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Goodbye, Overtime!

**This Reincarnated
Villainess** Is Living
for Her New
Big Brother

2

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characters

Ekaterina Yulnova

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



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.

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Prologue: ICBM—Intercontinental Ballistic Message!

Despite her noble station, Ekaterina, the young lady of the House of Yulnova—one of the three grand ducal houses of the Yulgran Empire—ran to the kitchen almost every day to prepare lunch for her brother.

Said brother, Alexei, was already the head of the family at the young age of seventeen. In order to get through all of the work needed to govern a large duchy, Alexei borrowed a room at the Magic Academy where his subordinates joined him. They had much to do, and Ekaterina worried every day for her capable brother. With his overly serious personality, she feared he would drive himself to an early death from overwork.

The origin of her worries could be traced back to her memories of her previous life. Before being reborn as Ekaterina Yulnova, she had been Yukimura Rina, a systems engineer who'd died of overwork herself before she could even celebrate her thirtieth birthday. Her only solace in that life had been an otome game called *Infinity World: The Maiden of Salvation*. More specifically, what she'd loved was one of the characters: the doting brother of the villainess. That character was not even one of the love interests, and he barely appeared, but that hadn't stopped Rina from using every moment of her free time to play the game in order to catch a glimpse of him.

Two months ago, after suddenly recovering her memories, Rina had realized that *she* was the villainess of the game she'd spent so much time on.

Actually, saying that she *was* Ekaterina was slightly inaccurate. Her Rina personality, newly recovered from her memories, and her Ekaterina personality, who'd lived her life normally until that day, were so different that they'd initially clashed. During that time, her body had been in chaos, and she'd collapsed again and again. After her first collapse, she'd awoken in utter confusion. There she was, inside the world of a game. How did that make sense?

It had taken three full days for her two personalities to reconcile their new

reality and merge.

Still, she'd managed to recover quickly. Alexei was even more wonderful in real life than in the game, and he loved her very much. In all of his old-school tsundere glory, he was cold to others yet endlessly sweet to her. This prompted a sense of optimism in Ekaterina. She was inside a game, sure, but she got to be showered with her fave's love! Was there any better way to live?

Nope, she concluded.

Ekaterina had been separated from Alexei at birth, and the siblings had grown up isolated from each other. The one responsible for that was their grandmother, Alexandra, a capricious woman born an imperial princess. All her life, she'd used her status to do as she pleased. She'd relentlessly bullied Anastasia, Ekaterina and Alexei's mother, until she and her daughter were forced to live in poverty in a run-down secondary residence, away from the world.

Alexei had always despised the fact that his mother and sister had to live in isolation, but he had assumed they were safe there. He'd felt terrible guilt when he discovered how bad their living conditions were, and as soon as he succeeded to duke upon the deaths of his father and grandmother, he'd tried to rescue his mother.

However, the harsh living conditions had already taken their toll on her. In her last moments, she'd mistaken her son for her husband and passed soon after, leaving Alexei with only one remaining family member—Ekaterina, the sister he had never known but who looked so much like his mother. This was what led to his obsession with his sister.

To think that story wasn't explained in the game! They're both so pitiful!

If the rest of the story progressed like in the game, my brother and I, the villainess, were both doomed. However, since I'd gotten my memories back, I sure as hell wasn't about to let that happen! Depending on the route we embarked on, there was also a risk the empire would be attacked by the Dragon King and fall, so I wasn't sleeping on that problem either!

I'll do anything I can to prevent such futures from coming to pass! I'll lower all

of the flags and lead us toward happiness!

While I was at it, I'd also make sure to stop my brother from dying from overwork!

I'd made these resolutions after recovering my memories and had thus decided to stay away from the heroine and the main love interest, the crown prince. However, along the way, I'd become friends with them both. Whoops!

Still, the heroine, the prince, my brother, and I had joined forces to clear one of the key events of the game, driving back the monster that had attacked the academy. Thanks to that, the empire would (most likely) not fall!

All I had to do now was push the heroine into the arms of her charming prince and everything would probably be fine. Although for the time being, that part wasn't exactly going all that well—maybe? Hard to say.

Regardless, with the safety of the empire more or less guaranteed, I felt as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

I can take it easy for a while.



Today, like most other days, Flora and I cooked together before packing everything inside our baskets and carrying them to my brother's office.

Flora Cherny, my friend and the young lady of a baron's house, was the heroine of the game. In the original story, Ekaterina bullied her because of her commoner origins. After recovering my memories, I'd initially sworn never to approach her, but it hadn't worked out like that, okay? By now, the kindhearted, bright Flora and I were basically inseparable.

"Welcome, my lady."

My brother's attendant, Ivan, immediately opened the door. He was all smiles, but I noticed that it seemed a little forced today.

"Is something wrong, Ivan?" I asked. "You seem down."

"It's nothing," he replied. "It's just that I failed to be as thorough as usual when sharpening His Grace's pen, and the feel appears to be off."

For something he said was nothing, Ivan seemed ashamed. The "pen" he was

talking about was a quill pen—in other words, a sharpened feather. They needed to be sharpened with dedicated knives before use. Depending on the way it was done, it could be harder or easier to write with the resulting pen. Preparing Alexei's quill pens was Ivan's job, and it was quite unusual for him to mess up.

"You're very dedicated, Ivan," I said with a smile.

As someone who knew how much easier life was with modern pens, I couldn't help but admire Ivan's endeavors to produce the perfect quill despite the hassle.

Can someone please invent something better already? Pretty please?

Anyway, there was a new face inside my brother's office: Ephrem Rosen, the knight commander of the Yulnova Duchy. He was a taciturn and handsome man in his midforties, with gray hair and a matching mustache. The armor he wore reminded me of the cliché armor most knights wore in the fantasy stories I'd seen and read in my previous world—a fairly close imitation of the Knights Templar gear.

I was getting excited at the idea of sharing a meal with a man like that when Alexei spoke up.

"The roses will soon be in full bloom. I've just gotten word that the day of the imperial family's visit to our capital residence has been set. It will be your first meeting with Their Imperial Majesties the Emperor and Empress. If you need anything to prepare for that day, do let me know, Ekaterina."

"S-Sorry?"

The imperial family would visit our house? An imperial visit—that reminded me of something!

"Please retain your colors until the imperial visit..." That's the end of one of the poems of Hyakunin Isshu. What was the beginning again?

"Your peak covered in red leaves. If you have a heart..." Though, I can't recall what peak this is about! Wait, I know! Mount Ogura!

Am I thinking of random poems to run away from reality? Yes! All right, all

right, time to settle down. Wait, nothing's all right! The entire imperial family is gonna visit us!

My brother truly knew how to make an impactful announcement. I'd understood every word, but my brain still couldn't process the news. I felt as though an ICBM had just come crashing through my windows!

Alexei must have noticed me going pale, because he scrambled to explain what this was about. The three grand ducal houses each had a flower they used as a symbol, and each grew theirs in a large garden in their respective capital residences. It was customary for the imperial family to visit them yearly when these flowers were in full bloom.

Now that I thought about it, we did have a gigantic rose garden at home, but I had no idea it was a thing for the imperial family to come to admire it every year!

"I'm sorry, Ekaterina. I made a grave error," Alexei said. He brought one of his hands to his chin and—in a rare occurrence—looked almost panicked. "I should have warned you earlier! New dresses take a long time to prepare, so I should have given you more time. What an oversight..."

"It's all right, brother," I hurried to say. "It's my fault for not knowing something so important."

To Alexei, this was common knowledge. The thought of explaining such events to me most likely had never crossed his mind. Eight months had passed since I'd come out of my confinement, so I could only blame myself for staying cooped up for six months and failing to learn about the world.

All that to say: my brother wasn't to blame. No way!

In any case, I couldn't help but be impressed by the three grand ducal families! To think they got to do flower-viewing parties with the imperial family every year! I'd never expected such a thing!

Now, the issue was that thinking about attending the party made me feel like passing out!

Alexei had asked me to tell him if I needed anything to "prepare for that day," but what was I even supposed to prepare?

I have no clue! I can't even picture what it'll be like! What do I do?!

"There is no need for you to be so nervous, my lady," Novak, Alexei's aide and mentor, said. "This event is held every year. The servants know how to prepare for it. The only thing for you to consider is your attire."

His sensible words were a balm on my anxiety. Of course, this was a regular thing for everyone but me.

"It's not my place to say, but I'm sure you'll be fine," Flora said, patting my back softly. "His Grace and Prince Mikhail will be by your side."

Ah, true! I could spend the entire day hidden behind Alexei! Besides, I already knew one of the members of the imperial family. The only people I needed to worry about were the emperor and the empress.

"You'll have no problem having a new dress made either," Halil, Alexei's trade advisor, said with a smile. "As long as you do not request something too elaborate and place your order soon, it'll be ready for you on time. Fortunately, tomorrow is the weekend. You could return to your residence to make arrangements."

Hey, why are you the dress-ordering expert when you're a guy? Oh, right, you're a merchant.

Still, how shocked did I look for everyone to attempt to reassure me so much?

Time to get over it, me!

"Thank you so much, everyone. I'm much more settled now."

I had to purchase an outfit for the big day. A fancy dress...

There must be trends in this society too, right?

"If I may, my lady, I advise you not to pick a dress in accordance with the latest fad," Aaron said with a sigh.

I couldn't help but be surprised. Our young mine advisor looked like a poised scholar, so I hadn't expected him to have clear-cut opinions on women's fashion.



Aaron continued, “The Yulnova Duchy produces jewels, but in recent years, customers have stopped purchasing them and their value has dropped. Recent fashion focuses on extravagant silk imported from beyond the Summit of the Gods. The fabric is woven with intricate patterns, so most avoid wearing large jewels with it. They say the combination is in poor taste.”

The Summit of the Gods was the name of the large mountain range that rose in the center of the continent and separated the east and west. The spine of the continent was similar to the Himalayas in my previous world, only far steeper and more inaccessible. Because of this, most of the trade between the east and west had to go by sea.

“Even though we’re finally able to mine and put the finest gems on the market! It’s such a shame. Jewels should reign supreme over all minerals, yet no one wants them,” Aaron lamented.

I’d forgotten Aaron was obsessed with mining and stones. It was quite a feat that he’d made use of that passion to rise to the post of mining advisor.

Something bugged me, though. What did he mean by “finally”?

“Were we unable to sell the fine gems we extracted in the past?” I asked.

The atmosphere in the room grew tense at my question.

How come?

Alexei’s face soured as he answered, “Our grandmother declared all precious jewels hers and refused to let them leave the territory. Her fussing over shiny stones was better than her poking her nose into the iron ore business, so I let her be.”

The old hag? Again?!

I wasn’t surprised to hear that Alexandra, our awful grandmother, had been up to something *else* in the past. After our respectable grandfather Sergei had passed away, she’d been the one to force my mother and me into a life of misery. The prideful princess truly had done whatever she wanted without recourse.

So, when she wasn’t busy bullying my mother, she had other troublesome

hobbies!

It sounded like Alexei had been quite involved with the duchy's affairs even while our father and the old hag were alive. I had already suspected as much, but it was still shocking to have it confirmed. She'd forced a little boy to work and had even *hindered* that work with her greed. She'd deserved nothing more than to become monster fodder!

Oops. I shouldn't speak ill of the dead. Dead people are all Buddha! Though, pretty sure Buddhism isn't a thing in this world. Still, I need to calm down. Gotta get it together.

More importantly, was Aaron trying to say he wanted me to show everyone the beauty of our jewels? Like advertising our local specialty, right? The thought made me feel a bit like a tourism ambassador.

I think that's anything but the job of a villainess but, hey, why not?

"Large stones are usually said to be unsuitable for young girls, but with your poise and beauty, I'm sure one would look beautiful on you. I'll prepare a parure so exquisite even Her Imperial Majesty the Empress will envy you, so please wear it," Halil said, clearly also excited about using me as a free billboard. "Oh, and, Your Grace, don't you think that Celestial Blue would be a perfect fit for her ladyship? What do you say, my lady? It's about time for Her Imperial Majesty the Empress to set a new trend! This is the perfect occasion to give her a push."

What's Celestial Blue? Whatever it is, if I can help, I'm happy to. I just hope they don't expect too much from me.

"Ekaterina, don't feel pressured to wear jewels or Celestial Blue. You can do whatever you'd like. If you prefer imported silk, you may purchase as many bolts as you desire. That *is* the safest choice to meet Her Imperial Majesty. She pioneered this trend, after all," Alexei explained. "Her family, the House of Yulsein, controls the port through which most of the merchandise exchanged between the east and west travels. Such goods make their fortune, and this process has also allowed the empire to increase its exports to the east, bringing profits to the entire nation. Her Imperial Majesty is very wise."

