

Goodbye,

Author Chidori Hama

Illustrator Wan Hachipisu

Overtime!

1

This Reincarnated
Villainess Is Living
for Her New
Big Brother



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Villainess Is Living
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Big Brother

Ekaterina Yulnova

The villainess of the game that
Rina is reincarnated into.
Her nemesis is overwork.

characters



Alexei Yulnova

The young head of the ducal
House of Yulnova and
Ekaterina's older brother.



Mikhail Yulgran

The main love interest in the game and heir to the imperial throne.



Mina Frey

Ekaterina's maid.



Flora Cherny

The heroine of the game and a young lady with commoner origins who is now part of a baron's house.



Ivan Nil

Alexei's attendant and bodyguard.



Vladimir Yulmagna

The heir of the House of Yulmagna.

**Goodbye,
Overtime!**

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Big Brother**

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Prologue: The Corporate Drone and the Villainess

Who am I? Where am I?

You might think I asked those questions as part of an elaborate joke, but I was deadly serious. As serious as anyone could be, in fact.

Who in the world am I, for real?!

I can't tell anymore. There are...two of me.



My name was Yukimura Rina, embattled systems engineer, just a working woman circling the drain toward thirty. The company I worked for had apparently never heard of labor laws, so I spent most of my time up against the twin foes of unreasonable expectations and sudden specification changes. Every day, I was at it from dawn to dusk, getting three hours of sleep a night at best. In fact, I pulled all-nighters at the company so often that getting to rest my head on my own pillow was a luxury.

For better or worse, I found my job very rewarding. I loved to jump in and save the day, putting runaway projects back on track. No one ever celebrated me, but I knew my work was appreciated.

Or, rather, I convinced myself that was the case to avoid looking the truth in the eye: to my company, I was nothing more than a well-worn tool, easily replaced if I broke.

Yippee! Here's to another day of corporate servitude.

I should have changed jobs, but I was so accustomed to working myself to the bone that all I did when I was close to the edge was download a game to soothe my weary heart.

In hindsight, why didn't I take advantage of the few hours of rest I could get? My decision-making process was so altered by overwork that I turned to a random otome game instead. I started it during my commute and got hooked right away.

To be honest, I thought that both the setting, a fantastic magic academy, and the main love interest, a dashing prince, were incredibly embarrassing. Hearing him propose to me with the cheesiest lines in existence when I reached the happy ending was downright torture.

I was always an action manga kind of gal, so why in the world did I download such a girlie game?

Somehow, I found myself a fave anyway.

Villainesses were otome game staples, and the one I picked was no exception. Really, it ticked all the typical otome game boxes, but you probably guessed that from the cliché magic academy setting and the main boy being a prince. An *imperial* prince, at that!

The slightly less cliché part (or was it?) was that the villainess had an older brother.

I fell for him at first sight. He was *much* better looking than the prince and the other love interests. You could tell he was an ice magic user from his light blue hair and eyes. He had delicate features, but despite his pretty looks, he usually wore a blank face or cold glare. He even had a monocle that gave him the air of an intellectual—which he *was*. He stood at the top of his class.

Yup, he's the whole package, gorgeous and capable!

He also happened to be a duke. Not the heir of a ducal house—no, an *actual* duke. Despite being a seventeen-year-old student, he'd inherited his father's peerage after his early death.

No matter how you look at it, he should be in his twenties, right? He totally looks like an adult!

Sadly, that perfect guy was way too attached to his sister! Virtually all of his lines were about her:

“You’re more beautiful than any other girl, my dear sister. You’re the only one worthy of being the empress.”

“I shall use all of my power as a duke to make your wish come true. You’re my treasure.”

“I won’t allow anyone to hurt you; not a god, and certainly not a prince!”

He barely ever appeared, so they probably hadn’t splurged on a big-name voice actor, but he had an attractive, deep voice. Too bad he only used it to pamper his sister, though! He was so obsessed with her that it bordered on ridiculous.

Aren’t you supposed to be a frosty, stoic hot guy?

Worst of all, his sister was an idiot. She spent her time harassing the heroine in the stupidest ways possible in the hope of winning the prince’s heart. Not sure why she thought that was a good plan, but she was hung up on it. She also spent astronomical amounts of money on her dresses, but all she achieved was drowning herself out with flashy clothes. I barely remembered her face.

Her doting brother showered her with everything: affection, money, and he even took responsibility for her when her pestering backfired. *You didn’t even know until after the fact, so how could it be your fault? If you don’t let her take responsibility for her own actions, how is she gonna grow up?*

That was how I wound up making comments to myself about them all the time, focusing more on the villainous pair of siblings than the main cast. I couldn’t have cared less about the prince!

Eventually, the in-game day of reckoning arrived. The villainess went on a rampage and tried to murder the heroine, but her deeds came to light. As a result, the brother and sister were stripped of their titles and possessions and forced to become commoners. Even then, dumbfounded as he was, the brother’s first reaction was to gently embrace his weeping sister.

I assumed this event was designed to satisfy the player, but I just felt sad. Obviously, the duke had never wanted to put his sister on the throne to expand his power. All he wanted was to grant the wishes of the sister he loved so much. While he appeared mature, he was still a kid on the inside.

I played until the end, but the rest of the game felt like a slog.

Thinking back on it, I might’ve kept playing because of my awful job. I didn’t have anyone who supported or cared for me. Watching the duke absolutely treasure his sister, even if he went about it the wrong way, warmed my heart.

If he'd been a dateable character, that would've been sweet, but a bit of googling had crushed my dreams. He didn't even have a hidden route! All I could do was restart the game to enjoy the crumbs of my fave, standing by his sister's side.

All right, time for another run.

I really should've gone to bed, but I had such trouble sleeping those days that I didn't feel like it. Stress and depression were hot on my heels, and I wanted to escape reality.

So, I lay on my bed, playing until my hands started trembling. After a while, I couldn't move my fingers anymore. Soon after, I outright blacked out.

That's when I died—probably.

Stupid, right?



My name was Ekaterina Yulnova and I hailed from the prestigious House of Yulnova.

Oh, right, the villainess's name! I remember! And your brother's Alexei, yeah? Not much else is historically accurate, but your names are straight out of Imperial Russia.

When I turned fifteen, I left the duchy for the first time and traveled to the imperial capital in order to enroll at the Magic Academy. I was just beginning to discover the vastness of the world, which frightened me more than I could express. Just six months prior, I'd been living a much smaller life with my mother in the manor I'd been confined to since birth.

Huh? "Confined"? What's up with that? The game never mentioned anything about that!

My house stood among the three great ducal houses of the Yulgran Empire. It had been founded by Sergei, one of the younger brothers and the most faithful follower of Pyotr the Great, the father of the Yulgran Empire, and had thus been granted the most plentiful territory in the Yulgran Empire. Many empresses had come from these families, which took great pride in the purity of their blood.

They were so noble and influential that, if the imperial family ever found itself with no heir, one could be chosen from the three great ducal houses. The ties that linked the House of Yulnova to the imperial family were strong. In fact, our grandmother had been an imperial princess before she'd married into the dukedom.

Oh yeah? That's so cool. I guess Edo Japan was like that too. The eighth shogun, Yoshimune, was adopted from the Kishu Tokugawa family, a branch of the main Tokugawa house, wasn't he? At the end of the day, the three great ducal houses are like the three branches of the Tokugawa family. Super prestigious!

My grandmother had been a proud and, above all else, *strict* person. As she had been an imperial princess, no one could stand up to her, and she'd eventually become the family's indisputable matriarch. There'd been no one in the world that she'd loved more than her only son, and no one she'd despised more than my mother, the daughter of a measly marquis.

After I'd been born, my father had stopped visiting my mother. I'd never met him nor my older brother, not even once. My grandmother had taken it upon herself to raise my brother, keeping him from my mother.

She hadn't done the same with me. As a girl, I'd been of no interest to her. Instead, I'd lived with my mother. Things had been normal enough when I was a child but, as the years passed, the number of servants had declined, and our lives had become more and more difficult. We'd not been allowed to leave the residence under any circumstances, but by relying on one another, we'd withstood these dreary days during which we often lacked essentials like food and clothes.

What the hell?! That's horrible! Bullying young brides is never okay, you old hag! Being an imperial princess is no excuse!

There was one thing my mother always repeated: "Become the empress."

To her mind, if I rose to the top, even grandmother would have to kneel to me. Then, I would finally be able to do whatever I wished.

“You must meet the prince and become his bride, no matter what,” she’d said, again and again. Inevitably, tears would start rolling down her cheeks, and she’d whisper, “Please, free me from this cage...”

I’d been forced to watch her beautiful face—almost a mirror to my own—grow more haggard with every passing day.

That’s why you were so hell-bent on marrying the prince? I’m sorry I judged you so harshly.

By the time I’d turned ten, mother, who’d always had a weak body, was so ill that she could barely rise from her bed. I’d spent most of my time by her bedside, and the rest I spent staring out the window of my room. For the most part, I watched the trees change color as the seasons went by or our few servants as they’d busied themselves with work. However, on rare occasions, another group walked past the residence.

Their appearance was the only thing I’d looked forward to. I hadn’t known why they’d sometimes take this path—hunting, I’d supposed—but one of them always caught my eye. He’d been a very lovely boy with hair the color of pale blue delphiniums, barely older than I was. No child had ever visited the residence, and I couldn’t help but think he stood out amid the party of rugged men. I never understood why, but he always looked my way.

Wow, I feel bad for your brother. He must have longed to see your mother, but with that witch forbidding him from doing so, the best he could do was wander close enough to steal a glimpse of her. On top of that, he didn’t even get to! God, I hate your grandma!

Then, half a year ago, my drab yet peaceful life was shattered out of the blue.

A messenger from the main house had suddenly arrived and announced that father had died in an unfortunate accident. As if following behind him, grandmother had passed soon after. The new duke, the messenger said, had ordered us brought to the main house at once.

Before we knew it, mother and I had been forced into a carriage without any thought spared for her frail body. I did my best to comfort her through the pain, though I was shaken by the unfamiliar sway of the carriage. By the time we’d

reached the duke's residence, she was burning up, barely conscious.

As soon as the butler saw her, his face paled, and he admonished the messenger—but the damage had been done. The butler quickly bid that she be carried into a room, and he sent for a doctor. As I watched her, lying on the luxurious sheets, I'd known the end was near. She'd begun to resemble a corpse.

That was when my brother barged into the room. At that time, I didn't realize it was him. The man who'd appeared had been so tall and mature, his monocle adding to his stern atmosphere, that I'd assumed he was an adult far older than I was.

Mother's eyes widened at the sight of him, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"You finally came for me...Lord Aleksandr..." she whispered.

The name that had rolled past her lips was father's.

The man froze for a second, stunned. Then he answered softly, "I'm so sorry...Anastasia."

Those had been my mother's last moments. My brother never heard her speak his name. Not even at the end.

Ugh, I'm gonna cry! That must've been awful for him.

You're right. Deep down, I always knew that my brother was the one who'd suffered the most.

Despite that, he'd continued to carry out his duty to perfection. He'd swiftly organized a grand funeral for our mother even as he'd kept the duchy's affairs running. The way he'd handled everything had been so mature that I could hardly believe he was only two years older than I was.

Brother must have felt pity for me because he was exceptionally kind. He'd arranged a lavish room and beautiful clothing for me, and he had appointed an array of servants to tend to my needs. Compared to my time at the secondary residence, I was treated like a princess. Even after he'd returned to the capital, my brother often wrote to me, always asking whether there was anything I needed or wanted.

I never properly answered him. At every turn, I'd return his gifts and spurn his kindness. Silence hung heavy over me like a stifling shawl during our trip to the capital, despite his numerous attempts to converse with me.

You might not have known it, but you must've been testing his limits. I've heard that abused children often behave that way, fumbling for proof that someone can truly be trusted...or not.

I knew that what I was doing wasn't right but whenever I'd tried to speak to him, I'd remember my mother's last words. A cold anger, as dark and deep as an unknown sea, would take me over in those moments.

Did you blame him because your mother's last words were to him? Even though she mistook him for your father?

I'm sure that mother never needed me.

Grandmother, father, and mother...they'd all needed him, not me.

What use am I?

Ah, you're spiraling. I won't lie to you; some parents don't care one iota about their kids. I'm sure aristocratic families are even worse in that regard, since they favor their firstborn sons so much. I get why you're pissed, Ekaterina. But the root of all evil was your awful grandma, right? I don't know what your father was like, but your brother and mother are both victims, just like you! Here's an idea. Write that old hag's name on a piece of paper and trample it with a fancy pair of stilettos! Kick the paper until you get all of that rage out! Taking it out on your brother is making you hurt even more, isn't it? You're a kind girl deep down, I can tell.

Stilettos? Ha ha ha! Thank you, I think. But...who are you?

I'm not entirely sure but...I think I'm you?



The world around me burst open like a popped bubble, and I suddenly

opened my eyes. The first things I saw were the heavens and the celestial gods gazing down at me.

Huh? Am I in heaven? No, it's just a canopy. A gorgeous one, though. Almost looks like a master from the Renaissance painted it. Is this some celebrity's mansion?

What in the world am I thinking? And where am I?

"Ekaterina!"

I gasped, but as Ekaterina turned toward the voice and saw the person who'd called her name, she relaxed.

I, on the other hand, was taken aback.

What the hell?! He's so damn handsome!!! I've never seen someone so fine in the flesh! Actually, I don't even think I've ever seen a hottie like him on TV! He's so my type, I could die!

The man sitting by Ekaterina's bedside was none other than her older brother and my total fave: Alexei Yulnova. He was even more good-looking than in the game, from the way the light caught his soft blue hair and eyes to the glint of his trademark monocle.

I gawked, unable to stop myself, at his smooth light skin and at the fascinating color of his eyes. Their almond shape gave him an air of cleverness, and they gleamed like Paraíba tourmalines, as though they weren't simply reflecting light but emitting it—almost like neon. His straight nose and pale lips were perfect, just like the rest of him. Even if you interrogated me for a whole day, I couldn't name someone with more elegantly balanced features.

As a woman nearing thirty, I couldn't help but be blinded by the way his youthfulness combined with the mature and angular charm of an adult man. While he was still young, he wasn't cute like a boy anymore. He was handsome like a man.

I'm way overanalyzing his looks, aren't I?

"How are you feeling? Are you sore?" Alexei asked. "I wouldn't know what to

do if I lost you too.”

The pain in his voice, far sharper than her own, returned Ekaterina to her senses.

Ah, I hurt my brother again.

In crisis lies opportunity! This is your chance to improve your relationship! Lean on him like a fledgling foal, it's sure to make him happy!

What did I...just think...?

Uh-oh. Our personalities are like oil and water, so we're both thinking at the same time!

My head hurts.

Before I knew it, Ekaterina had brought one hand to her forehead.

“Ekaterina, do you need me to summon a doctor? Just nod and I will. Answer me, please!”

I need to reassure him, but I've been so stubborn for so long! I don't know how to talk to him anymore.

In that case, how about we move that hand to the side a li'l bit?

I moved the hand that had been lying on Ekaterina's forehead. It fell to the side of the bed, almost as though she was extending it for her brother to take.

Alexei opened his eyes wide. He noticed that her hand was trembling slightly and immediately held it between his.

His hands are so big. And so warm. It feels nice...

Ekaterina rolled onto her side, locking eyes with Alexei.

“Brother, I'm so sorry...for worrying you.”

Alexei blinked, dumbfounded for a moment, before smiling softly. It was plain to see that he was happy.



“Don’t apologize, silly,” he said. “It’s entirely my responsibility. You’ve only just arrived in the capital. I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard.”

Right, I remember now. We stopped on our way to the mansion so he could show me the Magic Academy before the start of the semester. Something strange welled up inside me when I saw the school building beyond the gates, and I lost my sense of reality.

The gates of the Magic Academy? I saw them so many times in the game’s opening sequence, so that must’ve brought back my memories. That means this is the duke’s residence. No wonder it’s so luxurious.

The memories of my past life...

Unbelievable, right?

While it was certainly confounding, every hint pointed to the same conclusion: Yukimura Rina, white-collar zombie, had been reborn as Ekaterina, the game’s villainess.

Hold up, doesn’t that mean I’m headed straight to my downfall?! Not to mention the empire could meet its end if the heroine messes up!

“Huh?!” Ekaterina gasped with a start.

Alexei panicked, letting go of her trembling hand. “Ekaterina? Perhaps I must send for a doctor after all.”

“Don’t, there’s no need. I’m fine, brother, honestly.”

“But...”

“Instead, could you please hold my hand for a little longer?”

Unvarnished joy made Alexei’s eyes sparkle. “Yes, of course. My dear Ekaterina, I’ll gladly do anything you desire.”

With that expression on his face, Alexei looked far younger, though his monocle clashed with the mellow atmosphere that had surrounded him.

What a softie! Argh! He’s too cute! Aren’t you glad you

pushed through your insecurities, Ekaterina? Okay, I'm serious about this! I won't let anything bad happen to either of you, and there's no way I'll let my own life be ruined by overtime ever again! I'll destroy the damn doom flags looming over us, and we'll all be happy!

"I-It hurts..."

"Ekaterina!"

Yikes, sorry! We really gotta do something about this split personality thing first.

Three days went by before "Ekaterina" and "Rina" became one.

On the first day, I spent most of my time asleep. In my dreams, I tossed and turned through both Ekaterina's and Rina's lives, thoroughly exhausting myself.

On the second day, I opened her eyes, feeling much better, and even managed to stand up. Unfortunately, whenever I saw something that surprised me, I collapsed again. My body was struggling to handle two different sets of feelings and reactions at once. Whenever our emotions flared, it shut down. It was like trying to go to the left and to the right at the same time—the world spun until I felt sick.

On the third day, my brother, who had grown increasingly worried, begged me to stay in bed. I tried to read a book to pass the time and was assaulted by an eerie feeling; I had no recollection of the letters, yet found I could read them just fine. In fact, it felt natural to read them. At first, I felt nauseous, but after pushing through for a while, that gradually lessened.

In time, I realized that my heart had settled.

It took a lot out of me, but three days isn't too shabby for adaptation time.

While both of my personalities had merged together, I got the feeling that I'd retained only Ekaterina's mannerisms and speech, while my personality took after Rina's. That made sense, considering my life as Yukimura Rina carried the weight of almost twice as many years. My life as Ekaterina had mostly been spent confined, drifting through one dull day after the other.

Thus was born my new self, a corporate drone in villainess's clothing.

"I'm terribly sorry for worrying you, brother," I told Alexei, who'd come to visit me on the morning of the fourth day. "I'm perfectly fine now."

I smiled brightly to show him I meant what I said. Unsurprisingly enough, he did not take my word for it.

"That's great, but you'll rest today too," he said, concern plain on his face. "You've fainted so many times in a row. Your body is fragile, Ekaterina. I don't want you to overdo it."

He's such a tsundere! The original flavor!

I'd once heard that, originally, tsundere were characters who treated everyone but one person coldly. It wasn't the main meaning of the word anymore, but Alexei fit the classic definition perfectly.

Despite his ice prince appearance, I'd never seen him act coldly to Ekaterina in the game. He only ever treated her as gently as possible. She was the only person in the world he loved without limits, to the point of turning overprotective at times.

Seriously, how perfect can you get?

"I promise I'm fine now! Why, my body's never felt so good! I'm like a newborn baby, just bursting with energy! Like I caught a second wind! Besides, I have a very good reason I cannot rest any longer," I stated, deadly serious. "I'm supposed to enter the academy in just one month, but...my scholarly abilities are absolutely abysmal!"

I'd been confined until six months ago, at least as Ekaterina. Thus, I had never received a proper education as a noble lady.

Under normal circumstances, young aristocrats were placed under the care of a tutor when they turned five. I, on the other hand, had been left to my own devices for fourteen years. I remembered my mother trying to arrange for a teacher to come to our residence, but her attempts had failed. Undoubtedly because of my hateful grandmother, who couldn't resist a chance to harass her helpless daughter-in-law.

Look what kind of trouble your bullying got me into, lady! What are you gonna do about it, huh?

My mother had taught me the basics but, without any teaching material and with her illness forcing her to stay in bed most of the time, she hadn't been able to teach me much. During my six months with Alexei, he'd hired tutors for me. Regrettably, since I'd been in the middle of my rebellious phase, I'd refused to study—whoops! All in all, my keeping up with the classes at the academy sounded unlikely.

Especially considering the fact that I was to enroll at the *Magic Academy*. Mastering mana control was every student's main goal. Meanwhile, I was off to the side still confused by the mere concept of mana. I was being asked to master something that I still had trouble believing in.

I mean, magic being a thing in the game world makes sense to me, but could I confirm it with my own two eyes before we move on to actually learning how to use it? Please?

"I know you're worried too, brother. Isn't that why you brought me to the capital a month ahead of schedule?"

Alexei paused before answering. "Regardless, your health is more important than any of that. If you're concerned about your grades, I'll handle that for you. Don't worry about it."

Hey, hey. Now I'm wondering how much Ekaterina took advantage of Alexei's influence in the game.

"Even so, I truly wish to study, brother! The history book I borrowed from you yesterday was so fascinating!" I exclaimed.

Before turning into a soulless worker bee, I used to be a bit of a history buff. Truth be told, I preferred historical novels over the serious history books, but I still loved history! I'd loved the book he'd lent me. I genuinely wanted to know more!

"Also, I've found a goal for myself! I need to study a lot if I want to make it happen," I said with determination.

"Oh, a goal? What is it?"

“I want to study enough to understand law, history, and the ways of the world, so I can help you with your work, brother!”

My words took Alexei by surprise; he stared at me open-mouthed.

At seventeen, Alexei was already a duke. In my past life, I hadn’t dwelled much on the setting, but I’d realized something over the last three days:

Isn’t being a duke way too much work?! He’s a student, CEO, and prefectural governor all at once!

He’d done his best to stick by my side these past few days, but an unending number of documents for him to check and decisions for him to make streamed in regardless. I’d overheard him discuss the production of the duchy’s mines (isn’t *owning* mines crazy?) and the matter of a tax exemption for a village that had recently suffered a landslide. The bad quality of recent imports, which had prompted Alexei to request refunds, had also come up.

The craziest thing I’d heard brought up was a huge dragon that apparently appeared in the forest sometimes, preventing people from harvesting the four-hundred-year-old black dragon cedar trees that grew in the deepest part of the forest. My brother had been asked to approve a budget increase for patrols, as well as to sign a report explaining why the black dragon cedar exports would be delayed.

Unbelievable monsters straight out of fantasy books mentioned alongside mundane paperwork and budget increases bewildered me. One thing was for certain, though: Alexei was absurdly busy! But he still managed to get everything done?!

I suspected he’d crammed everything there was to know about the dukedom into his brain. If you gave him the name of a village, I bet he could list the exact location, topology, population, and local production. He was also prepared to face emergencies at any time and had cultivated an array of skills to deal with trouble and lead the territory through hard times.

Is there anything he can’t do?

A seventeen-year-old being that competent was almost unfair. He reminded me of Uesugi Yozan, a wise feudal lord of the Edo period, who’d taken over his

territory at a similar age.

All this responsibility is no joke! He's got a death flag looming over him!

Talented individuals always ended up with the most work; Alexei was no exception. Just as I'd made up my mind to lower the flags that threatened the Yulnova family, I'd noticed that yet another danger menaced my dear brother: overwork.

Give me a break. How am I supposed to deal with that danger?! It's even more insidious than the others!

That's what had prompted me to declare I'd help Alexei in the future. Considering the pleased smile on her—*my* brother's face, he probably didn't take me seriously.

"You're such a kind girl, Ekaterina. You don't need to worry about my work."

"The first step is catching up with the other students," I continued, ignoring what Alexei had said. "I promise I won't exhaust myself so please, brother, help me find good tutors. I'm scared to enter the academy at my current level of knowledge. Please..."

I tilted my head to the side, looking up at my brother with my biggest, wobbliest puppy dog eyes. As I'd expected, my devoted brother readily nodded and promised to find me tutors by the following day.

Yes! Still, I'm pretty sure no one but you would fall for the villainess's puppy dog eyes, so I'll make a note not to use that technique on others. If anything, they might cringe.

Now that that's settled, I just have to work hard enough to gain the knowledge of an average student!



"Welcome home, young master."

It was two days before Ekaterina was set to enter the Magic Academy. Alexei, who'd just returned from the imperial palace, felt a pang of irritation at the form of address.

"Don't 'young master' me," he snapped at his trusted confidant, Boris Novak.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Novak said, unbothered.

While his short black hair had started graying, the fifty-three-year-old man still boasted a firm and muscular body. He’d administered the Yulnova Duchy for years and had served as Alexei’s closest aide and advisor since Alexei was a boy. He’d taught him everything there was to know about running a territory, and continued to support it in both public and private affairs alike. Novak’s teachings had been so instrumental to Alexei’s growth that one could say the current duke had only turned into such a fine young man thanks to him.

Their closeness was also the reason Alexei didn’t bother concealing his irritation—Novak was the only person to whom he showed such emotions.

“How was the ducal meeting?” Novak asked.

“Same as ever. Magna was his usual testy self.”

The three Grand Dukes of the Yulgran Empire regularly gathered to hold meetings in the presence of the emperor. One was the Duke of Yulnova to the north, whose territory held abundant resources such as ore; the next was the Duke of Yulsein to the south, whose coast boomed with foreign trade; and the last was the Duke of Yulmagna to the east, whose large territory brimmed with vast plains and lakes. The three Grand Dukes referred to each other by the shortened form of their respective names: Nova, Sein, and Magna. Founded by the younger brothers of Pyotr the Great, father of the Yulgran Empire, these renowned dukes were the pillars of the Empire.

Alexei let one of his servants, Ivan, take his coat away and sat down in his leather chair.

“He spent the entire meeting ranting about how he’s always been disadvantaged,” the young duke continued. “He wants shares in our mines or Sein’s ports and won’t back down. So shameless. I can’t fathom why he has so much land but won’t develop it. I wish he’d answer that first. Why should we foot the bill for the outdated, oversized chivalric order he keeps?”

“That sounds like the usual,” Novak said, “so what’s really made you so sour?”

Alexei’s face twitched. “He dared to insult Ekaterina.”

“The lady from House Nova is so frail that she hasn’t had a true education, nor has she accepted any requests to socialize. My daughter, Elizaveta, feels for her and would love to invite her over. She’s a kind girl, see.”

The current Duke of Yulmagna, Georgi, was thirty-eight years old. The imposing man, who’d trained his body relentlessly, barely bothered to conceal his ambitions. He was hellbent on having his daughter become the next empress and would not hesitate to insult Ekaterina—and the entire House Yulnova in the process—if it brought him closer to his goal. He often mocked Alexei for his youth. While Alexei had always let such comments slide, Magna turning his tongue against Ekaterina had outraged him.

“I ended up chilling the room,” Alexei confessed.

“My, my.”

Alexei carried a strong affinity for ice, which tended to run wild when he couldn’t control his feelings. Still, he usually kept a tight grip on such things and, ever since he’d come of age, such incidents had been rare. The stoic Alexei losing control in front of the emperor showed how badly Yulmagna’s words had affected him.

“Luckily, Duke Sein drew everyone’s attention, so it didn’t cause a stir. He still maintains his neutral stance and won’t take part in a conflict over the succession.”

At forty-five, Duke Dmitri of House Yulsein was the oldest of the three Grand Dukes. His children were older than the crown prince and had already married. Furthermore, the current empress, Magdalena, was his younger sister. It was therefore impossible for the next empress to come from his family. While Dmitri was refined and gentle, he was also smart and business-savvy, having made a fortune from his ports. Alexei respected him.

“Lady Ekaterina’s tutors submitted their last report on her progress,” Novak said.

“Oh, yes?” Alexei’s face relaxed as he accepted the document Novak had offered for him.

“She should be able to follow her classes without issue at the academy. She did well,” he said after reading through the page.

“I expected no less from your sister, Your Grace. She’d never studied history or geography before, but she’s shown promise already. The same goes for mana control. She’s achieved more than enough. It would appear she grasped some of the subjects before her teachers even started their lessons. For instance, I’m told she excels at mathematics.”

In her past life as Rina, she had studied complex science extensively. As a result, high-school-level math had been a walk in the park for her. The overall level of mathematics had been far higher in her past world, and the material she’d been given here paled in comparison to her old high school curriculum.

On top of that, Ekaterina had learned more than she’d initially expected from her mother and the books she’d read over and over again during her days in confinement. Her knowledge of literature had a solid foundation.

“It would appear she was taught by your mother. Lady Ekaterina is a bright young lady, just as your mother was.”

“I’m sure she was,” Alexei said quietly.

Memories and the pain that went along with them burdened Alexei’s heart. The servant *he’d* sent to bring his mother home had caused her death. In her last moments, she’d called him by his father’s name. Never once had she recognized him as her son.

“Your Grace... No one could go against the matriarch’s orders. She bade that your mother be killed if she ever stepped foot inside the main mansion. I never expected that, even after her and your father’s deaths, there’d be those ready to carry out her orders. I let my guard down. None of this was your fault, Your Grace.”

“It *was* my fault, and the weight of my sin won’t lift until I breathe my last. Yet, Ekaterina forgave me.”

“I know you’ve suffered most of all, brother. The ones to blame are grandmother, for her choices, and father, for defending and enabling her. I’m

sure that mother must have missed you so much. She would have wanted to hold you like this,” Ekaterina had said, hugging him close in place of their mother.

For the first time since their mother’s passing, tears had welled up in Alexei’s eyes. He’d been utterly unable to stop them.

“She’s the kindest soul I know.”

Alexei had been pulled apart from his mother by his grandmother. Despite that, and even though she’d raised him, she had never shown him any love.

His father, Aleksandr, had been a charming man who attracted the love and adoration of others. His mother had adored him and doted on him so much that he’d grown into a lazy man-child who wasted his time with gambling and mistresses. His father—Alexei and Ekaterina’s grandfather, Sergei—had passed away at the young age of fifty-eight. While he’d inherited the title, Aleksandr had never bothered to manage the estate, leaving everything to Novak. Needless to say, he’d never shown any interest in his son.

