into our conversation.

"I know, don't rush it," I replied.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Sacher asked, seeing the conversation was turning incoherent.

"I'm just talking to the leopard. Don't worry about it," I said, patting Snow's fur soothingly again as I urged Sacher to keep going.

Sacher told me that they'd cornered the mayor, gone underground, and found a small leopard held captive. They rescued her and instantly pursued the mayor. At that point, Snow declared *"That's my sister!"* but I soothed her again so she wouldn't disturb my thoughts. Sacher then told me the mayor failed to get the weapon to move and decided to use that terrible item.

"A Liberal Materia..." I gritted my teeth bitterly.

The item that'd ruined our Academy Festival and had nearly claimed Magiluka's life was now being abused here...

"The mayor tried to use the divine beast as sacrifice, but the item didn't really care about that and swallowed the mayor up along with it. That's what made that grotesque weapon start moving. Then it busted through the openable ceiling. I thought we'd get buried in the rubble, but Magiluka used a Protection Field spell to shield us..."

Sacher paused there and glanced at Magiluka. The spell she'd used was a shield that deflects physical pressure from all directions, but keeping it deployed for long periods of time was greatly taxing in terms of mana

consumption.

“While she did it, I picked up Magiluka, the princess grabbed me, and we all flew through the collapsed roof. The princess tried really hard to keep flying even with the two of us, and she dodged the rubble really well, and Magiluka kept her spell up the whole time to keep us safe. Magiluka kept going until she was almost out of mana, and she told us what to do on the spot too. The princess really praised her—said she had quick thinking and gave proper instructions.”

“...I see.” I looked at Magiluka and brushed my hands through her hair. I was proud to call her my friend.

Tousling her hair made her eyes open to a crack. “...Lady... Mary?”

“I’m glad you’re safe, Magiluka,” I whispered softly.

“...Lady Mary.” She extended her trembling hands toward me, like she was asking for something.

“...What? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Lady Mary... We’re too...high up... Put us down...” Her pained whisper was so soft that the whirring of the wind almost made it inaudible—she was just that feeble and terrified. After all, we were flying at altitudes much higher than we’d ever gone with levitation magic. This must have been like hell for her.

“Princess, we’ll get away from here! His Highness is helping evacuate the people, and we’ll land soon too.”

“Understood! Leave us to handle things here and go on!”

Aaaah! Don’t say that, Princess, that’s setting a death flag! I thought to myself, mortified.

“Once we get a good distance away, we’ll put the two of you down. Sir Sacher, once we land, run like your life depends on it and take Magiluka over to His Highness. Princess, once you see a chance to disengage, meet up with us! Snow, start landing!”

“Huh? Huuuh?! But my sister...!”

“We’ll handle that later. Just do what I say for now!”

Snow begrudgingly complied and landed a good distance away from the weapon. Sacher said nothing, carried Magiluka on his back, and began running. He understood exactly what his role here was. Before long, Emilia landed next to us.

“Did the two of them get away?” she asked.

“I think so. Princess, you evacuate too,” I told her.

“What?! No, if we leave this place, that thing could start heading that way. We failed to properly appraise the threat, so it’s our duty to buy time for the soldiers to evacuate and prepare for ba—”

“Princess! Snow and I will handle that!” I cut her off with a shout.

As rude as that was, raising my voice did surprise Emilia into silence.

“I want you to fall back while confirming there aren’t people left behind who didn’t retreat in time. Having you lead them to safety will be more calming to the people here than us doing it.”

“H-However, can you two handle that monster?”

“Don’t worry. Snow is a divine beast, despite appearances, and she said she’ll go as far as destroying it. She sounds very dependable!”

“Hey, what do you mean, ‘despite appearances’? And I didn’t say any of that! You’re lying!” Snow protested, but I pretended I didn’t hear her and insisted the divine beast would handle everything.

This was a bit reckless of me, but I capitalized on the fact only I could hear what she said.

“But we cannot just leave you alone to handle this... This is a Relirex problem, so why are you going so far to help?” Emilia asked, baffled.

My lips curled into a sheepish smile. I hopped off Snow, approached Emilia, and wrapped my arms around her, much to her surprise.

“...Emilia,” I told her, calling her by her given name despite knowing how improper it might be. “You’re my friend, and you need help. It’s only natural I’d try to help.” I said it as affectionately and naturally as I could.

Emilia stepped away from me and stared at me for a while. She then looked like she wanted to say something, but she fell silent and nodded.

“...Understood. We will rely on you for now. Just don’t do anything reckless, Mary! You must promise us. As a friend!”

“I promise!” I replied with a grin.

Emilia flew off and followed the other two while looking around the area for people possibly left behind. After watching her go, I could hear the giant weapon approach me, destroying everything in its path.

“Okay, Snow, you’ve waited long enough!” I said and hopped onto Snow’s back. “Let’s go save your sister!”

“All right, Mary!” She energetically jumped into the sky.

“Safina? Can you hear me, Safina?” I used communication magic as we soared.

“Yes, Lady Mary, what is it?” she replied right away.

“Could you call Mr. Girtz? Also, I wanted to let you know that the princess, Magiluka, and Sacher are fine.”

“Thank goodness... Ah, Miss Fifi and Mr. Girtz just passed by!”

I concisely explained what Sacher told me to Safina, who relayed it to the two magus smiths. I had to keep it short, because communication magic depleted a great deal of magic. Honestly, it wasn’t very taxing for me, but I had to keep the strain it placed on Safina in mind.

All the while, Snow maintained an appropriate distance out of the giant weapon’s reach, hopping around to keep it distracted. It occasionally reached toward us with one of its large arms, but Snow dodged it easily. That said, she didn’t seem to care much about the fact I could end up falling off of her—and while I wouldn’t fall off that easily, it was still a bit insulting...

“That weird item doesn’t work according to our common sense, so it probably made that weapon move.”

“So, if Liberal Materia summoned a monster just like it did in the festival, it’s probably using it in the weapon’s heart as a power source. It would explain all

the muscles and blood vessels around that area too. It basically stuffed one of those monsters from back then into the annihilation magus engine to power it."

This was my interpretation of the situation. What a ridiculous item... All the organic bits on the weapon must have belonged to the monster.

"We need to confirm how it's being powered. Safina, could you ask them where its power source should be?"

"...They say it's where you'd expect it to be, in the middle of the torso. That's the most protected spot."

"Snow, can you get closer? I need to see where its power source is. It should be around the middle of its torso, at the most sturdy-looking spot."

"D-Don't be reckless! That thing has too many arms, and weapons, and it can move in ways that make no sense considering how it's built. If I'm going to do this, I'll need you to back me up with your magic."

Snow weaved past the weapon's multiple arms, somehow pulling away from it. As we dodged, some things similar to bows that were set around the weapon's torso fired arrows at us. With all these obstacles, we couldn't exactly get closer and get a good look at the weapon.

"Do magic attacks work on it?" I asked Safina. The answer was clear, though; Emilia had used spells on it repeatedly, but the weapon didn't seem damaged at all.

"...Girtz said this weapon was made to counter demons, so it was equipped with a lot of magic resistance."

"That makes sense. I guess that's how it blocked Emilia's spells..."

"Apparently, a certain percentage of its body is made out of mythril ore, and it has a magic barrier spell etched onto its circuitry."

"That's troublesome... Doesn't it have any weak spots?"

"...Apparently, its main method of attack is those arms. Golems can't cast spells, so if you stick to its torso, it should have trouble attacking you... Apparently."