"My..." I couldn't help but voice my admiration. "By popularizing a product

with a large profit margin like silk, she enticed eastern merchants to travel to the empire. But filling an entire ship with fabric is nearly impossible, so they must bring along anything they can sell. If they're purchased together with the silk, the merchants are surely amenable to offering discounts, and then those goods circulate in the empire and improve the flow of commerce. Likewise, making the return trip with an empty ship would be a waste, so the eastern merchants fill up their cargo hold with imperial goods on the way home, thus increasing our exports."

The empress is clever indeed.

She reminded me of the young ladies of Sengoku period Japan or Italy during the Renaissance. Back then, the ideal daughter was one who could mediate between her birth family and her husband's family and bring prosperity to the two.

"How splendid!" I continued. "Setting fashion trends is expected of an empress, so she could not be criticized for doing so, and she revitalized her family's territory while ensuring the empire profits too! Her Imperial Majesty acted impeccably! Am I correct?"

"You...were quick to comprehend the big picture, my lady," Novak said, perplexed.

He seemed to have a hard time believing a fifteen-year-old girl could understand all this and draw the correct conclusions in a matter of seconds.

I'm a fully grown adult with experience working on goods distribution systems and order systems, sir!

Even if I hadn't studied commerce, I'd developed countless systems for salespeople. Plus, to be fair, some of my understanding came from the finance documentaries I'd enjoyed watching. I was a bit of an old man at heart.

"Could it be that you one day hope to sit on the empress's throne and accomplish such things yourself?" he asked.

"No! Oh no, no, no! That's the very opposite of what I want!" I reflexively exclaimed, shutting down the idea at once.

Even the monster attack, which was the part of *Infinity World* I'd thought was

least likely to happen in a “real” world, had played out just like in the game! If I, the villainess, so much as *breathed* in the direction of the imperial throne, a doom flag would pop up over my head right away. I absolutely did *not* want that!

Brrr! How scary!

I regained my bearing just enough to see that Novak’s face had paled. In an attempt to recover, I blurted out, “I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to be willful! It’s just that the prospect of joining the imperial family is quite...”

“Ah, is that right?” Novak murmured, sounding a little disappointed.

“It’s fine. I’ve long since decided it was too much,” Alexei said. For some reason, he seemed to be in a good mood.

“Rosen,” he continued, “isn’t my sister wise? Until the day I take a wife or she leaves the family to marry, she shall be the mistress of the House of Yulnova. I want you to swear allegiance to her and make her the Lady of the Order of Yulnova. Arrange to pledge your sword to her on the eve of the imperial family’s arrival. If anything happens to me, you and your knights will serve Ekaterina as your new master.”

“Everything shall be as you command, Your Grace,” the knight commander exclaimed, standing up and bringing his fist to his chest before bowing. “I’ve heard much of your sister’s wits and benevolence from Moldo, who will soon be joining our ranks. Having her as the lady of our order would be a great honor.”

The “Lady of the Order,” me? That and the stuff about pledging his sword to me were right out of a medieval romance! To be honest, my heart skipped a beat!

Alexei stroked my hair and smiled.

“There are still many things that should rightfully be yours as a daughter of the House of Yulnova that you have yet to receive. I’ll endeavor to fix that as soon as possible. You’re sickly, Ekaterina, so there is no need for you to aim for the rank of empress. Just do your best to prepare for your audience with Their Majesties. That will be more than enough for now.”

“I understand, brother. I will do as you say,” I answered, relief washing over

me.

Thank you so much, Alexei.

Also, so sorry I whined about that sickly image of mine so many times! There is no better excuse not to become the empress. Just watch me making full use of that from now on while I dodge every damn flag that comes our way!

Chapter 1: The Rose of Yulnova

The following day, Alexei and I boarded a carriage and returned to our capital residence.

Roses had already started blooming in the large garden, and several gardeners were running around caring for them. There were plenty of different varieties in the garden; their job was to make sure each would be in full bloom on the day of the imperial visit.

Apparently, people often said that there were “no roses you couldn’t see in the garden of the Yulnova, only roses you could see nowhere else.” Making adjustments so that all of these would bloom at the same time must have been incredibly difficult. The imperial family visited every year, but the frequency didn’t make it any less of a big deal.

Since lunchtime yesterday, I’d been worrying over how to choose and order a dress. When I’d gotten back to my dorm room after class, I’d complained about it to Mina.

“Procuring dresses is a servant’s job, my lady,” she’d answered, her tone even and her face void of emotion as usual. “I will take care of everything else, so you just need to decide what kind of outfit you’d like to wear.”

I’d been taken aback by that answer at first, but after thinking about it for a while, it made sense. For the past six months, I’d received more dresses than I could count without ever going out of my way to order them myself. They’d been prepared for me, so I’d just worn whatever I was given.

That said, most of them hadn’t looked great on me. With my indigo hair and mature appearance, frilly yellow dresses were a bit of a fashion faux pas. They made me look ridiculous.

From what I’d gathered, the better process for these things was to get a servant to call upon a designer. You then told them what kind of dress you were looking for, and they’d show you some sketches. Next, you’d order the designs

you liked best.

So, after serving me dinner, Mina had stepped out to set up an appointment with a popular capital designer. She was set to meet me today at our residence. Wasn't Mina managing to book an appointment for the following day amazing? *That Time My Beautiful Maid Was Mad Efficient.*

Well, the Yulnova influence had probably helped.

It was now time for me to meet the designer! Her name was Camilla Croce, an up-and-coming designer who'd only recently turned thirty. The thin, energetic woman wore her silver, green-tinged hair in an intricate updo.

When I suggested she sit down with me, she looked at me with wide eyes. Did noble ladies usually make designers stand for the duration of their meetings? I hesitated, but I didn't think I could focus while forcing her to stand, so I once again offered her the seat opposite me. Eventually, she accepted and sat down across the table.

I started explaining to her that I needed a dress for the imperial visit and that I was hoping to have something made with a simple design so as not to appear rude or showy.

"A simpler design will make your natural beauty stand out," Camilla said with a note of relief. "It also happens to align with the current fashion, as we strive to emphasize the beauty of the fabric. It shall fit you like a glove, my lady. I have brought along some samples of fabrics you may like: gorgeous, high-quality silks direct from the realms of the east. I'm sure you'll love them."

"Oh, about that. I already have an idea of the fabric I'd like to use."

At my signal, Mina spread out several pieces of fabric on the table. I'd gotten them from Halil this very morning.

"Are you familiar with Celestial Blue?" I asked.

All of the cloth on the table was blue, with the darkest an intense, rich shade of the color. It looked as though a piece of early twilight sky had been cut out and laid down as fabric. It was somehow equally deep and clear, and so beautiful I found myself captivated whenever my eyes wandered its way. The lighter shades were also gorgeous, one of them reminding me of the sky in the

spring, while the very lightest was much like the zenith of the sky blending into the clouds on a bright summer day. Still, the dark one was my favorite.

I'll just come out and say it: I fell in love at first sight!

This world called this color “Celestial Blue.”

I don't know who coined such a pretty name for it, but I give them my full stamp of approval! Good marketing!

The term referred specifically to the blue dye and pigments made using lapis lazuli mined in the Yulnova Duchy. Fabric dyed in this color was incredibly expensive. The darkest shade in particular was beyond pricey, and the amount needed to make a single dress cost well over the annual income of a regular commoner family.

It resembled a color that was called ultramarine in English—“the blue from beyond the sea.” Europeans used to source lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, hence the reference to the sea. In my past life, one of my university friends had been an art nerd and loved to paint. She had obsessed over this particular type of blue, so I had known already that lapis lazuli could be used to make such a pigment before coming to this world.

“Of course, I’m familiar with Celestial Blue, but...” Camilla’s eyes were glued to the table. “This is my first time seeing such a uniform dye job with this color. Are these unusually made?”

“Why, indeed,” I answered. “This was not dyed using ground lapis lazuli but a new pigment.”

The one who’d discovered it was our grandfather’s younger brother, Isaac. Aaron (the mineral freak) had told me about him at length, his eyes shining like he was a maiden in love. Apparently, Isaac was the best mineralogist in the history of the empire. This new pigment was not found in mines but man-made. I supposed Isaac had discovered a way to make something similar to synthetic ultramarine.

“With this new dye, we’ll be able to produce cheaper yet upgraded fabric! I’d love for Her Imperial Majesty the Empress to see it. With her acknowledgment, it’ll surely spread swiftly across the empire.”

“Cheaper...” Camilla repeated.

Got her!

“That’s wonderful!” she exclaimed, before composing herself. “I apologize for my rudeness. As the young lady of the House of Yulnova, you do not have to worry about such things. I just thought of all the ladies who may now get a chance to wear this beautiful blue.”

“Those are my thoughts exactly,” I said.

With the meddlesome old hag out of the way, there’s no one here who’ll whine about these things reaching other territories!

The truth was that ten years had already gone by since Granduncle Isaac had discovered a way to synthesize this pigment. It’d been in the process of being researched further to stabilize the formula when our grandfather passed, and the old hag had decided to kill the project because she’d refused to let anyone but those who were noble enough to afford it get their hands on the Celestial Blue of the Yulnova.

Halil and the others had promised to stop everything to placate her but had actually kept the research going. The pigment had been finalized a while ago but, even after grandmother died, they hadn’t been able to market it because of the current foreign-fabric trend.

I was starting to realize that my brother and his subordinates were most likely busy every day because there was still a lot of damage to undo.

Ha ha! I hope they make it so cheap that even commoners can afford it. Turn in your grave, you old hag!

“I’d also like you to incorporate a jewel from the duchy in your design. You may pick whichever inspires you,” I said.

Mina brought several gems neatly arranged in a case and showed them to Camilla. We’d received them from Aaron.

The precious stones gleamed in various colors. They were all several centimeters large in diameter, and even I, a complete neophyte, could tell from their vibrant colors that they were fine gems. In my past world, each of these

would have sold for wild prices I couldn't even imagine. Millions of yen? Tens of millions? Perhaps even hundreds?! Just thinking about it made me dizzy.

I'm just a living billboard! These aren't mine! I'm just borrowing them! I reassured myself.

"I'm fully aware that my request does not match the current trend, but as a representative of the Yulnova Duchy, I wish to display the charms of our territory to Their Majesties. I'll have the stone you choose embedded into a simple brooch, so please secure it onto the gown."

"My! What beautiful, fine jewels. I believe I understand what you want. A simple and elegant design that will elevate the gem and the gorgeous blue color. The colors shall be the focal point of your outfit, yes, yes! I'm sure I can make you look like a mysterious goddess with these!" Camilla exclaimed. She began to run her pen over her sketchbook. "Let's forget the trends and create a new path for you! Oh, it will be grandiose! I shall give this everything I have!"

From then on, we engaged in a heated battle. On one side was Miss Camilla, who wanted the design to be simple yet eye-catching, and I was on the other, trying to get her to draw something even simpler so that only the fabric would stand out.

Initially, I'd intended to give her free rein over the design, but somewhere along the way, I started having a lot of fun participating. Besides, the thought that I could be useful to my brother in this way fired me up.

I'm starting to look forward to the flower-viewing party. Uh, just a skosh, though.

"My lady," Camilla said after we'd more or less agreed on the design, "your outlook on most things is the opposite of your late grandmother's."

"You met my grandmother?"

"Indeed, when I was just starting out. She was a strict—no, a dignified and proud lady, I should say."

You can go ahead and admit she was an impossible old hag, I won't mind, I thought loudly without voicing it.

“Did something happen between the two of you?” I asked instead.

“No! Not quite. It’s just that she was quite famous in our circles for ordering new dresses *very* often, so I’d hoped to catch her attention. I once had the opportunity to make her a dress but...while she did keep it, she let me know that she did not like it. It was a lavish dress with quite the intricate design and...”

Customers like that totally rang a bell. I’d met my share in my previous life.

I cleared my throat and asked, “At that point, had she paid you for your work?”

“You’re sharp, my lady. That’s the thing. I was never able to charge her for the dress.”

That she-devil, for real!!! A proud lady? Don’t make me laugh! If she’d had any decency, she wouldn’t have trampled on a young designer like that!

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but do you happen to have anything proving she did not pay?” I asked.

“I do. I kept the letter I received from her maid. It stated that she did not consider that she had received anything at all, as she disliked the dress. Thus, she would not pay.”

I was starting to feel sick. How could you accept and keep the dress while refusing to offer payment because you didn’t like it? *Hello, lady? Did your brain ever work?*

“Mina...” I said.

“I’ll let Graham know.”

“Thank you. Please show that letter to our butler, Graham. You shall be paid what you’re owed, and allow me to apologize for my grandmother’s behavior.”

“Thank you very much, my lady!” Camilla exclaimed, bowing deeply.

Managing cash flow must be a nightmare for designers. *I’m so sorry our resident witch did that to you, Camilla!*

“How admirable you are!” Camilla continued. “You are kind, have impeccable

taste, and act so wisely in spite of your young age. As the daughter of the noble House of Yulnova, you have no need to concern yourself with my matters, but you showed me such consideration. Why, I cannot help but be moved.”