Alexei, who took after his father in appearance, had instead inherited his grandfather’s serious personality. His grandmother had always been strict with him. She’d forced him to study day in and day out so that he might take over the work his father despised as soon as possible.

It was his duty, she’d often told him. Alexei had only just turned ten when he’d been forced to take on part of the duchy’s workload in the wake of his grandfather’s death.

Despite his mature disposition, Alexei had been a child, and he’d often wished his mother could be by his side.

In the end, his dear little sister, so much like his mother, had been the one to gift him the words he’d dreamed of hearing—despite him deserving nothing but her contempt for having let them suffer for so long.

Until he’d laid eyes on them for the first time, Alexei had never imagined they’d been treated so poorly. In truth, the one who’d sent them to that manor wasn’t his grandmother, but his grandfather, Sergei. He’d done it for their

protection.

As the influential prime minister, Sergei had been the only man with enough power in the family to stop his wife from acting out. However, while he'd been a respectable man, he'd seldom left the capital and hadn't the reach to stop his wife from doing as she pleased in the dukedom. That'd been what prompted him to move Ekaterina and her mother to a different home altogether. He'd given them money to live well while protecting them from his wife. However, after he'd died, Alexei's grandmother had surreptitiously fired their servants and slashed their budget, forcing them to live in misery, imprisoned away from the world.

Alexei should have stepped up to care for them after his grandfather's death, but he'd been too young and preoccupied to notice their struggle.

The moment he'd first laid eyes on them was burned into his mind.

His mother, bedridden on the verge of death, and his sister, Ekaterina, an emaciated child. The old clothes she'd been wearing had been too small even for her thin frame, threatening to rip at the seams. How could the young lady of a noble house have looked like that?

He also remembered the fear in her eyes when she'd looked at him.

The next time he'd seen her, six months later, she'd become so beautiful that he'd hardly recognized her. She'd looked far more mature too. However, she'd refused to say a word to him.

That's only natural, Alexei had thought.

When he'd brought her to the capital and she'd fainted, though, he'd thought his heart would stop. He couldn't believe it when she'd extended her hand to him as soon as she'd woken up. She'd even asked for it when he'd let go.

Even though Ekaterina had forgiven him, Alexei had no intention of forgiving himself. He knew there was nothing in this world he wouldn't do for his sweet sister.

"She is a gentle soul," Novak agreed. "I've only exchanged a few words with her, but her high spirits and wit were clear. Besides that, her mana is plentiful, and her beauty is beyond words. Her eyes and hair shine with the noblest color

in the empire, blue.” The subjects of the empire were born with a variety of hair colors, but since most of the children of the imperial family had blue hair, it was known as the noblest color of all.

Novak continued. “She’ll undoubtedly bloom as the blue rose of Yulnova, much like the rose on your crest.”

The family crests of each of the three Grand Dukes bore flowers—the rose of Yulnova, the lily of Yulsein, and the narcissus of Yulmagna. This was why the power struggle that’d long simmered between these three houses had been dubbed the Feud of the Blue Flowers.

Novak was clearly drawing to a conclusion. “Besides, His Highness Mikhail is her peer. They’ll have many occasions to get to know each other at the academy. Not to mention, the young lady of House Yulmagna, Elizaveta, is only ten. Lady Ekaterina has a good shot at becoming empress.”

Alexei shook his head. “Never,” he said harshly. “I will *not* let the imperial family have her. Yesterday, she said to me that she wanted to stay away from the imperial family—away from our grandmother’s family.”

“I heard that His Highness will enter the academy at the same time as I. Mother wanted me to become close enough to him that I could become the empress and force grandmother to bow to my will, but neither of them are here now. Honestly, I wish to live freely, without the burden of such a heavy position. I’d rather focus on my studies and avoid entanglement with the cold imperial family.”

Novak shrugged. “Marrying for her family is the duty of every noble lady. You ought to have scolded her.”

“Novak, she’s far too frail to rule. In that sense, Magna wasn’t wrong; his daughter has the upper hand. Anyway, I’d love to see him drown under the wedding expenses. Instead of competing to crown an empress, I’d much rather lend him dowry money at an astronomical rate. That way, I can keep his house in check even after Vladimir inherits.”

Alexei was far chattier than usual, Novak noticed.

While Alexei had always disliked Georgi and his eldest son Vladimir, who was only one year younger than him, Novak had no doubt that his true motive was elsewhere. He didn't want to let go of his sweet sister, especially not now that they were getting along like normal siblings.

"What a thorough plan," Novak said with a nod.

Despite his confidant's gesture, Alexei could tell that he wasn't convinced. He raised an eyebrow, awaiting his next words.

"But who knows? Once she meets the prince, Lady Ekaterina's feelings may shift. His Highness is a dashing man," Novak said, "or so I'm told."

Alexei hmphed and grimaced, unable to object.

"That's fine. If she comes to want His Highness, I'll fight Magna to the bitter end. I'll place her on the throne even if it costs my life. *Anything* Ekaterina desires shall be hers."

Chapter 1: Entering the Magic Academy

At the start of my day, I sat at my vanity and meticulously studied my face from every angle.

I was beautiful, gorgeous even. The deep blue of my hair—unthinkable in my previous life—reminded me of lapis lazuli. The long and abundant locks flowed down my back in natural waves that reached all the way to my hips. My blue eyes with purple highlights sparkled like tanzanite and contrasted against my skin, which was the color of white porcelain. I had a straight nose and small yet plump lips that gave me a suggestive edge. The same could be said about the curves of my body. I was only fifteen, but I already looked far more beguiling than I ever had as Yukimura Rina. My waist was also slimmer than in my past life.

Seriously, though, what cup size are my boobs? Are they gonna get even bigger?!

Somehow, the warm light of the morning didn't quite fit me. I was a budding flower, yet I already had a mature allure. I didn't look sweet or cute in the slightest. I could picture myself standing in front of an eerie ancient castle as lightning struck behind me. My beauty was just that impactful—that *intense*. Rather than soft smiles, I got the feeling elusive smirks and unrestrained waves of laughter suited me better.

I can't help it, can I? I'm the villainess!

"You're beautiful, my lady," my maid, Mina Frey, said matter-of-factly.

"Thank you, Mina," I answered feebly.

Mina was a cool beauty with short purple hair, and I couldn't help but think the duchy's maid's uniform suited her very well. She'd been by my side ever since I'd moved to the imperial capital and always spoke in a very detached tone with an unchanging facial expression. She was so much like a statue that I'd initially worried about whether we'd get along or not.

“Are you stressed, my lady?”

“Well, yes, a little,” I confessed.

I rested my cheek on my hand and sighed.

The big day had finally come. Today, my brother and I would leave the ducal residence and move to the Magic Academy’s dormitory. Tomorrow was the entrance ceremony.

Worrying won’t get me anywhere, but I can’t stop my hands from shaking.

As the villainess, what awaited me at the academy was...my downfall. Not to mention, if the heroine failed to clear an important event, the entire empire would follow right behind.

I’d already made my first move to lower the flag that loomed over me: I’d told Alexei that I had no intention to marry the prince. All I had to do now was make sure I interacted with the heroine and the prince as little as possible. I’d never bully her in any way, shape, or form! Hopefully, that’d be enough to keep me out of trouble.

What worried me far more, however, was the potential destruction of the empire. I had no control over the heroine and no way to ensure or know in advance whether she’d live up to her tasks.

If she failed...

Well, according to the original plot of the game, the empire would fall to the might of the final boss—the master of all monsters, the Dragon King.

I knew I’d end up straying from the original scenario, but I had no choice. I had to do what I could to prevent that from happening. That was why I’d decided to pour my energy into improving my mana control.

Ekaterina—wait, I had an affinity for earth magic, a different attribute from the heroine’s. Because of this fundamental difference, I had no idea whether I could successfully clear events myself if the need arose. Still, my tutor had praised the strength of my mana, and I’d managed to complete every assignment he’d sent my way.

To be perfectly honest, I’d loved his lessons on using magic. I always became

immersed in what I was doing, which explained my speedy progress. Back when I'd been playing the game, I'd barely paid any attention to the characters' mana attributes. After all, magic was such a staple in games that it'd just been another mechanic to me.

However, living it was something else entirely. The existence of mana within my own body gave me an indescribable feeling, a mix of disbelief and exaltation.

When I'd started training, I'd suddenly recalled some of Ekaterina's early memories. Her mother had taught her the basics when she'd been just a little girl.

Not only was I able to call upon my mana as soon as I remembered that sensation, but I also felt as though it was natural to do so.

In my past world, magic had come in all sorts of forms in fictional settings, but the image that'd stuck with me had been magicians holding wands and chanting spells, just like in that one bestseller.

In this world, however, magic wasn't even called that most of the time. People preferred the term "mana control," and they described it as an art that used innate power to connect with the world and control the resulting energy.

Got it? No? It's okay, me neither!

It would be like trying to explain to someone with two arms how to move a third arm. Mana was the same. Unless you actually had it, you'd never get it.

Anyway, I had control over earth. When I activated my mana, I felt as though it left my body and dived into the earth. I could then reshape the earth or make it move in accordance with the amount of mana I'd poured into it.

I'd tried to do the same with fire and water but, since I had no affinity with those attributes, I couldn't pour any mana into them.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about this. It felt both peculiar and obvious at the same time. Another interesting fact about this world was that no one ever yelled the names of their spells out loud. There was no need for it, so people eyed you strangely if you pulled something like that.

Anyhow, mana control practice was always an exciting activity for me. I'd received permission to practice in a corner of our large garden. My tutor had gradually taught me how to increase my control over my mana, but I'd hoped he'd let me do more. I'd been dying to try my hand at more difficult spells and did my best to make him aware of it.

When he'd finally challenged me to move a doll made of earth, a golem, I'd been so excited that I made my creation dance the traditional Bon Festival dance. My tutor couldn't hold back his laughter.

Oops, sorry!

In a way, that'd been for the best, as that little incident had brought us closer. From that point on, we chatted more. He actually told me a lot about himself. For instance, I learned that he was only working as a private tutor temporarily while looking for a research job, and he had a young daughter.

Thanks for everything, Mr. Moldo! Your build made you seem kind of intimidating, but your glasses and gentle demeanor softened your aura!

While my golem's dance made him laugh, Mr. Moldo still praised me for managing to move my golem so much on the first try. Still, while he seemed to genuinely think I was talented, it was all in the realm of what could be expected from a good pupil.

I was hoping I'd earn some sort of bonus or cheat ability for transmigrating into another world, but it doesn't seem to be the case. That's too bad.

Anyway, those had been the steps I'd taken to try to mitigate the threat to the empire. But while I was so preoccupied with my plan, I'd completely forgotten about the other thing that'd been stressing me out.

How am I supposed to socialize with noble kids?!

I'd done what I could to catch up in terms of scholarly abilities. I was fairly certain I knew enough to seem normal to the other students, at least at the start. I'd been completely upfront with my tutors about my lack of education, so we'd covered the basics. Alexei had hired the cream of the crop and their classes had been clear and effective.

But I'd forgotten something big: school wasn't only about studying!

Ugh, what do high schoolers even talk about?!

I imagined fashion and famous actors were the main topics of conversation in this world too, but I knew virtually nothing about those. Idle chitchat had never come up in the game!

As the villainess, I'd lived my whole life confined and had never talked to a lady of my age, and as a corporate drone, I'd been a commoner! Not to mention the Americans had axed the nobility in Japan ages ago, so it wasn't like I even grew up with them around!

So, setting aside the death flags, I was pretty damn scared of going to school.

To my surprise, Mina took my hand in her own and gently massaged the base of my thumb.

"Pressing here will help ease the tension in your body," she said. "Try doing it when you feel overwhelmed." While Mina was always expressionless and spoke curtly, she was a kind girl who knew how to take care of others.

"Thank you, Mina. I do feel a little better."

I smiled at her while wondering to myself whether acupuncture was also a thing in this world. I'd just said that soft smiles didn't fit a villainess, but I couldn't exactly burst into a dramatic bout of laughter now. Mina would assume I'd gone mad!

"I'm so glad you're coming to the academy with me, Mina. I look forward to spending more time with you," I said.

"A noble lady saying such things to a mere maid is unheard of. Please be aware of your position, my lady."

"Come on. Who cares about that?"

"You're so strange, my lady."

Mina often told me that. To be fair, I felt like a maid calling the lady she served "strange" was even stranger, but I wasn't all that well-versed on the topic. Either way, I didn't really mind.

"There's no need for you to worry. You're one of the noblest ladies in the empire. Besides, His Grace will be by your side."

“You... You’re right,” I agreed, but my voice remained tense.

I’d seen Ekaterina and Alexei become mere commoners in the game, so I couldn’t relax based on our current status. If anything, the fact that he’d be punished alongside me worried me the most!

“Does the idea of spending time with the other ladies concern you?” Mina asked. “If so, it’s fine. Stay close to His Grace or retreat to your room after class to visit with me. As much as is within my power, I’ll protect you, my lady.”

“I’ll protect you, my lady”? That’s something a hunk would say! My beautiful maid is a hunk!

Well, as a maid, there wasn’t much Mina could do, so I assumed she meant she’d stay cooped up in my room with me. That was more than enough, though. I was incredibly grateful.

Not to mention that it was a brilliant solution. Running away was a little embarrassing, but I didn’t care! I’d do what I had to do about my impending doom, then hide in my room whenever things got tough. After all, I only had to attend the academy for three years!

“Thank you, Mina,” I said, taking her hand in mine, a bright smile on my face. “I’m feeling a lot better!”



After getting dressed, I walked to the entrance hall and found Alexei waiting for me. He was just standing there, but he looked cooler than ever in his formal attire. He offered me his right arm, and I rested my left hand on it. While I was calm on the outside, I was squealing like a fire alarm in a burning building inside my heart. He was escorting me like a proper gentleman would—something far, far more exciting than holding hands!

I’m so glad I’m alive! No, I’m so glad I died and was reincarnated!

I boarded the carriage alongside Alexei and it departed, traveling along the main avenue. The wheels rattled as the *clippity-clop* of the horses’ hooves on the ground echoed around us. I’d ridden this same carriage on my way from the duchy to the capital but, now that I’d recovered the memories from my past life and my mood had lifted, I found the experience far more enchanting.

The city is also beautiful!

Just like old European cities, this place was the epitome of chic. The view seemed to go on endlessly in every direction, with stone buildings standing tall, bell towers reaching for the sky, and gorgeous sculptures adorning the streets.

“Brother, is this the palace?” I asked.

“That it is.”

At the very heart of the city rose the palace. It reminded me very much of Cinderella’s castle—the one that decorated a famous theme park.

“My! What a huge statue!” I exclaimed.

“That is Pyotr the Great,” Alexei explained. “And a statue of Duke Sergei, our forefather, stands down that street.”

“Does he look like you?”

“Hmm, I can’t say. The statue was made when he was fifty.”

Oh, no way to tell, then.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t taken you to see the sights even though this is your first time here,” my brother added. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine! I’m the one who decided to focus on studying. Still, I’d love it if you accompanied me on a tour of the capital, when you can. You’re always pushing yourself, brother. I want you to relax from time to time.”

“Sure,” he answered with a smile. “If you wish for that, I’m happy to accompany you. We’re almost there. How do you feel?”

Ah! I’d gotten so excited twisting my head around like a tourist that I’d entirely forgotten my nerves.

“You collapsed the last time we were here.”

“I-Indeed. Then, could you hold my hand, brother?”

Alexei squeezed the hand I extended with both of his.

As the carriage moved forward, the Magic Academy’s gate came into view. The gate was huge and so was the academy. There were several school

buildings as well as dormitories, an auditorium, and even a pond and a forest.

The Magic Academy of the Yulgran Empire: I knew this place well, for it was the very location the otome game *Infinity World: The Maiden of Salvation* played out. The game started with this gate opening. It had been closed when I saw it before, but it was open now, and a bright blue sky stretched over it.

This is just a gate. And what lies beyond is just a regular building.

“I’ll be fine, brother.”

“Good.”

From tomorrow onward, I’ll be a student here. I’m sure everything will be all right. I won’t lose to some stupid disaster flag!



I feel so rested. I was worried I wouldn’t sleep a wink because I was so wound up before bed, but I have stronger nerves than I thought!

Today—the day of the entrance ceremony—would finally mark the beginning of the game. I looked around my unfamiliar room and felt a little off-kilter.

“Good morning, my lady,” Mina said, opening the curtains and letting the morning light seep into my large bedroom.

“Good morning, Mina.”

As you may have guessed already, the suite I’d been given was incredibly luxurious—nothing like what I’d expected from a student dormitory. On top of the large bedroom, it came with an equally large living room that doubled as a study, as well as a small room and kitchen for my attending maid to use.

From what I’d gathered, despite there being thirty dormitory buildings in total, there were only ten such deluxe rooms, one in each of the ten historical buildings. Only royalty, or the sons and daughters of dukes, were allowed to use them.

“Would you like to have your breakfast in bed or the study, my lady?”

“Do I not need to go to the cafeteria?”

“No, my lady. Meals are brought straight from the kitchen to the deluxe

rooms using lifts.”

This class system truly is a doozy. Is it really all right to treat the students so differently?

Such elite schools, like Eton College, for instance, had existed in my previous life, but I’d heard that not even the British royals (or the Japanese imperial family members, for that matter) were given preferential treatment over the other students.

Well, potential future emperors and empresses were at risk of being poisoned so ensuring their meals weren’t touched by many was necessary, or so I assumed. Besides, my brother probably spent most of his time cooped up inside his room, working, and he definitely needed at least this much space.

According to what I’d seen in the games, regular rooms were cozy studios. In my past life, I’d thought that was fancy enough—after all, the young aristocrats who studied here didn’t have to share their space with roommates—but I realized now I hadn’t known the half of it.

Still, it would come in handy if I needed to become a shut-in.

I ate breakfast in bed and changed into my uniform. Rather, I let Mina dress me. The design was just as cute as I remembered, but I wasn’t sure it suited a villainess like me that well.

All right, time to attend the ceremony.

In the game, the entrance ceremony acted as an introduction during which the player could read about the setting and story. Obviously, this time I wouldn’t just read about it; I’d live it for real.

All in all, it paralleled a typical Japanese entrance ceremony. The new students first gathered in front of their dormitories and were led to the hall where the current students and the attending guests welcomed them warmly. We were then invited to sit down. As the lady of a ducal house, I was placed in the front row.

Thank goodness I had a good night’s sleep. Imagine if I dozed off in front of all these people!

The musicians in the orchestra pit—I couldn't believe a school auditorium had one—played a solemn piece (the national anthem?) before the headmaster gave a congratulatory address. Then, he invited the current student representative to make a speech.

"His Grace, Duke Alexei Yulnova," he said.

HUH?! Isn't this the student council president's job? Why is my brother the one doing it?! Did the prez catch a cold? Is he replacing him because he's the one with the highest status among the current students? Why're they calling a student by his title, anyway?

Alexei took the stage.

UWAAH! HE'S SO COOL!!!

It was my first time seeing him in his uniform, so I couldn't help but get excited. Okay, I'd seen it in the game, but seeing it in real life was truly something else! The boys' uniform included a blazer, but the general vibe was more of a military uniform than a school uniform. It was heavily decorated, so perhaps it was closer to a full-dress uniform. Between his monocle and uniform, he looked somewhat *domineering*.

I realized all over again how perfect his figure was, especially when compared to the previous speakers. He was tall and his legs were long and striking.

He's thin but has such well-defined muscles! Too cool!

In this world, young lords all practiced horseback riding and swordsmanship. Alexei could easily slice a target into two with a swing of his long sword, and he had the arm and chest muscles to match his prowess. His straight posture made him look even better!

Alexei walked to the stage, his gorgeous face expressionless. He carried an air of majesty one would never expect from a student. No one could seem to take their eyes away from him. He slowly gazed at the crowd from one end of the room to the other. Even from afar, the light blue of his eyes gleamed like gemstones. While the audience had been fairly quiet this entire time, the room had fallen even deeper into silence. There wasn't one whisper to be heard.

Alexei opened his mouth.

“Greetings, new students.” His deep, pleasant voice echoed in the auditorium.

The contents of his speech were nothing new or interesting. He simply welcomed everyone as one of the students of the esteemed Imperial Magic Academy, but the way he spoke gave it much more gravitas than the in-game speaker. He was so incredibly competent; I couldn’t help but be moved!

After finishing his speech—the perfect length, neither too short nor too long—he left the stage as the room erupted into applause.

He glanced at me on his way back to his seat. I waved. A soft smile curled his lips, but it disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared, a merciless look of neutrality overtaking his features once more.

The gap! Gaaaah! He’s so precious!

“UWAAAH!!!”

Huh? Wait! Did I scream aloud?! No, it came from behind me? What the heck, did something happen?

Another voice coming from the stage pulled me from my thoughts.

“Please welcome the representative of the new students, His Highness, Prince Mikhail Yulgran.”

Huh?! The current student representative is a duke and the new student representative is a prince?! This is a battle between royalty and nobility! What a fraught ceremony!

This time, squeals and cheers filled the room as Prince Mikhail appeared on the stage.

His hair was as blue as the sky on a bright summer day, and his eyes were azure. While he appeared dignified, the lines of his face were soft, giving him a gentle, cheerful look. He was already on the tall side, but would most likely grow taller still, becoming even more graceful in the years to come. Even though he was standing in front of the entire student body, he didn’t seem the slightest bit nervous.

As expected of a prince. I smiled, taking him in.

Yup, no way.

Mikhail was cute, no doubt about that. He was a good-looking guy, and I suspected quite a few girls would pick him over Alexei and his cold demeanor. Me, on the other hand? I had been close to thirty in my past life, so fifteen-years-olds were absolutely out of the question for me! Besides, I was always more into capable men. While I was also fifteen at the moment, I could say without a shadow of a doubt that I'd never fall for such a cute, guileless boy.

Despite his actual age, Alexei looked well over twenty and was the picture of maturity, so I could fangirl over him without reserve. On the other hand, I had no interest in Mikhail whatsoever. Actually, my interest in him was *negative*. I'd honestly been a little worried that I'd fall in love with the prince at first sight. Good thing that didn't seem to be the case.

While Alexei's aura had turned the auditorium dead silent, a couple of people cheered and squealed during Mikhail's turn. It wasn't noisy *per se*, but the effect he had on the girls was plain to see—and hear.

His popularity was impressive, considering the fact that people had started screaming before he'd even gotten on the stage. Although I still felt like the timing was slightly off. Had those girls screamed for Alexei instead?

Does my brother have a secret fan club? I guess it'd be more surprising if he didn't.

Alexei was handsome, top of his class, rich, and held one of the most prestigious titles in the Empire. Besides, his parents and grandparents were gone, which meant you wouldn't need to worry about annoying in-laws. *There's really nobody better to marry!*

His status wasn't as high as the prince's, but, in my opinion, most women would choose being a duchess over the empress. Ruling was hard work!

Wait, when you think about it, my dear brother is a grade A catch!

No doubt about it, the screaming girls were after him!

That's no good! I gotta protect him! Though, wait a sec. I'm just his sister, and he's got to get married eventually.

Wouldn't I be a bother if I fought off every single girl who approached him? There was no mother-in-law or father-in-law to worry about, but I could very

well become the annoying in-law!

Still, protecting my brother was paramount!

I just wanted him to find a nice, supportive girl who could make him happy, but there was a big chance his fiancée would be chosen to meet our family's needs. No one would care about my opinion.

Hang on! Considering his rank, shouldn't he already have a fiancée?

For all I knew, I hadn't been told because I hadn't asked directly. His marriage could be planned out, agreed upon, set in stone!

It's definitely possible! What should I do? I gotta make sure!

Abruptly, I returned to my senses when the people around me started clapping. The prince had finished his speech.

Ack! I didn't listen to a word of it! Whoops, sorry, Your Highness!



"Ekaterina."

I was on my way to my classroom after the ceremony when Alexei called out to me.

"Brother!" I exclaimed, running up to him. "Your speech was magnificent!"

"Really? It was last minute, so I didn't say much."

He says, like it's nothing. As I'd expected, due to the difference from the game, he'd filled in for the original speaker.

"Rather than my rushed speech, what did you think about His Highness's?"

"Huh?"

"Prince Mikhail took the stage after me, remember?"

Huh-wuh-whaaaat?! Why does Alexei care about him? How do I tell him that I have zero clue what he said because I was speculating about weird things? Oh no, did it show on my face?!

"Ah. It, uh... Well...it was...great?"

I'm being so obvious. I should be honest. He won't get mad, right?

“But... Truth is...I...don’t remember much of it,” I admitted.

Alexei froze.

Oh no, he must be disappointed. Please, it’s not my fault your speech was a hundred times more engaging than His Highness’s!

“B-Brother! Speeches aside, I have a question for you, if that’s okay?”

“Of course, go ahead.”

“Do you have a fiancée?”

“Sorry?” he let out, a puzzled look on his face.

“I’m aware that I have no say in this, but please let me state one thing! No matter your choice of future wife, I hereby promise that I’ll never mistreat her even a bit! Even if we end up clashing, I won’t cause you any trouble! Please, don’t worry even a second about it!” I exclaimed, clenching my fist unconsciously as I spoke with as much conviction as I could, hoping to prove my sincerity.

Bullying young brides is not okay! I promise to take that motto to heart!

“Clashing...” Alexei repeated before bursting into laughter.

How rare.

It was my first time seeing him laugh so heartily. He looked somewhat childish like that.

How adorable!

It wasn’t a laughing matter, though! Conflictual relationships with your in-laws were a huge problem! Not that I’d ever had any in-laws.

I noticed a couple of students stopping in their tracks to stare at Alexei, dumbfounded.

“I-I’m not engaged,” he eventually said, removing his monocle and wiping away the tears that had formed in his eyes. “I’ll ponder such things *after* I graduate. Between my work and studies, I haven’t had a moment to consider it. Besides, I’m not interested in taking a wife before I ensure you’re in good hands and happily married. So, you don’t need to worry about clashing with my

fiancée anytime soon, I promise.”

Then, he wasn’t engaged! I felt relieved—and I couldn’t help but notice he was even cuter than usual without his monocle.

“Well, I won’t marry until I see you content with a wonderful partner,” I answered.

“In that case, neither of us can get married, can we? I suppose we’ll just have each other forever.”

“How lovely! That’d make me happiest!” I exclaimed. My brother was my fave so that absolutely worked for me!

“You have a child’s innocence, Ekaterina,” he said, chuckling. “Take your time growing up. And come to me once you’ve finally found someone you like. As long as that man makes you happy, I’ll help your wish come true.”

Thank you, brother. But, sorry, I’ve actually got eleven years on you. Not to mention, I was the kind of stupid adult who’d forgo sleep just to see you for a couple of seconds here and there in a game. I literally died!

I genuinely couldn’t think of anything better than staying by his side. Besides, I needed to be with him if I wanted to lower the death flag flapping above him!



After bidding Alexei goodbye, I rushed toward my classroom.

By that point, I was pretty late. Most people had already entered their respective buildings. I saw a few people walking by, so I was trotting behind them when, suddenly, my eyes fell on one particular silhouette: a dainty girl.

She had shoulder-length hair, a pale pink that was reminiscent of cherry blossoms. Even from the back, I could tell she was sweet and lovely. Her large, bright purple eyes sparkled like amethysts as her long eyelashes cast a shadow under them. Her uniform also fit her like a glove.

I shouldn’t have been able to see any of that from afar, especially not from behind, but I could somehow picture every detail very vividly.

It was only natural, though, because it was *me* I was talking about. The same went for the way my uniform complimented my looks. How could it not when

that uniform had been created for *me*?

But I'm not entering any commands, so why am I walking?

No! What am I thinking?! That's the game's heroine, and I'm not the player anymore! Get a hold of yourself, me!

"Me"...?

Who in the world am I?

My legs gave way.

Oh no... I'm shutting down...

"Ekaterina!"

I heard Alexei's voice in the distance, but it faded into nothing as I blacked out.

Chapter 2: The Heroine and the Imperial Prince

“Three days,” Mina said sternly, holding up three fingers. “You are to stay on bed rest for the next three days at the very least. His Grace made himself clear. If you disregard his warning and overexert yourself, you’ll be put on a leave of absence and sent home.”

“Nooooooooo!” I whined from my prone position in bed inside my spacious dorm room.

Mina’s expression didn’t shift one bit at my complaints—although that was unsurprising, since her face was blank from the start.

“Don’t you think his reaction is reasonable, my lady? You were so lively this morning that I can hardly believe you collapsed. His Grace told me you were chatting with him in high spirits only a few minutes prior. Even if you say you’re fine, we cannot take your word for it.”

“But I really am fine!”

“Three days, my lady. Please don’t leave your room during that time. His Grace will have my head if you don’t follow that rule.”

“No way,” I moaned.

“Don’t you know how good he is with a long sword? He could easily chop off a head or two.”

Ch-Chop off, huh?

Exhaustion caught up to me, and I closed my eyes. To be honest, my head was still spinning.

When I witnessed the heroine I had once controlled in the game moving about like her own person, my mind dissociated from my body. After all this time being Ekaterina, I wasn’t sure why such a thing had happened.

I guess, in my past life, I experienced the whole story as Flora.

The heroine was a girl named Flora Cherny. While she’d been born a

commoner, her mother's close friend, Baroness Cherny, adopted Flora after her mother—her only living relative—passed. Eventually, her strong mana had been discovered, and she'd been allowed to attend the Magic Academy.

I thought my corporate drone and villainess personas had merged perfectly, but a little change of environment had been enough to destabilize me. When I thought about it, all I'd done in the duchy was study.

I suppose following my brother's order to rest until I'm used to this place would do me good.

I'd ended up worrying him again.

Hang on! Oh my God, it's coming back to me!

When I'd collapsed, he'd been the first to notice and rush to my side. He'd even picked me up princess-style and taken me to the infirmary!



H-H-He just carried me! Like a princess! AAAAH!!!

Back then, that was my first thought when I woke up.

My second was that I had no idea what was going on or where I was. When I turned my confused gaze upward, I saw Alexei's beautiful face scrunched up with worry.

"B-Brother...?"

"Ekaterina! You're awake!"

He looked on the verge of tears as he gently pressed his cheek to my forehead and hugged me tighter.