"Snow, get closer! We need to get past those arms and stick to its torso. It

shouldn't be able to attack us if we stay close to it."

"Okay, but let me warn you, I can't worry about you when I'm avoiding this thing, so you have to protect yourself," Snow replied.

"I know. Don't worry about me and move in."

Taking my words as confirmation, Snow charged toward the weapon faster than ever before. The weapon extended its many arms toward Snow, trying to grab her, but she maintained her speed. She just barely skimmed past the occasional sharp attack, willingly getting injured to move closer.

For a moment, the attacks stopped—we'd slipped through the arm. Then we saw the weapon's heart—its power source.

"Nooooooooo! My sister! My sisteeeeer!" I heard Snow's screams in my mind.

The weapon's giant heart pulsed repeatedly. Attached to it were the shriveled remains of the mayor Dabzal, as well as the limp form of a small leopard, her fluffy tail now drooping and her body emaciated and bony.

Snow lunged forward, trying to approach the heart, but—

"Snow, we have to dodge, now!" I ordered her, overcome with a bad feeling, and tugged her body sideways.

My tugging made her flight veer off into a curve. The next moment, a flurry of fireballs propelled toward the heart, aiming at the spot we were occupying just a moment ago. It was literally concentrated fire. In dodging at the very last second, we were able to just barely avoid getting hit.

I'd have been unharmed because of my magic nullification skill, but that didn't extend to Snow. A few fireballs had ended up narrowly hitting her, but she wasn't seriously hurt. When we moved away from the heart, I saw (what looked like) human mouths having surfaced near the weapon's many eyeballs—those had likely chanted the spells.

"Hey, old man, it just cast spells at us! Didn't you say it can't use magic?!" Angered by the fact Snow got hurt, I shouted at Girtz, forgetting that I was using Safina as a relay.

"Eeek!" I heard her screech in my head, which calmed me down instantly.

"Ah, sorry, Safina, I wasn't talking to you..."

"Ah, yes... Hm..." Safina calmed down, relayed my words to the magus smiths, and then replied, *"Mr. Girtz says he doesn't remember adding a feature like that to the weapon, so he assumes that the monster evolved itself to be capable of that. He says you have to destroy the engine soon before it evolves further."*

I apologized to Safina again and turned pensive.

"Mary, my sister! My sister's there! If we don't save her soon, she'll die!" Snow took distance from the magus weapon and hurriedly prepared to charge in again.

"Calm down, Snow! So, you're saying she's still alive?" I grabbed onto her neck and whispered into her ear.

"Y-Yes, but her mana is being drained as we speak, and us divine beasts live off of large reserves of mana. If she runs out of mana, she'll die."

"And the more it moves, the more it uses its mana... That must be why it keeps changing. Anyway, we can't let it drain more of your sister's mana," I replied. Then I used communication magic to ask Safina, *"But how are we supposed to destroy its power source exactly?"*

"Hmm... Mr. Girtz says you're supposed to just break it to pieces, or gouge it out..." Safina replied. *"But so long as it uses the mythical beast as a mana source, it can keep regenerating its heart."*

"Huh? Then, how are we supposed to do this?"

"...You're supposed to gouge out its heart and pull the divine beast out of it at the same time... Or so he says."

"Right... We'll try it."

I instantly tried to think of a plan of how to go about it, but then Safina said something that made me pause. *"H-Huh, erm, apparently, pulling the divine beast away from the heart isn't as simple as it sounds."*

"What do you mean?"

"Anything absorbed by that thing is considered part of its body," she explained.

“Part of its body?”

“In other words, if you gouge the heart out before pulling the divine beast out, it’ll count as part of its body and die along with the rest of the monster... And the opposite holds true.”

“What kind of crazy logic is that?! That’s absurd! Magiluka was fine when it happened to her!” I ended up lashing out at Safina from the sheer absurdity of the idea.

“In Lady Magiluka’s case, she was safe because she wasn’t absorbed by the Liberal Materia, but this time... So... N-No, you can’t mean that!”

“What’s wrong, Safina?” Hearing her exclaim in surprise gave me a bad feeling, but I asked anyway.

“...A divine beast might be able to resist the unification and separate safely, but... Based on everything you’ve told us, it sounds like it’s too late, and it can’t resist anymore...”

“You don’t mean...”

“A-Ah, right now, Lady Elizabeth gave the demon soldiers orders, and they’re preparing several large magus bolts that can propel large spears at the monster...”

“...What?”

Apparently, they were talking over what to do without regard for me and were coming up with their own decisions.

“They’re going to go on a full offensive to prevent any further damage, and they intend to kill the monster in spite of the divine beast...”

“They want to kill it in spite of the divine beast?!” I exclaimed aloud despite myself, but then clasped a hand over my mouth, realizing the blunder I’d just made.

“M-Mary... What did you just say? What did you mean by that?” Snow asked me, a hint of anger in her voice.

I could see her fur stand up in agitation. Realizing there was no hiding what I’d heard, I shared what Safina had just told me with Snow.

“Are they joking?! We were used like pawns, and she’s completely innocent in this! She’s a newborn, and she doesn’t even know she’s a divine beast yet! She’s my precious baby sister, and they think they can just kill her because they ‘have no choice’?! This is why I hate humans!”

Snow’s anger and sorrow flooded my head. Her ancestor had their kindness taken advantage of by bad people, and they were forced into servitude. Her entire bloodline had been bound by that pact, and Snow herself had been held captive. And now, an innocent divine beast that was completely oblivious to all this was caught up in it because of one demon’s greed, and was going to be killed for lack of a better option.

It really does feel terribly selfish...

As Snow trembled in anger, I patted her gently on the head. She shook her head, rejecting me, but I didn’t stop.

“If you hate humans so much, why are you helping me?” I asked.

“That’s because...you just happen to be the first person I can talk to in a long time. And you broke that terrible box... So I can trust you...maybe...” As she spoke, her voice grew fainter in my thoughts, like she was trailing off.

Still, that made me happy, but at the same time very sad.

“Thank you, Snow. I wish I could say I understand your anger and sorrow... But I’m in no position to say that. I’m sorry, Snow... This is awful, unreasonable...”

Snow’s visage grew muddled as tears filled my eyes.

“Mary.” Sensing my regret, Snow stopped shaking her head in an attempt to escape.

“Snow... I won’t betray your trust! I promise, I will save your sister!” I wiped away my tears and shouted my resolve.

“Mary...”

“Snow, please. Trust me.”

Floating in the vast sky, Snow and I silently looked at each other. Snow was the first to move. She moved her head away and fixed her eyes on the weapon

again.

"...I trust you."

Her words filled my heart with warmth, and I teared up a little again. I wanted to hug her tightly, but we didn't have the time for that now. We had to spend every second now on saving her little sister.

"Say, Snow, would your sister understand what I'm saying?"

"She's still little, so she can't understand complicated words. But she's always been one to react to the voice of others' hearts instead of their words."

Those words reminded me of what Sacher told me. Despite being afraid of demons, the little leopard had forgiven Emilia after she'd apologized. She'd sensed something in Emilia's heart that'd made her realize she was there to save her.

"But I'm not sure she's conscious right now... I doubt she has the strength to resist the unification..."

"Snow! If you don't believe in your little sister, who will? If she can just resist the unification a little, I'll shatter that thing to bits! So Snow, lend me your strength! Let's wake her up, together!"