Yeah, I’m probably the furthest thing from a noble lady inside. Sorry for the deception!

I knew she was just flattering me, but since I was basically a fraud, I awkwardly accepted the compliment in silence.

“If you like the dress I make for you, I hope you’ll call upon me again in the future,” she said.

“Why, of course. Likewise, I’d be overjoyed if you recommended our Celestial Blue to other ladies of the capital if you enjoy working with it. Sadly, it’s not widely known yet.”

“Using Celestial Blue more often would be my honor, my lady! I can already think of a few ladies whom it would suit beautifully and who usually have a taste for novelty. I love the color, and I’ll happily promote it as much as I can for your sake, my lady.”

“I’m delighted to hear you say that.”

Having a new option to offer to her customers would help Camilla’s business too, I suspected.

Here’s to a blossoming win-win relationship!

Before taking her leave, Camilla took my measurements and promised to be back the next week with a basted dress for me to try on before the final stitching was completed.

I left the drawing room as well and headed toward a certain room—the one in which the portraits of the successive dukes of Yulnova and their families hung. The walls of the large room were adorned with portraits dating back as far as four hundred years. They began with Sergei, the first head, and his family and continued on to my brother, the current head.

I stopped in front of our grandfather’s portrait. The dandy man sat comfortably on a chair while a serious-looking young boy, Alexei, stood by his

side. He seemed to be about ten and did not yet have his characteristic monocle. I indulged myself for a moment and smiled at the sight before strengthening my resolve and turning my attention to the next painting, which was *needlessly* huge!

Are you for real?!

A young woman filled the conspicuously large canvas. My first thought was that she was gorgeous. The tall and slender beauty was draped in sumptuous clothes, and a fancy tiara crowned her light-blue hair that had been arranged in an updo. Both her necklace and earrings were set with humongous gems. While she was smiling, her almond-shaped light-blue eyes remained cold.

More than anything else, the fact that she looked so much like my brother pissed me off.

This was our grandmother in her youth—Alexandra the imperial princess in all her glory.

Why is that portrait even here, right in the middle of the heads' portraits, huh?! She wasn't even part of the family at that time!

Stupid old hag. I mouthed the words without a sound so that Mina, who was behind me, wouldn't hear. *Hmph!*

I turned my face away from the portrait and looked at the next one. It showed a man sitting carelessly with his long legs crossed. He had a sweet, easygoing smile and was almost *too* beautiful. He also had light-blue hair and eyes and closely resembled Alexei (without the monocle). This was our father, Aleksandr.

The next portrait was of my brother. He stood with a sword in his hands and looked dignified and graceful. He was even more beautiful than our father, but he had a tenser, more severe expression that spoke volumes about the responsibility he felt as the young head of a vast and wealthy territory who wielded considerable authority.

Unlike I, who resembled our mother, Alexei took after our father and grandmother. There was one striking difference, though: their eyes. While my father and grandmother also had light-blue eyes, they did not hold the same characteristic glow that Alexei's did. His almost looked like neon lamps.

Admittedly, I'd never met our father or grandmother in real life, so I couldn't tell for sure whether that was only because the painter's skills had been lacking. All I knew was that, in Alexei's case, the distinctive gleam of his eyes had been wonderfully rendered, both in the painting where he was next to our grandfather and in his personal portrait. The painter who'd done these might've just been better, but I wanted to believe his eyes were truly different.

"My lady."

I heard a voice that did not belong to Mina call for me. I turned around.

It was an old lady in a black dress. She wore the same dress as the head maid in charge of managing the female servants in the mansion, but she was not the head maid.

"The butler told me you wished to see me."

"Indeed. You're Nonna, my late grandmother's waiting maid, are you not?"

"Yes. My name is Nonna Zares."

"Perfect. I heard that grandmother often ordered dresses. I'm sure they haven't been thrown away, so could you show me where they're stored? I'd like to see them," I said.

Nonna bowed without answering and turned her back to me before she started walking.

What an attitude! I'd been expecting as much.

I followed her. As we walked, I asked, "In your opinion, what kind of person was grandmother?"

"The epitome of nobility," the old maid answered resolutely. She hadn't missed a beat, as though there was only one right answer.

"What about father?" I asked.

This time, Nonna stopped to think.

"He was...a wonderful person," she said after a pause. "A charming gentleman who could steal the heart of any woman he met. He was not only good-looking but also refined and elegant. He treated ladies with the utmost

care and tenderness. He did not let himself be distracted by dull matters but celebrated the beauty of life instead.”

In other words, he’d been a womanizer—one who “stole the heart of any woman he met,” apparently. He must have been hard at work chasing after new girls left and right.

Were you trying to be a real-life Hikaru Genji, the Heian period’s number one skirt-chaser?

His face looked so much like Alexei’s that I couldn’t help but think it made sense, though. If Alexei put his all into hitting on girls, he’d probably achieve the same level of success.

Still, “celebrating the beauty of life” by dumping all of your work on your underage son was just terrible. What a deadbeat dad.

“My, is that right? But what did these dull matters entail?” I asked. “I can’t help but wonder.”

Nonna looked over her shoulder and stared at me.

“Looking over documents, managing money. Those sorts of insipid tasks,” she said.

I held her stare.

“I see. So, father did not care to manage the duchy’s money,” I said. I smiled as though that was the most ridiculous thing I’d heard all day.

Nonna’s eyes hardened but my smile did not budge. Eventually, she averted her gaze and resumed walking.

Ha, my win. I probably shouldn’t have been proud of something so childish, but oh well.

Once we reached our destination, I almost fell on my butt.

What in the world?!

I’d been expecting something like a walk-in closet, but no! This was a walk-in *hall*! Well, halls were usually walk-in-able, so what I was saying probably didn’t make much sense, but, like...seriously?! This hall was large enough to hold a

small party! She'd turned an entire party hall into a closet!

The shutters of the windows were closed, perhaps to protect the dresses' colors from fading, so the hall was dimly lit. The sight of those countless dresses on dress forms in the darkness was straight out of a horror movie. Forget a closet, she'd created a dress *graveyard*!

Brrr... I bet the old hag's soul haunted this place! Scary!

"This is far from all of them. Most are in the main mansion in the duchy. That is how a lady ought to conduct herself," Nonna said proudly. "Your grandmother had a new dress made at least once a week. She never wore the same one twice and would not spare a second look at the ones she did not like, let alone wear them. Magnificence and pride are the best qualities of a fine noblewoman, after all."

Nonna looked at me with cold eyes. "You have been in the capital for two months, yet you only ordered a dress for the first time today. That is regrettable. Do you have no consideration for the great name of Yulnova? A ducal house must show its power so that those who are inferior never dare look down on it. I shall introduce the best designers of the capital to you, those who earned your grandmother's favor despite her strict standards. I hope you'll at least make the effort of having a dress made once a week from now on."

I remained silent.

"You must also fix the way you behave around servants, my lady. It is important to be aware of your rank. I shall teach you how to act like your esteemed grandmother in every situation. As the closest to your grandmother, only I can do so! Yes, I shall make you into a splendid lady!"

"My! Does that mean anyone can be a great lady so long as they order countless dresses?"

"It is proof that one belongs to a house with the financial power to do so," Nonna answered. "But that is a trifling matter in the end. A true lady should live in the pursuit of loveliness. Unrefined people let themselves be entrapped by worldly things such as wealth and power, but a truly admirable life is spent polishing one's beauty, surrounded only by beautiful things."

“Goodness.” I brought my hand to my mouth and let out my best villainess laugh. “How vulgar.”

“Wha—” Nonna stared at me, mouth agape. “What did you say?! Vulgar...? Did you just say that was *vulgar*?”

“Indeed, that is exactly what I said,” I replied. “Ordering more dresses than you’d ever need and ignoring one’s duty as a member of this house to live in the so-called pursuit of beauty? That is far from a way of life I’d refer to as noble. Only foolish good-for-nothings act that way.”

“H-How... How dare you be so conceited?!” Nonna screamed. “If Lady Alexandra were still here, you would have been whipped for this offense! You’ve insulted an imperial princess!”

“How scary. A good thing she isn’t, then,” I said.

While I made a show of laughing scornfully, the corners of my mouth pulled down. A hateful thought had crossed my mind. Had that witch whipped Alexei in the past? If she had, I’d murder her myself...even if she was already dead.

“Now that neither grandmother nor mother are here anymore, *I* am the mistress of the House of Yulnova,” I continued. “That is the will of this family’s head. I shall be the one to decide how a lady of the Yulnova ought to behave. I have no interest in begging the likes of you to teach me anything.”

Nonna started trembling.

“What do you take the authority of an imperial princess...of the *imperial family* for? Are you trying to say you rank higher than Lady Alexandra?!”

“I know I am repeating myself, but grandmother is no longer among us. Besides, you seem to be mistaken about something. From the day grandmother married into this house, she stopped being an imperial princess. Incidentally, who do you think *you* are? Do you think yourself above me, the lady of the House of Yulnova? Which does remind me: you implied I was too soft on the servants, did you not? What should I do with an impertinent one who talks back to her master? Whip her, was it?”

Nonna’s face tensed up. She was clearly regretting having provoked me, but she was also so enraged that a vein had risen on her forehead. Was she going to

assault me? I'd never fought anyone before. Nevertheless, I was confident I wouldn't lose.

Bring it on.

Just as I had that thought, Mina took a step forward and placed herself in between us. She did not say anything, simply fixed her gaze on Nonna. I wondered if she was doing the same as she did with the Right Right Trio: staring at her neck and wondering how much grip strength it'd take to strangle her to death.

I was surprised to see Nonna's expression change once more. Her face paled and she stepped back almost immediately.

"Lady Alexandra would never have allowed such a filthy thing to remain by her side! Get away from me, monster!"

Sorry? I involuntarily channeled the spirit of a famous kickboxer and MMA champion. *Watch out, lady. It's right leg hospital, left leg cemetery!*

"How many times are you going to make me say it? Grandmother is gone, and you're nothing but a servant. I will not have you question who I keep by my side. Mina is kinder and more capable than you'll ever be. Thank you for showing me to this place, but I do not require your services any further. I shall take my leave. Let us go, Mina."

Having said my piece, I turned my back to her.

That old hag had been quite something. The more I heard about her, the shittier I realized she was.

After arriving in this mansion, I'd been so busy studying to prepare for my admission to the academy that I hadn't had the time to interact with the servants with the exception of Mina, the maid Alexei had hired for me. It seemed like there were some rotten apples among them—most likely those who used to serve the wicked witch.

Firing them all at once would leave the mansion short on staff, so I assumed Alexei was letting them go and hiring new staff gradually, but I was sure some would disturb that process by refusing to pass the baton.

“My lady, should I *tidy up*?” Mina asked, her tone detached.

I didn’t know how to answer. I hesitated for a moment, then said, “No, we cannot afford to be short on staff for the imperial visit. I’m sure the butler may find her absence troublesome, even with her predilections. Once our important event is over, I’ll tell my brother what happened. I shall then leave the decision in his hands.”

“Understood. If I may, my lady,” she continued with the same tone, “I’m not a monster.”

I smiled. “Of course not, Mina.”

“But my maternal grandfather was a monster.”

I once again didn’t know what to say. Deep down, though, that made total sense.

Part monster all along, huh.

I now understood how she was able to carry me so effortlessly.

In this world, there were monsters with human forms, so it stood to reason that some humans had children with them. I hadn’t thought about it before, but love stories between monsters and humans didn’t shock me too much. After all, the Dragon King was one of the love interests in the game.

“Is that so? I didn’t know. I’m sorry if you told me before and I forgot,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever mentioned it prior to today, my lady. You collapsed as soon as you arrived in the capital, so I didn’t get to introduce myself properly to you.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

At the time, my memories had just come back, and I’d been stuck with two personalities and two sets of memories doing loop the loops in my brain. My head had hurt constantly, and I’d passed out whenever I tried to move. It’d been hell. I was thankful the process had only lasted three days.

“To clarify, that means I have some monster blood running through my veins,” Mina said. “As you’ve seen, some people do not take well to it. The House of Yulmagna, for instance, would never hire someone like me. Does it not

bother you, my lady?”

“Bother me?”

I pondered the idea for a moment, but I had no issue with Mina or that part of her identity. In my previous world, I’d read tons of manga and novels with nonhumans, or rather demi-humans, I should say. In such stories, those who hated demi-humans were basically awful people.

To be honest, I might’ve felt a *bit* anxious alone with a part-monster person I didn’t know at all, but Mina and I had been together for two months already. She took care of me in every way, including bringing me meals and dressing me. So what if her grandpa wasn’t human? Big deal!

“I just remembered the first time I met you. I woke up and was feeling thirsty, but my brother wasn’t by my side, and I couldn’t move. You helped me sit up and were so gentle as you gave me water. I felt at ease in your arms. Then we talked, and I discovered how blunt you are. That surprised me at first! Your touch was so gentle, after all!” I smiled at Mina. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, I’ve never been bothered by any part of you, Mina.”