Just thinking about it is gonna give me a nosebleed! His arms! His chest! His shoulder! They're so warm!

I hid my face in my hands in embarrassment.

I'd always dreamed of being carried princess-style, but when it finally happened, I couldn't stop worrying about my weight. It bothered me so much that I said, "Brother, I can walk on my own. Please let me down."

"Request denied." He shot me down at once. "If something happened to you,

I wouldn't be able to take it. You are my life, Ekaterina."

I nearly died on the spot!

Brother, you're too cool! Your sister can't take it!

After such a strike to the heart, I couldn't say a word until we arrived at the infirmary.

I was impressed he'd managed to carry me all the way there. Though, when I thought about it, the noblemen of this world trained to head into battle wearing a suit of armor and a helmet without the weight hindering them, so they were strong. The game hadn't really gone into the details when it came to the characters' muscles, but I knew that from Ekaterina's memories.



After Alexei laid me down on one of the infirmary's beds, I told him to go to class. Instead, he looked at me with a hangdog expression.

"Are you not going to ask me to hold your hand this time?"

At that moment, he reminded me of nothing more than an overgrown puppy with droopy ears.

Where did the ice king who overpowered the entire school with his gaze go?! My moe meter is ringing! My brother's too stinking cute!!!

I was so overwhelmed that I almost screamed, "I'll give you my hand, my heart, anything!"—but then Mina arrived. She took over sitting by my bedside so Alexei could return to class.

Mina's arrival actually helped me dodge a bullet because Alexei had already decided to take me back to the duchy as soon as possible so I could rest. He hadn't said so outright, but I'd sensed his plan. I immediately put together a counterplan of my own: I begged Mina to take me back to my dorm room.

My room was in the girls' dormitory, and boys were forbidden there. While he might have been a duke, I knew that Alexei was too much of a gentleman to intrude. As long as I stayed in the dorm, he couldn't take me home.

Initially, I tried to walk back on my own two legs with Mina's help, but she soon picked me up. To my shock, I was carried princess-style for the second time in one day!

Seriously, what kind of maid is strong enough to carry her mistress in her arms like that?! This deserves a spin-off! We'd call it That Time My Beautiful Maid Showed Her Might!



That's how we'd gotten here.

"I'm sorry, Mina. Did my brother get mad at you for moving me?" I asked.

"At first, yes. But I told him exactly what you said: 'Lady Ekaterina was so disheartened by the idea of leaving the academy that she's been crying ever since.' He grew so melancholy that he couldn't maintain his anger."

"Eh heh, I see..."

I'm sorry for taking advantage of your love, brother!

Listen, I had no choice. I could have sidestepped my own personal doom flag by leaving the academy, but then I'd have no way to save the empire from destruction. I couldn't afford to go back home!

I'll lower that wretched flag for you, brother, I promise!



I spent the next three days enduring my forced bed rest.

On the morning of the fourth day, I at last headed to my classroom for the first time. When I stepped in, the other students held their breath as they stared at me—or rather at *us*. I suspected their reaction had more to do with the fact that Alexei had escorted me to my classroom. He'd left a strong impression on everyone during the entrance ceremony, after all. Mina had also accompanied us with my bag. Most of the students had servants at home, but only those who stayed in deluxe rooms were allowed to bring them to the academy. The three of us made quite a sight.

"Where does Ekaterina Yulnova sit?"

The group of boys Alexei had asked timidly pointed at a spot. My brother led me to my seat, and Mina pulled the chair out for me without a word.

"I'm heading back to my own classroom. Make sure to tell the teacher right away if you feel sick. Remember that you're not well. Don't overdo it, and be gentle with yourself."

"I will do as you say, brother," I answered meekly.

Alexei's face was lined with worry as he caressed my hair gently. He took a look around the class, his eyes sharp, as if warning that he'd hold everyone here accountable if something happened to me. I felt the corners of my lips curl into a smile but quickly schooled my expression.

"I shall be awaiting your return, my lady," Mina said.

She handed me my bag and the two of them left the classroom, Alexei's face still clouded.

All right. Let's check out my classmates Ah. Yep. They're all put off!

No one wanted to get close to me now! I couldn't blame them. One minute in and all I'd done was flaunt my rank. And what if I collapsed again? They were probably terrified of being held accountable. Not to mention that, after three full days, most of the girls had already formed their cliques.

Boy, this sucks. Ha ha... Ha ha ha... Haaaaah...

It wouldn't save me, but figured I might as well greet the person sitting next to me.

"Erm. Hello. My name is Ekaterina Yulnova. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The girl next to me blinked with surprise that I'd started a conversation with her. Despite that, she answered very politely: "Thank you very much for introducing yourself. I'm Flora Cherny."

No surprise there.

The heroine always sat next to Ekaterina. Though, in the game, Ekaterina had snapped at her the second she said hello.



A few days after I joined class, I realized I was doing just fine thanks to my private tutors' teachings. I'd been worried for nothing.

Our mana control teacher was only focused on theory and history for the time being. I'd learned a lot more at home from Mr. Moldo—his lessons had been detailed and rich. The work I'd put into learning mana control with him had paid off.

I couldn't let my guard down when it came to this particular class, though.

"All of you had your mana assessed before the start of the school year, and you've been deemed to possess sufficient mana to attend this academy. I hope you are aware that your potential makes it all the more crucial for you to learn how to control your mana well," the teacher said.

I had no quibbles with that. I agreed with the teacher and was just waiting for the *actual* bomb I was so worried about to drop.

"Every year, a handful of misguided students assume that practical skills are

the only thing that matters and that theory holds little value,” the teacher continued. “Be assured that this is not the case. Putting into application what you’ve learned in theory and history class is the only way to deepen your understanding and achieve precise control over your mana. For this reason, you’ll soon take a quiz to assess your understanding of the material. If I deem the class ready, we’ll hold a practical class on the training grounds at the end of the month.”

As soon as I heard this, I scribbled down “end of the month” in my notebook and circled it.

The practical mana control class was directly linked to the fall of the empire. If Flora didn’t successfully clear the event that’d be triggered during that class, the final boss would eventually show up and destroy the empire.

While my studies were going without a hitch, my social life was a bit of a disaster. I was still a loner, as expected.

Oh well, whatever.

There was a group of girls that had tried to get close to me. They’d invited me to lunch on my first day. At first, I’d been pretty happy, but...it had ended up bringing me nothing but trouble.



As soon as I sat down with the three girls in the cafeteria that day, I realized that I was in for a ride.

They spent the first few minutes fawning over me in the most outrageous ways. I forced myself to smile and bear it in silence until, mercifully, they moved on to chatting among themselves. The content of their conversation? Nothing but shade!

This trio, led by the daughter of a count (which I assumed meant she stood near the top of the food chain in this school) hated Flora—a commoner, but nonetheless a very pretty girl. They also *loved* gossiping. I listened as they made up the wildest stories with no proof whatsoever, then egged each other on, repeating, “Right? Right!” over and over again.

That was when it hit me: these three were the bullies I’d nicknamed the

“Right Right Trio” when playing the game!

In the game, these three terrors were Ekaterina’s cronies. They always stood behind the villainess, going “Right! Right!” whenever she said something. Their names never came up, and their faces weren’t distinct enough for me to remember, so I hadn’t recognized them.

That’s no good! If I hang around with them, I’m heading straight to my downfall!

Besides, I was fed up with their antics.

I finished my plate as quickly as possible and wiped my mouth with a napkin in a manner that befitted a noble lady. Then, I stood up.

“Do forgive me, but I have a previous engagement with my brother. I must excuse myself. Have a good day.”

Thank you, Mina!

I took her advice to use my brother as an excuse and booked it.



I henceforth distanced myself from them, but they were a tenacious trio. They flocked to me whenever I was alone, no matter how many times I subtly avoided them.

Get the hint, will you?!

Sadly, they weren’t taking suggestions.

Obviously, they were dying to befriend me to get a taste of the House of Yulnova’s fortune, prestige, and privilege. During our first conversation, they could barely conceal how eager they were to latch onto me.

The Ekaterina from the game got eaten alive by these sharks, didn’t she?

During the short breaks in between classes, I could pretend I was so worried about the next class that I had to prepare. I’d say something along the lines of “Do excuse me, but I’m terribly busy right now” and bury my head in a book. Eventually, they stopped approaching me during those.

What they did, however, was huddle together to belittle Flora, who also

studied during breaks, just loudly enough for her to hear. Flora never reacted, but it annoyed me to no end.

My biggest issue was the lunch break. I'd given up on eating at the cafeteria because the Right Right Trio would *not* leave me alone.

Instead, I had Mina bring me sandwiches from the dormitory's kitchen. That had seemed like a safe solution, until one day when I was eating alone in the schoolyard—only to be ambushed!

"Lady Yulnova!"

I almost spat out my food when I saw the damned trio running up to me.

"This just won't do! You shouldn't be eating lunch on your own. People will laugh at you, you know?" one of them said as the other two sniggered.

Urgh! Gimme a break! Why do you think I'm hiding here, huh? Besides, I'm a grown-up working woman, do you think eating alone scares me? If I didn't have the guts to do stuff on my own, I'd have starved long ago!

I held myself back from screaming all that. Instead, I fled again.

I didn't want to bother Alexei, but sticking close to him seemed to be the only way to get those three off my back. With that in mind, I made my way to the third-year-students' classroom.

"The duke? He's in his office," one of my brother's classmates told me.

Darn, I hadn't expected that.

His classmate was pretty hot, an "older brother" sort with a sporty vibe. He had fiery red hair and friendly golden eyes that seemed to gaze into my soul.

I think I remember a love interest like him? I'd only played the prince's route, so I wasn't entirely sure.

"His office?" I asked.

"He's been borrowing a meeting room to take care of his work for the duchy ever since he enrolled. He spends most of his breaks and evenings cooped up there."

Even here, he was working?! And hadn't this guy just said that Alexei had

been at it from the time he enrolled? Wasn't that before he'd even taken over the family?

I'm sure he also stays up late studying after returning to his room. Death by overwork is no joke, brother!

I'd also noticed that his classmate had called him "the duke." Though, to be fair, it had sounded more like a nickname than referring to him by his title.

Anyhow, the nice buff hottie told me how to find Alexei and, sure enough, he was in a proper office.

My brother sat at a large desk covered in papers. Smaller desks had been set up for his subordinates—the big shots of the duchy. They were either busy taking notes or reporting to Alexei, and I somehow felt like I'd stepped into a board of directors meeting.

He is in the middle of work!

"What's wrong, Ekaterina?" he asked.

"Well... I...just wanted to have lunch with you, brother."

Without hesitation, Alexei rose with a smile and accompanied me to the cafeteria.

However, I was certain that he'd end up working even more after school to make up for it. I'd also wasted his subordinates' time. Guilt ate at me as I ate my lunch.

Damn you, Right Right Trio!

I asked Alexei what he usually did for lunch. He told me he had someone fetch him a plate from the cafeteria. I worried that it must be cold by the time it reached him and suggested someone could prepare him something easier to snack on while he worked. He just shrugged.

Alexei was still growing, so his appetite should have been at its peak, yet he didn't seem to care *what* he ate! Something about it didn't sit right with me.



Much to my horror, the Right Right Trio even tried to barge into my dorm room! There were ten dormitory buildings for the first-years but all three of

them somehow ended up in the same building as me.

Talk about bad luck!

Ugh, wasn't it the same in the game? Ekaterina, the Right Right Trio, and the heroine were all in the same dorm.

Guess that means it's fate, then.

Brave Mina chased them away for me. I was sure they'd protest, but she managed it beautifully.

"Thank you, Mina. What did you tell them?"

"I merely insisted that you were busy studying...while staring at their necks and pondering to myself how strongly I'd need to press to squeeze the life out of them."

"I see..."

That Time My Beautiful Maid Almost Became a Murderer.

I was very thankful to her so it was fine, probably?

"My lady, are those three bothering you?" Mina asked in her usual deadpan.

I wasn't sure how to answer. If I told her they *were*, what would happen to them?

Nah, she wouldn't...

"I wouldn't go as far as that. But they are indeed a bit annoying," I said. "I feel like letting them bother me would be a personal defeat, though."

"'Annoying,' are they? I understand, my lady."

A chill ran down my spine.

Welp, oh well.

"Listen, I've given this a lot of thought. I have a plan, so no need to worry about it, Mina."

I was safe in the dorm and during short breaks. My only issue was lunchtime. I could kill two birds with one stone, because I wanted to help my brother enjoy his meals too.

That's right! Who cares about the Right Right Trio? Thinking about my brother is a much better use of my time! Let's focus on bringing him some joy during lunchtime!

Working right through lunch was exactly what I did in my drone days, and look where it got me!

All right, I know what I gotta do.

My plan had nothing to do with the trio; this was for my brother. Part of it would mess with my anti-flag strategy, but whatever. I'd figure things out.



The next day at noon, I put my plan into action. I headed to the cafeteria—or rather to the kitchen. Everyone seemed pretty busy (obviously, considering the time) but I grabbed a cook and asked if I could borrow a corner of the kitchen.

Yep. I'm going to cook.

In my past life, I'd started living alone when I went to university, and I'd cooked for myself often. My friends had praised me whenever they'd stayed over and tried my cooking, so I was confident I wasn't bad at it.

Though I stopped altogether when I got a job and started surviving on convenience store meals.

The problem was that the kitchen tools of this world were very different from those I was used to. Actually, the kitchen reminded me of the one in that famous animated witch movie, the one with the herring pie! They didn't have microwaves or even gas here, and I had no idea how to operate a charcoal-fueled stove. I didn't have any experience cooking as Ekaterina either, so that didn't help.

Come what may, I'll just try my best!

The cook was quick to give me permission.

"There's some unused space in there, don't worry," he said. "Please share it with the other student who visits."

The fact that someone else was there didn't come as a surprise to me. In fact, I felt relieved.

I see she made the right choice!

The heroine would only get picked on if she went to the cafeteria. Borrowing a stove and fixing herself a meal so she could eat alone was the way to go.

That habit will come into handy later too.

“Lady Cherny,” I greeted her.

The pink-haired girl turned around and stared at me, puzzled. “Lady Yulnova...? What brings you here?”

“Well, I—”

As I prepared to explain myself, my eyes landed on the wicker basket set on the counter in front of Flora. Its lid was open. Inside, I could see the freshly cooked food she’d just packed.

It looked absolutely *delicious*.

Several thin, round pieces of crepe (or wrap, I wasn’t sure) filled with salad, omelet, and other such ingredients were neatly lined up. She’d use an array of fillings, lending them a sense of visual appeal and balance. Each one was also the perfect size to pick up.

They belong in a restaurant!

These were spot on, exactly what I’d wanted to cook! They’d be perfect for my brother!

I grabbed Flora’s hands without thinking and exclaimed, “Lady Cherny! Your cooking is perfect! I can’t believe how talented you are!”

“I-I’m not deserving of such praise!”

“Could you please teach me how to make these? I would love to cook some for my brother.”

Flora let out a confused noise as she blinked at me in astonishment. I explained to her that since Alexei worked over the lunch break and didn’t pay enough attention to what he ate, I was worried about his health.

“I’ve never cooked before, but I’m ready to work as hard as needed! Would you be so kind as to show me the process?” I begged, bringing my hands

together. "Just once would be enough."

"Lady Yulnova, you like your brother a lot, don't you?" Flora said with a smile.

"Will you help me?"

"Well... I'm not necessarily opposed, but this is commoner food! I made it the way I prefer, so I'm not sure a duke would enjoy it..." Flora picked up one of the crepes and held it out to me. "Would you mind trying it first?"

"My! Thank you!"

Was she kidding?! I'd been dying to have a taste! I chomped into it. It was filled with...potatoes and bacon? It tasted a lot like German fries. The seasoning was great too. Just spicy enough!

"You truly are talented," I said. "It's delicious."

"Thank you so much," Flora said. A blush had crept up her cheeks and she seemed genuinely happy.

Argh! She's so cute! I can almost see the flowers fluttering behind her and hear the little birdies chirping.



As expected of the heroine. She was the polar opposite of a villainess like me, whose face evoked domineering old castles and crashes of thunder. No doubt the prince would fall for her in a heartbeat.

That's a pretty girl for you!

"I'm glad to help if you don't mind that it's me."

"Not at all! I'm sorry for asking so much of you!"

Without further ado, the heroine and villainess cooking session began.



I was having so much fun!

Flora taught me how to make the batter and how to operate the stove. This time, we tried using potato salad, sauerkraut, and sausages for the filling of the crepes(?). I kinda felt like I was making hand-rolled sushi instead.

"You're so good at cooking the batter!" Flora told me.

Thanks! I lived in Osaka for a while, so I'm great at flipping okonomiyaki! I even had experience with crepes from an old part-time job!

"It's all thanks to you, Lady Cherny. Your expertise is rubbing off on me," I said aloud.

"Well, I've been doing it for a long time. It was only my mother and me, and I did all of the housework since she had to work."

"My, is that so? You worked so hard despite your young age. How impressive!"

Being a single mother was tough in every world. Her mother must've felt relieved to have such a capable daughter taking care of the household.

"Until seven months ago, I also lived alone with my mother," I whispered after a pause. "But I...was never of much help to her."

Flora froze, her eyes locked on me. "Until seven months ago? Then, your mother..."

"Yes, she departed."

“Mine too,” she confessed. “My mother also passed away seven months ago.”

“Oh my...”

We exchanged a look and smiled at each other.

I knew from the game that the heroine’s mother was dead, but hearing her say it gave it a different weight. It was my first time hearing that our mothers had passed at the same time, though.

My circumstances had been far from easy, but I could hardly imagine how hard everything had been for Flora. Her only family member had passed away, and she’d been relentlessly bullied since enrolling here.

You know what? It’s time for a change of strategy in my battle against the flags!

I’d decided not to get close to the heroine, but scrap that—I was her friend now. We were both loners, so, in a way, it was inevitable that we would start chatting. Our alliance could get the Right Right Trio off my back *and* shield Flora from their bullying, thanks to my influence as a duke’s sister. I was staunchly against bullying, and that stupid trio was getting on my nerves.

Besides, regardless of convenience, I had a real feeling we’d get along.

Now, I just needed to avoid the prince and I’d be fine! I wouldn’t seek him out or speak a word to him!

By the time we were done, Flora and I had made so much food that I could scarcely move it all on my own. She kindly offered to help.

“You’re even helping me to carry everything,” I said, flustered. “I’m so sorry for the trouble.”

“Don’t mention it, I had fun! If anything, I should be thanking you.” Imaginary flowers did a cancan behind her as she smiled at me.

She’s way too cute!

I invited her to join us for lunch, but she refused. I could see why she’d be hesitant. After all, it’d mean she’d be in a room full of unknown men, including my brother, a duke. Still, I suspected she’d get picked on again if she ate alone, so I vowed to get her to join us one day.

I knocked on the door and Alexei's attendant, Ivan, opened it.

He stared at me for a second before exclaiming, "Why are you carrying such a large basket, my lady?!" He immediately snatched it from my hands.

Ivan was quite different from Mina, in that he always had a friendly smile plastered on his face, but he was just as attentive as she was. He had light-brown hair, warm amber eyes, and was roughly as tall as my brother. Overall, a pretty good-looking man, if I did say so myself.

"Thank you," I said. "Could you please brew some tea for everyone?"

Ivan nodded. "It smells good. Where did you get this, my lady?"

"Oh, I made it," I answered, wearing a satisfied grin despite myself. Ivan was clearly astonished.

You're making quite a face, I thought.

"Your Grace. Her ladyship is here," he said after recovering his composure.

Alexei raised his head. "Ekaterina? What is it?"

"I brought you lunch, brother."

"Her ladyship made it herself," Ivan added, lifting up the basket to show Alexei.

His eyes opened wide, and he wasn't the only one surprised. Each of his subordinates lifted their eyes from their papers at once and stared at me in disbelief.

Hey, are you really that surprised?! Well. Their pausing in their work worked out in my favor.

"Everyone, would you care to take a short break to fill your stomachs?" I asked. "This isn't much, but I cooked for all of you."

"You...cooked?" Alexei repeated. "But how?"

"I borrowed the cafeteria's kitchen," I said. "I did have help, so there's no need to worry about the taste."

While we were talking, Ivan, always the perfect attendant, had set plates on the table and taken the crepes (though I was still questioning if they were

actually crepes) out of the basket.

Oh! I suddenly remembered something and grabbed a little bundle I had neatly packed.

“This is your share,” I told Ivan, offering it to him. “I wrapped them so they wouldn’t get cold. You can enjoy them when you’re done with your work!”

“You prepared some for me too?” Ivan looked equal parts surprised and delighted. He then put them aside to serve everyone tea. Alexei’s subordinates sat at their desks, and I borrowed an empty one to join them. My heart pounded as I awaited their reaction.

“It’s delicious,” Alexei whispered after the first bite.

YESSS!!! He praised me! The words came out right away, so I know he means it for real!

“These look like the snacks commoners sell in the streets. I often ate them during my student days. Ah, these sure take me back! I must say they’re *very* good. Sausage and mustard are a match made in heaven,” the youngest of my brother’s advisors, Aaron Kyle, mumbled as he munched on his first crepe. His glasses lent him a scholarly countenance. He was the person in charge of the duchy’s mines.

“In the capital, every family has its go-to. My family preferred onions with bacon as a filling, but potatoes and bacon are excellent too,” Viscount Boris Novak said, his voice as austere and elegant as usual.

Boris Novak was my brother’s right-hand man. Since House Novak was a branch family of our house, I’d always thought he was from the duchy, but it turned out he had once been a low-ranking official in the capital. My grandfather, Sergei, had taken him in, and he’d later married into House Novak.

“I’ve tried one of these with jam once in the duchy, but the savory version hits the spot too! Did you know variations of this dish exist in several countries?” Halil Talal said, scrutinizing his serving, his curiosity apparent. The trade advisor’s dark skin made his foreign origins immediately obvious. As the son of a great merchant who owned businesses all over the world, he was knowledgeable about foreign countries and could even speak several

languages.

Besides those three, Alexei also relied on a forestry and agriculture advisor, financial advisor, executive advisor, legal advisor, and knight commander. They took turns visiting his office depending on what matters demanded their lord's attention. Most of them had been recruited by our grandfather and were experts in their respective fields. One could say they were the greatest assets Sergei had left to his grandson. It was only thanks to them that Alexei was able to balance his schoolwork with his duties as a duke.

Such incredible people were currently eating commoner food and chitchatting. By the sound of things, it wasn't something they did often.

"It's my first time hearing you talk about your childhood, Novak," Alexei said. "Where in the capital are you from?"

"Downtown. You wouldn't know about these parts, Your Grace. To be honest, I haven't stepped foot there in over twenty years myself. It must have changed a lot..." He trailed off before switching the subject. "What about you, Aaron?"

"I haven't seen my family in ages! Well, I have four brothers, so I'm sure my parents are so busy with them they've all but forgotten I even exist."

"Four is still fine. I've got nine brothers, you know? My father has three wives," Halil said.

"Now that's quite something!"

Laughter erupted, but then they seemed to remember that I was there and it died immediately.

"Please, don't mind me! I'm glad you're having fun," I said with a smile.

I'd heard my share of salacious comedy as well as been the target of sexual harassment and bullying during my time as an office worker. A joke about a guy with three wives was the least of my worries.

"We don't usually make merry like this," Alexei said. "This is all thanks to you, Ekaterina."

"I'm so happy to see you having a good time, brother," I answered, a big smile on my face.

Even if they were short, it was good for him to have nice, relaxing breaks...to avoid death from overwork!

“I’ll cook you something else tomorrow, so let’s have lunch together again!”

Alexei frowned. “I appreciate the thought,” he said, “but the idea of you cooking on your own worries me. What if you get hurt? I’ll have someone from the kitchen prepare it instead, all right?”

“I thought you weren’t interested in having anything prepared especially for you,” I reminded him. “If you make use of your status to demand special treatment, the reputation of the House of Yulnova might suffer. That concerns you, doesn’t it, brother?”

“Ugh...”

How very like him.

I had my doubts when he told me that he didn’t care about what he ate, and I’d been right on the money. Alexei had offered to have my grades altered without a second thought, but ask for preferential treatment for himself? Never.

“There’s another girl who makes her own food in my class. I had a most pleasant time cooking and chatting with her. Please, allow me to continue, brother!” I begged.

“As you wish, Ekaterina. Anything.”

Alexei’s advisors did what they could to suppress their laughter at the sight of their lord agreeing, albeit with some reluctance. He was known to never let his emotions cloud his decisions when it came to work, so his leniency when dealing with me must have been a sight.

I remained in my brother’s office even after we’d finished eating and helped out however I could, only heading back to class right before the end of the lunch break when he wrapped things up.



Even without Alexei present, his subordinates continued working. Alexei gave out directions, checked reports, and took decisions during his breaks while the

others followed through on his orders and drafted reports while he was in class. There was far too much to do for them to wait to resume work after school alongside Alexei.

“I never expected her ladyship to bring us homemade food,” Aaron said. “This was my first time meeting her. She’s so lovely and kind, and seems to worry about His Grace. Just thinking that he finally has a family member who cares so deeply about his well-being fills me with relief.”

“Likewise,” Halil agreed. “But it looks like there’s a lot more to her than meets the eye. Lord Novak. What do you think of this? This is Lady Ekaterina’s proposal.”

“What?” Novak asked. He took the piece of paper from Halil and read the first line. “This is about...wagons?”

“She tackled an issue we’ve long struggled with, commercial revitalization measures. She laid eyes on Lord Aaron’s report and immediately produced a proposal suggesting an alternative use for the wagons we use to send ore to the capital.”

“The wagons are supposed to boost trade somehow?” Aaron asked, tilting his head.

“As it stands, our wagons are empty when they come back from the capital. Since we have guards and wagons making the trip back anyway, she suggested that we let small merchants, who do not have the means to arrange for imports from the capital, purchase the space for a low price. By doing so, we’d have more shops selling products from the capital and the duchy’s economy as a whole would benefit. Now that I consider it, I have to say I’ve never seen my family’s ships come back empty. We employ the same method.”

Novak silently read through the rest of the document, a serious expression taking over his features.

“Trade is outside my area of expertise but...what must’ve been a casual suggestion on her ladyship’s part sounds like a groundbreaking proposal to me. Our way of thinking is molded by the roles we hold, and rarely do we discuss with those who think beyond that scope,” Aaron said.

Halil nodded. “I agree. I’m surprised her ladyship thought of something like this. Hasn’t she lived in seclusion for most of her life? She isn’t His Grace’s sister for nothing, then. She takes after Lord Sergei as well.”

Had Ekaterina heard their conversation, she would have screamed (inwardly) that she’d worked on goods distribution systems in her past life.

In time, this little suggestion would be nothing but the beginning.



I sneaked back into the classroom right before it was time for the first class of the afternoon to start. I arranged my things on my desk in a hurry. While my hands moved, I turned to Flora and smiled.

“Thank you so much for your help earlier. My brother loved it,” I said.

“I’m glad to have been of use,” Flora said politely.

As soon as she opened her mouth, I heard someone whisper, “How shameless can that lowborn be? I can’t believe this!”

“Right! Right!”

Nobody asked you to insert yourselves!

I was so annoyed that I almost turned to glare at them. Before I could do that, however, I noticed that Flora had lowered her head. Huh, strange. She usually ignored those idiots gracefully, never reacting to their unpleasant remarks. That was when I noticed that her uniform was dirty.

I seethed silently. Had they physically abused her?!

The teacher walked in at that moment, which might have been for the best. I was seconds away from standing up and picking a fight with the Right Right Trio. It could’ve turned into an outright brawl!

Damn them! How dare they?!



“Lady Flora, do you have a moment?” I asked after the tedious class—to which I had barely listened.

“Ah, yes.”

She looks surprised. How come? I suddenly realized that I'd called her by her first name. *Guess I have to roll with it now!*

"Do you dislike me using your first name?"

"No! Not at all! Please do!"

"Thank you! That makes me so happy! I hope you'll call me Ekaterina," I said.

"B-But, that would be..."

"Do you find it uncomfortable? I thought we'd become friends after opening up about our mothers, so I wanted to be closer to you, but..."

"Unpleasant?! Not one bit!" she fumbled to say, shaking her head so hard that her pink hair swayed left and right like cherry blossoms in a strong breeze. "It's just, well, our social standings are so different. I'm not worthy of addressing you so!"

"I don't want you to force yourself, but please know that I'd be overjoyed if you decided to call me by my name."

"I-I understand, I, um... I'm delighted that you think of me that way," she answered, her fair cheeks taking on a reddish tinge.

Aaaaah! Your name fits you like a glove! You're like a flower fairy!

I'd never given it much thought in my past life, but I suddenly realized that, unlike most other names in this world, Flora didn't sound very Russian. It was kind of similar to girls called Maria in Japan—not unusual enough to be outright weird, but still somewhat rare.

"Lady Flora, would you mind showing me your notes? You always take such clean, complete notes."

"Of course not," she said. "Here you are."

"You're so kind! Mine look like this," I said, showing her my notebook.

"My! Your own notes are very well organized!"

Heh heh. Back when I'd first entered my company, I'd taken a course on the art of taking business notes. I was simply replicating what I'd learned back then.

That said, there were no markers or colored pens in this world, so they

weren't *that* good. The only writing tool I had at my disposal was a quill. While quills were visually appealing, they were challenging to use for several reasons. They were so thin that I struggled to even hold them, and dipping them in ink once was barely enough to finish writing *one* line. Besides, the tip became less sharp as you wrote, so you had to use a knife to sharpen it regularly.

Can someone invent a better pen soon, please? Anyone?

Anyway, Flora's notes were a dream to read: neat, thorough, and she even summed up the teachers' oral explanations and added them at the end.

"You're so good at summarizing information! I didn't manage to catch everything, so do you mind if I copy this part?"

"Go ahead."

Another voice came from behind me. "Look at her taking flattery so seriously. What an eyesore!"

"Right! Right!"

Ugh. I blocked off one of my ears with my hand and snickered in Flora's direction.

"My, but the flies are so noisy these days. Do you think it's because the weather's warmed up recently? Their buzzing grates on my ears; it's sometimes hard to bear," I said.

Flora opened her eyes wide and then let out a little chuckle of her own.