"Crush it to bits? But you're just human, you can't—"

"Don't worry. Despite appearances, my body's completely invincible!" I said with my chest puffed up.

Snow's body trembled, like she was laughing.

"Heh heh, just your body? That's a weird way of putting it."

"W-Well, don't worry about that."

We exchanged thin smiles. Now wasn't the time for it, but this momentary peace was very pleasant and calming, and it helped steel my resolve.

"Safina, can you hear me?"

"...Yes, Lady Mary?" Safina replied feebly, disheartened by having had to deliver grim news to me earlier.

"Has Princess Emilia regrouped with you yet?"

“Ah, yes, she just arrived earlier with Lady Magiluka and Sir Sacher.”

“That’s good. Then I need you to deliver her a message. We’re going to save the little mythical beast and destroy that weapon, so please apologize to the soldiers and have them wait.”

“A-All right!” Safina said, cheering up upon hearing the resolve in my voice.

Emilia will understand. She’ll believe in me and find some absurd way to stop them.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and glared at the monster beneath us. Its body was morphing before my eyes as it spurted more malformed arms.

“Snow, I’m sorry, but can I count on you to handle everything until we get to the point where it can’t interrupt me?”

“Yes, I’ll go in as hard as I can! So please, Mary, save my sister!”

If that monster got in my way at the wrong time, I could end up hurting the divine beast too. I knew I was still inexperienced, and I had no intention of being conceited and overconfident—whenever I couldn’t afford to make a blunder, I wouldn’t act alone, but I’d rely on my friends to see my mission through. And this time, I had reliable friends—one right next to me, along with my other friends nearby.

Snow couldn’t see it, but I was grinning atop her back.

“All right, let’s go!”

The final battle was about to begin.

12. Blessings upon This Small Life

Following my instructions, Snow flew up as high as she could. Far below us was the monster, and we were moving in a direct line toward its heart.

“Let’s go, Mary! Hang on tight!”

“You got it! Accel Boost!”

I chanted the words of power, further speeding up Snow’s stride. Using that as a signal, she bolted forward in a nosedive, without any tricks or stunts. She

was aiming at the monster's heart and nothing else.

Sensing our intent, the weapon retaliated, extending its countless arms and weapons toward Snow.

"Don't mess with divine beasts!" Snow's shout echoed in my head as she roared loudly.

She dodged some of its attacks by the skin of her teeth, and she got hit by others, but she didn't change the trajectory of her nosedive. As she continued to plunge, she unleashed her earlier magic attack on the weapon.

"Take this! A full force...Howling Blast!"

Snow's roar became a shock wave that pushed away both the enemy's physical as well as their magical attacks. Still, we were up against an enemy optimized for magical defense. It deployed multiple magical barriers that suppressed Snow's roar and prevented it from reaching its heart. But even its magic defense had a limit for how much it could take, because the air surrounding the remaining barriers exploded, destroying them.

Snow more than did her job to help me. The enemy's heart was right in front of me now.

The way is open!

I braced myself on Snow's back, preparing to jump off...but before long, the heart was blocked from sight by a large mass of approaching hands.

What do I do about this? Snow can't react because she just used her spell. I have to protect us from—

I instantly wrote off the idea of jumping, but Snow swung her body forward and sent me flying toward the heart anyway.

"Snoooooooooow!" I shouted toward her.

"Go, Mary! Save my sis—"

With an intense thud, countless arms enveloped Snow and hid her from view. I couldn't go back now. I fixed my eyes forward and continued my fall through the open path to the heart.

“Thank you, Snow! I’ll handle the rest!”

I spread out my limbs to curb the speed of my fall. Normally, I’d be terrified of this feat of skydiving, and my nerves would be screaming at me to stop, but I couldn’t afford to be afraid now. I had to get the divine beast cub out of the heart, destroying the monster without getting the little one caught up in the damage—and now that its attacks were focused on Snow, this was my chance to attack the heart directly.

With that singular thought in mind, I fixed my eyes on the cub. The heart area was silent after the explosions from earlier, and even if the monster was capable of trying to stop me from approaching, it wasn’t doing so.

With my concentration fixed on the little one, I focused on what I had to do next without panicking. I just had to hope the little one could still resist the unification, even for a little longer.

But then, I heard another roar from behind me. Snow had likely attacked in an attempt to shake off the arms holding her down. The howl wasn’t in telepathy, but even if I had heard her talking into my thoughts, I’d have ignored her at a time like this.

“Please! Did you just hear that roar?!” I called out to the cub from the bottom of my heart as I plummeted down. “That’s your big sister! Her emotions are reaching out to you! So please, fight back, resist just one more time! I’ll save you, I promise! Believe in me and keep fighting! I’ll take you back to your big sister!”

But the cub didn’t react.

God, please! Let me save her!

But then, I saw something flash briefly in front of me. It was only for a second, but I did see it. It was a faint, feeble light, but I did see a flicker. Compared to the monster, it looked small and insignificant, but to me, it looked like significant resistance.

And then, it happened—the small, weakened cub was struggling in an attempt to hang on to life. She raised her small paw up, trying to reach her sister’s voice, and she managed to levitate just a few inches away from the

mass of flesh.

Just for this one moment, she'd managed to separate herself from the heart. After just a few more seconds, she would be reattached, but this was more than enough time for me to act.

"Thank you..." I whispered.

I tilted my head, like I was preparing to headbutt the heart in an attempt to minimize the air resistance and increase my falling speed.

"Protection Field!" I chanted a spell.

I wasn't going to take it easy against this terrible monster. I was going to ram into it, intent on completely destroying it, and cast the spell so as to protect the cub from the shock waves of our collision. Perhaps realizing my intent, the cub rolled up like she was bracing herself and let out a small glow.



“Go away alreaaaaaaaaady!” I shouted and held up my sword so as to gouge into the heart.

The heart deployed magical barriers so as to protect itself, but I didn’t care. My sword broke through layer after layer of barrier, until at last, it pierced deep into the throbbing heart. I then used my free hand to catch the small life enclosed in my magic barrier and cradled her gently in my arm, protecting her.

I felt the unpleasant sensation of my sword cutting through a mass of flesh, breaking through its armor and penetrating all manner of matter. But right now, the small warmth I held in my arm was all that mattered. Feeling she was alive was all the answer I needed.

A loud, thundering sound filled the port town, and the annihilation magus engine became completely still.

For a few minutes, deafening silence hung over the area. Particles of light started spilling through the armor plates, and the monster began falling apart like a tower of blocks with a loud rumble.

It was over.

“Mary...”

After some time, I heard a gentle voice in my head. I knew I’d basically crash to the ground without a hint of gracefulness, but I curled up my body so as to protect the small leopard in my arms. I wouldn’t be hurt, so I tried to serve as a cushion for the cub in the barrier.

I opened my eyes to react to the voice in my head, and I spotted Snow peering into the wreckage, looking quite ruffled and bruised.

“Snow...” I said, then I looked down at the small cub in my hands.

She lay curled up, entrusting her body to me. She was alive. I’d saved her. But she wasn’t shining like earlier, and she looked even more emaciated and exhausted than she’d looked when I’d seen her from afar.

“N-No...” I hugged the cub with trembling hands, trying to confirm her warmth again. She was still alive, but I could tell her warmth was slowly slipping away. The meaning of that made tears well up in my eyes.

“N-No, no, no! Not after I saved you! You can finally meet your sister!” I pleaded in the face of her fading warmth, but reality, in its cruelty, didn’t comply.