A faint smile appeared on her usually expressionless face.

“I also remember that day,” she said. “You thanked me after I helped you drink. Even though I was a mere servant, you thanked me for something so simple. I was surprised too.”

“Isn’t that natural?” I asked, tilting my head in confusion. I suddenly realized something. “Mina, could it be that you’re also my bodyguard?”

“I am,” Mina confirmed immediately.

“Are you strong?”

“I am,” she replied, just as swiftly.

Now that was a big shock! This meant that Mina was none other than...a battle maid!!!

She could fight, she could clean, and she was so beautiful her maid dress fit her like a glove! How did someone like her even exist?! *That Time I Met an Unbelievably Perfect Life-Form!*

Wait! I had to verify something important!

“Mina! Are you paid enough?!”

“Sorry?”

“You’re both my maid and my bodyguard, and you work from dusk to dawn every day! You should be compensated appropriately for both these roles!”

Pay people what they’re worth! No unpaid labor will be accepted in this house!

“I’m receiving more than enough, my lady. The House of Yulnova is far from stingy. His Grace knows when money has to be spent.”

“Is that right? That’s wonderful, then,” I said with a smile, relieved.

For the first time since I’d met her, Mina gave me a bright smile.

“You’re so odd, my lady.”

“My, you haven’t told me that in a while.”

“If I don’t bother you, please allow me to care for you forever, my lady.”

“I would love that.”

My pleasant conversation with Mina gradually washed away the irritation I’d felt around Nonna.

Regrettably, somewhere I couldn’t see, Nonna was about to self-destruct.



Alexei was in his office preparing for the imperial visit with the butler when Nonna, enraged, barged into the room. She immediately started talking, going on and on about how insufferable Ekaterina was.

Alexei listened to his late grandmother’s waiting maid, his neon blue eyes gleaming with a cold light. He let her speak without a word. When she finally stopped, she was out of breath.

That was when Alexei unleashed his fury.

“Ekaterina asked who you thought you were to act as though you were above the lady of the House of Yulnova. I shall answer that question for you,” Alexei

said. “You’re a pathetic insect. You lived by a tiger’s side for so long, basking in its glory, that you somehow fooled yourself into believing you were a tiger. But you’re nothing but an insignificant worm.”

Nonna was astonished by the harshness of his words.

Alexei didn’t give her any time to compose herself and continued, “Did you think that by coming here to complain, I’d allow you to treat her however you wanted? With grandmother dead, did you think you could now latch on to her like the parasite you are? Did you truly believe I would let that happen? Since you were close to grandmother, you must know that I often warned her against extravagance and that she flew into a rage every time and disparaged me.”

“Y-Your Grace...” Nonna’s face was growing paler by the minute.

“What did she used to say to me again? She went through so many insults it’s hard to recall. Coldhearted, disrespectful, unfilial, a disgrace who didn’t understand what nobility means... Ah, yes, and she always finished by telling me to disappear from her sight. I’m not sure why you assumed that I’d want you to make my sweet sister anything like her. How ridiculous.”

Alexei turned to look at his butler.

“Graham, I’m sorry for asking this of you at such a time.”

“It won’t be a problem, Your Grace. We have gathered sufficient evidence.”

Alexei nodded, then addressed Nonna once more.

“You said your name was Nonna Zares, did you not? You’re dismissed. I know you embezzled the money meant to pay the people grandmother hired. If you refuse to accept your dismissal, I shall hand you over to the imperial guards. You can leave quietly or find your way into a cell. Choose wisely.”



Alexei and I both had preparations to handle over the weekend, so we’d decided to spend the entire time at the mansion. We were eating dinner together when he informed me that he’d let Nonna go. He was quite concise and didn’t say much about how it had gone.

“You most likely chose not to say anything to me because this is a busy time,”

Alexei said. "I'm sorry I couldn't respect your consideration."

"Why would you apologize, brother? I should be sorry for making you handle this. You said I was the lady of the House of Yulnova. As the mistress of the house, I should be the one managing the servants. My inexperience added to your burden, brother."

Before trying to help my brother with *his* work, I should have made sure to fill the role of the lady of the house properly. I'd tried to take a step in that direction by checking on the old hag's dress collection and having a talk with one of her remaining followers, but I hadn't been all that successful.

I'm sorry! I have a vague idea of what the lady of the house is supposed to do, but I'm not at the level where I can fulfill that role on my own just yet!

I could bridge the gaps in my knowledge by reading books and studying, but taking care of a household wasn't a topic covered in school. Even in my past world, historical records detailing household management were scarce. A noble house with four hundred years of history must have developed unique traditions I had no way of knowing.

Alexei smiled.

"You have a strong sense of responsibility, so I thought you might say that, Ekaterina. But there's no need for you to worry about this. Graham is here to manage the affairs of the household. He's been our butler since the days of grandfather and knows this mansion like the back of his hand. I myself leave most household matters to him."

Graham, who was standing behind Alexei, bowed. He was a few years younger than grandfather and appeared to be around sixty. He was exactly how I imagined a butler should be: elegant and well-groomed, with beautiful silver hair.

"However, if you wish for it, I shall give you the authority to make every decision as the lady of the house," Alexei added.

"There is no need, brother. Since you trust Graham, I believe he should remain in charge of this residence. However, I do think I should learn." I nodded at Graham with a smile. "Graham, if it isn't too much trouble, would you be

amenable to teaching me what you know, little by little?”

“Of course, my lady,” Graham answered with another polite bow. “In fact, I’d be overjoyed to see you take your rightful place and supervise us. Circumstances have led us to the current status quo, but I’d love for our kindhearted lady to support His Grace. How wonderful it would be for the two of you to lead the House of Yulnova in harmony.”

“I see,” Alexei said. “It seems like I’ve been relying on you too much, Graham. It’s high time I did something to lessen the load on your shoulders.”

Right. Considering the average lifespan in this world, Graham was approaching retirement age!

“Ekaterina,” Alexei continued, “if you truly wish to learn, would you like to return home with me every weekend so that you may manage the household alongside Graham? After the imperial visit, of course. Ah, but tests are also coming up. Only after you’ve taken your exams, then.”

“Indeed...”

Argh! I’d tried not to think about it, but the dates of my first exams had been announced yesterday! They’d start the day after the imperial visit!

I’m giving up on them. Sorry, brother.

“I’d love to, brother,” I said. “The thought of being useful to you delights me!”

Deep down, I felt like crying tears of blood, but I made sure not to let my internal turmoil show on my face and smiled like a proper young lady.

“Thank you, Ekaterina. I wish I knew of a way to share just how blessed I feel to have a sister as gentle as you.”

“Oh, brother! That makes me happy enough. I find myself lacking the means to express myself too! I’m sure you’d be most shocked if you knew how glad being by your side makes me.”

You’ve been my fave in two lifetimes, after all.

I wasn’t about to say that, though. I didn’t want him to know there was a corporate drone inside his dear sister’s body. Whenever he praised my kindness or wits, it stung since I felt like a fraud.

I wasn't kind at all. For instance, I knew full well that our staff would be in a difficult situation with Nonna suddenly gone with no replacement, but I had no intention to request her return.

The name Nonna meant "ninth." To be the waiting maid of a duchess, one must be born to a noble family. However, as her name suggested, Nonna was the ninth child—someone no one had any hopes or aspirations for.

In this world, families paid dowries. Her family must have used a good chunk of its fortune paying for the wedding ceremonies of her older brothers and the dowries of her older sisters, leaving nothing for the ninth child. She couldn't remain with her family and have them take care of her forever. So, unable to marry and with no place to live otherwise, she'd ended up in the old hag's service.

To her, being taken in by our grandmother must have felt like the one good thing that had happened in her life, and she wouldn't have wanted to give up her position for anything. When the old hag passed away, however, she'd found herself in a difficult situation. It was plain to see that Alexei was slowly replacing my grandmother's followers, so she'd tried to get her claws into me to preserve her fortune. Unfortunately for her, her confidence in the stupid ideals that'd been ingrained into her and her desire to assert dominance over me had caused her downfall.

Had she met the original Ekaterina, who didn't know better after living in complete isolation all her life, things might've turned out differently. In fact, the Ekaterina from the game might've been receptive to such ideas. However, our personalities had already merged, so she'd missed her chance.

As I thought about it, I started to feel bad for Nonna. She'd had no choice but to revere that witch and do everything as ordered. Alexei had shared that Nonna had embezzled money as well, but had she ever been given the chance to lead a different kind of life?

Regardless, she now had to accept the consequences of her actions. She wouldn't receive her severance pay, nor would she receive a recommendation letter. Alexei hadn't taken away the money she'd stashed away over the years, so she could live out her days with that.

Employing people can be a real challenge, I realized for the first time.

Alexei had always lived on the side of “employer” and felt the responsibilities that entailed. My respect for him grew once again. As someone who’d lived as a normal citizen in my past life, acting as a duchess by proxy, supervising over a hundred servants (if you counted the gardeners), and entertaining the royal family were crazy ideas. I felt like a hermit crab, ready to hide away in its shell.

Despite that, I would do my very best for my brother’s sake!

The following day, I spent most of my time with my etiquette teacher learning how to behave in front of the imperial family.



Time flew, and the eve of the imperial visit arrived in the blink of an eye.

The sun shone over the capital residence of the Yulnova family. It was pristine from the preparations for the upcoming imperial visit. Today, an additional ritual would take place. It was the day the Order of Yulnova would swear allegiance to its master and to its new Lady of the Order, Ekaterina Yulnova.

The roses of the large rose garden were almost in full bloom and the fragrance of beautiful, colorful flowers wafted in the air.

The gardeners were hard at work, putting the finishing touches on the garden. They exchanged every rose bush that had passed its peak for a bush that was waiting in the back garden. These had been brought from the main mansion in the duchy, where the temperature was colder and the roses thus bloomed later. The rose bushes that had yet to bloom were exchanged for bushes from the greenhouse. There was much to be finished today, from the final pruning to the removal of the last weeds and cleaning.

On this busy day, one of the gardeners was on the balcony, caring for a single crimson rose inside a large flowerpot. He made sure the heavy blossom faced the right way and removed every leaf that had started discoloring. His job, which consisted of bringing out the beauty of a single rose, was different from that of the others, who cared for an ocean of flowers.

“Why, how beautiful! Thank you for making it so lovely.”

The gardener turned around expecting to see a maid. Instead, he was left

flabbergasted, his mouth open.

He was faced with a blue rose—a woman more beautiful than any he'd seen before in his life.

Her lustrous indigo hair was tied up, revealing a captivating white nape. Her large blue eyes were streaked with purple. Her long indigo eyelashes cast a shadow upon her cheeks, and her plump lips, curled up in a smile, allured him. She wore a hair ornament and earrings set with magnificent gems. She was slender enough that a gust of wind might break her, yet the curves of her body were so well-defined the gardener didn't know what to do with his eyes. And the color of her dress—how blue it was! A darker shade yet not tinged with purple, like the indigo of her hair was. It was as deep blue as the early night sky glimmering with stars. The gardener couldn't begin to explain how well it suited her. It looked as though this color had been created for her.

One thought came to him: *How I wish I could create a rose just as blue.* Every gardener dreamed of making a blue rose bloom, but he now knew it couldn't just be any blue. It had to be *this* blue.

"Oh, did I surprise you?" the woman said. "I'm sorry for disturbing you on such a busy day."

At her words, he came back to himself.

"Forgive me! I soiled your eyes with my lowly presence!" he exclaimed.

The former lady of the House of Yulnova had been famous for her bad temper and unreasonable outbursts. She'd refused to have her eyes tainted by dirty commoners, and the gardeners had known to make themselves scarce whenever she took a stroll in the gardens no matter how busy they were.

There was no mistaking the nobility of the lady in front of him. Nonetheless, she smiled.

"I should apologize, not you," she said. "Please go on. I will not take up any more of your time. Have a good day."

The blue rose turned her back to him and walked away.

Left alone, the gardener let out a deep sigh. He still felt as though he was

standing in the middle of a dream.



“I’m sorry for the wait.”

I held the hem of my dress and slowly walked down the stairs. Alexei and Rosen, the knight commander, were at the bottom of the stairway discussing something. As I drew closer, they looked up and fell silent. I saw a tinge of admiration or perhaps wonder in their eyes, and a wave of relief crashed over me. Camilla’s efforts had been worth it.

That said, I was more focused on the fact that Alexei looked perfect in his Master of the Order attire—a more lavish version of the knights’ ceremonial clothes.

In the end, I’d had two dresses made. The week following our first meeting, Camilla had come to me with two basted dresses. I also had to attend the ceremony with the knight order, and I’d figured that wearing the same outfit two days in a row (especially to welcome the imperial family) wasn’t the best of ideas, so I’d ordered both of them. I was pretty sure Camilla had heard about my schedule and hoped for that exact reaction. She had a good head for business.