"If this keeps up," I continued, "I might need to ask someone to exterminate these pests. Oh, but, don't mind me, Lady Flora. I was just talking to myself."

Flora shook her head. She could have followed suit and suggested I go through with my pest extermination plan, but she was far too kindhearted for that.

Anyway, the message was clear enough. Even the Right Right Trio ought to have understood that Flora was under my protection after that.

I have no interest in hanging out with you lot! If you dare touch one of her hairs again, there'll be hell to pay, all right?!

“By the way, Lady Flora, will you teach me how to cook another dish tomorrow?”

“If I’m really a suitable teacher, it’d be my pleasure,” she answered.

For the time being, I would stick to Flora like glue to protect her from bullying. I’d distance myself once she met the prince and he took over protecting her, but for now, we’d cook together, study together, and I’d focus on raising her affection stat.

Wait. That makes it sound like I’m trying to capture her heart. The villainess dating the heroine, huh? What kind of joke would that be?

Anyway, it wasn’t like that kind of yuri route even existed in the first place...or did it? To be honest, I didn’t know about every single one of the routes.

Nah, there’s no way, right?



The following day, Flora and I cooked together once more. We then headed toward Alexei’s office, baskets in hand as we conversed.

Shocked stares followed us as we passed people in the hallway. It made sense. As a member of one of the three grand ducal houses, I was one of the highest-ranked ladies in the academy. On the other hand, Flora, who came from commoner origins and was only the adopted daughter of a measly baron, had the lowest ranking. The two of us walking side by side must have seemed bizarre. Add the fact that we were both very pretty girls, and it explained why so many people stared. I supposed my looks were so intense that I seemed more like a beautiful *woman* than a pretty girl. Either way, the boys took notice of me.

“So the Nova girl is a lady in name only. How shameless...” I heard someone whisper.

I frowned. *Who said that?!*

I was about to get mad when a more pressing matter monopolized my attention.

“Hi,” another voice said from the open window next to me.

I turned and came face-to-face with sky blue hair.

URGH! The prince appeared!

I couldn't prevent the shudder that went through me. I almost took a step back. My internal math had made me start believing the very existence of the prince equaled impending doom.

"Y-Your Highness," I stuttered. "Good day to you."

Normally, I would have raised my skirt a little and bent my knees in reverence but with the huge basket I was holding, complying with etiquette was difficult. At least Mikhail seemed to notice.

"I'm sorry for being so abrupt. Please remain at ease, Lady Ekaterina Yulnova," he said. Just like his hair, his smile was as radiant as a bright summer day.

I took Mikhail's word at face value and simply bowed my head. Flora copied me. Still, I couldn't help but be surprised he'd called me by my full name.

"I apologize if I startled you," the prince said. "Vladimir and I heard from Alexei that he had a younger sister. I realized it was you when I saw you wave at him during the entrance ceremony."

Is my brother...on good terms with the prince?

Well, it wasn't all that strange. They were of similar status and age, so he must have been called to the palace to be a playmate for the prince when they were children. Still, the prince had a sharp eye, to realize who I was to Alexei.

Who's Vladimir, though?

Seemingly reading my thoughts, Mikhail glanced at the other side of the hallway. I followed his gaze and saw a male student with light indigo hair that leaned blue. His lips were curled into a sarcastic smirk but he was stunning—or rather, he looked like he would be in a couple of years. The insignia pinned to his collar told me he was a second-year, but his smooth little cheeks were too adorable for me to believe it. He reminded me of a visual kei singer, but without the layer of makeup on.

His pretty features are really out of this world. I hope he doesn't turn out to be

too annoying, though.

A pair of beautiful green eyes with gray highlights peeked through his long bangs. I got the gut feeling that he was the one who'd called me shameless. For some reason, the English phrase, "green-eyed monster," popped into my mind. *Sorry to borrow from you, Mr. Shakespeare.*



“Vladimir, do you have anything to say to Lady Ekaterina?” Mikhail asked.

Vladimir simply said no before turning on his heels and leaving.

Dude, you sure you should act like that in front of your prince?

Mikhail watched him walk away for a few seconds before turning to me once more and smiling.

“You were carrying a basket yesterday too,” he said. “I can’t help but wonder where you’re headed with it.”

Huh?

“Well... I...”

I hadn’t stumbled on my words because the weird guy from before still weighed on my mind, or because I had unexpectedly been forced into conversing with the prince. Rather, it was because his words had jogged my memory.

This is...one of the game’s events!

I’d played through this route so many times that I knew exactly how it went. The prince took an interest in the heroine carrying a basket and struck up a conversation with her.

You’re talking to the wrong girl, Your Highness! The heroine’s right here! Argh, this is all your fault, visual kei guy! You are a plot derailer!

After this thought ran through my mind, I realized that it might not only be his fault. Since Flora and I were of broadly different statuses, etiquette dictated that the prince had to address me, the one with a higher status, first. If the three of us were old friends, he could ignore that rule, but this was our first meeting. Mikhail could *not* talk to Flora!

AAAAAH!!! I didn’t think of that! Why am I so stupid?!

I’d decided to stick by her side to protect her from the bullying, but I’d ended up ruining this event for her!

What’s done is done, I thought, accepting my fate. Now I’ve gotta figure out another way to raise the prince’s affection with Flora.

“My brother is using one of the rooms as his office, and I was on my way there to bring him lunch,” I answered. Before he could speak, I continued, “Your Highness, please allow me to introduce my friend to you.”

I took Flora’s arm with a flourish. “This is Lady Flora of Baron Cherny’s House. She’s a kind lady and the best cook I know. She came to my aid when I was worrying about what to make for my brother, and she helped me prepare a warm and easy-to-eat lunch for him.”

Flora had been keeping to herself, so she seemed to be at a loss now that I’d pulled her into the conversation out of nowhere. Her large purple eyes stood out even more when she widened them in surprise.

Yep, cute. So, what do you say, Your Highness? She’s a real cutie, isn’t she? I thought, a smug look taking over my features.

“Ah, you are Lady Cherny. I’ve heard rumors about you,” the prince said with a bright smile. “You seem to be quite the talented young lady.”

The prince really is a good guy, isn’t he? I sensed that he’d called out to me because he’d heard that jerk berate me. Not to mention, a revered prince such as himself—the noblest man after the emperor—had taken Flora, a common-born girl, as his beloved in the game. Now that I was a part of this world, I realized how amazing that was!

“Your Highness, would you care for a bite?” I asked.

“I’d love to,” he said right away.

“Do give him one of yours, Lady Flora. They turned out so much better than my own.”

“That’s not true, Lady Yulnova! You’re very skillful yourself,” Flora said. Despite that, she opened her basket and reached into it.

Today, we’d made bread. We’d even filled the balls of dough before cooking them on the stove in a heavy pot. As a result, they were springier than the soft oven-baked bread I was used to.

As Flora handed one of the buns to the prince, a delicious smell wafted through the air.

“Thank you. I’ll try it,” he said before taking a bite out of it. “Oh, nice! There’s cheese inside, right? You cooked it just long enough.”

“I’m glad it is to your taste, Crown Prince,” Flora said with a smile so sunny Mikhail looked dazzled.

Yes!

“Do yours have a different filling?” Mikhail asked, his gaze falling to my basket.

I squeaked. I hadn’t expected him to inquire about mine, especially not when he was probably on his way to have lunch. Though, he was a growing boy so perhaps eating this much was typical. I remembered that some of my high-school classmates used to swing by our local okonomiyaki place after school and then head home to eat dinner pretty much every single day.

Just like my brother, the prince was most likely practicing his horseback riding skills and swordsmanship, as well as building enough muscle to wear a full set of armor into a fight. I could see why he’d be hungry all the time.

“I made sweet bread filled with berry jam,” I answered.

“I’d love to try one,” the prince said, a just-as-sweet grin on his face.

I forced an awkward smile in return. Other girls his age probably fell over themselves to please him at this sight. As an older woman, I couldn’t help but think he looked like an overgrown puppy. A gorgeous, pedigreed puppy. His smile widened as I opened my basket and offered him a bun.

He must have quite the sweet tooth.

“Here, Your Highness,” I said.

“Thank you.” He tried it. “This is just as delicious! I love it.”

“It’s an honor.” A genuine smile crept onto my face. *Look at him getting all excited over sweets like a kid.*

“I apologize for stopping you,” Mikhail said.

“No, thank you for sampling our cooking, Your Highness,” I answered. “Well, then, please have a good day.”

Flora and I bowed and walked away.

At any rate...event cleared! Uh, right?

Flora let out a shaky breath.

“Ah... I thought my heart would stop,” she said, pressing on her chest. “To think I’d speak with the Crown Prince.”

She just radiated *adorable* when she blushed. Even though a nuisance (me) had gotten in the way, she’d managed to make a good impression on the prince (I thought). If everything had gone well, the prince would run to her rescue the next time she was in trouble (I hoped).

“He was quite friendly, was he not?” I asked.

Guys like him were probably more popular with the ladies than people like my brother. Flora seemed to be impressed with him and, to be honest, my own heart might have skipped a beat if I hadn’t played through that exact scene in my past life. Then I might have spiraled into villainy! The thought alone made me shiver.

No, no, the only one for me is my dear brother! All hail the original tsundere!

Still, the whole “beautiful prince leaning in through the window and begging for your homemade food” situation was super cliché. I’d seen scenes like that in so many school rom-coms.

Well, I guess recognizing iconic scenes is the true charm of otome games.

Still, Ekaterina’s upbringing had been so tragic that I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the reality of it all. While I was in the world of an otome game, this wasn’t *just* some game. Everyone had their own lives, and even this world itself had a long, rich history that had never been brought up in the game. This Earth was still round and revolved around the sun. Thinking too hard about the scope and *realness* of it made me dizzy.

Nevertheless, I was now convinced that the rules of the game still applied here. The flags were right there, ready to lead my family and the entire empire to their destruction. To live in this world as the villainess, I had no choice but to take my destiny into my own hands and pour all of my energy into lowering the

flags, like I'd resolved. After all, I absolutely refused to cause any trouble for my dear brother.

I imagined as well how his subordinates would be troubled if he was suddenly demoted to a commoner. Just thinking of what the Yulnova Duchy must have turned into in the game after Ekaterina and Alexei were judged broke my heart. As an ex-corporate drone, I knew too well: losing a capable superior was a terrible blow.

"You're amazing, Lady Yulnova," Flora said. "You spoke so confidently."

"But, I must say, I was surprised too." *So surprised that I almost backed away from him.*

The prince hadn't done anything wrong, but coming face-to-face with the person most likely to be responsible for my doom was bad for my heart. I just hoped that he'd get together with the cutie-pie next to me as soon as possible so I could have some peace of mind.

I'd be able to relax then...right?

Either way, my little Flora and Mikhail were the perfect couple. Flags aside, I wanted them to be happy! I'd joked about how cliché this school-setting rom-com was, but I still had to admit that those two made a pretty picture.

Pretty boys and girls make the world go round.

It'd be like watching a pure love story right out of a movie unfold from the special seats. No, even better, since I'd get to help out! I couldn't imagine anything as satisfying! They were both good kids too, so I felt like a big sister watching over them.

Hold up.

Just yesterday, hadn't I made up my mind not to get anywhere near the prince to make up for getting close to the heroine? If I was going to support their love, I couldn't exactly avoid him.

Is it just me or are my anti-flag measures slowly falling apart?

It wasn't like I could help it, though! The prince had come to me himself! Ignoring him was lèse-majesté! I would have made my situation even worse!

All right, all right, I got this. Time for a new plan! The villainess shall root for the heroine and the prince!



“I’m sure you’ll have many more occasions to speak with His Highness, Lady Flora. You’re the cutest young lady in the academy, you know. His Highness is bound to take an interest in you,” Ekaterina said.

“N-No way! I’m sure the Crown Prince—” Flora tried to refute her, but Ekaterina cut her off.

“I hope this doesn’t offend you, but please allow me to warn you about something,” she said. “If you refer to him by his title, you might be told you’re not respectful enough. ‘Your Highness’ would be more proper. Though, this is a small detail, so please don’t fret too much about it.”

Flora flushed red and brought her hand to her mouth. “Is that so? I’ll be careful from now on. Thank you very much.”

Ekaterina smiled to cheer her up. Flora didn’t say a word, but deep down, she couldn’t help but think:

His Highness certainly took an interest in you, Lady Yulnova. You’re beautiful, kind, and noble enough to stand by his side. He’d even heard about you from your brother before. There are so many reasons he belongs with you! I cannot fathom why you wouldn’t see it.

In this world, no one but Ekaterina herself knew that she was a villainess, and not a single soul suspected that she used to be a white-collar worker around thirty in her past life.

To the eyes of outside observers, Ekaterina Yulnova was a captivating beauty who belonged to one of the most noble and affluent families in the empire. She was also a young girl of fifteen years with a weak constitution who had yet to learn the ways of the world.

Would the day Ekaterina herself noticed that discrepancy ever come? She was so busy stressing about the flags that loomed over her, this unfamiliar place, her brother’s health, and a myriad of other things, that it was unlikely—at least not for quite a long time.

Chapter 3: The Flag for the Fall

When I knocked on the door of my brother's office, Ivan opened the door. He was surprised to see someone else next to me.

"You've brought a guest, my lady?" he asked, though he took my and Flora's baskets from our hands without missing a beat.

"I have. I wanted to spend time with her, so I invited her to have lunch with us. I hope you don't mind that I brought her to your workplace."

I knew full well that Ivan wasn't in a position to tell me whether he minded or not, but I couldn't raise my voice enough for Alexei to hear me. It wouldn't be ladylike.

"Your Grace, her ladyship is here. She brought a friend with her and is inquiring whether she may be allowed to enter." Faithfully, Ivan passed on the message for me.

"I don't mind. Ekaterina may do as she wishes," Alexei answered.

Flora stuck to my side as her eyes darted around the room. I understood why. Entering this office was like stepping through the doors of another dimension, one somewhere between a CEO's office and a prefectural government's office filled with executives. It was a bizarre sight for a normal student.

At the center of this peculiar space sat Alexei. His presence commanded respect, even more so than the adults present in the room. I suspected he felt almost otherworldly to Flora. To be fair, he looked nothing like a student. I'd twisted her arm a little to get her to come here, so I couldn't help but feel guilty seeing her nerves.

At least she wouldn't have to worry about any bullying here! This was the safest place in the whole school.

Compared to yesterday, there was one more person in the room. His name was Baltazar Forli, and he was the forestry and agriculture advisor. His skin was just as tan as that of Halil, who came from a desert country, but it wasn't due to

his origins. Rather, it was because he'd explored every last corner of the large forest and every wood in the Yulnova territory himself. Age had turned his hair entirely white and left deep wrinkles on his face. He reminded me of a veteran warrior.

At sixty-five years old, Forli was Alexei's oldest advisor. He came from the same generation as our grandfather, Sergei, and used to be one of his closest friends. When he heard that I, a noble lady, had cooked with my own two hands, he was speechless.

"Times have changed," he whispered after a long moment.

If you mean I'm nothing like the old hag, you're quite right, I thought.

The reason a man such as he, who seldom left the field, had traveled all the way to the capital was none other than the dragon I'd heard rumblings about. He'd come to discuss the stagnation of black dragon cedar lumbering in the hope of finding a solution.

So, instead of the merry atmosphere we'd enjoyed on the previous day, I had a feeling today's break would turn into a power lunch.

I'm so sorry, Flora.

"After receiving a myriad of reports regarding the dragon, I ascertained its presence in person," Forli stated. His claim took our breath away.

Now that's a hands-on approach!

In my past life, everyone would've had something to say if someone said, "Oh, I heard there was a brown bear, so I went to check it out by myself." Yet, nobody seemed surprised by Forli checking on something far more dangerous. Hadn't the dragon appeared deep in the forest, away from any settlements? I assumed the life expectancy in this world was lower than in Japan, and this guy was already sixty-five.

He's incredible!

"How was it?" Alexei asked, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Not even a little fazed?!

“Young master, as I feared, it is no ordinary dragon. If it is truly the Dark Dragon, the ancient beast known as the king of the north...then no human shall triumph over it.”

“I see.”

Wait! Hang on! This report was oozing chuuni energy, so why was my brother nodding along with such a grim face?

Not to mention, he lets his senior advisors call him “young master,” and isn’t that the cutest thing in the world? Wait, no, snap out of it, Ekaterina! Focus!

“As a result, I believe carrying on with our labors will prove infeasible. Transportation will be onerous, but we must log from another area, await the Black Dragon’s departure, or notify the client of the situation. Please make a choice, young master.”

We went from a fantasy story pitch to super serious options, huh?

“Halil, what is your view on this?” Alexei asked.

“I suggest waiting,” he said. “The client will surely accept a wait of half a year. Clearing out a new logging area from scratch will be so costly that we won’t see much benefit.”

He’d stated his conclusion first before adding a concise explanation. *And so fast! Good going, Halil!*

“What do you think of that, Forli? Will the dragon move during that time?”

Forli’s expression turned distressed. “I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot say. The Black Dragon is not like other monsters. It is said to be more intelligent than humans. According to the legends, it can speak and transform into a human. Some go as far as to say it rules as a sovereign over the rest of the monsters.”

Huh? A dragon...that rules over the rest of the monsters?

That rang a bell, and I frowned as I tried to recall the memory.

“I have no proof, but I suspect the Black Dragon is awaiting our next move. In recent years, we have dramatically expanded our lumber industry to obtain building materials and fuel. I imagine the dragon took offense. Monsters have been appearing more often, but I don’t believe this to be the will of the Black

Dragon. We ventured too far into their habitat. If this is what prompted this behavior, waiting will not solve anything. Nor will selecting another area. They'll appear there to deter us," Forli concluded.

Alexei's expression grew more severe. "If the Elder of the Forest says so, then we shall not lose ourselves in foolish optimism," he said. "The current order matters less than the reality that we may one day anger the Black Dragon. We must prepare, for if that time comes, the clash shall require all of our strength."

"That is exactly my concern," said Forli.

Oof. Boy, that's heavy. But, wait a minute... That Black Dragon...

It had a different name in the game, but aren't they talking about the final boss that destroys the empire if you mess up?!

It hadn't been mentioned in the game at all, but had so much foreshadowing existed in the world all along?

Seriously, though, how are this world and the game related? Is it some sort of program? No. I shouldn't overthink it. There's no point giving myself a headache.

I couldn't be certain, but perhaps this situation offered me a chance to lower the destruction flag looming over the empire. This deforestation business had reminded me of something crucial. I made up my mind and spoke up.

"Excuse me... If the Black Dragon appears to be watching what we do, perhaps it'll leave if we show it we intend to slow down our logging?"

Everyone turned to me in surprise. They never would have expected a young lady such as me to butt in.

"It isn't impossible, but our fuel needs increase yearly. Slowing the logging industry would have consequences," Forli said.

"If I may ask, are we making an effort on afforestation to make up for the trees we cut?" I asked.

"Afforestation? It's my first time hearing this word..."

Figured as much!

When I lived in Osaka, I once went on a school trip to Yoshino, a city in Nara Prefecture. I would have enjoyed it a lot more if we'd gone to view the cherry blossoms. Instead, we'd learned about the area's afforestation efforts, which were centered around Japanese cedars. They'd begun during the Muromachi period, or so we'd been told. Afterward, I'd even had to write an essay describing examples of afforestation around the world and their histories. I'd learned that, in Europe, people had cut down trees for centuries to reclaim farmland without ever thinking of planting them back elsewhere. They'd only started replanting trees in the second half of the nineteenth century.

It sounded like the same thing had happened here!

“‘Afforestation’ means replanting trees,” I clarified. “When farmers harvest wheat, they sow more, do they not? I’m suggesting we do the same thing with trees, replanting more in place of the ones we cut down.”

“Replanting trees in place of the old ones?” Forli repeated, puzzled. “My lady, trees and wheat are quite different,” he said. “While we can harvest wheat again after a year, trees need many years to grow.”

“That is quite right,” I said. “I’ve heard a saying about this: ‘Nurturing wheat calls for a one-year plan, nurturing trees for a ten-year plan, and nurturing people for a hundred-year plan.’”

I had a feeling the original saying was about rice rather than wheat, but it ought to work the same, right?

Think positive! If you let doubt take over, you lose! The key to a successful presentation is self-confidence. That’s a secret that con men use!

“Our great House of Yulnova boasts a history of four hundred years. How can we support the empire if we cannot carry out a plan to grow trees?” I said resolutely—and, admittedly, I was showing off a little.

“Lord Forli,” I continued, “as you said yourself, the Black Dragon is an ancient beast that no human can triumph over. If we continue to cut down trees at our current rate and what you surmise is true, we will incur its wrath sooner or later. Should that happen, not only our duchy but also the entire Yulgran Empire will face disaster! We must avoid this fate at all costs. I cannot bear to know that you, my dear brother, and all the citizens of this empire are at risk.

Even if we cannot stop logging at once, we must start growing more trees so that we may sustain ourselves in the future, and show we do not intend to steal away the entirety of the monsters' territory. Do you not think that this is the path we ought to pursue if there is a chance it can soothe the Black Dragon?"

Forli let out a groan while the others stared at me.

"Ekaterina," my brother eventually said, breaking the silence. "You spoke of 'afforestation,' right? I've never heard that word myself. How did you come up with it?"

"As I mentioned earlier, I simply thought of trees in the same way I think of wheat. The trees of the forest are also an important product of our duchy, are they not? In that case, we cannot simply cut them down without thinking of a way to preserve this resource. It will take time, but if we put our minds to it, we might even be able to grow trees that make for finer materials than the ones that already grew in the forest."

Deep in thought, Alexei made a toneless hum. He lifted his head quicker than I expected.

"All right. Even if we were to ignore the matter of the dragon, it would be a good way to utilize steep terrain unsuited to agriculture. There is no harm in thinking of the future. Forli, study afforestation and put a plan into practice as quickly as possible. Let us ask the client for a six-month extension and see how the Black Dragon reacts. If it hasn't moved in three months, we'll reconvene."

"As you command, young master."

As expected of my brother! Right away, he'd understood the advantage of a measure he'd never heard about before and made a rational decision that found a realistic common ground. He was so capable I couldn't help but admire him!

Still, to think the countermeasure to the threat that was "the Black Dragon, king of the north and the sovereign of the monsters" was afforestation...

Talk about anticlimactic.

I was the one who'd proposed that course of action, but I couldn't help but deplore how normal it felt. Still, if I'd gotten things right, the Black Dragon—or

as he was called in the game, Vladforen, the Dragon King—was the final boss! No one would ever manage to beat him if we ended up on the end-of-empire route!

I guess there's still the option of capturing his heart instead...

Apparently, the Dragon King was one of the hidden love interests. I'd discovered that while looking up whether Alexei had a hidden route. There was a set of conditions to clear before you could even activate his route, though. In his human form, the Dragon King had black hair and crimson eyes; he was absolutely breathtaking.

Unfortunately, while I knew it was possible, I had absolutely no idea how to win him over. I'd considered trying his route because of how good-looking he was in his human form, but once I'd read that Alexei barely appeared in his route, I'd given up. At the end of the day, Alexei was the one for me. Considering his looks, I'd expected the Dragon King to be an arrogant character, not the kind to soothe my heart with his unconditional love for his little sister, so I hadn't bothered reading his guide.

I'm sorry for being so useless!

All I could say was that the Dragon King in his dragon form, roaring as he trampled over the burning ruins of the imperial palace, struck an impressive figure. From what I remembered, he was almost as big as the palace itself! If I were to give an estimate, I'd say he was over a hundred meters tall! Bigger than a jumbo jet! Twice as big even!

Now that I thought about it, the game never really expanded on *why* the final boss attacked. What I knew was, if you failed to clear a certain event, you'd end up on an action-packed route in which more and more monsters would appear. In the end, the final boss showed up.

That's why I'd been so convinced that the only way to save the empire was to clear that particular event. As it turned out, there was more to it! The final boss was unhappy about the forest, his territory, getting stolen. If I could fix that, maybe I could prevent the attack from happening altogether.

Besides, I knew from my past life that reckless deforestation was detrimental in many ways. Water retention would fall, making flash floods, mudslides, and

landslides more common on steep land. The lack of underground water would lead to the earth drying up, lowering biodiversity, and eventually altering the mineral composition of the rivers. As it flowed into the sea, the water risked having an impact on marine ecosystems too.

Come to think of it, I remembered my brother receiving a report about a landslide. For all these reasons, it was time to stop deforestation!

Afforestation for the win! There are only advantages!

Plus, I would still do my utmost to clear the event, so we wouldn't end up on the end-of-empire route.

With that pending issue out of the way, the atmosphere in the office lightened.

"Truly, this is a feast," Forli said, a smile on his face as he tasted the food. He looked at Alexei and then at me. "I confess, my lady, that I was most surprised when I heard that you personally prepared this meal for the young master. Nonetheless, I'm delighted to see the two of you have such a harmonious relationship."

The way he spoke reminded me of a stoic old samurai, but I could see the kindness in his eyes when he looked at us.

"Lord Forli," I said. "Do you always call my brother 'young master'?"

"I do. And I shall continue to do so until he graduates from this academy. An elder must be allowed a whim or two."

Alexei forced a rueful smile. "I'm no match for him," he told me. "Ekaterina, Forli was our grandfather's classmate at the academy."

"That is correct," Forli confirmed. "It was unbecoming, but in those days, I called Sergei by his given name. We were quite the troublemakers but, looking back, it was a most pleasant time. I wish you also had some more time for yourself, young master."

They used to be troublemakers, huh? Old people loved to tell such stories.

I understood him better now, though. He didn't think of Alexei as a kid. He was treating him as such, in a socially acceptable way, out of consideration for

this boy who'd been forced to grow up too fast. He and my grandfather must have been close for him to be so concerned about his grandchild.

"Still, how lovely is your friendship! You bonded over cooking, correct?" Forli asked me.

"Indeed. Please allow me to introduce her to you. This is Lady Flora Cherny. The two of us are in the same class, and she's been kind enough to become my cooking teacher," I answered.

Flora bowed her head deeply as the men's attention turned to her. Her pink hair swayed as she proceeded to shake her head, saying, "I could never call myself your teacher. You're far more talented than you give yourself credit for, Lady Yulnova. I have nothing to teach you!"

"As you can see, she's not only a good cook and a good teacher, but also very humble," I said. "Even His Highness praised what she made today!"

"His Highness?" Alexei questioned.

"He stopped us in the hallway earlier," I explained. "He seemed curious, so we offered him a taste. He told you what you'd made was delicious, did he not, Lady Flora?"

I'd meant to hint at Flora's and the prince's relationship, but my brother and his advisors exchanged a look.

"Brother, I hear you're on good terms with His Highness. He even knew my name."

"You're the same age as him. He must have taken notice of you," Alexei said.

"Speaking of which, do you know someone called Vladimir, brother?" I asked. "He seemed to be one of His Highness's acquaintances. He's a second-year student with somewhat indigo hair."

Alexei's expression soured immediately.

"Vladimir Yulmagna. He's the heir of the House of Yulmagna, another of the three grand ducal houses." Alexei paused. "Did he address you?"

"Hmm? No... I wouldn't say he did." He hadn't exactly *addressed* me—more like whispered stuff behind my back.

I see now. He's from the House of Yulmagna. Did he act like that because of the rivalry between our houses? Petty.

"So that man was Yulmagna's heir? He's only one year younger than you, but it looked like he had a lot of growing to do," I said, dissing him with a bright smile. His attitude toward the prince had been awful too. That guy couldn't compare to my brother at all.

Come to think of it, he had the same name as that macho dog-lover who'd been leading Russia for years before I died. *You're gonna have to work hard to get to that level, weird boy.*

Alexei chuckled. "Vladimir is a smart man, but there are rumors about him, concerns about the way he treats ladies. I hope you won't get involved with him."

So he's a womanizer! You can just say that!

"I understand, brother. I'll heed your warning," I said.

Was he the kind of guy who thought that any girl he spoke to would fall for him in a heartbeat? As Rina, I'd encountered one of that type. Don't worry, though, I'd flat out rejected his advances.

Sorry, but you don't have my number, buddy!

"So, you are from Baron Cherny's house, Lady Cherny. If I'm not mistaken, your territory is Angar, in the east. Is that correct?" Forli asked Flora.

She seemed surprised by the sudden question but soon recovered. "We do not have a territory. The baron and baroness sold it a long time ago and now reside in a small rented house in the capital. It's a beautiful home with many flowers growing in the garden."

"I see..." Forli simply nodded, but I could feel an awkward atmosphere taking over the room.

"I believe they still have money from the sale, but the baroness sells her embroidery. Although, I suppose it's more a hobby than a real job. My mother was a seamstress. That's how she met the baroness and became her friend. The two of them loved to cook and often shared recipes, and the baroness became

like a second mother to me. When my mother passed, she and her husband took me in. So, even though I am part of a baron's house now, I was born a commoner," Flora said calmly, her head held high.

She was so dignified and virtuous.

Flora let out a little laugh. "I'm sorry for the heavy topic," she continued. "It's just that Lady Yulnova and I come from different worlds, so I thought I should be upfront from the start. She's been nothing but kind to me, and I've tremendously enjoyed cooking with her. When I saw her speaking confidently on the matters of a grand duchy, I realized again how different the two of us are. I'm afraid Lady Yulnova will be ridiculed by the people of her circle for spending time with someone like me."

I was taken aback. What in the world was she saying? That was when I realized that Flora too must have heard Vladimir speaking ill of me.

You shouldn't worry about these things!

"Lady Yulnova is very kind," she continued. "I know she'll tell me not to worry about this. That's why I wanted to ask *you*, Duke—I mean, Your Grace. Please tell me if you believe I'm not worthy of associating with her."

Alexei's brows lifted in surprise at Flora's words, but he nodded. "Thank you for broaching the subject yourself. My sister lived away from high society most of her life, and she does not know the ways of the world. I'm sorry, but I believe it'd be for the best if she could learn to take her rightful place."

"Brother!" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet.

Flora pulled on my sleeve and said quietly, "Lady Yulnova, our friendship might also bring trouble to His Grace."

I wanted to yell, but I contained myself. "Brother... May we talk later? Just the two of us," I said calmly.