“...Thank you, Mary.”

Snow approached me slowly. She pressed her snout against her sister and rubbed her cheek against her. The cub stirred ever so slightly, trying to meet her, but her expression was relieved and serene.

“Why are you thanking me, Snow?! You can’t just give up!”

“I...! Believe me, I don’t want to give up on her either!” Snow’s voice echoed in a shout inside my head. *“But, but...”*

Her words trailed off into a near inaudible whisper. She, too, realized that there was nothing to be done in the face of cold, harsh reality. I refused to give up, however.

Aren’t I invincible?! I have endless power, endless mana, endless magic! I can do anything if I put my mind to it! I should be able to do something!

“Isn’t there something we can do?! Some way to save her!”

“Our sort feed on mana. But after using so much mana, I don’t have enough to give her...and it’s hard to tell how much mana a divine beast needs—”

“Well, she can take my mana! Have her take as much as she needs! Go on, if you can do it, let’s get started! Hurry!” This was a chance. My mana could save the cub. I shouted hysterically, holding up my arms to Snow like I was offering a blood donation.

“H-Huh? B-But, she’s a divine beast. You’ll need a lot of mana to compensate for what she lost—” Snow said in clear concern for my well being.

“I don’t care! Just do it!” I bellowed at her.

“F-Fine... But don’t blame me if something happens. I’ll serve as a relay to transfer your mana to her, so hold her in your arms and imagine you’re sharing your mana with her...and then, chant the same words I do.”

“All right, got it.”

Snow curled up, enveloping me and her little sister. Feeling this warmth, I closed my eyes naturally.

Please... I'll give you my mana, so live on...

"Let's begin, Mary."

"Right..."

We both chanted as one:

"Harmonious Healing."

This must have been some kind of spell. I felt like some kind of invisible bond connected me to the two mythical beasts. I kept my eyes closed and maintained the image of something flowing out of me and into the other two.

After a while, without me noticing, all my friends had gathered around me.

"M-Mary... Just what are you doing?"

Huh? I feel like I just heard Emilia from afar...

"...Mary and the divine beasts are shining... And the divine beasts' wounds are healing..."

"Ooooooooooh!"

What's with all these voices I'm hearing? Aaah, I'm feeling kind of tired... My consciousness is getting pretty muddled...

"Mary... How much mana do you have? If you've got this much, you should have said something sooner. I can keep drawing on you as much as I want. Ah, can you give me some mana too?"

Hey, don't get carried away, Snow... But if it saved your sister, that's...good...

My thoughts grew foggy, not because I'd lost too much mana, but simply because all the stress I'd been under had finally been lifted, leaving me tired.

"Thank...you..."

As my consciousness faded, I heard the small, awkward voice of a young girl. But my consciousness slipped before I could reply.

13. The Argent Holy Woman? Who's That?

When I opened my eyes, three words slipped from my lips, speaking to the first thing I saw.

"...An unfamiliar ceiling."

"Lady Mary! You're awake." Tutte heard me and peered into my face.

I looked back at Tutte, somehow feeling like I'd been in this situation enough times to get used to it.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"At Princess Emilia's villa. Thankfully, it wasn't damaged in the fighting, so she let us stay here."

Tutte's words slowly sunk into my groggy mind, but then, I sat up in alarm.

"What about the cub?!"

Tutte pointed at something next to me. I turned to look, and I saw a small, fluffy leopard cub let out a big yawn.

"...Th-Thank goodness...!" I said in relief, patting the small leopard on the back. She didn't resist and curled up, letting me pat her.

"I should be the one saying that, Lady Mary. You've spent a full day sleeping after that. I was worried!" Tutte said, relieved, and started walking around the room, making preparations.

"I was asleep an entire day? Why?"

"Aah, I might have gotten a biiit carried away and drained too much mana out of you... Ehe he, sorry..." I heard an unapologetic voice in my head.

I looked around and spotted Snow, who was crouched near my bed, raising her head to look at me.

"Just how much mana did you drain out of me? A sorry isn't going to cut it!" I picked up a nearby pillow and threw it at Snow.

She accepted her punishment, and the pillow hit her square in the face.

"But you sleeping for a day isn't because of mana deprivation—you still had

plenty left. I guess your consciousness went out because it was your first time spending that much mana.”

Snow was right, I didn’t have any experience wasting that much mana in one go, so I accepted her explanation.

“Forget that, Mary! You’re a big deal now!” Snow said as the pillow slid off her face and brought a paw to her lips in a snicker.

“A big deal?” I asked, looking at Tutte suspiciously.

She realized what I was asking and her expression turned quite bothered.

Why do I get a really bad feeling about this?

Tutte began explaining what happened while I was asleep. Put simply, it was the birth of the legend of the Argent Holy Woman.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” I groaned, cradling my head.

Apparently, all the civilians saw a girl riding a holy beast and talking to the prince, and based on what Fifi said, I was apparently the only person capable of talking to a divine beast in recent memory. Because of that, the excuses I’d come up with, like the amount of mana and the frequency, were ignored in favor of me being a holy woman.

What really sealed the deal were my efforts to save the little cub. The majestic sight of me glowing along with the two divine beasts and healing the cub from the verge of death all looked like a miracle too. Apparently, it’d taken me a long time to heal her, and all the while, Emilia and her soldiers had watched me from afar.

The bad part was that I was the only one lying there, so no one else but me could have performed that miracle. News of it became rumors that filled the port town as it was being rebuilt, and the name I was given was “the Argent Holy Woman.”

This is the Dark Isle—how does a Holy Woman make sense here?

Fifi’s testimony did convince everyone I’m capable of speaking to the divine beasts, but because of that stupid name, I wasn’t sure if I should be happy no one thought I was crazy anymore. Very mixed feelings there. I immediately

started hatching an escape strategy.

Thankfully, the island's people only saw me afar, so they don't know my face. I can just explain it away to my friends later, but I have to make sure people don't recognize me. So long as no one does, I'll just leave the island without anyone knowing it's me... Ah, I guess my silver hair will make me recognizable, but I can just wear a hat. Aaah, I'm lucky this isn't a formal trip...

"By the way, when will we be sailing back?" I asked.

Tutte looked into it and soon had an answer for me. "There are some matters to attend to, so it'll be the day after tomorrow."

"I think I'll stay indoors until we leave, then, if it's all the same to you..." I said, burying myself under the covers again.

"I thought you might say that, so I made preparations," Tutte said, setting things up so I could stay inside my room.

So this was what she'd been working on silently before I woke up. I had to appreciate my capable maid.

"*Huh? Aren't you going to go out and be worshipped by everyone?*" Snow asked.

"Of course not! My motto is 'Lead a good, uneventful life!'" I said, keeping my head under the blanket.

"*"A good, uneventful life'...? You?"* Snow mercilessly objected.

I settled into sulky silence.

Afterward, my friends dropped in to visit after Tutte told them I woke up. Emilia, who was supposedly the busiest of the group, was the first to show up. I had her process the event such that on paper it would be known that the divine beast defeated the giant weapon instead of me. I had her use her authority to bend the facts, rather forcibly reminding her that "We're friends, aren't we?"

Then again, Relirex had to contend with the fact one of their mayors had rebelled against the kingdom, so I doubted my involvement would make as big a splash by comparison. Fifi came to visit me and filled me in on Girtz's fate in the aftermath of the event. He was sentenced to live his life under the watchful

eye of the kingdom going forward. But since he was (as his expressionless disciple put it) an insociable shut-in, he accepted his sentence happily.