They were both A-line dresses, but the skirts weren’t as spread out as most were, and the hems were slightly lifted to reveal darker underskirts. We’d used the Celestial Blue dye to the utmost by making most of the dresses dark blue with light-blue and zenith blue accents. The main differences between the two dresses were the positions of these color accents and the color of the lace used. Camilla had used white lace on the first and black on the second.

Today, I’d chosen the dress with white lace. The lapis lazuli of my skirt sometimes let streaks of zenith blue shine through, while my sleeves and collar were a vibrant light blue like the sky in spring. In addition, I wore white gloves and a large brooch on my chest.

The jewel that decorated the brooch, a rainbow stone, was something that hadn’t existed in my past life. I was taken by the way it shone so brightly over the dark blue fabric (yes, the rainbow stones *emitted* light). It looked as though a twirling blue light...no, a shining blue rose was trapped within the clear stone.

I'd learned that rainbow stones weren't all that rare. They usually emitted a faint glow and were used like lamps. However, there weren't many as delicate and beautiful as this one. Such stones were considered precious and could sell for crazy prices. This one in particular was of such high quality that Aaron wasn't sure they'd ever find another as beautiful. Apparently, it was his absolute favorite. According to him, it was precious enough to warrant being displayed in a museum!

I also had a golden hair ornament with a large sapphire and matching sapphire earrings. All three were made of huge, heavy stones passed down in the family for generations. I'd wondered how much they'd have sold for in my previous world, but the thought had made my head spin. I estimated they were worth at least a few hundred million yen. I repeat, a few hundred *million*!

Designwise, my dress was actually rather simple, and the stones really stood out! They were gorgeous!

My only issue with the refined shape of the dress was that it left my figure *very* apparent, which I hadn't considered. Wearing a dress like this on my scandalous villainess figure was a little...indecent. I'd made sure not to expose much skin, especially around the chest area, but that had backfired terribly! There was fabric everywhere, sure, but it hugged the curves of my body so closely that I almost looked like the femme fatale from the anime that followed the adventures of a famous master thief. This wasn't my first time thinking it, but I really did not look fifteen!

While the effect had taken me by surprise, Camilla seemed to have planned for it. "The eyes of all the gentlemen of the capital will be on you!" she'd exclaimed when she'd seen me in it.

That's not what I was looking for, though! I'd thought back then, but what was done was done. I'd accepted the dresses.

Now, as I reached the bottom of the stairs, Alexei took my hand.

"You're beautiful. As beautiful as the Queen of the Night," he said.

"Queen of the Night" was another way to refer to the Spirit of Twilight, this world's goddess of the night. Unlike in medieval Europe, the people of the empire were polytheists. The Spirit of Twilight was not one of the major gods of

their religion, but she was said to be the most beautiful goddess of all.

“The stars and the moon pale in front of your beauty. I do not know who named this color Celestial Blue, but seeing you draped in it makes me fear you may ascend to the heavens. I beg of you, Ekaterina, do not disappear. Please remain by my side,” he said, kissing the tip of my fingers.

“Oh, brother!” I let out a little laugh.

That was just like him. He was such a big fan of mine that he only ever looked at me through rose-tinted glasses. Still, I couldn’t help but be impressed by his flowery rhetoric. *Aristocrats are just built different!*

“My lady, you are truly breathtaking. As the knight commander of the Order of Yulnova, allow me to tell you how honored I feel to have you, the most beautiful woman of the empire, as our lady.”

“A master of flattery you are, Lord Rosen,” I answered.

The spirit of chivalry included showing favor to the ladies after all. Going all out with flattery while keeping a straight face was probably one of the fun parts of being a knight.

Anyhow, thank you very much, good sir!

Alexei escorted me as we followed Rosen through the corridors. Eventually, we reached a small room. It was finely decorated, and both the walls and the fabric of the furniture were a deep green color. I assumed it was some sort of drawing room.

A familiar figure was waiting for us there.

“My lady,” the man greeted me.

“Mr. Moldo!”

Anatolie Moldo was one of the private tutors who’d been hired in a hurry to help me fill the gaps in my education before I went off to the Magic Academy. I still exchanged letters with him regularly, but I hadn’t seen him in a month. He now wore the formal uniform of the Order of Yulnova and held a sword.

As soon as we walked in, he bowed to us and said, “Your Grace, my lady, thanks to you, I have just joined the glorious Order of Yulnova. I shall devote

myself to the order henceforth and never forget the debt I owe you.”

His uniform suited him well, and I couldn’t help but be moved by the sight. Because of his glasses and calm demeanor, I used to think he’d flourish as a bureaucrat, but he absolutely looked the part of a knight thanks to his large frame. I’d worried a little for him at first, even if I was glad he’d secured a steady job, since being a knight was nothing like being a teacher. However, seeing him like this, I was sure he’d do just fine.

“You look dashing, Mr. Moldo!” I said. “I have received far more help from you, so please, be at ease. I’m glad to count you as one of the members of our knight order.”

“Indeed. Ekaterina battled the monster admirably thanks to you,” Alexei added. “I have high expectations. I’m sure the order will benefit from your views and tactics.”

“You honor me, but Lady Ekaterina’s feat was only made possible by her splendid control over her mana and her ardor to learn. I shall do my very best to repay my debt to her ladyship and to honor your respect and affection for the Order of Yulnova, Your Grace.”

Mr. Moldo was surprisingly quick to adapt. He’d already adjusted to the way of speech of the knights. I was starting to be curious about his background before he became a private tutor!

Just as that thought went through my mind, Alexei said, “Ekaterina, were you aware that Moldo was born to a branch of the Yulmagna family? He worked as a researcher for the Astra Research Institute for some time. Magna’s martial ethos is so omnipresent that even researchers are made to follow military training. That makes Moldo, who’s accomplished in the military arts as well as an eminent mind, the perfect advisor for our knights.”

“Oh my! I never knew!”

“I am ashamed to say that I left because I lacked endurance. Yet you have not only given me another chance but also allowed me to serve in a position I could only have dreamed of. Studying the House of Yulnova’s precious documents while devising practical countermeasures against monsters is a dream come true! It’s all thanks to you, my lady. My wife and child are also beyond grateful.”

Interesting! So, on top of his other duties, Mr. Moldo would try to find information on holy magic for Flora. In my opinion, I hadn't done much for him besides persistently ask him questions about how to fight monsters, but I was glad it had worked out so well.

We then moved to a large, dazzling hall with Mr. Moldo. A gigantic chandelier hung from the high ceiling, and an enormous fresco depicting a scene from the founding of the empire decorated the walls. The flag of the Order of Yulnova had been raised alongside another one marked with the crest of the House of Yulnova.

The hall was filled with knights standing in tight rows. Some were permanently stationed in the capital, while others had made the trip from the duchy to reinforce the security for the imperial visit. There were around a hundred of them in total. They stood straight and dignified in their formal uniforms, each with sword in hand. It was an impressive spectacle.

From what I knew, the Order of Yulnova included around a thousand knights. In the past, it had served as the Yulnova's private army and fought the forces of other families and nations. After four hundred years of existence, however, the empire had stabilized and such conflicts were rare.

Nowadays, the main role of the order was to fight monsters. Plenty of powerful monsters lived throughout the Yulnova Duchy, and our order was famous for being strong enough to handle them. Knights also rescued people when natural disasters struck.

If I were to compare them to corps from my previous life, I guess they'd be some sort of hybrid between the JSDF and the kind of special unit that came up in most tokusatsu movies (monsters and kaiju weren't all that different, really).

Every year, new recruits were chosen in April to fill existing vacancies. The ceremony to welcome them and have them swear allegiance to the head of the Yulnova was usually held the day before the imperial visit.

The knights of the Order of Yulnova were seen as champions of justice, and there was no shortage of applicants every year. Apparently, that wasn't the case everywhere, and in some territories, knights weren't exactly popular. There were several reasons behind that, but it mostly boiled down to corrupt or

oppressive lords using their orders for repression.

The most unpopular order in the empire was made up of ten thousand men—or useless tax-money sponges, as the people called them. Its main job was to crush every popular uprising (or ikki, as they were called in Japanese history). Such actions had earned it the ire of their citizens.

Which knight order is that, you ask? Take a wild guess—the Order of Yulmagna.



“Here approaches His Grace the Duke of Yulnova, Alexei, and his esteemed sister, Lady Ekaterina,” Rosen declared, his clear voice resounding through the hall.

The knights in attendance struck the ground in unison as they brought one hand to their chests and their heads dropped reverently. Alexei and Ekaterina followed Rosen, then climbed onto the elevated platform in front of the assembly.

“Raise your faces,” Rosen ordered.

The knights complied, their faces lifting as one toward the beautiful pair of siblings. Strong feelings of devotion and admiration welled up in their chests at the sight.

On one side stood Alexei.

He’d only been ten when his grandfather died. From the day of his grandfather’s passing, Alexei had been master in all but name of the Order of Yulnova. At thirteen, he’d taken command of his first military expedition to subjugate monsters and won the respect of the knights through his impressive mana control, swordsmanship, and levelheaded decision-making. On paper, however, Aleksandr had remained Master of the Order until his death, so it was to Alexei that the knights had sworn their oath in the previous year.

Needless to say, the knights did not think much of Aleksandr. How could they approve of a man who participated in such glorious ceremonies as this one but sent his young son to the battlefield in his stead?

From this day onward, the young man who’d stuck with them through thick

and thin out in the field would finally become their master both in substance and in name. The thought moved them deeply.

By Alexei's side was Ekaterina.

After Sergei died and Aleksandr inherited his title, Alexandra should have stepped down as the Lady of the Order to be replaced by Aleksandr's wife, Anastasia. However, Alexandra had held on to the title, never allowing Anastasia the honor. Instead, she had remained confined until her untimely death.

Back then, all the knights had known of Ekaterina was that she too lived in confinement, away from the main house. She'd appeared to them only as a tragic heroine. After interacting with Moldo, they'd learned more about her. According to him, she was just as brilliant as her older brother yet kind and humble. She was feminine and thoughtful, so much so that she even sent sweets to her private tutor's daughter out of the goodness of her heart, but also dignified and brave enough to stand up to a monster so her classmates could flee.

Today was their first glimpse of her. In her bewitching attire, the beautiful Ekaterina appeared far older than fifteen. The knights felt as though they were in the presence of a goddess. They would have been hard-pressed to even imagine a woman more worthy of becoming the lady of their order; that was how strong an impression she made on them.

Had Ekaterina known their thoughts, she surely would have screamed: *"I'm so sorry for being a fraud! Forgive me!"*



Excluding the new recruits, four knights would swear an oath to me and offer me their swords: Rosen, the knight commander; his second-in-command; and two commanding officers who had made the trip to the capital just for this ceremony. Then, our new knights—ten in total including Mr. Moldo—would swear allegiance to Alexei before offering me their swords as well. That is to say, these knights would *literally* offer up their swords for me to take. I'd then use them to tap the knights' shoulders, sealing the deal.

While the general process was the same everywhere, the way of doing it

varied for every order. Some barely touched the knight's shoulders with their sword, while for others it was customary to slam it hard enough to leave a mark.

Here, a light tap was enough. Apparently, orders with a long history mostly preferred the more brutal manner (a way of channeling their fighting spirit, perhaps). The orders of both Yulmagna and Yulsein went for hearty blows. From what I'd heard, our house was only gentler because Kristina, the wife of Yulnova's founder, Sergei, was a petite woman who wasn't cut out for violence.

A famous story from those days even remained, in fact! Apparently, Sergei, who'd been a devoted husband, had once unsheathed his own sword after hearing one of his vassals complain about Kristina. He'd threatened to cut off the guy's arm himself if he wasn't happy with Kristina's method! I could believe it. I'd seen a painting of the couple together in the portrait gallery and had noticed the contrast between the tall, muscular Sergei and his delicate wife.

Speaking of such ceremonies, the imperial family also barely touched the sword to each knight's shoulders. No one had a story about why they did it like that, but most assumed that the process had been simplified to be quicker, considering the tremendous number of knights in the imperial family's service.

Thank you so much, Kristina. I don't think I could leave bruises on fourteen men's shoulders! Besides, swords are basically metal rods. Wouldn't I break bones if I hit too hard?

I even asked later and learned that it *was* something that had happened recently in the more vigorous orders. Eek!

I'm glad our order is the way it is.

During the ceremony, Rosen was the first to unsheathe his blade. He knelt before me and respectfully held up his sword. The blades used by the knights of the empire were sabers. Just like Japanese swords, they were slightly curved and about a third of the blade was double-edged. It was perfect to slash *and* thrust, making it functional as well as elegant.

"I, Ephrem Rosen, Knight Commander of the Order of Yulnova, hereby dedicate my blade, chivalry, soul, affection, and undying loyalty to the noble Lady of the Order, Lady Ekaterina."