"Of course," Alexei said, nodding.

I let myself plop onto my chair. We finished eating in relative silence, disjointed bouts of conversation happening here and there, and then Flora left. I approached Alexei in a corner of the office.

“Ekaterina...” He looked troubled, but his voice was as gentle as ever. “I’m sorry for shattering your efforts. I know you did that out of kindness, but your ranks are too disparate. The two of you live in different worlds. Even within our own class, there will be constant strife. You need to learn how to think and behave in a way that befits your rank, so you can protect yourself. I hope you can understand that.”

There were so many things I wanted to tell him that I didn’t know where to begin—how to say them. The words felt stuck in my throat.

Suddenly Alexei gasped. “Ekaterina!” he exclaimed. “I’m sorry! I... Please! I beg of you! Don’t cry, Ekaterina...”

I wanted to retort that I wasn’t crying, but I noticed that my vision was getting blurry before I could deny it. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

Alexei extended his hand, but I shook my head. It was the very first time I’d refused his touch since recovering the memories of my past life.



“Brother... Looking down on someone for being of a lesser rank... That’s exactly what grandmother, an imperial princess, did to our mother.”

Alexei froze.

Oh no. I ended up saying something horrible to him. Comparing him to that witch, what was I thinking? I didn’t understand why I was in such disarray.

Right at that moment, the bell signaling the end of the break rang.

“Excuse me, brother,” I said.

I have to take a step back and pull myself together.

I turned back and rushed to the door, disappearing into the hallway.



“What shall I do with your dinner, my lady?” Mina asked when I got back to my room after school only to bury myself under my covers.

“You eat it...” I mumbled.

“So you don’t want it, all right. But why should I eat it?” she asked, her tone even.

“It’s not good to waste food...” Heaven will punish you if you waste food. We ought to reduce food shortages!

Mina patted my back through the thick feather quilt. “You don’t seem to be crying, so that’s a relief,” she said. “Why are you hiding under your covers?”

“I’m thinking,” I said, muffled by the blanket.

“You could think elsewhere. If I’m bothering you, let me know. I’ll step out of your bedroom.”

I didn’t answer, so eventually Mina said, “Please let me know when you feel better.”

She left. Now that she was gone, I could leave my hideout. I pushed away the covers violently and sat up.

I was still in my uniform but I sat cross-legged, folded my arms, and posed like a man deeply contemplating something. I always ended up sitting like this

whenever I had something to brood over. I couldn't show that to the people of this world, though! I was a proper noble lady now!

Aaaaah, I sighed inwardly. *What a mess.*

I knew this world from the game, but I'd realized once again how different this place was. My brother, Flora, and everyone else, I supposed, thought the same way in a world ruled by a strict class system.

I didn't want to criticize them. After all, what they said made sense considering this environment.

Alexei had told me that there'd be "constant strife" even in my own social class, hadn't he? I'd compared the three grand ducal houses to the three branches of the Tokugawa family but, upon reflection, it was the same back then. These three branches, as well as the three most prominent secondary branches, kept a secret feud going for ages. My brother too must've been fighting in this arena of schemes and trickery. With that in mind, I understood why he'd said what he had.

Still, there was a gap between their perspective and mine. I couldn't fathom how having a commoner friend could be a problem. I also knew from the game that Flora would soon prove her value to the world. On the other hand, Ekaterina and the Right Right Trio, who were of much higher status, would be judged for their crimes. That made me think that, even here, rank didn't decide everything.

Not so long ago, Japan would have been the same. The nobility had still existed, along with a class system, until roughly seventy years ago when the GHQ abolished it after the Second World War. Even the concept of human rights was a recent phenomenon. If I recalled correctly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulated that all human beings were born free and equal in dignity and rights, was only ratified after the war.

No, wait, it only became a universal declaration at that time, but the concept had been formulated much earlier than that, hadn't it? Wasn't the French Revolution slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity?" For all I knew, the concept of human rights already existed here too. Either way, the French Revolution had been a bloody affair. Not to mention that Napoleon had taken over as emperor

shortly after that.

Where's the equality then, huh?

Now that I thought about this more seriously, I didn't even think people had been equal in my past world. It had just become common sense to think that people *should* be equal.

Before I died of overwork, the ever-growing wealth disparity was a major problem. If you looked at Japanese history as a whole, the era when all Japanese could be considered middle class had been shockingly short. The GHQ had temporarily narrowed the gap between the poor and the rich through the dissolution of the zaibatsu and agrarian reform, but as time went by, the situation had slowly reverted. I wouldn't have been so surprised if a class system had emerged anew in modern-day Japan.

All that to say, I had no business being so shocked. There was no denying I had been, though, considering the amount of time I'd spent thinking about this.

I didn't think that *all* of my turmoil came from the gap between me as Rina and the others here either. Alexei's words had been difficult for me to swallow as Ekaterina too.

As far as I could remember, I'd always been confined in that house. I never got to see children my age, except for the rare occasions when my brother stopped for a few moments outside my window. After moving to the main residence, I'd barely spoken a word to anyone, half out of stubbornness, but also half out of fear.

That was why chatting and cooking with Flora had been so much fun. Spending time with her reminded her of my friendships in my past life, but as Ekaterina, this was my first time experiencing anything like this. Flora was my very first friend.

Hearing her say that it'd be better for us not to associate with each other only for Alexei to deliver the finishing blow and confirm it was a lot. It *hurt*.

Besides, she'd made it sound like she was worried about my social standing, but I'd been the one sticking to her. When she said what she said, I'd thought that perhaps she never wanted anything to do with me. After all, being with me

meant attracting attention. That was more than reason enough to think it was a pain to be my friend. I had to admit, the thought really got to me, and I'd felt sad and ashamed.

In the aftermath, I'd been so down I couldn't remember a thing from my afternoon classes. However, I'd finally remembered something important!

Even if you did everything right on the prince's route, and he visited you often, there was still a point at which the heroine pushed him away. The right choice to say in that moment was almost exactly what she'd said earlier: "Being with someone like me won't do you any good!" Next, you had to pick the option to distance yourself from the prince for his sake. Then, the prince would be the one to pursue the heroine again, and after a bit of back-and-forth, you'd finally be locked onto his route.

The game of love in all its beauty!

To be honest, I found those kinds of games totally unbeautiful in real life, and I'd spent my entire time playing this bit thinking the same. Nevertheless, now that I'd met Flora in person, I could see that the game had followed her true personality. Or perhaps Flora's personality matched with the flow of the game instead.

Chicken or the egg, huh?

Either way, Flora was just like that, and I was almost certain she'd pulled back out of genuine worry for me. In that case, just like the prince, it was up to me to close the gap! If I kept reassuring her that we should just ignore what others thought and there was nothing shameful about our feelings, she'd eventually come around!

It's really starting to sound like I'm trying to date her, isn't it? Well, she'll find love with her promised one soon enough, so it's all good!

From the outside, it probably looked like the villainess was stealing the prince's spot and hitting on the heroine.

Ha ha, whoops?

Despite *those* concerns, I was pretty confident things would work out with Flora. The more serious issue was my brother. Before I knew it, I'd uncrossed

my arms and shifted to rest my elbows on my knees and my cheeks on my hands.

For real, though, what is my problem?

I knew my brother, for better or for worse, thought like an aristocrat. Born and raised to become a duke, he took pride in his rank and was aware that he was not like others. He strongly believed in noblesse oblige, which was why he tirelessly accomplished his work on top of being a student. Naturally, just as he carried out his duty, he believed that those of the lower classes ought to carry out theirs.

I actually liked this side of him. He was so pragmatic that he was often thought to be cruel, but he was far stricter on himself than he was on others. He was incredibly serious—so much so that he ended up being stubborn, lacked flexibility, and wasn't all that good at taking others' feelings into consideration. However, he himself was never understood by others, and he carried his burden alone.

Yup. I still love him. My feelings haven't wavered one bit.

What he'd told me had been shocking for a Japanese girl on whom awareness of human rights and ideals of equality had been imprinted from birth, and I'd reacted too strongly because Flora's words had already shaken my composure. I wasn't surprised he thought that way; I even thought he had a point. So why did I still feel so terrible after our conversation?

Perhaps because that had been the first time since I'd retrieved the memories of my past life that I'd felt a gap between the two of us. I wondered what he'd thought about it. Did he think I was worthy of my rank? Was he disappointed in me?

No, I wouldn't believe it. He was too devoted for that.

In fact, since I'd broken down crying, I was worried *he* was more depressed than *I* was. Especially after what I'd said!

"Ah!" I exclaimed involuntarily.

I finally get it!

My brother was so attached to me because of his guilt! The yearning he felt for our mother and his regrets over letting her die had morphed into the blind love he felt for me, the girl who resembled her so much. Despite that, I'd gone and compared him to the old hag—the person he probably hated the most in the world for what she'd done to mother!

I'd really hit him where it hurt.

That was why I felt so down. I didn't feel terrible because I was hurt, but because I'd hurt him! Deep down, I feared he'd come to hate me because of it.

I'm the one who's too devoted, and even worse, I'm messing it up! This has to stop. I shall endeavor so that such a thing never happens again!

I wasn't sure that blind devotion was something I should try to improve at, but I couldn't stand anyone hurting my fave—not even me!

All right. Now that I've reflected on my feelings, understood them, and found a solution, it is time to make a move!

Mina was right by my side when I knocked on the door of Alexei's office, where I suspected he was still hard at work considering the time. Ivan opened it almost immediately, and I hesitated, unsure what to say. He didn't seem surprised to see me and simply smiled.

"Your Grace, her ladyship is here," he said.

Alexei, who'd been half sprawled over the document he was reading, raised his face as though he'd been hit by lightning. From the way he looked at me as he stood up, I could tell he was holding his breath.

"I... Mmm, I'm sorry, brother. Could we talk?" I said, clutching my hands together, trying not to fidget. I found it hard to meet his eyes, so I focused my attention on my hands.

"Yes... Yes, of course."

Relief washed over me when I heard Alexei say that.

Forli seemed to have left already, as I didn't see him in the room; only the same three men as yesterday were here. Mina pushed me forward, and I stumbled closer to Alexei.

“I, well, I came to apologize.”

Now that I’d said that much, I wouldn’t waver. A proper adult knew how to apologize swiftly and efficiently whenever an issue arose. The more one waited to do so, the more hurt they’d cause!

While I genuinely thought that, I still couldn’t lift my face. I believed Alexei’s obsession with me meant he’d forgive me, but I couldn’t stop thinking about worst-case scenarios. If he was truly disappointed in me, I’d die.

“What I said earlier...was uncalled for,” I continued. “I knew that you were only worried about me, yet I said something horrible to you. Please forgive me.”

Alexei was speechless, for a time.

Eventually, he cleared his throat and said, “I also gave it more thought. Afterward, that is. I might have been too hasty to judge Lady Cherny. You’re a smart girl, Ekaterina. I’m sure that, even when spending time with a lady from another social class, you’ll make the most out of that experience and broaden your horizons. I should have taken that into account. Therefore, you have nothing to apologize for.”

Oh?

“It also occurred to me that, since I couldn’t organize your debut in high society, Lady Cherny is the first friend you’ve made. Or, rather, I realized that once I was told as such. I... I’ve never been very good at picking up on other people’s emotions. I’m aware of that, but...”

I can’t believe it! He understood my feelings!

I also could hardly stand how adorable he looked, confessing his insecurities to me. I threw my arms around him.

“Thank you, brother! I love you so much!”

Alexei didn’t move a muscle, as stock-still as an ice statue. I, on the other hand, was more excited than ever, as relief replaced all the stress I’d been feeling.

“I’m so lucky to have such a kind older brother!” I exclaimed. “I promise to answer your trust by becoming a perfect young lady! I’ll work hard and make

sure my conduct and my studies befit our noble house! I'll also be a good friend to Lady Flora and broaden my horizons, just like you said! So, please, let me continue to cook for you and join you here for lunch! I want to be involved with your work so that I can understand it better!"

"A-All right," he answered, surrendering to my bullet-point list of all the things I was going to do better.

"And, brother," I said, taking a step back and holding his hands instead of hugging him, "You said you aren't good at picking up on other people's emotions, but that's perfectly fine. It means you have room for growth. You're so young, yet you're already managing a large duchy. Your knowledge, intelligence, and decisiveness are also impressive. If you could read people's feelings on top of that, you'd be too perfect, would you not? People all have areas they must work on."

You're only seventeen. You don't need to be perfect, I thought but didn't say.

"Being conscious of your flaws is the first step," I continued with a smile. "I have no doubts you'll conquer this one in time. You're so brilliant, how could you not? You know, I admire you from the bottom of my heart."

Personally, I liked his rational personality, even if it made him appear a bit cold at times. To be honest, I thought that the way he worried about it was precious.

Leaving my thoughts on the matter aside, I'd witnessed time and again during my days at school, at my club, or even at work, that those who were aware of their shortcomings, had the desire to fix them, and put in the work did better in the long run than those who appeared to have no issues at all. Even I, who'd been called out for rushing into things without thinking, had become adept at maneuvering behind the scenes when needed by the time I'd died.

One day, my brother would be feared as someone who could see right through others, and then he'd have what it took to become a crafty politician!

Wait, I probably shouldn't wish that for him.

"Ekaterina," Alexei said after a pause. "You sound quite mature today. Where did you hear such things?"

Oops. I can't say that the advisor of my club used to tell us that!

"That's...advice one of my private tutors gave me! The teachers you picked for me were excellent, you see?"

"Is that so?"

I'd thought it was a dopey excuse when I said it, but Alexei simply nodded. I realized eventually that tutors were the only credible source I could have given, since I hadn't been in contact with any other adults in this world.

Nice save, me!

Alexei smiled at me. It was a faint, fleeting smile, but I caught it like cupping a firefly in my hands nonetheless.

"Thank you, Ekaterina. You're truly a kind girl. I'm so sorry for saddening you."

I shrieked with glee inwardly. *That's it. This has to be it. Preciousness in its purest form! I'm so glad to have been born his sister!* Once more, I jumped into his arms.

"I'm the one who's sorry for saying something so cruel to you. When I think of how heartbroken you must have been, I can hardly forgive myself," I said. Making my fave sad was an almost unforgivable offense.

In my previous life, you alleviated my sorrow when I most needed it. In this one, you treat me like I'm the most important thing in the world. I should've given back to you, not burdened you! You're still just a seventeen-year-old boy. I want to support you, at least a little, since you're still a child. You shouldn't have to struggle so much, yet you bear it admirably. You're so good.

Alexei froze once more.

Before I knew it, I'd started patting his fluffy, soft blue hair.

Uh-oh. Sorry! I imagined that no one else had ever patted his head like that. *I'm truly sorry.*

"S-So, I know you are very busy, brother, and I think I've taken up enough of your time. Terribly sorry. I'll take my leave. My apologies for the trouble, everyone. Farewell!" I excused myself, stepping out of the office with Mina after a polite bow.

“Would you like to return to your room for dinner, my lady?” Mina asked.

“I need to see Lady Flora before that. One must strike while the iron is hot!” After my brother, it was time to capture the heroine’s heart! Or maybe I’d already had my own heart stolen by the heroine? Ha!

For some reason, Mina knew exactly where Flora’s room was. Just as I thought, *That Time My Beautiful Maid Was Clairvoyant*, Mina said, “I know the names and room numbers of every single girl in your dormitory, my lady.”

I realized all over again that I didn’t really get what the duties of a maid entailed.

Anyway, I knocked on the door and heard a small “Coming.” After a moment, the door opened. Flora’s purple eyes widened in surprise as they met my own.

“Lady Yulnova...”

“I’m sorry for bothering you so late, Lady Flora,” I said. I smiled at her, but Flora didn’t budge.

I’m not making her uncomfortable, am I?

“Earlier, at lunch, you said that you wanted my brother to make the decision, right? Well, my brother has changed his mind. He told me to make the most of my time here and to broaden my horizons. I came here to let you know.”

“Oh, but...” Flora looked down. As I saw her long eyelashes tremble slightly, I knew I could convince her.

“Lady Flora, you said earlier that our worlds are too different. But have you not noticed that we are in fact very similar? Perhaps more than anyone else.”

“Because of our mothers?”

“That’s one reason, but there’s another,” I said. With a little laugh, I raised one finger. “See, we’re both very much alone. While my status may be high and yours may be low, we’re lonely all the same.”

Up until seven months ago, I’d spent my days in confinement, while Flora had spent hers as a commoner, never imagining that she’d one day become part of a baron’s house. Out of the blue, our lives had been turned around and our worlds had changed. Now, our peers held us at arms’ length. While the reasons

were different, at the end of the day, we were the same.

“But there are so many people who want to be your friends, Lady Yulnova. People with noble origins, unlike me.”

“That may be so,” I said. “It’s impolite to acknowledge it, but I know the House of Yulnova is rich and powerful. Many of those who approach me do so with ulterior motives. Naturally, I don’t think that is the case for everyone, and I know I must learn how to deal with those who *are* ill-intentioned. However, if I’m honest, I do find it unpleasant. Aren’t I quite pitiful?” I joked, tilting my head to the side.

For a villainess, I sure can play the victim.

“Leaving all that aside, the truth is, I just want to chat with you more. When we talked while cooking, I couldn’t help but feel that we were very like-minded. Don’t you think that’s reason enough to wish to befriend someone?”

Call me saccharine if you want, but that was the undeniable truth! I meant every word! I didn’t want to be her friend because she was the heroine or to lower the doom flags that loomed over me. I wanted to be her friend because I enjoyed her company. That was all.

“Lady Flora, if you truly dislike me, then it cannot be helped, but—”

“I’d never!” she cried, shaking her head intensely. “I’d never...” This time her voice came out as quiet as a whisper.

Flora buried her face in her hands. I heard her whimper as she battled against the tears. I pulled her into my arms, squeezing her tight.

She’d done her best. She always did.

Come to think of it, she was really admirable too. Ending up in a school full of noble kids and learning magic was probably the last thing on her life plan. Unexpectedly, when her mother passed and she’d been adopted by a noble family, they’d discovered her powerful mana. After that, she’d been forced to enroll in this academy.

She’d been on a roller coaster of emotions when she’d asked for none of it. After all that, now she was being bullied. How absurd was that? Nonetheless,

Flora had never sulked or rebelled. She kept her head down and worked hard in silence.

So strong! So noble!

My first instinct had been to think she really lived up to her role as the heroine, but that was a ridiculous thought. While this was the world of an otome game, of which she was indeed the heroine, she was also a person made of flesh and blood. Her heart beat with real emotions, and she'd lived a life of her own. This wasn't a game; this was Flora's reality. She was a child who'd only lived for fifteen years but had to bear the pain of losing her mother and the hardships of loneliness and bullying.

Flora herself had no idea the universe had given her a role to play. Yet, here she was, bravely claiming that she didn't want to be a bother to me. She might have been a smart girl, but she was still fifteen. She was shortsighted and thought that, as long as she could endure it, everything would work out.

She's too brave. Come on now, big sister won't leave you alone. Let's be lonely together!

I rubbed and patted her back. Once she dried her tears, I invited her to my room.

I hadn't expected that Mina would start arranging for the two of us to have dinner the second we entered the room. Apparently, Flora had also skipped dinner and shut herself in her room. She'd been the one to put an end to our friendship, but it had devastated her just as much, huh?

A cutie, that's what you are!

Mina had been able to tell at first glance, so I was still half convinced that my beautiful maid was clairvoyant.

As we ate, Flora and I talked about many things, like what we'd cook tomorrow and how neither of us had listened to a word of our afternoon classes. We kept the topics light.

After dinner, however, we had a more serious discussion. I told her about my past: how my grandmother had bullied my mother relentlessly until we'd ended up confined. I also told her the story of the night my mother had passed. I didn't

share every single detail, but I made sure she knew enough.

Flora was astonished, and she cried on my behalf several times.

I confessed to her that I'd never been friends with another young lady before, and that I might very well make mistakes and get us both mocked. When I said we should think of how to socialize in a proper way, she nodded.

With that, I didn't think that Flora would try to break off our friendship because she felt inferior again. In a way, the villainess had successfully captured the heroine's heart...right?

I wonder. Are we friends for good?



At Ekaterina's request, Mina escorted Flora back to her room. The two ladies *had* chatted until late but, as they lived in the same dormitory, Flora had refused the offer at first, insisting that there was no need. Ekaterina had refused to back down, claiming that there might be troublemakers even within their dormitory.

After bringing Flora to her room's doorstep, Mina was on her way back to Ekaterina's deluxe room when a voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Hey, Mina."

Mina wasn't surprised in the slightest. She turned to look through the window to find Ivan, Alexei's attendant.

"Men are forbidden at women's dormitories," she said.

"I'm not inside the building, so it should be fine, right?" Ivan answered with a smile.

It might have been fine—had Mina not been on the third floor. Ivan was currently standing on a zelkova tree branch that stretched like a long arm to the third floor's windows. He looked perfectly relaxed, the thin branch on which he perched not even bent out of shape. Ivan was roughly as tall as Alexei and the branch should have snapped under his weight, dropping him to the ground.

The sight seemed almost out of a dream, but Mina didn't react.

"Thank you for bringing her ladyship to His Grace's office earlier. He's back to

normal now.”

“I did not ‘bring’ her. She decided to go see His Grace all on her own. I thought she’d stay cooped up in her room for the rest of the day when she came back from her classes, but she surprised me by deciding to visit him.”

“I see. They say she doesn’t know the first thing about the real world, but she’s surprisingly mature. I thought she’d come to convince His Grace, but she apologized instead. I’m sure His Grace found it easier to give in when she did that.”

“Her ladyship is a bright, kind, and strong-minded person. But it is true that she does not know the world. She desperately lacks common sense. That’s why I can’t help but worry she’ll get hurt one day. His Grace must too.”

“Oh, yes?” Ivan grinned. “His Grace dotes on her ladyship so much because she’s the only family he has left. Considering what happened with their mother, I understand. But to think she’s got *you* wrapped around her little finger too—our lady sure is amazing.”

“My job is to protect her ladyship. Making sure her feelings aren’t hurt is also one of my tasks. Don’t you do the same? *You* came to ask me to give them a push so they could make up even though their fighting doesn’t impact His Grace’s physical safety.”

“I hardly had a choice. I’d never seen him so helpless, as lifeless as a vegetable boiled in salted water. Well, it was pretty fun to witness,” Ivan said with a hearty laugh. “Whenever he looked at a document awaiting approval, he just said, ‘Sorry, my brain can’t seem to process it.’ He even ended up sprawled over the table! After her ladyship left the second time, he was back to his usual self, getting through one page after the other, saying, ‘Pass this on to Daniil and have this law scrutinized.’”

Ivan also remembered how Alexei had suddenly paused.

“He said, ‘I’ve decided not to marry Ekaterina to anyone.’ Lord Novak was so taken aback he blurted out, ‘Don’t be rash, Young Master!’ Honestly, I should be praised for keeping a straight face.”

“He...probably didn’t mean it.”

“Even if he doesn’t go through with it, he showed his true feelings. Doesn’t he sound just like a dad who treasures his little girl? Meanwhile, our young lady patted His Grace’s head as if she was doing so in their mother’s stead. Don’t you think they’re both trying to parent each other? They’re quite precious. I can’t help but envy them. His Grace would be happy if her ladyship stayed by his side forever,” Ivan said.

“Oh, but that’s just a joke,” he added. “I’m sure His Grace will come back to his senses soon enough. When Novak piped up, Alexei rushed to say, ‘I’m just entertaining the idea, that’s not a problem, is it?’”

“I don’t know if he was embarrassed or sulking,” Ivan continued. “It was a whole scene. Can you imagine His Grace’s sullen face? It’s more devastating than a natural disaster. It was torture not to laugh.”

Just like Ivan, the other three had been forced to do their utmost to hold back their laughter.

After listening to all that, Mina finally asked, “Ivan, why are you here?”

“It was all too funny. I had to share it with someone,” he said. “Don’t you agree it’d be nice if her ladyship stayed with us forever?”

Mina snorted. “Even if her ladyship marries into another family, I’ll follow her. I am going to be working for her forever.”

“That’s so mean! You should share! I just think her ladyship would be happier remaining a Yulnova. The two of them get along so well, and I don’t think she’ll ever find another man who treasures her as much.”

“What in the world are you talking about? She can’t marry His Grace, so that’s a moot point. Not to mention, *we* have no say in the matter of her marriage,” Mina said, “Besides, you’re one to speak when His Grace has *you* wrapped around his little finger.”

“Well, he’s easy to serve. He’s not as easy to understand or as affectionate as her ladyship, but he’s not one to be cruel,” Ivan answered, then a cynical smile shadowed his face. “And he doesn’t treat me like a monster.”

Mina’s face remained impassive. “Only idiots do that,” she said.

“Well, I *have* crossed paths with such an idiot,” Ivan replied with a note of bitterness. “Besides, I’ve seen His Grace at his lowest. When his mother passed, he didn’t sleep for five days. He was busy with the funerals and his work, of course, but more than that, he was plagued by insomnia. He only slept in the carriage on our way back to the academy, though saying he passed out would be more accurate. I felt bad for him, but the best I could do was cover him with a blanket. I kept wishing someone, anyone, would show him kindness. If he and her ladyship had been on close terms back then, it would have been different.”

Mina’s brows shifted ever so slightly in disapproval.

“If she ever learns of that, she’ll feel terrible,” she said.



“I’d never tell her. His Grace wouldn’t either.”

The loyal maid and attendant exchanged a look and nodded.

“Shouldn’t you get back to him and brew his tea or something?”

“You’re right. It’s about time I returned. I’ll be off, then.”

Ivan kicked off the thin branch and leaped back. He landed on another tree’s branches, as light as a bird. The leaves didn’t even sway.

Mina watched him wave but did not bother following him with her eyes as he disappeared into the night. Instead, she started walking toward Ekaterina’s room as though nothing had happened.



Let us rewind the clock back to the hours after Ekaterina fled from Alexei’s office.

The first period of the afternoon had just ended, and it was time for a short break before the next class. Alexei sat with his elbows on his desk and his face buried in his hands. He sighed for the umpteenth time.

The class just now had been hell for Alexei. He couldn’t focus and hadn’t been able to answer when the teacher had called on him. Worse, he hadn’t even known what the question was. He’d been left dumbfounded when the teacher sighed and said, “That’s enough.”

For Alexei, who hadn’t allowed himself to make a single mistake since his admission, this was a terrible failure.

Abruptly, a student approached Alexei.

“Hey, Duke, what’s up with you today? Something wrong?” he asked, puzzled.

The student in question was Nikolai Krymov, a tall young man with a large frame and impressive musculature. He was also notable for his fiery red hair and strikingly gold eyes. Nikolai was the heir of a count and had a surprisingly carefree personality. While their classmates, and sometimes even their teachers, kept a distance from Alexei out of respect, Nikolai treated him the same way he did anyone else.

At the Magic Academy, the classes did not change and one would find themselves interacting with the same people year after year. Alexei was aware that several of his classmates had nicknamed him “the duke” behind his back, their tone almost mocking, because he’d been taking care of the duchy’s affairs ever since his first year at the school, but Nikolai was the only one who used this nickname to his face.

The main reason Alexei had never reproached him was that the House of Yulnova owed the House of Krymov a debt. Anyway, the way the word rolled off Nikolai’s tongue, with his warm, deep voice, had never bothered him. It felt less like a reference to his title and more like a friendly nickname reserved for him.

Unbeknownst to Nikolai, Alexei believed that the two of them were polar opposites. Even when he didn’t mean to, tension filled the air whenever he stepped into a room. Nikolai, on the other hand, had a way of mellowing out the atmosphere with his presence.

More dejected than ever, Alexei found himself answering, “I made my younger sister cry...”

“Huh?” Nikolai blurted out, his eyes going wide. “*That’s* why you’re so down? Sisters are just like that, you know? Even if you don’t do anything to them, they whine and cry. That stuff always happens to me. I end up taking a beating from my folks and the little pest just sticks her tongue out at me!”

As it turned out, Nikolai also had a sister, and he had quite a few complaints about her. The son of a count saying words such as “my folks” or “take a beating” was peculiar, but it was in keeping with the uniqueness of the House of Krymov.

From one generation to the next, this family passed down its secret art of crossbreeding monsters and horses and the training of the resulting hybrids. While many noble families left the administration of their territories in the hands of others, the head of the Krymov family made a point of working in his immense stable in person. He was even known to help with the birthing of foals himself. The current countess was also a remarkable woman whose praises the previous countess sang endlessly. Born to a marquis house, she’d gone out of her way to marry into the House of Krymov because of her love for horses.

Nikolai seemed to remember something as he let out a little “Ah!”

“Come to think of it, your sister came by the other day! She’s got that indigo blue hair and her blue eyes are a bit purple, very pretty girl, right? She looked so mature and beautiful that I couldn’t believe she was a first-year. I noticed her skin was really pale and she was so thin she bordered on breakable. To be honest, I thought she was kind of unapproachable, but when I told her where you were she thanked me super politely. She’s got a good vibe going despite the sparkly elegant look. Hey, you know what, forget what I said earlier! Your sister’s nothing like mine. If that’s what a sister’s supposed to be, mine’s gotta be a monkey or something.”

Nikolai laughed and kept right on rambling. “You know she’s famous for being one of the two prettiest new girls. They’re already calling her the ‘blue rose’ apparently, and the other girl’s the ‘cherry blossom.’ Anyway, why did you make that well-mannered miss cry? If you’re gonna be that depressed about it, you should’ve taken better care of her.”

“Her...relationships weren’t ideal,” Alexei said. “She introduced me to her friend, but her status didn’t befit my sister’s.”

Nikolai hummed as though Alexei’s answer was unexpected.

“So you told her not to see that friend anymore and she cried, huh? I guess the people of your house do need to be careful who they allow around them. But don’t you think your sister already understood that?”

“My little sister...hasn’t had many occasions to socialize before. She was in a state of convalescence for the longest time.”

“That totally reminds me, you came late on the first day because she collapsed, didn’t you? If she’s that frail, she’s really nothing like the monkey we keep at home. But in that case, isn’t that classmate of hers her very first friend?”

At those words, Alexei’s eyes widened.