I had to concur that he needed an eye kept on him, lest he create another dangerous weapon of some sort.

Do be careful around him, Fifi.

As a digression, a lot happened in the aftermath of the disaster, but I spent the whole day in bed and claimed I felt under the weather after I woke up, so I didn't take part in any of it. Thanks to that, the public of Relirex didn't see any silver-haired girls afterward. It was a close call, but I got away with it.

"By the way, Lady Mary, what's the little one called?" Magiluka, who came to visit me, asked as she hugged the little leopard in her arms.

"Right, Snow, what's her name?"

"That's classified informationnnn!"

"Again with your classified information? Okay, let's come up with another name for her then," I said and started thinking.

Snow looked nervous for some reason.

"M-Mary, you already named me, so you, uh, you don't have to try too hard. Maybe you should, uh, ask someone else for a name?"

I was a little displeased with how opposed she was to me coming up with a name, but asking everyone else wasn't a bad idea, so I turned to my friends, who were present in my room.

"A name?" Sacher asked. "Well, it's white and spotty, so maybe White Speck?"

Hearing him come up with the same name I did, I grasped my forehead and hung my head.

Him coming up with the same name is one thing, but when I hear someone else say it, it really does sound like a terrible name.

Sacher's suggestion earned him icy glares from all the girls in the room,

prompting him to flee to Reifus's side.

"Coming up with names can be difficult," the prince said with a slightly bemused expression. "Maybe we should think of some sort of comparison or rely on our first impression of her?"

"Well, I'm no good at that, so... What about you, Lady Magiluka?" Safina gave up right away and turned to Magiluka.

She looked fixedly at the cub in her arms. The cub, noticing this, raised her head to look back at Magiluka.

"...Lily," Magiluka whispered. "I believe in one old story, it's a white flower that stands for innocence and blooms in the land of the gods. She fits that image perfectly." As she said this, Magiluka held up the cub, who meowed happily.

"Lily..." I grumbled to myself. "Both the story behind it and the way it sounds is perfect."

"See, Mary? That's how you come up with a good name." Snow's voice echoed loudly in my head.

"Well, excuse me and my poor naming sense. Why don't you have Magiluka come up with a new name for you too?" I asked in a sulking manner and pulled the blanket over my head.

"Now, now, I do like the name Snow," the divine beast said, patting me with its paw. *"And I like it because it was you who gave it to me."*

And so it was that Snow's younger sister was christened Lily.

Before long, it was time to return to Aldia. The port town was abuzz with residents going about the rebuilding efforts, so much to my relief, our escort to the ship wasn't accompanied by any major crowds. What's more, with the incident fresh in people's memories, security was tighter, so no one but us and the people facilitating our travel were allowed near the ship.

Despite this, I, not one to be careless, hid my hair under a large, wide-brimmed hat.

Heh heh heh, with this, I've escaped! I pumped my fists excitedly in my heart.

I looked behind and saw Snow following me nonchalantly. I asked her what she was doing.

"Well, I have nowhere in particular to go, and you have lots of mana. Plus, you can talk to me, and it'll probably be fun to have you around."

With that said, the two divine beast sisters flew off the wharf and hovered in the air near the ship, waiting for us to set sail. Her reasoning sounded pretty haphazard, but I had no real reason to turn her down, so I decided to take them along.

What am I going to tell father? I hope he'll let me keep them...

But my concerns aside, the ship was preparing to set sail. Fifi and Girtz came to see us off, and I casually asked them to make me a small, fashionable version of an item that would help restrain my powers. Also, much to my surprise, Lady Elizabeth came to say goodbye despite being quite busy.

I panicked and let the prince handle the talks with her, hiding in the back with my head hung the whole time. Once his exchange with her was done, just as Tutte was fixing the hat on my head, Lady Elizabeth approached me and brought her face close so as to whisper into my ear.

"You're a truly wonderful girl. Leaving that one behind so he could skulk back home for me... Thank you."

"Um, what are you talking about?"

"Heh heh. I thought you'd say that," Elizabeth said with an elegant smile, like she'd figured everything out, and walked away.

I watched her leave, dumbfounded, which she probably assumed was just me acting.

Why does it always turn out like this? Tell me, God.

"Good! We set sail, one and all!" Emilia's call pulled me out of my thoughts, and I hurried onto the ship.

"By the way, Princess, this sailing ship looks familiar. Don't tell me it's the same one we took to get here..." I said as I got on deck.

“The very one! We shall escort you home in our country’s fastest sailboat!” Emilia replied proudly.

“And don’t tell me Miss Ken is under us.”

“Miss Ken? Oh, you mean the kraken? Well, she has her issues, but she’s top class in the ship-towing business. Rest assured!” Emilia gave a cheerful thumbs-up.

“That’s not what I’m worried about! What about her family issues? She doesn’t have any more missing brothers, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, we asked someone who’s good at conversing with krakens to check about that. Apparently she has no other brothers. No need for concern.”

“R-Really... Well, that’s a rel—”

“Oh, but she did mention having a delinquent little sister who fought with her mother and ran away from home. She’s still missing, but that won’t be a problem, we’re sure.”

“No, that sounds like a big enough problem to me!” My scream and the blowing of the ship’s horn echoed through the port town.

And so, my first and very eventful trip abroad came to an end.

Epilogue

Let us turn back the clock a bit to something that happened during the day Mary spent sleeping. As the port town was embroiled in uproar, a sailing ship departed silently in the seas some distance away. It sped away from the island, like it was trying to escape the commotion.

It sailed for so long that come dawn, it would be too far to be visible from the Dark Isle. Standing on the deck of the ship was a man, covered entirely in bandages and visibly injured. His face was contorted in agony and humiliation. It was the youth in priest's garb whom Mary had defeated.

"After coming this far, they shouldn't be able to pursue me any longer. I suppose I have Dabzal to thank one last time for this. Him causing such a huge panic helped distract from my escape."

He had the sailors check that there were no ships pursuing them and confirm the ship's route. A few minutes later, they reported back that there were no ships in sight and that the ship would soon reach its destination. Only then did the youth finally relax and look at the broken box in his hands.

"I considered committing suicide there, but I must return to the homeland and report about that girl. He...no, the cardinals all misunderstand the threat. That girl, Mary. She's too dangerous. Only a true monster could destroy a legendary-class item like this...and her wits and ability to plan and predict are not to be trifled with either."

Using the panic caused by the monster attack, the youth, who had been knocked out in the hideout, managed to come to and secretly make his escape. The two girls who had fought him were aides of the Aldian prince. The brown-haired girl had used sword techniques he'd never seen before, and given training and experience, she could become an impressive swordmaster in the future.

But that silver-haired girl was on a whole different level. Even now, she was already extraordinary. The way she used magic was abnormal, and his

experience told him that she wasn't even putting forth her best effort. His appraisal of her at present was that she was stronger at martial prowess than Ilysha, more skilled in magic than Elizabeth, and a match as a tactician to both of them—and overall, a monster.

His master, the Cardinal of the Back, was not aware of this. As such, he had to return to the homeland and report this to her, even if it meant being punished for his failings. That sense of purpose drove him forward.

There was only one person Mary could be compared to.

"I must report it. She's the Argent Knight..."

"Ooh. Why, I'd love to hear that report too," a voice said from over the youth's head.