After he swore his oath, I took the sword from his hands and placed it on his shoulder before replying with a vow of my own: “I, Ekaterina, gladly accept Sir Rosen’s pledge. I thank you for your loyal services preceding this day and shall expect great things from you henceforth.”

Then, I used the flat of the blade to tap his shoulder before returning it to his hands.

“Lady of the Order,” he said, once again presenting his sword to me, holding his head low.

Hang on! Was that last greeting part of the process?

I couldn’t help but feel embarrassed with an elegant older gentleman like Rosen kneeling in front of me. My heart was pounding. It didn’t help that I was super-duper excited as a history buff too. What a wonderful ceremony this was to witness firsthand! Still, I was as nervous as all get-out. I wished I could enjoy this beautiful picture from afar without being the one to actually receive the oaths!

As Alexei’s sister, I couldn’t do that, though.

All right! Thirteen knights to go! You can do it, girl!



The ceremony proceeded smoothly without the knights learning of Ekaterina’s ridiculous thoughts and soon, the ten recruits became officially members of the order.

After the ceremony concluded, Alexei and Ekaterina left the hall, leaving the knights behind. The new knights were welcomed by their peers with a tinge of jealousy for having gotten the honor of offering their swords to the radiant pair of siblings.



“You must be tired, Ekaterina,” Alexei said as soon as we exited the large hall. “You should return to your room and rest for tomorrow.”

I shook my head. “No need, brother. I’m fine. I was just...”

“‘Just’?”

“...made aware of my own powerlessness.”

Swords are so heavy!

I probably should've expected as much. After all, the sabers the knights used were basically eighty-to ninety-centimeter rods of steel.

What shocked me most, though, was that regardless of the actual weight of the item, it had felt much heavier than expected! In my past life, I would've had a much easier time lifting these swords! To be fair, I'd never actually held a sword in my past life, but I was certain I'd had more arm muscles back then. Actually, not just arm muscles—I'd had way more stamina too.

As a member of the choir club in both middle and high school, I'd been forced to build my endurance. We'd even run laps together to prepare for recitals. Most people considered choir and brass band cultural activities, totally different from sports, but I did not agree! The endurance I'd built during my school days had probably been part of the reason I'd withstood being worked to the bone by my toxic employer for so long—and I'd still died of exhaustion in the end.

“That's only natural, Ekaterina,” Alexei said. “As a daughter of the House of Yulnova, you should not have to lift such heavy objects. I'm sorry I forced you to push yourself so much.”

“Please, don't apologize! I meant to say that I should better myself, mind and body, to fulfill my role as the Lady of the Order.”

Come to think of it, I'd never had a chance to build any muscle in this life. I'd spent most of it confined, unable to so much as take a walk outside. After being freed, I'd shut myself away, then studied for a month straight after regaining my memories.

Yeah, I should really do something about this. Especially because I'd have to perform my duties at the same ceremony next year.

“I'd like to exercise, brother. I promise to only do activities you deem worthy of a lady of my stature, so may I please have your approval?”

I'd made use of my sickly constitution to justify not wanting to become the empress but—oh well! As a character trait, sickliness was fine, but I couldn't let myself waste away for real. With my current stamina, a cold would be enough

to bring me down and worry my brother. I couldn't have that! Ideally, Alexei would continue to *believe* I was sickly, but I'd be as healthy as could be. That'd be the best outcome.

I would be coming back to this residence every weekend from now on. It was a perfect time to pick up horse riding or singing—any noble activity that allowed me to move my body in some way.

"Of course you may. It'll do you good. As long as you promise not to overdo it, that is." Alexei took my hands in his and smiled. I once again noticed how rugged his hands were from his daily training.

"You're amazing, brother," I said. "You're always so busy, yet you still train every single day."

"The nobility's magic is said to exist to protect the masses from monsters. Besides, while we may be at peace for now, there is no telling when a war will break out. Being ready to fight at any time is our duty as nobles," Alexei said. "Ah, I almost forgot. There is something I wanted to show you. If you truly feel fine, come with me."

I followed Alexei to a large room where countless weapons were stored. Rows of armor, helmets, spears, axes, and other such equipment were neatly arranged by type, and there was enough space for someone to walk and pick up weapons without bumping into anything. Swords were arranged neatly on one of the walls. Alexei approached, picking up the one hanging at the center. Precious stones decorated the pommel and the scabbard was so beautiful it was practically a work of art.

"This has been handed down for generations in our family," he said. "It was Sergei's most prized sword."

The sword of the founder, huh? In other words...the family's lethal weapon!

In my past life, I'd only ever heard that expression used as a metaphor to, for instance, refer to a prime minister organizing a snap election as his ace in the hole. Now, this sword very much was the lethal weapon of the family. I smiled thinking about how the most dangerous tsundere was holding our family's most dangerous weapon in his hand.

Maybe I'm noticing this too late, but a ducal family with four hundred years of history is quite something, isn't it?

Alexei pulled me out of my reverie by offering me the sword.

"Try holding it," he said.

"All right." I readied myself, then grabbed it, only to look up at Alexei in surprise.

"Goodness! How light it is!"

How?! It's so much lighter than the ones I held earlier! It couldn't be a bamboo sword now, could it?

I stared at it suspiciously until Alexei took the sword back and unsheathed it. Even though it was four hundred years old, the blade shone with a silver glimmer. I was puzzled. It should definitely be heavier than the knights' swords!

"This sword is said to feel light to those who carry the blood of the Yulnova but be far heavier than a regular sword for those who do not."

"That's incredible! I didn't know such a thing was possible!"

"In truth, I wonder if it simply becomes lighter when in contact with any individual who possesses a large quantity of mana," Alexei said. "The pommel is set with rainbow stones. One of the theories surrounding these jewels is that they form when mana condenses. Surely, that must have to do with the way this sword reacts. While it *is* said that the people of the Astra Empire knew how to ascertain parentage, I doubt they could have done so by simply holding a sword."

"I'm sure you're right, brother," I said. His explanation wasn't as cool, but I liked the way Alexei analyzed things. He was quite convincing!

Either way, a sword that can change weight is amazing, and Alexei makes such a pretty picture with a sword in hand!

Sabers, much like katanas, had beautiful curved blades, and the way the tip of the blade was double-edged was also similar to some types of old Japanese swords. Even though the two were so similar, the sabers of this world were usually held with two hands, not one like katanas. That was probably why Alexei

looked so superb, effortlessly carrying this saber with one hand!

Alexei must've noticed the adoration in my gaze because he let out a small laugh before taking a few steps away from me. He raised his sword and paused. I felt as though his neon blue eyes shone brighter as he fixed his gaze on the empty space in front of him.

Ah! My eyes opened wide. I suddenly felt as though I could see the monster that had attacked us during the practical class.

WHOOSH!

He brought down his sword and a gust of wind hit me. The sharp slash cut off the head of the illusion in one go.

"What a fine strike, brother!" I exclaimed. Before I knew it, I started clapping. "If you'd had this sword in hand when that beast appeared, you surely would have slain it immediately."

"Good job realizing, Ekaterina. I did picture that monster before striking."

"Once again, I truly feel safest by your side, brother!" I replied.

Alexei smiled. His eyes fell to his sword and he whispered, "I'm the Master of the Order, not a knight, but..." He dropped to one knee and held up his sword. "If you are ever in danger, I shall abandon my position as duke and commander in a heartbeat to become the sword that protects you. I have lived my life for the duchy thus far, and I will continue to do so, but for you, I am ready to throw away our house at any time. You are my lady too, Ekaterina. Please accept my sword."

My eyes shot open. "Brother!"

Wh-What do I do?! The most gorgeous guy I knew was on his knees offering me his sword! I'm gonna die! I'll die of moe overdose! My fave is out to kill me, help!



No, wait! That's not what I should be worrying about! Don't let the moe dull your senses!

"You can't, brother! You are the head of our family! As your younger sister, I should be supporting *you*!"

"I may be the head of the family, but I'm incomplete. Even though my subordinates and my people do everything they can to support me, I couldn't go on living without you. If you truly care for me, please... Please accept my sword."

Don't look so miserable! My heart can't take it!

That was enough to make up my mind. I took the sword before resting the edge on Alexei's shoulder.

"I, Ekaterina, accept Alexei the Duke of Yulnova's pledge with love and devotion. I thank you for your kinship and protection preceding today and promise to remain by your side and support you henceforth."

I tapped the sword on his shoulder, then carefully lifted the treasured heirloom and put it in Alexei's hands. But when he tried to take it back, I didn't let go.

"Brother, please stand," I said instead. A devious smile lifted the corners of my lips. As he stood up, I pulled on the sword, taking it out of his hands once more. Then, I knelt.

"Ekaterina?" Alexei asked.

"While I may be powerless, I, too, wish to protect you, brother," I said. "So, please, allow me to devote my sword to you as well."

I was overjoyed to see that my fave was ready to do so much for me, but in my book, things worked the other way around: I wanted to devote *myself* to *him*!

"But, Ekaterina... You are a lady..."

"And *you* are the Master of the Order. Yet that did not stop you from offering me your sword," I retorted. I looked up at him and smiled. "I hereby dedicate this blade, my love, and undying loyalty to you, my dear brother. Consider it my

soul and accept it.”

Alexei was beyond flustered (quite out of character!) but he still took the saber from my hands. I bowed as he let the tip touch my shoulder.

“I, Alexei, Duke of Yulnova, respectfully accept the sword of my lady and beloved sister, Ekaterina. I thank you for your dedication and promise to love, cherish, and protect you.”

I braced myself for the soft tap of the sword but it never came. I looked up at Alexei in confusion only for him to rest his hand upon my cheek. He leaned forward and kissed my temple.

AAAAAAAAAH!!! Somehow, I managed to keep that shriek internal. *Keep breathing, Ekaterina! Hang in there! Stay strong!!!*

I was willing myself not to faint when Alexei took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

“Brother, I’m not sure the ceremony was supposed to proceed that way.”

“Forgive me,” he said, as though he was at a complete loss for a moment. “Asking me to strike you with a sword was too much. Your dainty shoulder would surely break, and my heart would shatter right alongside it.”

I felt as though my soul was about to leave my body. How could he always look so cool and composed—with a monocle, no less—yet suddenly act so sweet?! I wanted to face the Alps and scream at the top of my lungs: “DAMN IT! YOU’RE TOO CUUUUTE!!!”

Why the Alps?! I don’t know either! Am I going crazy?!

Remarkably, I remained silent. I gestured for Alexei to lower his head. He probably assumed that I was about to tousle his hair, as always, and a strained smile appeared on his face before he obliged.

Instead, I put my hands on his shoulders for support and kissed his temple.

AAAH! I did it!

While I was screaming inwardly, I made sure to smile calmly.

“I heard that the act of striking the knights’ shoulders was meant to carve

their oath deep into their hearts so that they'd never forget it," I said. "In that sense, I suppose this was far more memorable. You pioneered a brand-new ceremony for the House of Yulnova, brother."

"I'm glad you liked it. If I do say so myself, I am quite proud of my invention," he answered with a bright smile. "The Lady of the Order dedicating her blade to the Master of the Order is unheard of. You always try to give back more than you have been given. Your kindness is as precious as it is noble, Ekaterina. And in my eyes, you are the best lady any order could ever have."

Chapter 2: The Imperial Visit

The sky of May was clear and blue as far as the eye could see.

The rose garden of the Yulnova residence in the capital was perfect. There were no fallen leaves or weeds in sight, and a wide array of colorful roses were in full bloom. A gentle breeze carried the delicate fragrance of the roses through the air, making the flag that bore the crest of Yulnova sway gently beside a knight in ceremonial clothes. Water jetted out of the immaculate fountain, glimmering under the sun and creating small rainbows.

I stood alongside my brother, waiting for the carriage of the imperial family to arrive. We were just outside the front entrance at a turnaround where several carriages could park at once. Behind us was a line of knights standing in place and carrying the flags of both the empire and the House of Yulnova.

We'd have to wait a little longer until our guests arrived. I could tell because the cheers I could hear were still far away.

The imperial palace wasn't all that far away from our residence. It was roughly the distance between the Tokyo Imperial Palace and the Akasaka Estate in my past life, about four kilometers. Speaking of the Akasaka Estate, it used to be the Edo residence of the Kishu Tokugawa family. I might have jumped worlds, but the way influential families were situated spatially in relation to one another was the same.

The people of the capital knew of the yearly imperial visits to the three grand ducal houses and eagerly awaited them, gathering to catch a glimpse of the imperial procession. The large road that connected the residences of the noblest families in the empire was usually quiet, but at this time of the year, it was jammed with commoners. The imperial family waved at them as their carriage advanced, so the short trip took a lot of time.