Nikolai was absolutely right. Ekaterina hadn’t had close servants she could talk to, let alone friends. According to the reports he’d received, she’d been utterly alone. After coming to the capital, she’d been so different from what

he'd imagined, able to chat happily with those around her, that he'd completely forgotten.

"If you're too harsh on her, you might make the situation worse. Is that classmate such a problem she really shouldn't be near her at all?"

"No..." Alexei remembered the way Flora had described her background without demeaning herself. She was far more dignified than most nobles of low status.

"Nonetheless," Alexei continued, "I want her to learn how to socialize with nobles. She's far too kind and doesn't know the ways of the world. I want her to create connections that will protect her in the future."

He hesitated. He knew firsthand that the people you had to be most wary of were those of your own rank.

What would grandfather do in my stead? He couldn't help but wonder.

Sergei, his grandfather, had valued talent more than rank and never hesitated to appoint capable individuals. Still, that was only true when it came to his subordinates. His best friend, Forli, was the third son of a marquis and, while he'd later cut ties with his family, he'd been born noble enough.

On the other hand, his grandfather also had a half brother. Isaac, Alexei's granduncle, was an illegitimate son. Despite the two having different mothers, Sergei and Isaac shared a close relationship. From what Alexei knew, Sergei had doted on his brother, who was five years younger, from the time they were both children. Isaac was a kind yet eccentric man who had gone on to become a respected scholar. He kept ties with a number of aristocrats. Surely, his grandfather had introduced him to a number of them.

Now that he considered the matter, Alexei doubted that his grandfather would have interfered if he'd introduced a commoner-born friend to him.

Grandfather would not have meddled in my friendships, Alexei concluded. The one who would have thoroughly rejected the very idea would have been her.

Alexei pulled on his hair.

You were right, Ekaterina.

Alexei still remembered how she had sounded whenever she flew into a rage. The one who would have shot his friendship down would've been his grandmother.

"That's exactly what grandmother, an imperial princess, did to mother..."

Alexei had always considered his grandfather to be his moral compass. When he'd passed away, Alexei was convinced that he'd taken over his duty of protecting the House of Yulnova from his grandmother's abuse. It wasn't his father who had succeeded his grandfather, it was him, and Alexei had always taken pride in that fact. Yet somehow, before he knew it, his grandmother's way of thinking had poisoned him.

She won't ever tell me that she wants me to hold her hand again, will she?

Suddenly, a hand tapped his shoulder.

"Duke! Hey, Duke! You with me? Yulnova! Alexei!"

Nikolai's voice finally registered as Alexei came back to himself.

"Are you okay? Your face's pale. Feeling sick?" Nikolai asked.

"No, I'm fine," Alexei said, shaking his head stubbornly.

A rueful smile curled Nikolai's lips. "The ice rose melted and withered, huh?"

"Sorry?"

"You really don't know about it? Some of the girls fawn over you so much they call you that. Come on, quit being so down. Everyone fights sometimes, and siblings stay siblings for life, no matter what happens. How about you let her be friends with that classmate of hers while they're at the academy? It's only three years. Though, it's another matter if you're *really* scared that friend might be a bad influence on her."

For a split second, a faint smile appeared on Alexei's face. "If it's just cooking," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Her friend. She taught my sister how to cook, so she could bring me a meal. She says she wants me to eat properly."

“How does a little sister like yours even exist?” Nikolai groaned. “Our monkey eats *my* food if I let it out of my sight. But if I dare eat one of her sweets, she chases me across the garden with a pitchfork!”

Pitchforks: basically just very large forks used to scoop up grass in stables, but definitely big enough to kill someone. Watch out!

“Sounds like your sister is more angel than monkey, unlike mine,” Nikolai said. “I don’t think you need to worry so much. She’s probably torturing herself over your argument too. How about you talk it out with her tomorrow?”

“You *are* right.”

When it came to Ekaterina, Alexei was so unsure of himself that his usual instant decision-making almost seemed like a lie. He was so terrified of her rejecting him that he didn’t have the courage to talk to her right away.

The next morning, Nikolai smiled as he saw Alexei walk into their classroom, back to his usual self.

“Morning, Duke. You look much better today.”

“Good morning. My sister came to find me after school, and we resolved our issues. I’m sorry for worrying you,” he said, his tone even. He dropped his gaze and lowered his voice before saying, “I’m...very thankful for your advice. Yes. Thank you.”

Alexei was clearly embarrassed. Nikolai’s smile faltered and his face scrunched up as he rubbed the back of his head.

“All good,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” Alexei asked.

“No, it’s just, the way you looked at me right now...? You know, never mind, forget it.”

Nikolai wasn’t all that knowledgeable about it, but he’d heard that the girls’ secret feud surrounding Alexei had become so heated that even the boys sometimes caught stray bullets.

Well, feud that it was, all the girls actually did was bicker, keep each other in

check, and make pacts among themselves without ever daring to approach their target. These days, they mostly only got heated whenever Alexei did something out of the ordinary. His smile at the entrance ceremony had been one such thing.

It's all a real pain, Nikolai thought.

"Anyway, good for you," he said.

Alexei smiled faintly and nodded. At that sight, a soundless shriek echoed through the classroom.



I resumed bringing Alexei his lunch to his office the day after we made up. Some time later, as I walked into the room with Flora, I saw that Forli was there to give my brother a report on the afforestation plans. The food Flora and I had made was set in front of everyone but, much like last time, they did not pause their work.

"First of all, we compiled a list of areas where trees were cut down but the cleared land was not used for any number of reasons. We shall start replanting trees in these areas first. For the time being, we are planning to relocate saplings that naturally grew in the forest," Forli said. "Several lumberjacks found themselves without work due to the interruption caused by the Black Dragon. They volunteered to do the necessary labor in exchange for wages."

In other words, this doubled as a plan to prevent unemployment.

"We also intend to request that a number of farmers start cultivating seedlings for future endeavors. Those with depleted land where nothing else will grow should still be able to grow seedlings. As for the types of trees, in addition to black dragon cedar, the list includes trees that produce edible fruits such as walnut trees and cherry trees, as well as trees whose wood we could sell to make furniture in around ten years. Black dragon cedar sells for a hefty price, but we will not be able to use any of it before twenty years at the earliest. In fact, waiting fifty years would be preferable, so we judged that incorporating different trees that could turn a profit faster was necessary."

Wow! Impressive, Forli!

He'd turned a vague idea into a realistic plan in such a short time. On top of that, he'd even turned this new endeavor into an unemployment relief measure and anticipated crop shortage issues.

In Japan, the afforestation efforts focused on Japanese cedars. Planting cedars comes with one big downfall: hay fever. They also have low water retention potential, which isn't great for ecosystems. However, mixing up cedars and broadleaf trees, as Forli had planned, should prove useful to mitigate these issues.

"So, you're thinking of purchasing the seedlings," Alexei said.

"That is correct. We also considered exempting the producers from taxes, but presenting this process as an easy-to-understand source of potential revenue seemed more appropriate. Afforestation is too new a concept. The farmers will not understand how this could be preferable over growing crops they can eat immediately. I believe linking the idea of afforestation to direct profit is a necessary step."

I once again very much agreed with him. New practices were always met with resistance. The same went in my work as a systems engineer. Every new system release had been a bit of a challenge.

"What do the people of the forest say?"

Mmm?

"They seem doubtful that things will go as well as we hope, but they do approve of our efforts to limit logging."

"I see. The Black Dragon is said to value the opinion of the people of the forest. We can only hope that they'll share our intentions with the dragon in positive terms."

"Excuse me, brother, Lord Forli, who are the people of the forest?" I asked.

"Ah, you don't know about them, do you, Ekaterina?" Alexei said.

He explained that these people were an ethnic group that lived deep inside the forest. They were nomads who did not settle in any specific area for long or mingle with others much. They sounded a lot like elves. I was pretty sure elves

didn't exist in this world, though, so I supposed they were more like the mountain tribes that once existed in Japan.

"Several tribes make up the people of the forest," Alexei continued. "And the head of the largest tribe is Forli's wife."

"Huh?!" I said, surprised.

"Ah. Indeed, that is correct," Forli said.

After clearing his throat, he recounted the story: Born as the third son of the house of a marquess, Forli had become friends with our grandfather Sergei at the Magic Academy and had later taken up his invitation to visit the Yulnova Duchy. Even in those days, Forli was fond of hiking. That was how he'd come into contact with the people of the forest. After a confusing first encounter, he'd eventually come to know them better and had fallen in love with a tribe's patriarch's daughter, who had returned his feelings.

His family had disowned him then and there. He'd gone on to become our grandfather's subordinate and now was Alexei's.

That's amazing! A true love story!

I reflexively turned toward Flora and, just like me, her eyes were sparkling. I was almost thirty inside, but I'd ended up getting as excited as a schoolgirl over this beautiful romance.

Forli cleared his throat once more before digging into his food.

Today, we'd made pies—meat pie, mushroom pie, gratinated vegetable pie, and apple pie.

Baking all that during our lunch break and having enough time to eat would have been impossible, so Flora and I had started on the pies yesterday after school. We'd also stopped by the kitchen in the morning before school and during our short break.

These days, Flora and I spent time together after school every day. We had tea, reviewed our classes, and discussed recipes for the following day. The kitchen's staff had also started inquiring about Flora's recipes. In exchange, they helped us cook from time to time, so we'd started challenging ourselves with

more intricate dishes.

“This taste is so nostalgic,” Forli said.

Flora smiled. “I learned this recipe from the baroness. Her pies are works of art. You are close in age with her, Lord Forli, so I suppose that’s why it reminds you of a certain time.”

“Baroness Cherny. Hmm. Is her name Natasha?”

“Yes, the baroness *is* called Natasha,” Flora answered, clearly surprised. “Do you perhaps know her?”

“Lady Natasha,” Forli said. “At the time, she was still Natasha Merno, daughter of a count, and a fellow student at the Magic Academy.”

For real?!

“Joseph Cherny was my classmate, and I met Lady Natasha through him. Just like the two of you, she loved cooking and would share her creations with us. They were so good that people used to fight for a taste. Lord Sergei would always secure some with a nonchalant air. A glutton he was.”

Sounds like they were really buddy-buddy!

“Joseph and Lady Natasha eloped the night before the graduation ceremony. The one who set the stage for them was none other than Lord Sergei.”

Flora and I let out surprised yelps while Alexei flat out asked, “Excuse me?”

That’s one bomb you dropped here, Forli!

“I’m sorry but I’m not sure I follow,” Flora said, confused. “They...eloped? The calm baron and baroness...eloped?”

“Wait, Forli! Grandfather did *what?*” Alexei added.

“To think Lady Flora’s adoptive parents and our grandfather were linked in such a way,” I said. “It’s... It’s certainly a lot to take in.”

We were all taken aback.

Seriously, though! We’re talking about the heroine and the villainess here! There shouldn’t be such a fateful connection between them, right?

“While Joseph appears to be a meek, well-mannered man at first glance, he also has a strong side. He was the type to stand tall and state his likes and dislikes without shame. Lord Sergei was rather fond of his temperament. I suppose he saw something in him. I do not know how Lady Natasha and Joseph came to know one another, but by the time we were second-years, they’d already grown so close it seemed no one and nothing could stand between them. They did not engage in some flashy love affair, but I must admit, I couldn’t have pictured them apart. However, Lady Natasha’s family had long prepared another match for her and strictly refused to allow their union. So us students decided to do what we could to help them flee to the Cherny estate. When I look back, these memories are certainly the most vivid of my school days.”

A big escape planned by a bunch of students, huh? With the ringleader being the heir to one of the three grand ducal houses, I almost feel bad for the teachers and the students’ guardians.

“Right before they departed, Lady Natasha baked us an apple pie to thank us for our help, but Lord Sergei, who’d received it from her, ate the whole thing by himself,” Forli continued. “When I learned of this, I impulsively punched him.”

Hang on...

“But I seem to recall that my grandfather wasn’t very fond of pies,” Alexei said.

“Well, he ate so much of it in one sitting that he suffered heartburn for days. After that, he stopped eating them, regardless of his taste for them.”

Wow, couldn’t be me. Still, is that all true?!

I’d never met our grandfather, but I’d seen his portrait in the main house. There was also a painting of him with my brother at ten. Baby Alexei was so cute that I’d gawked at it for ages. I remembered thinking that our grandfather, on top of having good looks, looked like dignity personified.

Sure, this story was about his youth, but was it possible for someone to change that much?!

While Alexei and I were flabbergasted, Novak and the others wore strained

smiles. As far as they were concerned, Sergei was a wonderful mentor and the benefactor they respected more than anyone else, but they seemed to have been aware of his more willful penchants.

“Forli,” Alexei started. “Why did you not mention this tale last time?”

“I did not want to influence your decision. You giving anyone special treatment because of a fortuitous connection to Lord Sergei did not seem right.”

Alexei was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. I suspected Forli had thought that if Alexei had allowed me to befriend Flora because of this, he would’ve lost an opportunity to grow.

“I was always curious about what had become of Joseph and Lady Natasha. So much happened that I was never able to find out. I’m glad to hear they’re both well and living in harmony,” Forli said earnestly before taking another bite out of his pie. “A most nostalgic taste, indeed.”



After sending off Joseph and Natasha and watching the Yulnova carriage disappear on the horizon, Sergei had eaten every bite of the pie. He’d then returned to his friend’s side only to be punched. Naturally, he’d punched him back.

After wrestling for a while longer, the two boys rolled to the floor.

“Urgh. My chest hurts,” Sergei said.

“That’s heartburn. Seriously, an entire pie? Are you stupid?” Forli asked.

“I’d always wanted to try it.”

“You *are* stupid.”

“That I am,” Sergei sighed.

“You shouldn’t have let her go.”

“I never wished for more with her. So, let me get away with the pie, won’t you?”

“Shut up, and stop dragging me into your messes, you idiot.”

What Sergei had said was true. He wasn't in love with Natasha, though he enjoyed her company.

Sergei was engaged to an imperial princess, Alexandra. While the two of them were well-matched as far as looks went—a beautiful man and a beautiful woman—her haughty, cruel temperament and Sergei's earnest, sometimes elusive, yet unwaveringly kind nature couldn't have been more different.

Natasha was no famed beauty, but she was a petite, gentle girl who always smelled of sweet baked goods. Had she become his partner, he surely would have been happy.

"I'm never eating apple pie again," he said, moaning in pain.

Forli laughed.



Back then, he would never have imagined that his overbearing troublemaker of a best friend would leave him behind so soon.

Looking back on it now, it truly had been a fine time to be alive.

Chapter 4: A Monster Appears

That morning, I woke up earlier than usual. I sat up in bed and took another look at the letter I'd left on my bedside. Mina entered my room and paused, surprised.

"Good morning, Mina," I greeted.

"Good morning, my lady. You're up early."

"I just happened to wake up."

Mina drew the curtains open and I closed my eyes partway as the bright rays of the sun poured into the room. It was going to be a beautiful day.

"Why today?"

"Well, I have a class for the first time. Or rather, I've *had* mana control classes before, but it'll be my first time having a practical lesson here. I was rereading the advice Mr. Moldo gave me. You know, the tutor I had you take confections to."

"Oh, the one with the young daughter. She loved your gift, my lady, and your teacher thanked you profusely for offering remuneration when you'd only asked a single question. No one but you does such things."

"Tutors put their knowledge for sale. How could I request it be given to me without offering proper payment?"

Not to mention, as a systems engineer, I remembered being put on the spot by a former client asking me tons of questions on the phone. They'd kept asking why the program didn't do so-and-so and demanding that I fix it for them. I'd wasted so much time that day. Doing maintenance for them wasn't one of my duties, and I'd already moved on to another project!

An expert's craft and knowledge don't come for free!

Seeing the error of *their* ways, I'd learned not to act the same. Besides, Mr. Moldo was originally a noble whose house had collapsed, so he reminded me of

Ekaterina and Alexei's fate in the game, and he even had a small child to support.

"You don't need to work so hard, my lady," Mina said. "Your teacher sung your praises. He said that your mana was most impressive and that the lessons at the academy would be like child's play to you."

"Thank you, Mina. I just want to make sure I'm prepared."

Mr. Moldo was puzzled in his letter and assured me that no one would require powerful attacks from an earth-attribute mana user. Still, he'd answered my question in detail, explaining attack patterns and variations.

Thank you, Mr. Moldo!

The thing was that, according to the game, the first practical mana class was a key moment that determined the future of the empire. As for what exactly transpired—well, it involved monsters.

In the game, right as the students went to the courtyard and the practical class was about to start, a powerful monster appeared. The heroine and the prince, who jumped in to help her, joined forces to drive them back, allowing her to awaken her powers in the process. Failure to clear this event raised the destruction flag that spelled the end of the empire. If she failed, the Dragon King would eventually march an army of monsters on the imperial palace.

That's why I'm gonna clear that event!

So I *should* say, but now that I'd been a student here for about a month, I found myself wondering: was a monster truly going to appear *here*? In the heart of the capital?! It had been hundreds of years since anything like that had happened. It was like picturing a gigantic bear suddenly showing up next to the auditorium of a fancy Japanese university—it made no sense.

Just as bears did exist in some places in Japan, so too did monsters inhabit the empire. However, they normally only lived in remote areas such as forests, mountains, or lakes, and never approached cities. Even if you went back to the Edo period, bears didn't show up in the middle of Edo!

I'd initially assumed that the monster had been summoned using magic, but apparently summoning wasn't a thing anymore.

A thousand years ago, a gigantic civilization—several times bigger than the current Yulgran empire—known as the Astra Empire flourished on the continent. It was to the Yulgran Empire and its neighbors almost what the Roman Empire was to Europe: a spiritual forefather. From what I'd heard, the people of the Astra Empire did know how to summon beings, but the specifics of the technique had long been lost. That's why I didn't have the slightest idea how a monster could appear in the middle of the capital.

When I'd started thinking of ways to prevent this event from messing everything up, I'd considered making up a random reason to get knights stationed at the academy so that unarmed students wouldn't need to fight. However, since I lacked information on why or how the monster would appear, I couldn't think of a good enough excuse.

I couldn't exactly request their presence because a monster was *supposed* to show up now, could I? No one would've believed me.

It would be akin to barging into a university and being like, "Hello, bears are scheduled to visit your school today, so I suggest ringing the nearest hunter association!" You'd only be met with confusion and shown the door.

Getting knights to come here would be nearly impossible, and I didn't want to sound like a crazy woman and worry Alexei.

Besides, on the off chance that the knights *actually* came, I'd end up creating a situation that differed from the one in the game. What if doing so twisted the future in terrible ways? For all I knew, the alternative could be far worse—an unstoppable natural disaster, for instance! Just thinking about it scared me. Who was to say it couldn't happen?

In other words, the only thing I could do was...my best! I intended to do everything in my power to drive back the monster, clear the event, and pray that was enough to get us as far as possible from this damned route.

The time had come. I was in the training grounds with the rest of my class. It was just a delimited area in the school's courtyard, but it was fairly large. Four tennis courts could probably have fit in here. An elegant fountain with refined carvings stood in the middle of the grounds, while hedges and flower beds, as

well as a platform that could hold a bonfire, decorated the rest of the area.

This place had most likely been built to facilitate the training of the most common attributes, earth, water, and fire (there were plenty of wind users too, but you didn't need specific equipment to help with that). Other attributes like ice, light, darkness, and thunder also existed, but they were less common. It was even possible for one person to have an affinity for several of them.

This was our first practical class after having only studied mana control in the classroom so far. My classmates wore various expressions; some were in high spirits while others appeared dejected.

Everyone here had enough mana to satisfy the academy's admission criteria, but there were still disparities. To some, this class was the time to show off their plentiful mana, but to others, it wasn't so pleasant. Even if one wasn't born into a powerful house, having strong mana could lead to great prospects such as good matches or even adoption talks. Second and third sons—who would not inherit their fathers' positions—were particularly motivated to do well.

Come to think of it, I've read plenty of historical novels in which the characters were desperate to find a wife with a powerful family they could marry into. At the end of the day, samurai and nobles aren't so different.

I chuckled at the thought and looked around. My eyes landed on Flora, who seemed a bit stiff.

"Is something the matter, Lady Flora?" I inquired.

"Nothing... Don't mind me."

As she smiled at me, I realized that it was only natural for her to be so worried.

"Oh, that's right, you don't know what your attribute is, do you?" I said.

Flora had a lot of mana—more so than pretty much anyone else! However, at the start of the game, she had absolutely no idea what her attribute was. She'd only come to discover the nature of her magic during the monster attack.

The Right Right Trio, who never missed an opportunity to annoy me, latched

on to my words.

“My, the poor girl does not even know her attribute? Her admission to this school must have been a mistake.”

“Right! Right!”

They ended up saying the exact words I’d seen in the game, though at that time, they’d been spoken by Ekaterina, the villainess. However, the current Ekaterina—me!—simply laughed in their faces.

You should have listened in class, idiots!

“Rare attributes are often difficult to appraise at first. The teacher covered that in class, remember? I, for one, am looking forward to seeing what your attribute is, Lady Flora.”

The game played it off like the heroine was unique and special but, now that I lived in this world, I knew that rare attributes weren’t actually *that* rare. Still, they were far from everyday, and, including Flora, only a few of our classmates were unsure of what their attributes were. I supposed it made sense for the trio not to know this if they hadn’t paid attention in class. Asking about your classmates’ attributes wasn’t exactly normal, so this practical class was one of the first opportunities to learn what kind of magic others could use.

Except for me—I already knew.

“I’m also looking forward to it, but I can’t help but worry.”

“I imagine it must be a source of anxiety,” I said. “To be honest, I’m a little jealous, Lady Flora. My own attribute is the most banal there is: earth.”

I’m sorry Flora! I could put your mind at ease since I know what attribute you have, but I can’t tell you! Forgive me for the platitudes!

While the core of this event was to get the heroine and the prince to team up and fight off the monster, in the game, all I’d had to do was mash a button. How was that supposed to go in real life? Was I supposed to let poor little Flora, who didn’t even know her own mana attribute, fight off vicious beasts?!

No way! Aren’t you being too cruel, Mr. Game?!

“Everyone, it is time. Please gather in front of me.”

Right as the teacher's voice pulled me out of my thoughts, a prickling sensation ran through my body.

Huh?

I'd felt...*something*. I wasn't too sure what, but I turned around nonetheless.

The air right in front of the fountain danced in a heat haze. I strained my eyes to get a better look at the strange phenomenon when, suddenly, a gap opened midair. Dark flames started seeping out as the gap grew in size, making the air around us quiver.

Space itself was being ripped open!

Suddenly, a bestial howl echoed through the air.

While the beast looked very much like a wolf, it was covered in slate gray, metallic scales that shone under the light. In its mouth, still open in an earsplitting howl, sprouted three rows of fangs as large as those of a shark.

I shouldn't have compared it to a bear! Even a moon bear looks like an angel compared to that thing! It's at least three meters tall!!! Wait, three meters? Isn't that roughly the size of a grizzly, the largest bear there is?! Aaaah, still worse, and it's there! It's really there! The same monster as in the game!

Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! This has got to be a hundred times scarier than seeing it on my phone's screen! Was it really that huge?! For crying out loud, this kind of abomination shouldn't show up in the very beginning! That's cheating, you damn game!

Students screamed as they started running away.

Good call! Flee as fast as you can!

This entire situation was frightening beyond words. In my past life, I'd once panicked because an unleashed golden retriever had walked a little too close to me, so how was I supposed to face a murderous, grizzly-sized predator glaring at me like it had every intention to gobble me up?

That thing is a million times scarier than a golden retriever. It's terror personified!

One of the other girls tripped in her hurry and fell. She frantically started

crawling, but the monster had already noticed her. It lunged at her, opening its mouth to flash its three rows of sharp fangs, as though to mock her.

The next moment, though, the tip of its nose collided with a mud wall. It growled in displeasure and swung its head into the wall, destroying it in one hit. Still, I'd given her enough time to get back up and run out of the training grounds.

The monster turned its head, glaring at me. I could read the cold anger in its dark eyes.

It knows... It understands I created that wall.

I was scared out of my mind, my legs were shaking, and my eyes had even started watering, but believe it or not, I didn't run away. If everyone did, the beast would follow us.

Truly, seeing this scene on a screen was nothing like living through it. I was now in the same world, with no barrier standing between me and the gigantic bloodthirsty monster. I was just prey in front of an uncaged predator—something I'd never experienced before!

But I knew this would happen! I'd prepared myself!

The other students were all actual fifteen-year-olds. *Real* children! I was the adult here, so I had to protect them! Therefore, I was *not* running away!

In his letter, Mr. Moldo had given me the following advice:

"My lady, I have given your question some thought. In the event of a monster encounter, the consensus is that an earth mana user should first create a golem as large as possible to intimidate the monster. While it does depend on the monster's nature, it may flee at once when faced with an opponent larger than itself."

The wolf didn't look like it'd run away no matter what I did, but I still had to give it a shot!

I let my mana flow into the ground and felt the earth answer me. Just as water gushes forth from a fountain, earth burbled up, slowly taking the form of a humongous upper body. It was as tall as a three-story building. I shaped one

of its hands into a fist and had the golem raise it.

I heard a thunderous howl. The monster leaped and smashed the mud construct's fist before landing on its head and howling once more, its piercing eyes on me.

I glared back—albeit my own gaze was much waterier—and let my golem crumble all at once. The wolf fell, lumps of earth raining down on it. It didn't stay buried for long, though, and soon flicked the earth off its back.

It stepped forward with its thick foreleg.

I-Is it coming? Argh, it's so close! I'm terrified! But I'm not gonna chicken out!

The monster braced itself against the ground, then leaped.

Suddenly, I felt mana surge up. A sparkling shield appeared in front of me, protecting me from the huge beast that probably weighed at least three to four hundred kilos. The wolf fell to the ground at the same time as the shield and a wave of cold washed over me. That shield was made of ice, I realized.

A tall, light blue-haired figure came running into the training grounds.

"Ekaterina!"

Brother! You came for me!

Seeing a new enemy step into the arena, the wolf turned toward Alexei. My brother's brilliant blue eyes shone with a strong light as he fixed his gaze on the monster. There wasn't the smallest hint of fear in his eyes, and I could feel his powerful mana boiling under the surface.

Alexei lifted his right hand and an ice spear materialized that pierced through the monster's body. He hadn't hurled ice at the monster. Rather, he'd used his mana to create ice from *within*—an incredibly difficult feat. With his impeccable control over his mana, my brother had torn apart the monster's flesh from inside!

Amazing! You're so cool and strong, brother!

The fearsome monster staggered. However, after howling once more, it started shaking its body, shattering the ice spear. Black liquid with hints of blue gushed from its wound before stopping.

I remembered Mr. Moldo's words.

"Monsters are very different from other creatures. They will not die until their mana core is destroyed. In most cases, that core is located where the heart is, but there are exceptions. For instance, some monsters' cores are at the tip of their paws or inside their tails. If an attack to the heart does not kill a monster, one should focus on stopping its movements rather than attempting to defeat it. That is especially true for those who wield earth mana such as yourself, my lady, as it is most difficult to shatter a magic core with earth spells. I recommend trapping the monster underground."

Alexei's attack had destroyed the monster's heart but its core was obviously elsewhere. In that case, the next step was to trap it underground. The issue was that this wolf was incredibly nimble. Could I truly pull it off?

Stop thinking, me, just do it!

Right at this moment, the water of the fountain suddenly spurted up, higher than ever, before raining down onto the monster.

Alexei immediately froze it.

Water! That's right! *His* attribute is water!

I looked toward the entrance of the training grounds and, sure enough, right next to Alexei was a familiar blue-haired boy. The prince's expression was so serious he almost scared me. The mana seeping out of him was just as powerful as my brother's.

The noble and royal hotties fighting side by side... Now that's exciting! It'd be even better without the tiger-sized wolf trying to break out of the ice just in front of them!

Alexei and Mikhail were a sight for sore eyes, but I was so scared that I couldn't stop staring at the monster.

Mikhail wasn't only providing Alexei with water to freeze. Whenever the monster crushed some of the ice and tried to break free, he'd get his water to take the shape of a spear and pound against the wolf until it staggered, then Alexei could create another layer of ice. His mana control was splendid!

Alexei and Mikhail both seemed to know how to handle monsters. From the look of it, they probably had practical experience! They were two of the noblest men of the empire, so I couldn't fathom why that was the case, but they were incredibly impressive!

I noticed that the earth around the wolf had grown muddy.

In that case...

Handling the quagmire was difficult because components other than plain earth were mixed in, but I mustered my mana and tried my best. I let the mud slither up the monster's body where it froze because of Alexei's cold air. I'd heard that frozen soil was as hard as concrete, so I hoped it'd be more effective than ice to stop the monster's movements.

I also started removing earth from under the beast's feet. It sank into the pitfall I'd created. The soil piled up around it and was frozen stiff before the monster could push it away, slowly turning the earth around it into a prison.

Before I knew it, I was breathing heavily.

Ngh! This is tough! But I can keep going! Only a little more!

Eventually, the monster's entire body was buried in frozen soil to the point it couldn't move anymore.

W-We won! Right?

The next second, a cracking sound filled the air, quickly followed by a furious howl.

The beast pushed on its hind legs, jumping up and destroying the earth prison we'd entrapped it in. It immediately lunged at Alexei and Mikhail.

Stop!!!

I released my mana, creating a large mud wall in front of them. However, the wolf simply bounced off it as though it had seen it coming from the very start. It sprang into the air and bared its fangs as it descended toward me.

Ah...

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Flying monsters cannot be stopped by earth attribute users. If you ever encounter one, please run away and hide, no matter what.”

This monster isn’t exactly flying, though. Mr. Moldo, I don’t think I can stop any monster at all.

Panic took over, and I lost all control over my mana. The wall I’d built to protect Alexei and the prince came crumbling down.

I’m such an idiot.

I’m the villainess, not the heroine.

I could never have come out on top.

I took on a ridiculous challenge, like I was still a player.

Like I couldn’t die.

Brother, I’m so sorry.

The fragmented thoughts flashed across my mind as my eyes traced the peaks and valleys of those three rows of pristine white fangs, as though enthralled.

Out of nowhere, pink entered my field of vision.