He froze in place, feeling terror run down his spine. A winged shadow passed over him and landed elegantly on the ship's bow. The woman now before him was clad in a black outfit, with glossy, long black-violet hair and an aura of frost hanging over her body—it was none other than the fearsome Ice-Blooded Witch, Elizabeth.

"H-How...?" the youth croaked in disbelief.

Elizabeth eyed him with an alluring smile, which was enough to make the youth feel like an icicle had just stabbed into his heart. The pressure she gave off now was incomparable to when he had first fought her, which made it clear that she had been toying with him during their initial encounter.

Just then, something started falling—the watchmen on lookout above them had all frozen over and were now falling to the deck, shattering to pieces upon impact. Seeing this made him shudder.

"How? Heh heh, well, I'll admit I didn't think you'd try to escape back home like this, so I have to thank Mary for that."

Hearing Elizabeth mention Mary's name made despair wash over him. He'd been duped. That girl left the relay point so he wouldn't end himself, but instead try to report back to his homeland.

Looking back at it, there were quite a few things that felt off: the way she'd

seemed to just forget about him; the way she'd had him tied up in a manner that a pro would be able to free themselves from; and most damning of all, the way she'd discarded the box while making sure he could see her do it.

Of course, what had actually happened was that Mary had been so baffled by everything that'd happened back there that she'd simply forgotten about him, and she had basically thrown the box away because she'd had no further interest in it. Sufia had just happened to place him in a spot where he could see it happen...

"So, that girl... She planned...everything..." the man said, letting the precious box he was holding slip from his fingers.

"Yes, and you didn't spot me and took me to the island base the Papacy was building in secret as a bridgehead to attack us. She must have seen the supplies in your hideout and figured out this was what you were using them for."

"Ah..." He tried to turn around in an attempt to issue orders, but his body wouldn't move.

He could only move his eyes, so he looked down and saw that his body was gradually freezing over.

"Thank you for showing me the way. I don't need you for anything else though." Elizabeth's beautiful features curled into a faint smile.

This was the last thing the youth ever saw.

"You do some pretty unsightly things, elder sister."

A man flew down to the deck of the ship and said this with a sigh as he glanced at Elizabeth.

"If only you were half as reliable as Mary, stupid brother of mine, I wouldn't have had to take on this much stress," Lady Elizabeth said in a prickly manner.

"Mary'? Oh, that girl with the silver hair."

Her "stupid brother," the Dark Lord, thought back to the girl he'd seen during the evening party. Silver. What an unpleasant word.

“Do you know? In school and among the royal family, she gets called the White Princess, or the Argent Knight...”

“Gah!”

His sister’s words made the Dark Lord go speechless and widen his eyes in surprise. The name came as that much of a shock.

“You do understand, yes, foolish brother?” she asked him, regarding her brother like he’d just pulled a bad prank and she was chastising him.

“Yes, I know... Conceited thoughts like ‘I am worthy’...I discarded them back then. I swear it—on these rippling muscles!”

Her brother tried to lighten up the heavy atmosphere by striking a pose and flexing his muscles, but that only prompted a disappointed sigh from her.

“W-Well, either way, we discovered the island base they were building in secret sooner than expected. That’s good news!” The Dark Lord tried to change the subject and act as if what he’d just said had never happened.

There wasn’t much kingly dignity to his words, only the servile attitude of a younger brother who couldn’t argue back against his big sister.

“Haah. Very well. I suppose a job like this fits a dunce who’s only good at breaking things like you just fine. Just leave cleaning up the aftermath to me.”

“Yes, you can count on me for this. My wife is protecting the capital, and my daughter is taking care of the port town, so I will take care of things here properly. I swear it on these rippling muscles!”

The Dark Lord once again flexed his muscles and struck a pose to show himself off to Elizabeth.

“Heh heh. Your daughter, you say...” She giggled mysteriously.

The Dark Lord looked at her, confused. “Did Emilia do something?”

“That girl... When I let her know about the plan to quickly destroy the weapon rampaging through the town, she opposed it. Hee hee hee hee, even when I tried to overwhelm her, she remained serious and stood her ground. How many years has it been since the last time that happened? Not since we challenged her over her relationship with Lady Ilysha, I believe.”

As Elizabeth continued giggling to herself, the Dark Lord once again looked at her in confusion, not quite sure of what was so entertaining. With little regard to him, Lady Elizabeth spread her wings and soared up elegantly.

“I’ll be heading back then, stupid brother. I’ll let the Dark Lord make a complete and utter display of his fearsomeness. Teach the fools on the mainland the terror of opposing the Relirex Kingdom,” Elizabeth said, floating in midair with her eyes glinting in a mysterious manner.

“Yes. Nothing will remain. I will raze this place to the ground,” the Dark Lord replied, still striking his pose, but his eyes glinted red as he smiled, revealing his fangs.

And so, that day, one small island was completely disfigured, to the horror of its residents.

A few days later, the Papacy got word of the events, with both the Relirex and Aldian kingdoms presenting evidence of the Papacy’s involvement and demanding explanations. In this era, national borders set along the sea were vague, but even so, occupying that island had clearly been tantamount to unlawful military occupation against the surrounding countries. As a result, the actions of the Papacy were seen as them acting out of line, earning them the distrust and suspicion of their neighbors.

Side Story 1: That's a No, Lady Elizabeth

This happened after I woke up from my daylong sleep, when I was on the private beach near Emilia's villa. We were all clad in swimsuits and playing in the water. I had my large-brimmed hat on and sat on the sand by the waves, watching everyone play.

"The breeze is so pleasant..." I mused to myself as I looked up to the sky.

"Hold on, why do I have to be your pack mule and sofa?!" I heard a displeased voice in my head.

After having spent a day shut in my room and seeing no one was hanging around the villa, I decided it'd be all right to go outside for a change of pace.

"I mean, what was I supposed to do? If I didn't come along, everyone would feel guilty about having fun without me. I can't ruin their vacation."

"But you can walk just fine! Why are you acting all injured?"

"Aaaargh, I'll have you know I want to play with everyone too. But if I look like I'm all better, Emilia will drag me out to public events, and I have to make sure that doesn't happen. I can't let people recognize me in public. I need to restrain my urge to play here!"

My expression turned sour at this pained choice, and I clenched the hand I stuffed under Snow's fluffy belly in frustration.

"Ow, ow, ow! No pinching! Mary, you're pinching me!"

"Ah, sorry, I just kind of tensed up..."

I let go of Snow's belly and started patting it instead. Snow had carried me on her back all the way from the villa, and I hadn't moved an inch on my own. Everyone turned to look at me every now and then, so I'd smile and wave back. I was hoping everyone would believe I'm sick and feeble this way.

"I don't know why, but I'm really good at pretending to be sick. Grrr, I hate thiiis!"

“Ow! Would you stop that?! Don’t take it out on me!”

Once again, I’d accidentally pinched Snow out of frustration about my desire to play.

“By the way, where’s Lily?” I said, looking around as I remembered the adorable baby leopard who’d followed us here.

“Lily’s playing in the water with everyone else, Lady Mary,” Tutte, who was standing beside me, answered indirectly.

I looked to the sea, and indeed, Lily was swimming with everyone else. I was happy she was at least having fun.

“I worried she’d lose faith in people after what’d happened. I’m glad that didn’t happen.”

“Yes... That’s something both she and I have you to thank for,” Snow said, looking at Lily playing along with everyone else with kind eyes. I patted her again.