The main purpose of these imperial visits was to showcase the unity between the imperial family and the three grand ducal houses. To achieve this purpose, the imperial family made the route they'd be taking obvious by placing traffic

restrictions and imperial guards along the path, turning the trip into an impressive parade. This reinforced the authority and prestige of the three grand ducal houses and helped keep the rest of the nobility in check. At the same time, it stirred up competition between the grand dukes, lessening the chances of them teaming up to threaten the imperial family.

The Yulgran Empire had already existed for four hundred years. This was a rare feat, and many factors explained that longevity. The imperial household successfully maintaining itself at the top was without a doubt one of those. The three grand ducal houses existed in part to preserve the purity of the imperial bloodline but also to keep the imperial family on its toes, and they feared and revered them for it.

The cheers gradually grew nearer, until finally...

“Ekaterina, do you hear that?”

“Yes, brother.”

Alexei was referring to the distant sound of horns.

He immediately signaled for the hornists of our order to start playing as well. A loud sound echoed from behind us in response.

In the days of Pyotr the Great, he and his three younger brothers who later founded the three grand ducal houses did not only fly their respective flags on the battlefield. They also had their men play a specific horn melody to signal their position on the field, so they could coordinate more efficiently among themselves. In accordance with this historical artifact, the imperial family played Pyotr’s tune to announce their arrival at one of the grand duke’s residences. Each duke would then respond with his founder’s tune.

The history buff in me is thrilled!

So far, the imperial visit had mostly been a source of worry to me, but this part had me bouncing internally. Learning about the history of this world was as enjoyable as it had been in my past life. The founding of the empire and the shenanigans surrounding the four brothers were especially interesting!

The founding father of the empire, Pyotr the Great, was said to have been so charismatic he evoked admiration and devotion in the hearts of his men. He

had also been a splendid warrior with powerful control over his lightning mana. On top of that, he'd been a brilliant, foresighted politician. Despite these qualities, he had not been particularly good at taking command over his army on the field, and his brothers were said to have saved him at the last minute time and again.

Apparently, those who'd most often run to his rescue were the second brother, Sergei, and the youngest, Pavel. The third brother, Maxim, appeared to have been an equally poor commander on the battlefield. However, he'd been well-versed in diplomacy and very ambitious. So much so that, on several occasions, he'd colluded with Pavel and attempted to desert his older brother's side. After Pyotr became emperor, Maxim had supposedly abandoned those plans and greatly contributed to the development and stability of the burgeoning Yulgran Empire.

Unlike Pyotr and Maxim, who had been politicians at heart, Pavel had been a military man and the best commander among the four brothers. In his younger years, he'd been known for his rowdy personality. He'd only cared for strength and often mocked intellectuals, but as he grew older, he'd started realizing the importance of wisdom. "I must further my understanding" became his favorite saying, and he'd eventually created the Astra Research Institute, devoting himself to research. It'd even been said that he became an outstanding poet in his final years.

The second brother, Sergei, had been something of a jack-of-all-trades. He'd often taken on the role of coordinating his brothers, convincing Maxim not to break away with words or with force when necessary, then working hard to mend Maxim's relationship with Pyotr.

Sergei never betrayed Pyotr, who had trusted him very much because of it. Perhaps *too* much, for Pyotr had developed a habit of relying on Sergei for anything and everything until Sergei, in a fit of exasperation, left everything behind to seclude himself in his fortress. This happened twice! Both times, Pyotr had gone after him to apologize and make up with his brother.

I'd read a sentence describing their relationship in a history book that'd made me laugh. It went as such: "Lord Sergei was more like a wife to Pyotr the Great than his real spouse ever could have been."

In many ways, I felt like this period resembled the Sengoku period.

Alexei drew me out of my thoughts on history with a comment. “Their Majesties are both quite amiable, so don’t be nervous. Just be your usual self, Ekaterina.”

“Understood, brother.” He’d told me that half a million times already, but I still had a hard time controlling my nerves.

Nevertheless, I was gonna power through it! After all, Alexei had told me that the dress I wore today suited me even better than the one from yesterday. It had little to do with anything else, but as a young woman, that was enough to give me a motivation boost!

Today’s dress also made use of the charms of Celestial Blue. This time, however, the front of my bodice was a spring blue decorated with black lace. My chest was covered with frills for modesty, and the rainbow-stone brooch crowned the middle of my collar.

I probably shouldn’t say this myself, but black lace is just the thing for a villainess. It suited me, like, *amazingly* well. I was also sexier than ever—which I would’ve rather avoided, but the fact remained.

After seeing me in this dress for the first time, Alexei had stared, bug-eyed. It was very unlike him! He’d searched for his words for a long time before smiling awkwardly and saying, “I’m about to sound foolish, but...some say a man can do anything as long as there is a beautiful woman by his side. For the first time, I find myself agreeing. I think I could accomplish anything if I held your hand.”

To emphasize that, he’d taken my hand in his and squeezed it gently.

“You’re magnificent. Even more so than you were yesterday. I’m not too knowledgeable about women’s gowns, but this one suits you far better,” he said.

“My! That’s wonderful to hear, brother!”

All right, my knees. Don’t go weak on me now!

I’d prayed for my knees on the inside but made sure to show Alexei a warm smile on the outside. I’d handled it yesterday, but how was I supposed to

remain calm when he was even more devastatingly handsome today? Seeing someone like him, always so confident and sure of himself, fumbling for words was almost too much.

What am I supposed to do?! Nothing, actually, but that's beside the point! Okay. Deep breaths.

Silliness aside, thanks to my dear brother's compliment, I'd been energized and was ready to weather the oncoming storm.

The carriage of the imperial family finally passed through the gates of our estate. The magnificent, ornate carriage immediately drew my attention.

Wow! The horses are quite something too!

The two horses that pulled the carriage were part monster—demonic horses of Krymov, I'd been told. At first glance, they just looked like beautiful white horses, but each had a horn on its forehead, and their manes and tails were tinged a phosphorescent blue. I could also see fangs poking out of their mouths.

Why would horses have fangs? Aren't they herbivores? I guess they might not be.

The imperial carriage was so heavily decorated that it was too heavy for regular horses to pull. At least six of them would have been necessary. Somehow, these two demonic horses had no trouble with the task whatsoever.

One thing was for sure: the horses were super cool! I could totally see why people gathered to watch the imperial carriage go by if even the animals drawing it were a sight to behold!

At last, the dazzling carriage came to a stop in front of Alexei and me, and imperial servants in uniforms rushed to open the door.

Alexei brought his fist to his chest and lowered his head in reverence. I stood one step behind him and gracefully curtsied as was appropriate for a young lady.

"Alexei, no need for formal welcomes. Be at ease," said a pleasant voice. "Oh, and this must be your younger sister. I can't wait to meet her."

"It's an honor, Your Imperial Majesty," Alexei said, stepping back and taking

my hand. "I humbly present my younger sister, Ekaterina, to you, Your Imperial Majesty."

I could hear the pride in his voice. He pulled me closer and I approached, lifting my head.

"I'm Ekaterina Yulnova. I'm most honored to be in your presence, Your Imperial Majesty."

While I managed to sound calm, I grasped Alexei's hand tightly. I'd expected as much, but the emperor was as dignified as he was imposing.

I can't even say he's cool or anything like that. Such casual words wouldn't suit him!

Konstantin Yulgran, the emperor of the Yulgran Empire, was in his forties if I wasn't mistaken. He very much resembled the crown prince.

Is the prince going to look like that in the future too? That final form is too powerful! Good-looking guys age like fine wine.

Like Mikhail, his hair was as blue as the summer sky, but there were gray strands peppered in here and there. His eyes were also the same blue color as the prince's, though they carried more gravitas. It got me wondering what kind of life he'd led. The empire was at peace right now, and the one person who'd done the most to keep that peace going was the emperor. He was a wise ruler my brother admired deeply.

Thank you for your service.

As he looked at me, the emperor's eyes softened.

"What a beautiful young lady you are," he said. "I'm glad to see the two of you prospering. Good for you, Alexei."

"Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty," my brother said.

Alexei squeezed my hand and, after bowing once, turned to me and smiled.

"I heard about the monster incident," said another voice. "I expected to find a little tomboy by Alexei's side. To my surprise, here you are, graceful as can be!"

The person who'd spoken was the one I was dying to meet: Empress

Magdalena!

She came into full view as she exited the carriage. Her eyes and hair were teal, just like the waters where coral reefs grew. It was a gorgeous color. While there were laugh lines at the corners of her eyes, they gleamed with life, and she appeared youthful despite being roughly the same age as the emperor. She had dignified, well-defined features and was quite tall for a woman—almost the same height as the emperor.

She's as stylish as I imagined! That's a girl boss if I ever saw one! Her facial features are pretty different, but her vibe reminds me of a cool actress I loved in my past life. In the early days of her career, she played the role of the male lead in an all-female theater troupe.

"Ekaterina can be just as headstrong as you, mother. Although, she's also very kind."

Hey! Prince Mikhail! Are you praising me or dissing me?

My eyes followed his voice. When I saw him, I couldn't help but widen them in surprise.

Wow. The prince...is real princely today.

I'd only ever seen him in his uniform. Our school's uniforms were wonderfully made, but they were somewhat casual. His outfit today was magnificent, complete with a gold braid—I think that's what those're called—and he was every bit the imperial heir he should be. Need I say he was also incredibly handsome?

I wasn't the only one looking. His eyes were also on me.

"Come to think of it, it's my first time seeing you in something other than your uniform," he said. "That beautiful dress suits you. You seem very mature."

That was a surprisingly average compliment, fitting for a fifteen-year-old boy. Alexei's way with flowery words didn't seem to be the norm, after all.

"Thank you very much, Prince Mikhail. You're quite dashing too," I answered with a smile.

Mikhail's cheeks reddened a little.

Sorry, I know the villainess's smile is a lot to handle. However, as the crown prince, you're going to have to deal with ladies trying to charm you! It's time you started getting used to it!

Hang on. In this world, people marry a lot earlier than in my previous one. The ladies must already be all over you. Come on, Prince, get it together. Don't go blushing at the first smile thrown your way!



"My, your garden is once again a sight to behold!" Empress Magdalena exclaimed as we passed the arch covered in creeping roses and the rose garden revealed itself.

My brother and I were currently strolling with the imperial family. After admiring the roses for a while, we'd have lunch together. That was how the imperial visit went every year.

"You seem to be managing your estate and your territory just fine," the emperor told Alexei. "Despite your youth, you're already an accomplished lord."

"I don't deserve such praise, Your Imperial Majesty," he answered. "I still have much to learn."

As Mikhail's playmate, Alexei had frequented the imperial palace often in his youth. The emperor knew him well and expected great things from him.

"I went to see my grandfa—" Mikhail paused and cleared his throat. "That is, the preceding emperor some days ago. He inquired about 'Sergei's grandson's' well-being. He seems to miss your grandfather a lot."

The emperor Sergei had served was named Valentin. He was still alive, but most emperors abdicated and passed down their titles during their lifetimes.

Valentin was the younger brother of our grandmother, Alexandra. He was a smart man, but he had been born with a feeble body and timid disposition. Apparently, he was grateful to Sergei, who'd helped him many times throughout his life. He'd found it difficult to defy his bold older sister, but, after Sergei's death, he'd often concerned himself with Alexei.

Just like for our grandfather, the day would surely come for Alexei to become

Mikhail's prime minister or hold a similarly important post in the government. I wanted to make myself competent enough to handle the duchy's affairs by then so that my dear brother wouldn't have to work himself to an early grave!

I clenched my fist with determination—inside my heart.

"Ekaterina, your dress is superb," the empress said. "And what lovely blue colors!"

She took the bait!

I raised my fist toward the sky and struck a triumphant pose—again, inside my heart.

In reality, I said, "I'm delighted to receive your praise, Your Imperial Majesty. To tell you the truth, these colors were created using a new dye recently developed in the Yulnova Duchy. It produces colors that are more vibrant yet less expensive to produce than lapis lazuli dye."

"Oh my!" The empress's eyes sparkled.

I'd successfully caught her interest, though she seemed aware that I was trying to sell it to her. I assumed that happened often. The empress had already demonstrated she held influence in the business world.

"It's rare to see young ladies like you take an interest in their territory's products over fads," she said with a smile. "I must commend your attitude."

"Thank you very much. I have to say, I cannot help but admire the beauty of overseas silks when I see your dress, Your Imperial Majesty. I understand the ladies who aspire to resemble you."

No flattery! I was being one-hundred-percent genuine. The silk had been embroidered with precise geometric shapes that reminded me of patterns in Islamic art. The beautiful design fit the empress and her strong, independent woman vibe to a T. Since she was smooth enough to remind me of the leading lady of an all-female theater troupe, she was surely popular with girls! I could see why they'd want to wear the same dresses she did. She had what it took to be a trendsetter.

"Is that so?" the empress answered, raising her brows. Did she think I was just

paying lip service? I was starting to worry when she winked at me and added, “You say the cutest things.”