“No!” a tense voice exclaimed.

White light erupted from the cherry blossom girl.

Flora was in front of me, her arms spread, shielding me from the monster.

The wolf writhed in midair as soft white light wrapped around it as tight as a knot. It thrashed inside the light, but no matter how hard it fought, its brightness did not waver.

The monster had remained unyielding with an ice spear in its belly, but it grew feeble under Flora’s power. In time, anger disappeared from its dark eyes and a clear light took over. It stopped moving, and instead peered at Flora calmly.

Then, the light faded away, taking the beast’s body with it.



Silence fell over the training grounds.

I saw Flora's body sway. I rushed to support her, but then my legs buckled under me and we both fell. I didn't let go, though, and hugged her tight even as I trembled. Tears were running down my face.

Thank you. Thank you so much. How could you be brave enough to jump in front of such a scary monster to protect me? You must have been scared too! You're amazing, Flora.

You truly are the heroine.

"L-L-Lady Flora, a-are you okay?" I finally managed, stuttering as I fought to speak through the tears.

"I'm...fine," she answered so quietly it was almost a whisper, bringing her hand to rest softly on my arm. I was still shivering, so I felt the motion was more to reassure me than herself.

"What about you, Lady Ekaterina? Are you hurt?"

"No, no... I'm all right..."

The words had just left my mouth when I realized that Flora had called me by my first name for the very first time.

"Ekaterina!" Alexei exclaimed, running up to me and putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Brother!" I turned around and jumped into his arms.

I was so scared!!!

I wept even louder into his arms, as though I was a child. Alexei lost track of his own strength and hugged me so tight it hurt.

"Ekaterina, Ekaterina," he called out as he squeezed me.

Oof. I felt as though my bones would crack in his grip but that only made me happier. It hurt. I was alive. Living once upon a time as a twenty-something working adult didn't mean I wasn't scared of anything. I'd genuinely thought I was about to die.

In my past life, I'd once had to fix a failing system in under three hours while

the client threatened me with a penalty fee of several billion yen if I didn't deliver. I still remembered how my hands shook as I typed frantically, how my heart rate had sped up so much I was convinced I'd die. Still, that was nothing like today! I wouldn't have died for real back then! Today I might have!

Those fangs! Just thinking of them sent a shiver down my spine!

My brother was still saying my name again and again, his voice growing hoarse. When he heard me whimper, though, he came back to himself and loosened his hold.

"I'm sorry! Did I hurt you?"

I, on the other hand, kept clinging to him. I shook my head.

"You came for me, brother, thank you..." I said with great difficulty, still sniffing snottily.

Alexei hugged me a little tighter but was careful not to overdo it this time.

"I'd go anywhere for you, Ekaterina. I'd dive into the depths of hell to protect you. I swear to you," he whispered.

My heart did a dramatic backflip. *I'm dead. Killed by the moe.*

He'd whispered that! Into my ear! With his perfect voice! While hugging me!

The way his voice sounded while hoarse from emotion made it even better! Not to mention, since I was an Alexei fangirl, *anything* he did automatically hit harder. The words he'd just said to me sounded straight out of a pop song—specifically, straight out of an anime opening! The best part was that I knew he wasn't putting on airs. He meant it!

He'd already proved that today by running to help me with no regard for his life.

I don't care anymore! I'm never gonna get married, so you'd better take responsibility! Ugh. Guess I shouldn't be thinking that, should I?

I thought Alexei's sweet words would be the death of me but I actually felt some strength coming back to me. *Moe saves lives!*

When I noticed that Flora was still sitting on the floor looking at the two of us

with a smile on her face, I said, “Brother, Lady Flora saved me!”

Alexei nodded and finally let go of me. He walked up to Flora and dropped down on one knee in front of her, taking her hand in his.

“Lady Flora Cherny,” he said politely, bowing to her reverently.

A beautiful boy kneeling in front of a beautiful girl! What a feast for the eyes! I screamed inwardly. Truly, this scene seemed straight out of a painting!

“You saved my younger sister. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your bravery, and to apologize once again for my rude behavior the other day. I was a fool.”

Flora’s eyes widened in surprise. She shook her head. “Please don’t—”

“The House of Yulnova shall not forget its debt to you,” Alexei continued. “Please allow me to swear an oath to you.”

An oath! The prince did that in the game!

“As the head of the House of Yulnova, I, Alexei, hereby recognize Flora Cherny as a friend of our house. All those who bear the name of Yulnova celebrate our friends’ successes as though they were our own, and wage war against our friends’ enemies as though they were ours. Lady Cherny, your happiness is my happiness, and your enemies shall be mine too. I, Alexei swear to honor this oath.”

Wow!

The content of his oath sounded so much like the kind of things you’d have heard during the Sengoku period that the history buff inside me squealed with excitement!

“Your Grace! You don’t need to go so far! I’m the one who owes Lady Ekaterina a debt so large I could never hope to repay it! Please, stand up!” Flora argued while shaking her head.

“I cannot until you accept my oath,” Alexei said calmly. “My honor will not permit otherwise.”

While he sounded calm, it was plain to see that he would not budge. He’d made up his mind.

After worrying about it for a few more seconds, Flora gave in. “I-I understand. I shall accept your oath. So, please, do not kneel anymore, Your Grace.”

Alexei let out a little laugh as he stood up, pulling Flora up with him. She seemed surprised but grasped his hand tighter, standing up as well.

Ah, brother, you're wonderful! The two of you make such a pretty picture! Hey, wait a second, is this...a flag?! Could it be? I really can't tell.

There wasn't supposed to be any route in which the heroine got together with Alexei. Then again, in the game, my brother wasn't supposed to show up at all during this event. Perhaps a new route had appeared because he'd rushed here.

I was terrible with love and relationships—my past life presented plenty of evidence of that—so if we started diverging from the story I knew, I wouldn't be able to predict the outcomes.

If what I thought was happening was *actually* happening, I'd be happy for my brother...but I'd be lonely too. I was glad to have been reborn as his sister, but I still wished I could have completed such a route as the heroine in my past life!

“All's well that ends well.”

EEEEK?!

My heart almost flew out of my chest when I suddenly heard a voice next to me. When I wasn't looking, Mikhail had come to stand by my side.

Uh-oh! I'm so sorry, Prince, I totally forgot you were there!

I tried not to telegraph my surprise. Although, when I looked at him, I noticed that his eyes were almost gleaming. He didn't seem mad, but I still got the feeling that he'd realized I'd forgotten all about him.

“Once word gets out that the House of Yulnova officially supports Lady Cherny, her life at school should become far easier,” he said. “You'll be able to relax even when you're not with her.”

The prince seemed aware of Flora's struggles. Despite his status as an imperial prince, he was quite perceptive and sensible. Now that I thought about it, I'd noticed the same thing the first time I'd met him.

I snapped out of my reverie once I noticed that his uniform was filthy. I'd done that with my mud wall! I'd tried to protect him and Alexei but had lost control over my mana halfway through and had let the wall crumble on them!

"Your Highness, I'm so sorry," I scrambled to say, patting the dirt off his uniform.

Now that I'd calmed down, I could see how useless that last mud wall had been. Both the prince and my brother could have fended for themselves much more effectively. Instead, I'd provided the monster with a perfect platform and prevented them from reacting properly because of the wall's debris. I'd driven myself into a corner all on my own.

I just suck...

"Your Highness, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to you for rushing to my aid. Nevertheless, I conducted myself in such a careless way," I muttered, dejected.

Mikhail smiled. "You treated me to something good last time, so I just had to return the favor. A lady's cooking is quite precious, you see."

Feeding him really goes a long way, huh? I'm impressed one treat did that.

I supposed this was really because of the rules of the game. The prince was meant to try to save the heroine, so there he was.

"Besides," Mikhail continued. "Alexei and I are both trained in magic combat, and we have experience taking out monsters. You've never trained for it. It's only natural that you'd run out of strength while fighting."

Sure. I couldn't tell if he was trying to make me feel better or criticizing me.

Wait. Taking out monsters? You're fifteen and the heir to the throne, why in the world are you out there doing that?!

"I say that, but I've only killed monsters that had all but been lined up for me. Ceremonial last blows," Mikhail admitted with a smile. "I'm sorry for making it out to be a big deal. Alexei is different, though. Monsters turn up in the Yulnova Duchy often enough that he's probably led a monster-slaying expedition or two."

So, *that* was it. Still, even if it was ceremonial and he'd only finished off monsters that soldiers had rounded up for him, he'd still had to face these terrifying beasts! Even though this was his first real fight, he'd calmly struck this monster with his water. He was plenty amazing too!

Moving on to Alexei, I was once again shocked to discover the extent of a duke's responsibilities. On top of acting as a CEO and prefectural governor, he was also an anti-monster army commander?! His coolness was out of this world.

"You should brace yourself," Mikhail added. "Knowing Alexei, you're in for an earful later. He's good at lining up logical arguments, so his preaching is quite something. We played together as children, and I was honestly more scared of *him* getting angry at me than the adults. My mother even took to summoning him to lecture me whenever I misbehaved. Anyway, good luck to you!"

With a story like that, I couldn't help but question the adults around them—although I expected nothing less from my brother.

Heh heh, but my dear brother loves me far too much to lecture me!

Wait, didn't the prince sound like he was looking forward to my demise? Since when did he have such a vindictive personality? Was it because I played the role of villainess?

"Before he does, let me tell you something," Mikhail said with a bright smile.

Huh? What is it? No matter what you say, I'm not gonna falter because a fifteen-year-old brat lectures me.

"You were very brave," he said.

Uh, sorry?

"You were scared enough to cry, but you still *tried*. Including the teachers, I think the four of us are the best mana users at the academy. We were only able to organize and defeat that monster because you bought us time. Facing it alone was reckless, but it's thanks to you that no one got hurt. It was commendable."

Hold on, how do I say this? Hmm. What I did really wasn't *that* praiseworthy. I

had prior knowledge of what would happen from the game and only did my best to fight that monster because I knew something terrible would happen if I didn't. Even so, what he said made me happy.

I might have felt that way because it reminded me of my old job. One day, when I'd been under pressure to handle a system failure, I'd figured out the issue alone in fewer than fifteen minutes and had only needed another thirty to restore it.

When I'd reported that, had I heard any thanks? No, the only thing I'd been told was, "Find out the cause and put measures in place so that it doesn't happen again before our client's work day starts. After that, make sure to get me a report."

The cause, you say?! It happened because these idiots forced me to change the process when I told them half a million times it wouldn't work, duh!

Obviously, I hadn't actually said that. Instead, I'd pulled an all-nighter and typed out a report in a matter-of-fact tone. Systems engineering was just that kind of job.

Today, it was different. I'd been praised for my efforts. It wasn't much, but the words left me incredibly moved.

I'd gotten used to my efforts never being recognized or rewarded, but deep down, it hurt.

Hey, that job really messed me up, didn't it?

Thank you, Prince. You're dangerous, though, getting mature ladies to cry when you're only fifteen! You're gonna become one hell of a leader, adored and feared by your underlings!

Mikhail shook me out of my thoughts by taking my hands into his.

"Did I sadden you somehow? I apologize."

"Oh, no. You did no such thing."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said before adding, "By the way, I was wondering... Would you mind calling me 'Mikhail' instead of 'Your Highness'?"

"S-Sorry?!" I yelped, in the most hysterical, unladylike voice ever. The reason?

I'd heard this exact line before! In the otome game!

After defeating the monster alongside the heroine and growing closer to her, he was supposed to tell her that! "Would you mind calling me by my name," he'd said!

You're supposed to say that to the heroine! Not to anyone else! And certainly not to the villainess!

"I could never!" I blurted out.

"You know, Alexei didn't call me by my title either until he inherited his own. Then he started saying that, as a duke, he had to show his obedience to me in that way. You're his sister and bear no title of your own. I can't think of any issues."

Well, I can! A huge one! Just can't tell you what it is!

What was I supposed to do? What was the right answer to avoid triggering my doom?

"Your Highness," I heard behind me.

The temperature dropped. The weather hadn't changed; the cold air came from the voice.

Obviously, that voice belonged to Alexei. For some reason, he seemed even taller and more imposing than usual. His glare was ice cold.

"Ah, sorry!" Mikhail hurriedly said, letting go of my hands.

Is that why he's so mad?! Well, that's Alexei for you! He prioritizes me over his loyalty to the prince. He really has got a complex about me.

Alexei walked up to me and took my hand as he looked down on Mikhail harshly. "Your Highness, I must ask you to refrain from behaving in ways that may impact my sister's reputation."

"My apologies. Her courage left such an impression on me that I forgot myself for a moment. Your sister is a wonderful, brave young lady."

Is my reputation really going to suffer because the prince held my hand for a couple of moments? Come to think of it, Victorian England was like that, wasn't

it? I gotta be more careful.

The prince was way too smart (and crafty!) for his age. By overpraising me, he was taking advantage of Alexei's obsessive love for me.

Big sis can't wait to see what a force you'll be in a few more years!

"Lady Cherny, please call me by my name too," Mikhail continued. "The way you rid us of the monster deeply impressed me. You seem to have a rare attribute, and I'd love for us to become friends."

Oh! That's the prince for you! He seemed to have a pretty good idea of what Flora's attribute was. And he was actually doing his part getting closer to the heroine!

All right, if that's how you wanna play it, I'll help!

"It would be an honor," I told Mikhail. "Please feel free to call us by our names too! No need to bother with the 'lady'! You don't mind either, Lady Flora, do you?"

Her eyes widened for a moment but she came to stand close to me, on the opposite side of Alexei, before linking arms with me.

"No. As you prefer, Lady Ekaterina," she answered with a smile.

She's too cute! Her smile seen from this close is too powerful...

She'd even linked arms with me herself. I supposed she felt closer to me now that she'd started calling me by my first name.

Wait, I'm living it up, aren't I? I've got my little Flora on the right and my brother on the left. A babe on each arm. Even a prince, right in front of me.

I felt like our relationships had gotten kind of mixed up, though. Shouldn't Flora act a little friendlier to the prince? The way she looked at him seemed almost hostile.

Oh well. Coming on too strong wasn't good on the prince's route, so this was for the best. He didn't look the part, but he was the type to chase after you when you acted a bit cold. His flame always burned hotter whenever there were obstacles to overcome—a true go-getter!

Besides, I had a feeling a new route might have opened for Flora with my brother.

Do your best, Flora!



In the game, defeating the monster was enough to successfully clear the event. After that, the heroine and her love interest immediately returned to their daily lives.

While it might have been obvious to me if I'd given it a bit more thought, real life didn't quite work the same. The entire school was in an uproar! Groups of armed guards that usually protected the capital rushed to patrol the premises, creating a tense atmosphere.

Were there other monsters lurking somewhere within the large academy? How and why had a monster suddenly appeared on the training grounds? Could a trail be found? The guards were here to find answers, and they were not about to leave any stone unturned.

For the time being, all classes were canceled and students were ordered to return to our dorms at once—except for the four of us. My brother, Mikhail, and I were asked to come give our testimonies while Flora was taken away by a mana appraiser to investigate her attribute.

My brother and I did not agree on the next course of action, though.

"I'll do the explaining, Ekaterina," he said after the three of us had been asked to wait inside a small room until someone was ready to talk to us. "Return to your dorm and rest. This is the first time you've used so much mana at once. You must be exhausted."

"I'm fine, brother. I'm the only one who witnessed the exact moment the monster appeared. I must report what I saw."

I really, *really* wanted to know how this had happened, so I planned on supplying every last bit of information as precisely as possible. If I tasked a third person to do it, precious details might be lost.

Unfortunately, Alexei wasn't having it.

“No. You weren’t fine to begin with. What will you do if you collapse again? You need to be more aware of your own limitations and care for yourself properly.”

Can we forget about the sickly-young-lady schtick already? I wanted to say I’d passed out for very good reasons, but there was no way I could elaborate on that claim.

“Brother, I have a duty to do this so that something like this will never happen again. Giving up that duty in favor of rest would tarnish the name of our great house.” I played the pride card, and Alexei’s eyes softened somewhat.

“You’re already more than admirable enough, Ekaterina. You proved your courage and strength of character by fighting off the beast so that your classmates could escape. You’re worthy of bearing the Yulnova name, and I couldn’t be any prouder of you. So go rest.”

“Brother!”

“Ekaterina,” Alexei answered sternly, “you are outstanding. That much is true. But you are also reckless. Are you at least aware of that?”

Ugh, he got me there.

“Not only have you never received any formal training on how to fend off monsters, but you’ve only just started practicing mana control! If you’d stayed calm enough to consider your situation, you would have known to run away. You were lucky that His Highness and I ran to you, but you couldn’t have known we would.”

That’s sort of true, but I’d played the game and knew what would happen, so I didn’t exactly have a choice.

Boo-hoo, the prince was right; I’d ended up being scolded by my brother! The worst part was that I’d let my head droop and was taking it. Back at work, I used to stand up to my superiors or clients and argue back. Was it because of his perfect voice, or because he was actually right?

No, that wasn’t it. It was the *intensity* in his tone.

In my past life, I’d never met anyone who talked to me so seriously. The

prince had told me that he used to fear Alexei's preaching more than the adults'. I could understand why.

I know I've asked this a lot, but are you really seventeen, brother?!

"Did you even...consider my feelings for a second?" Alexei asked, his voice wavering. "Sensing the monster's presence out of the blue surprised me enough, then I looked out the window only to see you there, facing the beast. Even your teacher fled but you stayed put, ready to fight it. Do you know what went through my mind?"

I swallowed.

"I thought I would lose you, Ekaterina. Can you imagine how frightening that was? I do not fear monsters. The only thing I fear is something happening to you. When the mud wall collapsed, and I saw the monster pouncing on you, I realized I wouldn't be able to save you in time. I..."

I could hear the agony in his voice and I felt my breath catch in my chest.

"If I lose you...I think I might as well freeze this useless heart of mine. I have no purpose remaining in this world without you."

"Brother!" Ending your life with your own magic. That was how the nobles of this world chose to commit suicide, just like the samurai of old committed seppuku.

"You're the only one I have left," Alexei continued. "What would be the point of me living if you're gone? I told you, didn't I? If something happened to you, I wouldn't be able to take it. You are my life, Ekaterina. You hold my life, so please..."

"Brother?"

"Please, you must be aware of that."

No! No, no, no! Is he crying?!

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, brother! This was all my fault! I'll never do something like that again, please don't cry!" I exclaimed, diving into his arms as I felt tears flood into my own eyes. "You're also *my* life, brother! You're the dearest person to my heart, I could do anything for you! Your very presence is my happiness,

but I made you feel like this—Oh, I'll never forgive myself! I'm sorryyyyyy!!!”

Alexei remained silent.

Mm? I pulled away from him and looked up at his face.

“Hey, you’re laughing!”

“I’m not...” Alexei shook his head but the smile hadn’t fallen off his lips. He *was*.

“You tricked me! You’re a monster!”

“I didn’t! You were just so...you.”

“You’re still laughing! Liar!” Here I was, truly on the verge of breaking down!

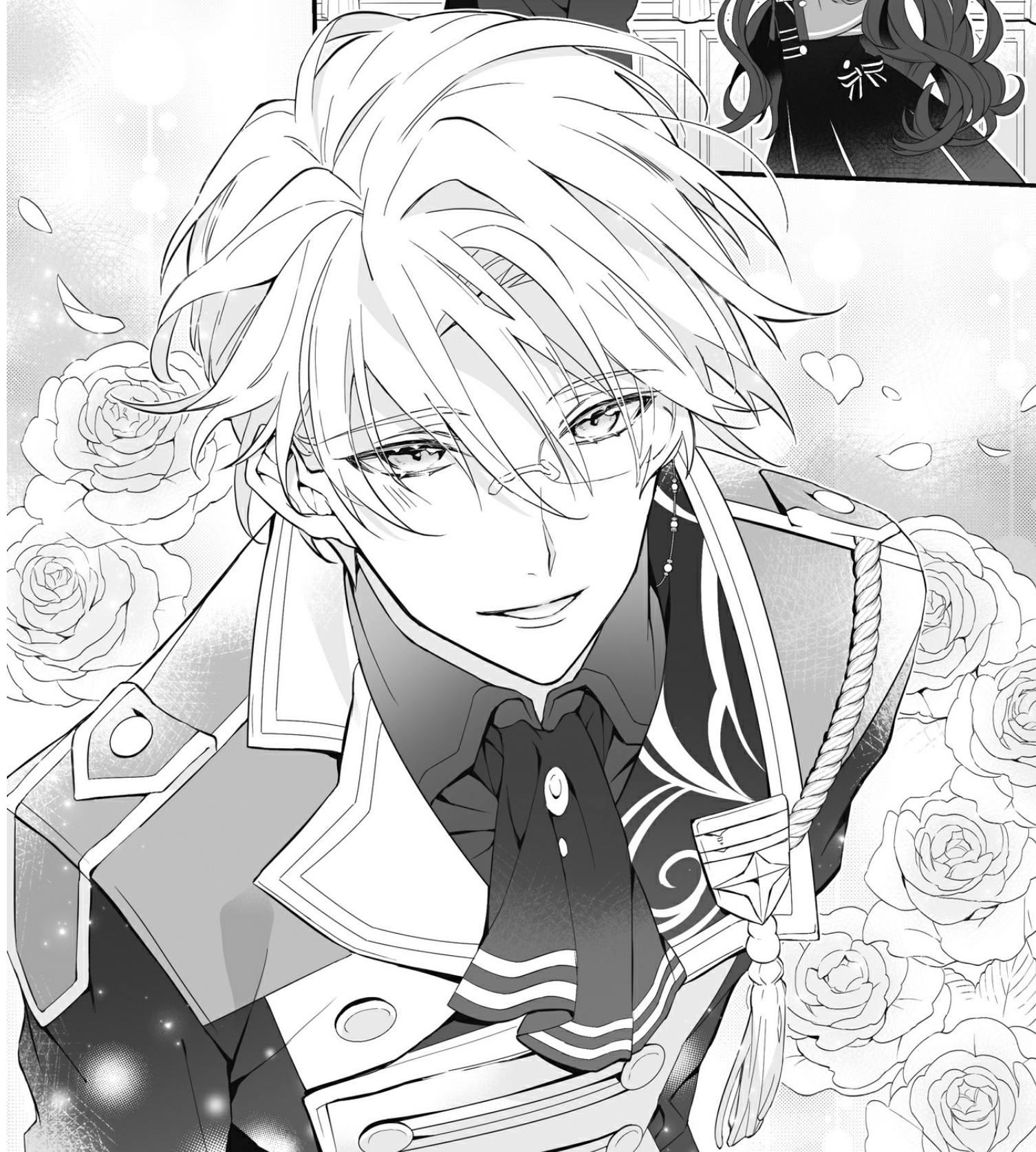
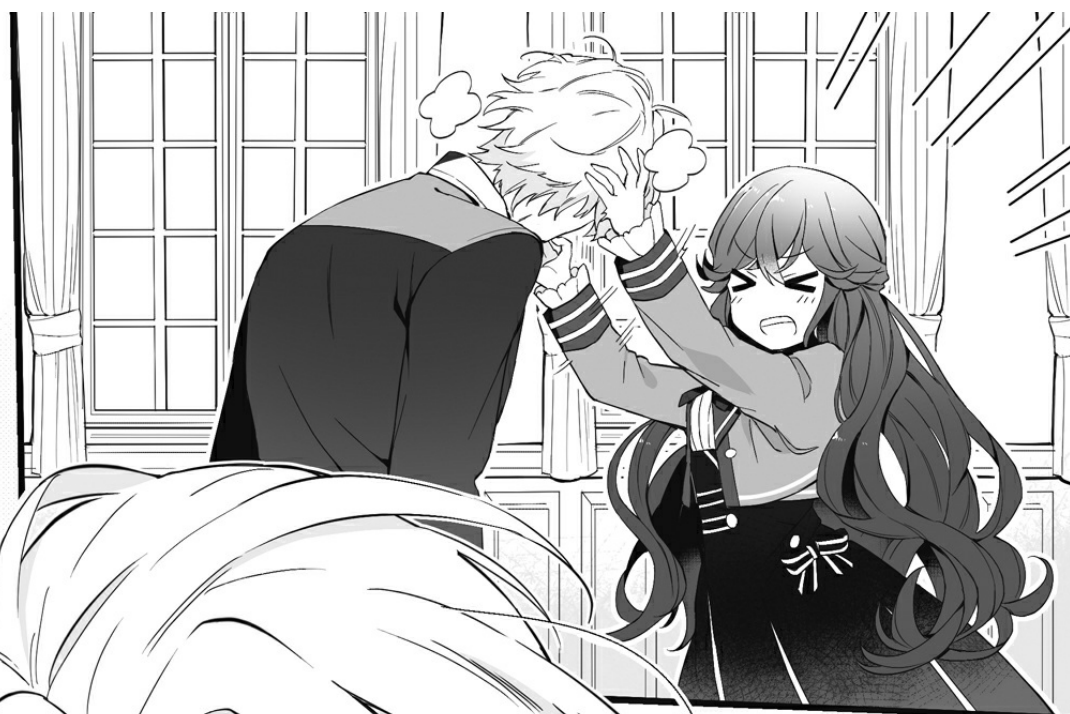
How are you going to make it up to me, huh?! Take this! I extended both of my arms and started ruffling Alexei’s hair with everything I had.

My childish act of revenge was the final straw and Alexei started laughing out loud. He even lowered his head to give me better access, defeating the entire purpose of my retaliation.

Ruffling someone’s hair is only fun for ten seconds, anyway, I thought as I stopped. The truth was that I couldn’t take the ridiculousness of my own actions anymore, but whatever. I pouted and pulled my hands away. I felt low-key embarrassed about it, but even thirty-year-olds sometimes want to pout!

“Are you satisfied?” Alexei asked, his hair an absolute mess. His neon blue eyes shone even brighter than usual.

Why do you suddenly look so happy, and what’s with that smug little grin of yours? Since when have your face’s muscles worked so well, Mr. Expressionless?! And those puppy eyes!!! I can’t take it anymore!



“I’m sorry,” I said, reaching out to comb through his hair and tidy it up with my hand. Alexei looked at me fondly as I did it. “I’m truly sorry for worrying you. I promise I won’t do something like that again.”

“Good.”

The heroine had awakened her mana and cleared the event, so we were most likely off the dangerous route for good. I wouldn’t need to fight monsters ever again—I hoped.

“Brother,” I started again, “the dormitory isn’t very far away, but I’m too scared to go alone. I feel the safest when I’m by your side, so could I stay with you? We’ll talk to the guards together, yes?”

Alexei paused, pondering over it, then sighed.

Score one more for Ekaterina! Adults know that you cannot give up at the first difficulty!

“You’re good at getting your way,” he said. “Too smart for your own good. Fine. I’ll take you back to your dormitory when we’re done.”

In hindsight, I should’ve said that from the get-go. It would have saved me some time. Lesson learned!

Alexei always yielded to me in the end, but I’d be sure to make that happen even faster in the future!

Soon enough, the three of us were shown into a room that was slightly smaller than the one Alexei used as his office to tell the imperial guards what we’d seen. Three guards in uniform were there alongside the headmaster and the vice-principal.

The lot of them seemed disgruntled, scolding us with their eyes as if to say we students had no business putting ourselves in danger to fight monsters all on our own. I understood that they had no choice but to scold us considering their positions, but this had been a case of force majeure, so I hoped they’d lay off us. It dawned on me that Alexei might have expected it and tried to get me to go back so I wouldn’t be subject to it.

Mikhail, Alexei, and I sat on the sofa. Alexei spoke first.

“We are waiting on your report,” he said.

The headmaster, who’d looked like he was about to speak, froze. I completely understood his reaction.

Brother, that isn’t what a student is supposed to say! You sound like you’re his boss!

“Our report...? Whatever do you mean?”

“I’d like to hear the current state of the investigation. How are you proceeding? What measures are in place? What have you figured out and what haven’t you? I’m not asking for results, as I’m aware the investigation is still underway, but I’d like to know the direction you’re taking.”

Yup, he’s acting like their boss, all right.

“The direction, you say? This incident occurred within the academy, so I believe you should leave these things to us.”

“I have no intention to take command. However, His Highness currently resides within the academy. How did you intend to report to His Majesty? If His Highness is ultimately the one to pass on the information, I believe you ought to keep him updated every step of the way. Besides, the monster appeared where my dear sister, Ekaterina, was having one of her classes. As the head of the House of Yulnova, I cannot help but take an interest in this matter. As such, I would like you to understand that I will keep a close eye on this investigation, not as a student, but as the head of the Yulnova Duchy.”

He brought up the prince, the emperor, and the duchy in one go. Talk about putting pressure on them.

The headmaster’s face had grown paler by the second. He probably hadn’t thought about how to report to the emperor yet and was at a loss. *I feel for you, sir.*

After staring at the headmaster and the vice-principal—whose eyes were cast downward—with contempt for a few more seconds, Alexei lifted his head and shifted his focus to the three guards.

“I apologize for the delay. Let us move on to the main topic. I’m told you wished for us to provide information, correct?” he asked them.

They straightened their postures as one of them answered, “Yes!”

Brother, isn't it about time you selected "end turn"? Poor guys, you've completely overpowered them. I wouldn't expect any less from you, though!

I noticed Mikhail, who was sitting on Alexei’s other side, glancing at me. He smiled as though he’d read my thoughts and agreed with me. In a hurry, I averted my eyes toward the guards. I hadn’t expected Mr. Pretty Boy to make eye contact with me so suddenly!

This situation reminded me of what he’d said earlier, about Alexei scaring him to death when they were kids. My brother must’ve had a similar vibe as a child too. Ah, just imagining it made me want to giggle. I bet he was adorbs!

Oh, and stop trying to befriend the villainess, Prince! You're a good boy, but I never know how to react! You're a walking doom flag as far as I'm concerned!

For the next three days, the imperial guards conducted an extensive search of the academy. They hunted for other monsters, for traces of some sort of ritual, or for any kind of hint, but nothing came out of it.

Alexei explained what they’d found to me after receiving a report from the guards. “Monsters like the one that appeared here are rare, but they confirmed that they live in marshes. However, they couldn’t find any trace of monsters being captured in a marsh and brought to the capital. They’ll continue investigating the academy on a smaller scale while focusing their efforts on studying the summoning technique that is said to have existed in the days of the Astra Empire. The House of Yulmagna has apparently offered their full support for this angle of the investigation.”