“By the way, Snow, can leopards swim? Are you okay being in water?”

“Mary, I know we look like leopards, but we’re completely different on the inside, so don’t think about it too hard.”

“Huh. Is that how it works?” I asked.

Lily ran over to us, dripping with water. It was such an adorable sight it filled me with an urge to scoop her up in my arms and hug her. Lily stopped right in front of me and then shook her body, covering me in water.

“Whoa, Lily, stop that! You’ll get my clothes all wet,” I said with a smile, but made no attempt to stop her.

“She wants you to play with her in the water too, so she decided to pull a little prank on you. Oh, but if it were me, I’d have filled my mouth with water and blown it on you!”

“Don’t do anything that dirty. Wait, can you even do that?” I asked Snow.

As I did, everyone else approached and joined us, but then looked behind me and stopped in their tracks in shock.

“I see you’re having fun,” I heard Lady Elizabeth’s voice behind me.

So, that was why everyone had frozen up, but it didn’t explain why everyone looked so shocked.

“Ah, Lady Elizabeth?” I said as I got off Snow’s belly and turned around.

I froze up like everyone else. Lady Elizabeth was standing there, but her outfit was...risqué. She was wearing something very close to the swimsuit I’d originally drawn for Magiluka and was walking around in it shamelessly.

Okay, that’s a no!

That was the only thing I could say with regards to her appearance. She was pretty, full in all the right places while narrow where she should be, and she had an adult’s charm, all clad in a swimsuit that showed it all off. A lethal combination for the eyes of any healthy boy.

“L-L-Lady Elizabeth, wh-wh-what are you wearing?!” I asked as the one who was most used to seeing swimsuits like this (albeit only in books and magazines).

“Hmm? Oh, Emilia told me about this,” Lady Elizabeth said, looking straight at me. “This is the new swimsuit you designed, right? Quite daring and novel. I never would have come up with a design like this. Impressive, Mary.”

She’s actually using the swimsuit I designed as a joke... I guess that’s the Dark Lord’s older sister for you. She’s not afraid of showing off her stuff. Maybe she’s just not ashamed because it’s a swimsuit?

Looking at Lady Elizabeth walk around in this swimsuit without a shred of shame made me feel embarrassed instead. The boys were red up to their ears and had to keep their heads down and direct their eyes toward the sand.

“Pfft, ha ha ha! We cannot stand it anymore! No more! Aha ha ha!”

I heard Emilia laughing from behind the rocks. Apparently, she was hiding there and looking on. Lady Elizabeth cocked her head, looking uncharacteristically puzzled.

“Hm, Lady Elizabeth, I don’t know how to say this, but...that design was basically a joke on my behalf. I didn’t submit it as an actual swimsuit. Princess

Emilia lied to you about that. What you're wearing right now, is, well, honestly it's just...a no."

"What?!" Lady Elizabeth exclaimed, realizing the situation, and suddenly blushed.

"Gyah ha ha!" Emilia laughed while pointing at her. "Auntie, you look like some kind of sexual deviant! You can't complain about father anymore after this!"

Elizabeth approached her, trembling angrily. Her footsteps made the white sands freeze...

"Gwah ha ha ha, we did not think you'd actually make it and put it on, but you went ahead and did it, you madwoman!" Emilia said, holding her stomach. "We didn't imagine you'd just believe us! Hee hee hee, our stomach hur— Gaaaah!"

Lady Elizabeth grabbed Emilia by the face, her hand like a claw, and lifted her up.

"Ughaaa! Our head, our head!" Emilia struggled in her grasp.

"I'll freeze you into an ice block, stupid niece!"

I heard Emilia scream and Lady Elizabeth's cold growl as we turned around and fled for safety.

"That's...what an adult is like, huh...?" Magiluka said, looking down at her body.

"I'm glad you get what it feels like to be me for once," I whispered as I rode on Snow's back.

Well, God, I guess there's always someone who's bigger and badder than you out there...

Side Story 2: Little Miss Ken, the Troublemaker

This happened on the night we departed back to Aldia. I was standing on the deck of the ship, only able to laugh dryly at the situation. Bobbing out of the sea in front of me were two large squid-like creatures, grappling each other in what looked like a scene out of a monster movie.

“So, who’s this new kraken?” I asked calmly as the ship shook and wavered from their battle.

“That’s Miss Ken’s missing little sister who ran away from home, it seems,” Emilia replied.

Silence hung over us for a moment.

“See?! I told you so!” I shouted at Emilia, finally snapping out of my attempt to escape reality and grabbing her by the shoulders. “How is this fine?! How is this safe?!”

“Th-Th-Th-This is straaaange, how d-d-d-d-did it come t-t-t-to this?!” Emilia said as I shook her back and forth. “Aagh, stop it, let go! If you shake us anymore, we might throw up!”

Emilia stepped away from me. I looked at her reproachfully, and she pointed at the monster battle taking place near our ship.

“This isn’t our fault! She picked a fight with us!”

Emilia was right; our voyage had actually been smooth for the most part, at least until we ran into this kraken.

“And after learning from last time, you had a demon that can speak to krakens join in on the exchange, right?”

“Of course. We didn’t neglect to do that. However...” Emilia answered cheerfully and then trailed off, looking out to the sea. I followed her gaze, looking again at the grappling krakens. “The other kraken instantly attacked her first with her tentacles, and that made her retaliate. The other side wasn’t

willing to listen, ha ha ha.” Emilia punctuated her story with feigned laughter.

“So, what are we supposed to do about this now?!” I grabbed her by the shoulders and started shaking her again.

“We saaaaid, stop shaking us! Hurk, we’re going to get sick, we’re really going to get sick...!”

I let go of Emilia, who really did look like she was about to throw up.

“How does this even happen?! Why did her missing sister show up and attack? Did Miss Ken do something to make her hold a grudge?!”

“Aaah, um, the other kraken said she had heard rumors of her dependable big sister working hard, so when she ran into her on the job, she felt oddly quite annoyed for some reason and wanted to get in her way. Ha ha ha...”

“Why do we have to get caught up in her grudge?!”

“Then Miss Ken got angry with her little sister, so we let her out of her cage, and that led to this sister quarrel. Ha ha ha...”

Each time the two of them clashed, the deck jolted hard and water washed over us. Without regard for our pointless conversation, the two squid sisters kept fighting while wiggling insults I couldn’t understand at each other.

“Pfft, ha ha ha, this is hilarious! My belly hurts!” I heard laughter in my head. Needless to say, it was Snow. The divine beast flew in the air and batted her paw like she was hitting the ground in laughter.

“Snow... I’m starting to feel oddly quite annoyed too. Want me to take it out on you?” I glared at her and whispered softly.

That made Snow stop batting her paw. *“So, um, what are you supposed to do about her? If they keep it up, the ship’s going to get damaged. Plus, I kind of want them to stop too, since they’re scaring poor Lily.”*

Snow’s little sister, Lily, was currently frightened and trembling in Magiluka’s arms inside her cabin. The reason I was here while all my friends were inside the ship was because Snow had decided to go outside and fight away whatever was frightening Lily, and Emilia dragged me along since I was the only one who could communicate with her.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Maybe bite them...? Those squid legs look kind of juicy. Hmm.” Snow wiped her mouth with a paw like she was actually salivating.

“That looks like food to you...? You do know you’re a leopard, ri... Oh, right, you only look like one.” I sighed.

Emilia watched our exchange—which to her looked like I was talking to myself—and upon understanding overall what we were saying, suggested this.

“‘Food’...? Is that divine beast thinking of biting the krakens?! If she is, have her bite the runaway sister! Miss Ken costs us a fortune to feed! We cannot risk her getting hurt!”

“Aw, but that one looks kind of unhealthy and yucky...”

“She says she doesn’t want to bite Miss Ken’s sister because she looks yucky,” I relayed.

“Then convince her to reconsider! That is why we brought you here!”

It felt like I had somehow switched places with Emilia, who was the interpreter on our trip to the island. Emilia wasn’t simply using a spell to end this whole problem early because with the two krakens locked in a grapple like this, there was no way she could ensure her spell would only hit the runaway sister.

“You know, for a princess, you can be really stingy sometimes,” I said, baffled.

“We are not stingy! It is just that if things end up damaged, we’ll be the person auntie rakes over the coals!” she said, looking like she was on the verge of tears, and grabbed me by the shoulders and started shaking me this time.

“F-F-F-F-F-Fine, fine, just stop shaking me!” I called out.

I knew I often did this to people, but having it done to me made me regret that a little. I stepped away from Emilia and looked at Snow, who was floating nearby.

“Snow, please bite the yucky one. We just need to drive it away, so don’t kill it.”

“Eeeew. Fine, I’ll just bite it once for now...” Snow said, dejected, and flew off toward the battle of the sea monsters.

Hearing my instructions, Emilia looked relieved.

“Thanks for the grub!”

Snow made to bring her fangs down on the runaway sister squid. But just then, Miss Ken pushed her sister out of the way with a loud wiggling sound and stood in Snow’s way.

Crunch.

“Gaaaaaah! She bit Miss Ken!” Emilia let out a most un-princess-like scream and grabbed her head in terror.

“That’s not Snow’s fault. Miss Ken jumped in front of her,” I said, implicitly claiming that I, as the one who had ordered Snow to act, wasn’t at fault either.

“Oh goodness, it does actually taste good... Ah, is it this part?”

“Snow, wait, you’re biting the wrong one! Don’t chew on it!” I told her hurriedly as she started munching on the tentacle. “What’s even going on here? Princess, translate for us.”

“Wiggle wiggle.”

““B-Big sis, why did you protect me?”” Emilia translated, looking utterly exhausted.

“Wiggle wiggle.”

““Don’t you see why? When all’s said and done, you’re still my little sister. What kind of sister would I be if I didn’t protect my little sister?!””

“Wiggle!”

““B-Big sis!””

“Wiggle!”

““My baby sister!””

The two squids wrapped around each other in a friendly manner—it was very heartwarming, but their movement produced waves that rocked our ship and

washed over the deck, leaving me wet. I wished they'd have had their tearful reunion somewhere else.

“Wiggle wiggle.”

““Big sis, I was wrong! I’ve changed my mind! I’ll go back to being a decent kraken now!””

“Wiggle wiggle.”

““Good! I’m proud of you.””

They kept clinging and separating from each other with an intensity that honestly wasn’t much different from when they were fighting. Emilia continued translating their exchange.

“Oh, I think this was the right one. Thanks for the grub!”

Snow, who had moved to a spot where she couldn’t hear Emilia and was oblivious to the touching scene taking place, once again crunched down on the runaway sister, and once again, Miss Ken pushed her out of the way and took the hit for her.

Emilia let out another scream that was honestly quite disgraceful for a girl.

Afterword

Hello, it's a pleasure to meet everyone... Making introductions in the third volume might be a bit off, but it's good to see you again. This is the author, Chatsufusa.

Come to think of it, a year has passed since volume 1's release, and we're already in volume 3. It's all thanks to the support of the readers who picked the series up. Thank you kindly, and please, do continue your support of the series.

(And if you're still on the fence about buying volume 3, I implore you to head over to the cash register and complete your purchase!)

Now then, volume 3 is a bit different from the two previous ones. I tried to challenge myself in all sorts of ways, and so there are some chapters from the perspective of other characters. Events take place in places Mary isn't aware of, only for her to stop them without even realizing it. I think it adds a bit of spice to the situations!

Also, the events this time don't take place in the academy, but in a place that we haven't visited yet: the Dark Isle, a name with a real sense of fantasy to it. But as things often are in this story, the name isn't very representative of the place!

And lastly, this is the long awaited (perhaps?) swimsuit episode. A swimsuit episode, ladies and gents! I've been looking forward to writing this. And yes, I basically abused authorial intent to make it happen. Sorry, not sorry.

This time, new characters that aren't human take the front stage, like demons and beastmen, and more challenging still, a non-humanoid character—the divine beasts that appear in this book. When I first brought the divine beasts up to my editor, I'd envisioned the usual suspect (I suppose?), a wolf, but the more we talked, the more I felt like a wolf had too much of a male image for some reason (at least in my head), so I decided to change it.

The next logical question to ask myself was “What *doesn't* feel like a

masculine animal to you?” The answer, of course, was a cat. A cat felt like it could be a girl on the inside (again, at least in my head), but then I ran into another obstacle: How can I include a giant *cat* in the story?

That was a question that bothered me for some time, but then, when I was absentmindedly browsing through my social media, I happened upon a picture from a zoo that shook me to my core—one of a snow leopard cub. That warm, fluffy, adorable snow leopard knocked me out in one hit. I remember thinking to myself, “That’s it!” And it fit Mary and her white image perfectly! Leopards had a feminine appearance, so a female leopard wouldn’t feel off, and it was large enough to look dignified.

With this, I had my mythical beasts! Phew, talking about it got me excited (I have to pause to take a sip of water now).

This may have actually made things much trickier for my illustrator, fuumi, but that’s how the mythical beasts came to be. In terms of distinctive characters, I could also go into how Elizabeth and Emilia came to be, but I’ve already talked for too long, so I’ll wrap it up here.

Now, allow me to extend a word of thanks to everyone involved in the making of this book. A real, honest thank you to Micro Magazine and my editor, Mr. I, for being patient with how long it took me to write volume 3, and of course for publishing it! It feels like my writing speed isn’t getting any faster... If anything, it’s getting slower!

While I’m at it, allow me to thank fuumi, the illustrator, for providing all these wonderful illustrations—I am forever in your debt for the abundance of exposed skin you had to draw for this swimsuit episode! Thank you so so so so so so much! It was a feast for the eyes! (Written while ogling the illustrations.)

Also, Kadokawa has decided to release a manga version of *Invincible Little Lady*, and volume 1 is on sale! Thank you! I’m gushing over how cute Mary looks there too! This double attack might just knock me out for good...but I can’t afford to get knocked out when I’m this lucky!

I got off track. Lastly, I’d like to thank everyone else who were involved in the making of this book and all the readers who support my work. Thank you very much. And more than anything, you readers who bought this book. Please

continue your support of the series!

Now, I've spoken a bit too long, so please allow me to end things here. Rest assured, I will be dreaming of meeting you in the next volume!

Author
Chatsufusa

Artist
fuumi

3

The
Invincible
Little Lady





“Ooh... You
forgive us?”

The cub licked the tip
of her nose in response.
This was enough to make
Emilia’s cheeks flush over,
and her discouraged
expression turned
cheerful.

“T-Too cute!
Goodness, what is
this? We absolutely
must take it home
and raise it!”











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The Invincible Little Lady: Volume 3

by Chatsufusa

Translated by Roman Lempert Edited by Zubonjin

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