He’d apparently visited the academy’s conference room to hear this report and had come to find Flora and me while we were on our way to the dorms after school. The three of us were currently in a gazebo near our dormitory.

A few steps away were Mina and Ivan. I knew that Ivan always remained near my brother, but I’d told Mina she was free to wait in the dorm. She’d

immediately refused, saying that her place was by my side.

On the day of the attack, when I'd returned to my room, my ever-cool, beautiful maid's face had warped itself in a rare expression of horror. A quiet wave of anger had welled up from her as she'd said, "I failed to be with you when you were in danger..."

Ever since that day, Mina had stuck to me like my shadow.

Farther away stood a couple of guards who watched over Alexei whenever he went back and forth between his dormitory and ours.

Tangentially, I remembered this gazebo from the game! It was beautifully made. Thanks to the season, blooming azaleas encircled it like a colorful cloud. The handsome Alexei surrounded by two beautiful girls made for a pretty picture, especially in this splendid setting.

"I suppose we can't ask for more," I said. "But if I may, why the Yulmagna?"

"Ever since the days of their founder, the Magna have always had a keen interest in the Astra Empire. They put together a research institute. No family possesses more ancient documents than they do. Over the years, they've injected fortunes into this research."

"My..." *Sounds like they're a lot like the Mito Tokugawa branch.*

I'd always thought the three grand ducal houses were a lot like the three branches of the Tokugawa family, but this was the first time I associated a house with a particular branch.

Ever since the days of the protagonist of a famous period drama, the Mito branch had poured endless efforts into compiling the *Dai Nihonshi*, a book that covered Japan's history. Now, there was no evidence for this, but a common theory estimated the cost of this colossal project at about a third of the Mito domain's GDP. By using the GDP of the current-day Ibaraki Prefecture as a benchmark, this figure equaled over one trillion yen.

The Mito domain had suffered from another budget problem. In an attempt to make it seem like the Mito branch's territory was of equal value to those of the other two Tokugawa branches, the Mito domain was assigned an estimated production value that was higher than what its land could actually produce. In

other words, it had been overtaxed and dirt poor because of it.

From what I knew, on top of their research on the Astra Empire, the House of Yulmagna also maintained a chivalric order as large as in the days of the founding of the empire, another endeavor that weighed heavily on their finances. The way they attached importance to martial arts and held a fascination for the ways of the past were very much in line with the Mito—or at least, with my image of them.

Their founding father, Pavel, was a military man who thought that one ought to be accomplished in both the literary and military arts. Apparently, his wonderful ideal had been passed on to this day. Studying the Astra Empire was considered a particularly noble pursuit as far as scholarly work went, and it seemed to be the symbol of the pride of the Magna. It was grand and all, but I almost wanted to tell them not to push themselves too much!

With their port, the House of Yulsein was obviously the equivalent of the Owari branch, while the Yulnova, whose territory was ripe with forests and natural resources, was the Kii branch.

No one but I cared about any of that, but I was very satisfied with my analysis.

“Not knowing why the monster appeared leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but I’m glad that this helped you awaken your magic, Lady Flora,” I said. “Besides, I’m sure something like this will never happen again.”

“I agree,” Alexei said.

Under our gazes, Flora flushed red. “I hope my mana can be of use,” she said.

“You don’t need to worry about that. Don’t they say that whenever a holy-attribute bearer graces the empire with their presence, monster activity slows down? Your very existence is a blessing to everyone in this empire. Oh, but there is no need for you to feel burdened! You’re perfect just the way you are.”

Flora’s attribute had finally come to light. It was incredibly rare, so much so that it appeared once every generation at most, sometimes skipping a few. I’d known what it was from the game, but I was excited now that everyone else did too!

This never came up in the game, but even in the Astra Empire, holy-attribute

users were worshipped. Most of them were women, and they'd come to be revered as saints. They lived almost as shamans and were tasked with the role of appeasing great monsters such as the Black Dragon.

This meant we didn't have to worry anymore! Now, Flora just needed to get together with the prince and any doom or death flags would be out of the way!

At least, that's what I thought until that very moment.

I hadn't really dwelled much on it before, but now it occurred to me that I'd only played the prince's route. Not to mention, I'd started doing things that had changed the original scenario and could very much have created a new route in the process. For all I knew, a different future was in store for us.

"Thank you very much, Lady Ekaterina," Flora said. "My only worry is that no one else currently has the same attribute I do. I can only rely on records to learn how to control my mana and train by myself. Still, the holy attribute is quite famous, and there are plenty of records to work with, so I *am* thankful for that. Those with poorly documented attributes have it a lot harder, having to figure out everything by themselves. I'll do my best to make sense of the records I have and become better!"

As expected of our earnest heroine.

"How lovely!" I exclaimed. "I must say I'd never realized how difficult things were for those with rare attributes."

I'd observed that even our training grounds had been made with the common attributes in mind. I supposed the teachers had no clue how to teach attributes that appeared once every generation at best.

"The House of Yulnova might be in possession of some records dealing with holy mana," Alexei said. "In the past, a holy-attribute bearer sojourned in the duchy to fight monsters. I'll see if I can find them."

"Thank you! I'll dedicate myself so that I can be of use to the House of Yulnova one day!"

"I'd be most thankful," Alexei answered.

The Yulnova Duchy was the one that suffered the most from monsters'

presence. A holy-attribute user hanging in our territory to pacify—or exterminate, if the need arose—monsters would be beneficial. This was a win-win situation!

“That reminds me, Ekaterina,” Alexei started. “This is about the tutor who answered your request for advice on fighting monsters. I showed his letter to my knights, and they thought it was fascinating. They’re considering hiring him as an advisor.”

“My!”

Would Mr. Moldo at last move on from being a private tutor (freelancer) to being a member of the duchy’s chivalric order (full-time employee)? That would be most fortunate!

“Mr. Moldo is brilliant,” I said. “And he has a young daughter, so I’m sure he and his family would be overjoyed by the prospect of a stable job. Do put in a good word for him if you can!”

“If you say so, I shall do just that,” Alexei said with a smile. “You’re such a kind girl, even worrying about your tutor’s family.”

Next to him, Flora also smiled brightly.

I mean, worrying about the people you know and their families is normal, isn’t it? In my past life, there was even a saying about how every chance meeting was actually predestined. Then again, things were a bit different in this kind of class-based society.

No, I’m focusing on the wrong thing again. I should know by now that my brother is overly soft on me and never misses an occasion to heap me with praise! No doubt about it.

Epilogue: Once a Villainess, Always a Villainess

Classes only resumed normally three days after the monster's appearance. The imperial guards searched the school with a fine-tooth comb, but nothing came up—no monster lying in wait and no hints. The academy was anxious to restart lessons to avoid straying from the curriculum, and the school was eventually declared safe under the condition that the guards kept patrolling.

Armed guards walking around all day made for a stressful environment, but the return of the students uplifted the atmosphere, bringing some life back to the premises.

Flora and I agreed to travel to and from class together from now on. The rest of our classmates mostly ignored us, so we were an island unto ourselves even in class, but we'd grown used to it.

Despite that, disagreeable voices still reached us. They were aimed at only one of us, as usual, but they grated on my ears regardless.

"How brazen. I can't believe the ringleader dares come to class!"

"Right! Right!"

After a few days away from the classroom, the jibe almost felt nostalgic. It was also right on time. I'd been waiting for them to speak up.

"My, what a strange thing to say," I said, channeling my inner villainess and letting a sardonic grin lift the corners of my mouth. "What could you be talking about?"

"W-Well," one of them stumbled to answer, taken aback. I usually ignored them, so they hadn't expected me to engage. "Why, we're talking about the attack, obviously. It makes no sense for a beast like that to appear in the middle of the academy! Someone must have planned it."

"Right! Right!"

Flora tried to pull on my sleeve, worry on her face, but I took her hand in mine

and doubled down, raising a brow. “Well, the imperial guards agree that this is all very strange. Hence why they’re pouring their energy into the investigation. You mentioned you know who the culprit is. That must mean you have evidence, right? Why haven’t you submitted it to the guards at once? They haven’t found anything, so I’m certain they’d welcome the information.”

“I don’t have any but...it’s obvious, isn’t it? Everyone’s saying it! That lowborn peasant must be behind it somehow!”

“Right! Right!”

I lifted one of my hands and let it rest on the side of my mouth. My pinky was pointing up, an important touch as far as dramatic effect went. Then, I let out a ringing laugh.

I’d always wanted to try the villainess laugh! I imagined dark clouds looming and thunder striking behind me as I loomed over the Right Right Trio.

“Everyone? Who might that be, exactly?” I asked. “Would you care to share a few names with me?”

“E-Everyone is just *everyone!*”

The three of you, huh? Got it.

“You must know reckless words have consequences,” I said. “If you continue to spread lies, our great House of Yulnova may have to take action. I should also inform you lot that my dear brother, Duke Alexei, has sworn an oath to protect Lady Flora Cherny, the person who saved my life. Henceforth, her friends shall be his. Her enemies as well.”

At the mention of the word “oath,” the three bullies paled.

“Speaking of which, did you know that Lady Flora finally discovered what her attribute was?” I continued, loud enough that the entire class would hear. “She is one of the few holy-attribute bearers. I’m sure you know that such people were revered as saints during the days of the Astra Empire.”

In fact, I’d jumped at the chance to confront the trio because I wanted everyone to hear about this.

“Oh, and,” I added, “you said earlier that Flora was behind this incident and

‘planned it,’ correct? Surely that means you can explain in detail how she pulled off such a feat. Did she capture a monster and ask an accomplice to bring it into the academy? Or did she perhaps summon it using a forgotten spell from the era of the Astra Empire that no one else knows? That’d be something! She must have a mighty organization at her beck and call! Oh ho ho ho!”

Lightning struck as the sky around me darkened even further, and I dropped my voice. “That would be ridiculous, don’t you think?” I whispered, my tone low and dangerous.

The Right Right Trio panicked in silence. Screaming at people meant attracting attention and risking outsiders getting in your way. Quiet threats, on the other hand, worked wonders.

You whisper when you’re truly angry. It’ll be on the test, so remember that, folks!

“I’m sure you understand my point now that you’ve had some time to think about it,” I added with a bright smile. “Well, if you’re too clueless to process such rudimentary facts...I suppose we could just feed you to the monsters. You’d be more useful as excrement!” I said, my tone light and cheery.

I let out a third villainous laugh that echoed through the classroom. Everyone else had fallen speechless.

Yeah, the excrement thing was overkill... I knew as soon as I said it. Noble ladies don’t talk about poop, do they? I didn’t mean to say that; it just came out! Eh, whatever, time to sweep it under the rug and make my exit! No more poop talk!

One more ominous laugh for the road. “Consider yourselves warned.”

All right, we’re done here! Bye!

So I hoped, when I suddenly heard the rustle of a chair moving as someone stood up.

I looked behind me, wondering who it was, and discovered that the person who’d just stood up was one of the most popular girls in the class—the daughter of a count who stood near the top of the school pecking order.

She walked up to us. I smiled at her and stayed put. Resolutely, I waited, since I had no idea what she wanted.

It was my first time facing her directly. She practically sparkled, and I had to admit she was eye-catching. Her fiery red hair reached to her shoulders and was streaked with golden highlights that shone under the light. Her eyes were also golden and her skin slightly tanned, while freckles peppered her nose. She had a somewhat boyish air, and her eyes gleamed in a way that reminded me of a wild, impetuous beast. Even through her uniform, I could tell she was muscular.

Now that I'd assessed her, she didn't seem like your typical popular girl. She was more...girl-crush material? I remembered a girl like that in my high school class. She used to distinguish herself during sports club tournaments and had a boyish, cool charm, along with a brotherly vibe. The rest of the girls used to fangirl on her all day long.

She stopped right in front of me, looking me in the eye, and said, "We're in the same class, but I believe this is our first time talking. I'm Marina Krymov."

"Thank you very much for taking the trouble to introduce yourself. I'm Ekaterina Yulnova," I answered with an elegant smile.

With her burning hair, bright eyes, and sun-kissed skin, Marina seemed almost like a spirit of the dawn. I, on the other hand, could pass as a twilight spirit. My indigo hair, blue and purple eyes, and pale, almost translucent skin blended *me* right into the night.

Marina's eyes narrowed and her body tensed. She reminded me of a tiger waiting to strike.

"Lady Yulnova, I..."

All right, out with it! What do you want?

"...wanted to apologize!"

Huh?

Marina smiled.

"You and Lady Cherny saved us all the other day," she continued. "Somehow, I failed to thank you until now. I came to apologize for that. Please forgive me!"

Reflexively, Flora and I exchanged a glance.

“Truth is, I wanted to talk to the two of you earlier, but I didn’t know how to approach you. After all, Lady Yulnova...” Marina paused, a blush creeping onto her cheeks. “When you first came to class, your brother leading you by the hand, you were just too beautiful! I couldn’t believe you were a fellow student! You seemed so mature, almost otherworldly. I didn’t feel like someone like me could converse with you!”

Ah. Sorry about that.

Sounded like the villainous siblings’ entrance had been even more impactful than I’d expected. That got me wondering what image Alexei and I sent to people when we were together. Did we look like that pair of siblings from the world-acclaimed animated movie featuring a grand ice castle?

Aaaah! I just imagined Alexei falling to the dark side and building himself an ice castle where he could reign alone and free! He’d be so cute!

Hey, now’s not the time for daydreaming, me. Get a grip!

Still, Marina seemed awfully excited about it. Could she be one of my brother’s fans?

“I’ve finally realized you’re a very friendly person, Lady Yulnova. It’s obvious from the way you interact with Lady Cherny, and from what you just said.”

Marina looked like she was trying not to laugh.

What I’d just said? Did she mean the excrement thing? I wasn’t sure how talking about poop had gotten the young lady of a count’s house to like me. Oh well!

No, hang on, it is weird. Sure, I’m the one who said it to begin with, but who wants to become friends with someone else based on something like that?! Are you an elementary schooler?

“And I’m sorry for my behavior up until now, Lady Cherny. You were born a commoner, but you’re far more ladylike than I am. I used to think that you had to be hiding something, but I’ve seen the error of my ways.”

Marina was so candid that Flora couldn’t help but smile. When she looked at

me, I smiled too.

“Lady Krymov, I believe I understand what you’re saying. There’s no need for you to apologize, but if that would make you feel better, I shall accept it. Thank you for your candor. Let us be closer from now on.”

“I’d love to! Please, do call me by my given name!”

“Then I hope you’ll do the same,” I said.

“Lady Cherny, may I call you Lady Flora from now on?” Marina asked.

“Of course!”

The three of us smiled brightly at each other. The atmosphere had mellowed out.

Suddenly, a hesitant voice interrupted us. “Excuse me, I, um, also want to make amends. I’m sorry.”

The petite girl who’d just spoken was standing behind Marina. She had glossy chestnut-colored hair tied up with a dainty ribbon and bright green eyes. She didn’t stand out much, so I wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but I believed she was from a baron’s house. Why was she apologizing, though?

I tilted my head in confusion before I remembered her. “At the training grounds! Could you be the girl who...”

The girl who fell while running away? I finished in my head.

“Th-That would be me, yes,” she answered, catching my drift. “My name is Olga Florus. I... When I fell, I thought I wouldn’t live to see another day. Your mud wall *saved* me, and you had to linger because of me. You could’ve run away otherwise! I keep thinking about what I put you through. I’m so sorry...”

No, no, no. You got it all wrong! Don’t tie yourself up in knots over it! But I guess I’m better off not running my mouth too much. I wished I could tell her I’d known the monster would appear and had been ready to fight from the start.

“You didn’t hurt yourself back then, did you?” I asked.

She seemed surprised but shook her head.

“I see, that’s great news. I’m glad to hear you’re all right.” I truly meant that. I

was so glad that no one had been hurt. “Please don’t feel responsible. I was reckless, that is all. I could’ve fled—no, I *should’ve* fled. I simply chose not to. My brother gave me quite the earful.”

I smiled for her. Tears had welled up in Olga’s eyes, but she smiled back.

“U-Us too!” a group of students exclaimed.

I started as they approached us. Marina was the most popular girl in class and the girls that always followed her around (her fans?) had stood up. Next, they were followed by a bunch of boys. Before I knew it, we were surrounded.

“I’m sorry too!”

“Me too! I wanted to apologize!”

“I’m sorry I ran away! You’re so cool for standing up to the monster!”

Their reactions nearly overwhelmed me. Luckily, the teacher walked in and everyone returned to their seats in a hurry. I sat down too and pondered the situation.

I’d thought that if I let everyone know about my brother’s oath and Flora’s attribute, no one would dare bully her so openly again, but their response had been far beyond the scope of my expectations. It must have been an effect of the Yulnova prestige. In the game, the heroine kept being bullied for quite some time, even after this event. A notable point of divergence.

I wondered, would the bullying stop for good after today? Or would the laws of the game kick in and force things to follow the original storyline?

Needless to say, I’d be overjoyed if no one bothered Flora anymore, but I had to admit the thought of straying too far away from the original plot scared me. There was no telling what consequences could arise. From now on, I would stay on my guard!

Still, what *was* this world?

Yes, this was the world of the game, and so many things that were outright impossible in my old world were completely natural here—monsters and magic, for starters—and a peculiar force made it so that the game’s events occurred here too. But that wasn’t the extent of it. Just like in my past world, people, *real*

people, lived here. They interacted, built relationships, had feelings, and were capable of change.

Well, some things *were* different from my past world. *I mean, I'm a noble in this one, after all.*

The flags still scared me, but I was thankful for this second life of mine. Despite existing inside the world of a game, I felt very much alive.

Alexei's Overwork Flag (and Ekaterina's Trauma)

"Brother, do you love me?"

Alexei's electric blue eyes widened in surprise. It was not often his younger sister visited him in his office after class, much less with such a serious expression plastered on her face. She held her hands in front of her chest as though ready to pray. Her beautiful face, framed by long indigo hair, made her look older than fifteen, yet her large blue eyes flecked with purple possessed all the innocence of fresh summer blossoms.

There was a sort of unbalance in her, Alexei always thought. One moment, she astonished the executives of the duchy with brilliant ideas no adults had ever thought of, and the next she was back to being the secluded young lady who, in her ignorance of the ways of the world, marveled at the smallest thing.

As these thoughts went through his mind, Alexei answered resolutely, "Of course, Ekaterina. Have I done anything to make you doubt it?"

At his words, a smile popped up on Ekaterina's face. She seemed genuinely happy, in the most childlike of ways. While Ekaterina's beauty made her intimidating and hard to approach, this particular expression had its way of turning her countenance youthful again. Alexei doubted she'd ever noticed that about herself, though.

"How could you?" she answered. "No matter what you do or say, I wouldn't doubt your love. I just felt like hearing it. I hope you can forgive my selfishness."

Alexei smiled. He was ready to fulfill Ekaterina's every whim at any time.

"I love you, Ekaterina. Even if the day comes when you don't wish for my affection anymore, I couldn't erase this feeling. So, if your love fades away one day, I hope you'll at least permit me to continue loving you."

"Oh, brother, I too feel the same. I certainly do hope you don't doubt my sincerity either," Ekaterina answered. She remained silent for a moment before smiling and adding, "Besides, I don't think such a day will ever come. Since I

won't need to grant you any such permission, may I make a request instead?"

"A request? Of what kind?"

"You're far too busy every single day, brother. You told me at lunch that you'd worked until late yesterday. I'm so worried about you I can hardly take it. Please, I request that you at least take the rest of today off. Just one little day, for my sake."

Alexei was at a loss for words. After a moment, he let out a soft laugh.

"So that is your request. I don't believe I've ever heard of another young lady whose wishes and whims are anything like yours. This is hardly selfish, Ekaterina. You're endlessly kind."

"Brother, I hope you don't think that I look down on your work or anything like that... I'm aware you have much to do, but too much work is bound to affect your health. Sometimes, overwork can even lead to death! Please heed my request. I know you loved and respected our grandfather, but I do not wish to see you pass away early like him."

The atmosphere in the office tensed when Ekaterina mentioned their grandfather. As soon as she noticed it, her expression shifted.

Alexei said quietly, "You don't know how he died."

"I don't... I'm sorry for saying something so insensitive. I shouldn't have."

"No, it's fine. I never told you anything about it."

Ekaterina dropped her head, so Alexei immediately reached out, stroking her long hair gently. She smiled, letting out a sigh of relief, and nuzzled up against him. The cute motion, coupled with her slanted eyes, made her seem like a cat. People tended to avoid him most of the time, so Alexei couldn't help but pamper his little sister, who seemed to genuinely enjoy his touch.

"Anyway, you want me to wrap up work for today, right?"

"Yes!" She said as much to Alexei before turning to the other people present in the room. "I'm sure this will cause a lot of trouble to those of you who are waiting on my brother's approval to carry on with your own work..."

Novak cleared his throat. "There is nothing urgent to handle today."

“Is that true?”

These days, Novak too has grown soft on Ekaterina, Alexei thought as he smiled at his sister.

“All right, then. I shall stop for the day. And *you* shall return to your dormitory and rest. You’re far worse at taking care of your health than I am.”

Ekaterina had brightened up so much that he sometimes forgot about it, but, up until a few months ago, the sickly girl had lived in complete isolation. While her porcelain skin made her beauty stand out, Alexei’s heart ached whenever he remembered that it was but a consequence of her poor health that rendered her unable to wander outside for prolonged periods of time. Whenever he thought of how slender her body had felt in his arms when he’d carried her after she’d passed out, he felt an urge to take care of her as well as he possibly could.

Ekaterina’s smile and cheerful voice pulled him out of his thoughts, “My! That makes me so happy! You’ll truly grant my wish, brother? Will you go back to your room, enjoy a nice meal, and go to bed early?”

This wasn’t the first time Alexei gave in, only to have Ekaterina pile up the demands. She had a way of becoming persuasive when she wanted to. He wondered if that was what people called a woman’s strength.

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Alexei said. “I just need to sign these documents and I’ll be done. So go on, return to your dormitory.”

“Yes, brother! I’ll do as you say.”

She was still worried, but she nodded. She was a smart girl and knew when to be good and obey.

“I’m sorry for the trouble,” Alexei said after she’d left.

Immediately, the duchy’s executives shook their heads.

“There is no need for you to worry about that, Your Grace,” Halil Talal said.

The foreign, dark-skinned trade advisor often received Ekaterina’s proposals, and he was one of her most ardent supporters. Part of it was because he valued

her input, but he most likely also felt a sense of kinship with her. When Alexandra had taken control of the duchy, she'd fired him from his official position, forcing him to work from the shadows.

"A young lady's whims are sacred," Aaron said.

Alexei laughed at the words of his mine advisor. It was an interesting turn of phrase. Alexei knew that his advisors looked at Ekaterina, whose whims were simply worries over him, just as fondly as he did.

"If you don't listen to the kind whims of our kind lady, you'll suffer divine punishment, Your Grace," Ivan said intently. "It's already commendable that she brings you lunch every day, but she even makes a share for me. She wraps it twice over so that it won't grow cold while I serve you. You'd be hard-pressed to find another young lady who is so thoughtful of everyone."

As he listened to his attendant's opinion, Alexei smiled.

"Ivan, could you risk your life for my younger sister?" he asked.

"Naturally," Ivan answered immediately.

"Then I shall give you a new command," Alexei said. "If something happens to me and you are still breathing, protect Ekaterina in my stead. The current laws of our empire allow women to inherit. If I die, Ekaterina shall be the next head of the Yulnova."

Sixteen years ago, one year after Alexei's birth, a new law had been enacted, allowing women to become the heads of their families. Even before then, women sometimes found themselves assuming those responsibilities through the vagaries of life, but they'd suffered from being in very precarious positions where ambitious blood relatives could sweep in and usurp their power. The thought of these women, left vulnerable by the empire's laws, had weighed heavily on the crown prince—now the emperor—and his future empress. The two had pushed to change the law against the strong opposition of a part of the nobility. It was only at the cost of much effort that their proposal had finally been enacted.

"Understood," Ivan said. "I don't believe such a time will come, as I expect to be dead before any harm comes your way, but I swear to protect her ladyship if

I find myself in this situation.”

Ivan was both Alexei’s attendant and his bodyguard. He’d been hired shortly after Alexei’s grandfather’s death, and the man was so skilled that anyone would agree he was worth his weight in gold. Nonetheless, Alexandra had despised him. It was plain to see that Ivan was particularly fond of Ekaterina, the polar opposite of Alexandra in many ways.

“Still, her ladyship is becoming more and more like a mother hen by the day,” Novak said, putting the documents Alexei had signed a moment before in order.

“She does tend to worry a little too much,” Alexei answered with a strained smile. “I have no idea where she hears such things. Besides, thanks to you helping me as you helped grandfather when he was busy with government affairs, I don’t often find myself overworked.”

All of Alexei’s subordinates used to work for his grandfather. During his lifetime, Sergei occupied several key positions in the imperial government, such as prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. This had made it impossible for him to devote all of his time to the duchy. The only reason everything had stayed on track was the ingenious system he’d put in place.

After inheriting the title, Aleksandr had never tried to do an ounce of the work, leaving everything in Novak’s hands. Alexei had accomplished a part of the labor, sure, but he’d been young back then. Regardless, the organization Sergei had left behind had been effective enough to weather the storm, proving that each of the duchy’s executives was incredibly competent.

Obviously, their current setup was only a temporary fix until Alexei could fully take on his role as the duke, but the fact that they’d been able to hold on was noteworthy.

Not even a year had gone by since Alexei had inherited his father’s title. He still had much to do, including making sure the people who had been loyal to his grandmother now followed his rules and investigating unusual money flows within the duchy. But it wasn’t so much work that he risked dying.

“She seems to believe that grandfather passed away from overwork,” Alexei whispered. The men in the room shared a look with one another.

“Someone might have made up a reason for Lord Sergei’s passing since they couldn’t tell her the truth. Well, I suppose not many in the main residence are even aware of the truth,” Novak said, his tone grave.

“Your Grace. Will you tell her?” Aaron asked.

Alexei shook his head. “It’s too soon.”

“I suppose her ladyship is worried about you because you have to handle your schoolwork on top of the duchy’s affairs. She started studying for the first time a month before her admission, so she must be hard at work every day, trying to catch up, and most likely assumes that you do just as much.”

“That’s right. I am far more worried about *her* health. At least it seems like she respects lights-out.”

At the dorms, every student had to turn off their lights at ten. Alexei was a serious young man and followed the rules without fail. He awoke along with the sun and usually practiced his swordsmanship first thing in the morning. He slept a different amount of time depending on the season, but he’d long grown used to that rhythm.

Ekaterina kept saying that she worried about him overworking himself. The trigger had most likely been that time he’d been dragged back to work while he was sitting by her bedside. However, at the time, he’d already taken a long break to travel between the duchy and the capital. Work had simply piled up. Besides, it had been March, the busiest time of the year.

In other words, it had been an exception, not the rule. Alexei didn’t usually live like that.

“She’s just as busy as I with her studies and cooking. Not to mention she tends to give every little thing her best. Her body is so frail, but she doesn’t seem to realize that. She never thinks of herself and spends her time worrying about others. She’s a good girl—*too* good.”

“We need to ensure that she doesn’t overexert herself,” Ivan said. “Mina takes good care of her, but like the rest of us, she tends to spoil her too much. I’ll tell her to be careful.”

Unbeknownst to the rest of them, Ekaterina’s trauma from her past life was

what made her assume the worst whenever she saw someone working too much. Despite that, she was nonchalant about the effort she herself poured into things. She'd died from overwork but hadn't learned a thing.

Needless to say, she hadn't noticed any of that.

Would the day when she could look at herself from an objective point of view ever come? One thing was for sure: if that day did arrive, it wouldn't be for a long, *long* time.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book. Nice to meet you, I'm Chidori Hama.

This novel is a so-called villainess story that revolves around a modern character being reborn into the otome game she used to play in her past life. She knows that only doom awaits her if she follows the original plot of the game and finds herself fighting against destiny to escape her fate.

When I first read a story with a similar trope, my first thought was to question the nature of the game's world. The world of a game doesn't exist, so how could anyone transmigrate into it? That oddity left a strong impression on me and I found myself wondering what I could do with it. What kind of story would I write? What kind of characters? Eventually, that train of thought gave birth to Ekaterina and Alexei's story.

I've loved writing ever since I was a primary school student. I'd lost track of my passion, but this work allowed me to reconnect with it for the first time in forever. I am incredibly thankful that so many people read it while I posted the chapters online. It's all thanks to you that my work caught the eye of an editor at Kadokawa Beans Bunko, allowing me to publish this story.

Thank you so much for digging pretty boys with glasses as much as I do! Thank goodness I gave Alexei a monocle!

Leaving the jokes aside, I'm beyond grateful to my amazing editor. This was my first time working with a publisher, and they helped me every step of the way when I was completely lost! They helped me get over my fear that this offer was just one big prank. I suppose it was a ridiculous fear to begin with, so I'm terribly sorry for that.

I'd also like to thank the wonderful artist who drew the illustrations for this book, Wan Hachipisu-sama. I was overjoyed when I saw the gorgeous Alexei and beautiful Ekaterina! How magnificent they are!

Finally, please allow me to thank you, my dear readers, who've been following me since the web novel. I'm incredibly thankful for everything! Some of you even shared your thoughts with me or left reviews. I can't begin to say how helpful that has been to keep my motivation up!

I've received a lot of comments along the lines of:

"These siblings should just stay together forever!"

"Big bro's is so dreamy, he ruined all other men for Ekaterina."

"I can't see either of them pursuing a serious relationship with anyone."

What kind of future awaits Ekaterina, who loves her big brother, and Alexei, who adores Ekaterina more than anyone else?

I hope you're excited to find out!

Chidori Hama

Goodbye,

Author Chidori Hama

Illustrator Wan Hachipisu

1

Overtime!



This Reincarnated
Villainess Is Living
for Her New
Big Brother



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AKUYAKUREIJO, BURAKON NI JOB CHANGE SHIMASU Vol. 1

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