The top star *winked* at me?! *ARGH, SHE’S SO COOL!!!*

“I’m sure this beautiful blue would do well beyond the Summit of the Gods,” she continued. “The people of the desert are quite fond of blue and green. Such colors remind them of water and plants, see?”

“You think we could export it? What a wonderful prospect,” I said.

It made sense! In my past world, too, green was a popular color in the Middle East. Plenty of countries even used it in their national flags. I’d also seen many pictures of mosques using beautiful blue tiles.

“Oho ho ho,” I laughed. The empress smiled at my reaction.

“Some sensitive ladies hear the word ‘desert’ and immediately reject any contact with those they consider barbarians, yet your eyes sparkled at the idea,” she said.

Barbarians? One look at the silk draping the empress’s body immediately told me these people had a sophisticated culture. *Who even says stupid things like that?*

Actually, I could imagine one person who would’ve said that kind of thing! Come to think of it, until last year, the ones who’d welcomed the imperial family during their visit were our father and the old hag. In her eyes, the emperor was her nephew, and the empress just his wife.

Had that witch *bullied* the empress?!

If you become the empress, even your grandmother will have no choice but to kneel to you.

The faint voice of my mother echoed in my ears and my face fell.

“Ekaterina? Are you all right?”

The empress’s concern brought me back to reality. “That was rude of me, I’m sorry...”

“Do not concern yourself with such things. Tell me, how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. I was just reminded of my mother. I hope you do not mind me saying this, but she would have been around your age, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“I see.” A pained sigh escaped her lips. “Anastasia... I remember her well. She was a few years younger than I. A beautiful, refined lady—the *perfect* young lady, truly. I once more offer my condolences for your loss. You are the spitting image of her, Ekaterina, yet you may have already passed her in maturity.”

“Your considerate words warm my heart, Your Imperial Majesty. I’m most grateful.” This was the first time someone had offered me their condolences for my mother’s death.

No, that wasn’t entirely true. At my mother’s funeral, I’m sure plenty of people had said similar things, but I didn’t remember a word from that day. The pain of her loss had been all I could feel. The people; the flowers; the grand, orderly ceremony... Nothing had registered. I’d stood there in a daze until it had ended.

Alexei had taken care of everything by himself. In retrospect, I felt bad for having failed to help him; I’d forced him to face a great trial alone. When I thought of that time, I was glad to have since recovered the memories from my past life!

That was when it occurred to me that I needed to focus. I was currently hosting the empress—in other words, entertaining a client! While I had never worked in sales, any working adult ought to know how to deal with clients.

“Your Imperial Majesty, if I may return to the topic you broached earlier,” I said. “Do the sensitive ladies you speak of not know that silk is imported from beyond the Summit of the Gods? I’m surprised they’d drape themselves in fabrics made by those they call barbarians. Well, I suppose being so sensitive must bring many such challenges into their lives.”

“Well!” the empress said before bursting out in laughter. “That is almost word for word how I answered them.”

Oho. As expected of the star who shines brightest among us women (what do you mean I have no way of knowing that)! She didn’t cave to the witch. Too cool! Empress, can I call you “big sister”?

“I have a feeling we will get along just fine, Ekaterina. I’m glad,” the empress said. “I cannot wait to chat with you more.”

“Me too, Your Imperial Majesty! I’m overjoyed!”



After our jaunt through the garden, we entered the residence and sat for lunch on the balcony that overlooked it. Although, while I called it a balcony, it was as big as my entire studio apartment in my past life!

On one side of the large balcony, knights of the Order of Yulnova and imperial knights stood in an alternating pattern, unmoving as fine statues as they gripped their spears. Servants came and went, bringing elaborate dishes to the table. At times, the chefs appeared with portable counters and showcased their skills in front of our guests to amuse them. They even flambéed something! In the corner, a food taster sat at a small table. The wide space was fully utilized.

The soft breeze lifted up the scent of the roses, and the weather was perfect for an outdoor meal. Likewise, the atmosphere at the table was peaceful.

After the emperor asked if Alexei had any issues managing his duchy, Alexei had mentioned the dragon that’d delayed logging. He was explaining that it was none other than the Black Dragon, the ancient beast known as the king of the north, when the empress spoke up.

“According to old tales, there is another dragon that is just as powerful in Sein’s territory: a sea dragon known as the Green Dragon because of its gleaming green scales. It lives in the depths of the sea and seldom interacts with humans, but it is said to emerge and lay waste to entire cities in rage when humans dirty its waters. The tales also recount that it can transform into a woman of unmatched beauty. That is where the custom of offering a ring to the Green Dragon during the summer festival that the harbor cities inherited from the Astra Empire stems from. Every year, one young man is chosen to throw a golden ring into the sea and propose to the dragon. It goes like this: ‘O exquisite lady, I offer you this ring as proof of my love and hereby swear to be yours forevermore. In turn, please become mine forevermore.’ If the suitor catches the eye of the Green Dragon, it changes into a beautiful woman and appears before him, or so the legend says.”

“What a romantic custom!” I exclaimed.

In my past world, there was a similar custom in Venice: the Marriage of the Sea. The doge of Venice would throw a ring into the sea and say, “We espouse thee, O sea, as a sign of true and perpetual dominion.” This tradition had continued for hundreds of years. With Venice slowly sinking into the sea in recent years, some people had started saying that it was a just retribution against a man spouting empty talk to a woman that was deeply in love.

“Instead of suppressing it by force, they offer it love. What a peaceful way to resolve conflict. Perhaps we, too, could reconcile with the Black Dragon if we offered it something,” I said.

This felt like a big hint to unlocking the hidden route of the Black Dragon, aka the Dragon King Vladforen, one of the male leads of the game. I’d seen his appearance when googling information about the game. He was an out-of-this-world beauty with jet-black hair and red eyes. I’d almost been tempted to try his route because of his looks, but I was too much of a sucker for Alexei. Even though he only appeared next to the villainess to say a couple of lines here and there, my love for him had pulled me through the hardships of my life.

Setting that aside, it was interesting that destroying the forest enraged the Black Dragon while dirtying the sea incurred the wrath of the Green Dragon. I was starting to think that these dragons’ role was to preserve the well-being of the land, which I appreciated. They sounded like important guardian deities to me.

“Were you to offer a ring and ask for love in return, Ekaterina, even the sun would descend from its heavenly throne to find you,” the emperor said with a smile.

“Receiving such words from you is too great an honor, Your Imperial Majesty,” I said.

Wow, the emperor had game! His words were just as flowery as my brother’s. Unlike Alexei, though, it was obvious that he didn’t mean them. However, that only added to his witty air. I could tell that he’d honed his skills over years of diplomatic meetings. I wondered if the prince would one day be like him. To be honest, I kind of hoped he’d remain as he was now.

“I shall not give my sister to anyone, not even to the Black Dragon or the sun,” Alexei said, sullen. “I will await it with my blade should it descend from the heavens.”

I’m sorry, brother. I forced you to unveil your excessive attachment to me in front of the emperor of all people.

“If you find yourself engaged in a duel with the sun, I shall be there to assist you, brother,” I said.

The entire imperial family laughed.

“How courageous you are, Ekaterina! Can you wield a sword?”

“Well, that...I cannot,” I replied.

“I can hold my own with a rapier,” the empress said. “Would you like me to teach you the basics?”

“How incredible!” I said. “I would love to learn from you!”

The leading lady bearing a blade! I can feel a whole new dimension of moe opening before my eyes! I so wanna see it!!!

“Ekaterina.” Alexei’s chiding tone brought me out of my reverie.

Urgh, I forgot about my “condition” for a moment here.

“I’m most thankful for your offer, Your Imperial Majesty,” Alexei said. “Sadly, my sister’s body is frail. She does not take well to intense exercise. She fainted after attending the academy entrance ceremony and once more after the monster attack.”

He even knows about that time?! How?!

After overcoming the monster attack event and saving the empire from certain destruction, I’d met with the imperial guards alongside Mikhail and my brother to share everything we’d seen. Alexei had taken me back to my dorm afterward. Mina had been waiting for me at the entrance, and we’d been walking to my deluxe room when I’d suddenly run out of steam. It hadn’t been the same as the previous times when I’d felt as though my body was shutting down, like it was a machine I’d lost control of. I’d simply run out of energy and found myself unable to take another step forward. Mina had been forced to

carry me princess-style again.

She must've told Alexei, which made sense. At the end of the day, *he* was her boss. Still, it bothered me a little that he knew.

Nevertheless, I was ultra thankful to him right now! This was his way of making sure the emperor and empress understood that I was unfit to join the competition to become the next empress, right?

Thanks for upholding my request, brother!

Mikhail seemed surprised. "You fainted after the attack? I'm sorry I failed to notice your condition," he said.

"She's too stubborn for her own good," Alexei said. "I told her to rest, but she insisted."

"I wanted to stay by your side, brother," I said, looking up at him with big puppy dog eyes.

Alexei paused before clearing his throat. "Well, I did allow you to stay, so I cannot blame you."

Their Majesties both looked at Alexei, warmth and affection evident in their gazes.

Sorry, I'm really making you show them this side of you!

"I cannot help but wonder whether there is yet another dragon in Magna's duchy," Mikhail said.

I was relieved he changed the topic.

"Vladimir surely knows," the emperor said. "You should ask him."

"I don't often see him at the academy, but if the occasion arises, I shall," Mikhail answered before smiling my way. "Did you know that Vladimir is more learned than many scholars? His memory is so exceptional that he never forgets anything after reading it once. Much like you, he happens to have a weak constitution, so he probably hasn't seen much of his own duchy, but I think he's memorized every last document that can be found in the Magna Duchy. He can even read ancient texts written in the language of the Astra Empire as though they were written in our language."

Wasn't Vladimir the guy who'd insulted me in front of the prince? Yulmagna's heir and a very pretty boy to boot, but he was one of the rudest people I'd ever met.

We're talking about the same dude, right?

Come to think of it, Alexei had also mentioned his intelligence. I remembered thinking he looked like he belonged in a visual kei band because he was slender and appeared to be in poor health. While my brother and the prince were also slim, they were both muscular and exuded an aura of power. On the other hand, for the heir of a duchy that seemed to attach so much importance to military might, Vladimir didn't look like he could don armor and bustle about the battlefield.

"I know it's hard to believe considering how he acted that one time, but he used to be kind and reserved," Mikhail continued. "You know that too, Alexei, don't you?"

Alexei paused before saying in a flat voice, "He became a different person so long ago I cannot remember how much time has passed."

"Seven years," Mikhail stated. "I remember well. Around the same time your grandfather passed and you stopped coming to the palace, Vladimir stopped too. He was too sick to come. When I saw him again after his condition improved, he'd changed." Mikhail smiled. "There's something else I remember! I think I was six, back then. On the day of my first meeting with Vladimir, who was seven at the time, you found him crying, took his hand, and led him to me."

What's up with that adorable story?! Tell me more!

"It was his first time at the palace. He cried because he was lost. What else was I to do?" Alexei asked, his tone just as cold as before.

Brother, had he been a girl, that would've been a huge flag. That's how puppy love begins! I didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed that Vladimir was a boy.

Hang on! Is that a BL flag?! I couldn't tell for sure, but if ending up with him could make Alexei happy, I'd support their love! *Maybe I need to calm down. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.*

“Georgi is impossible,” the emperor said with a sigh. “Leaving his son alone on his first trip to the palace. He’s always been that way, putting those who are closest to him last.”

The head of the House of Yulmagna and Vladimir’s father, Georgi, was roughly the same age as the emperor. With their sons being of a similar age as well, it was only natural they’d become playmates. It didn’t sound like they were all that close anymore, though.

“Alexei, you and Vladimir are both brilliant young men who will lead the empire into the next era,” the emperor continued. “I know you have your own circumstances to worry about, but I hope you’ll cooperate for the good of the empire.”

“Your wish is my command,” Alexei replied at once, bowing obediently.



Preparing for the imperial visit took vast amounts of time and money, but nobody in the empire was as busy as the emperor. After we finished lunch, it was already time for the imperial family to return to the palace.

Outside the main gates of the Yulnova residence, protected by the knights of Yulnova and the imperial knights, the sounds of the people’s chatter grew louder. They seemed to have noticed that the emperor’s departure was near.

As we walked to the front, where the carriage was waiting for the imperial couple and their son, cheers erupted from outside the gates.

“Thank you for today, Alexei,” the emperor said. “Your hospitality was much like you, thoughtful and thorough.”

“I’m grateful, Your Imperial Majesty. Your words honor every member of my household.”

While they exchanged goodbyes, the empress took my hands in hers and said, “I had a delightful time in your company, Ekaterina. Please come visit me at the palace soon.”

“I’m delighted, Your Imperial Majesty. I shall do so without fail,” I answered, squeezing back. She was acting so friendly that I almost felt as though we were classmates.

Next to her, Mikhail's lips pulled into a strained smile. "Thank you, Alexei, Ekaterina. I'll see you at the academy."

Then, they boarded the carriage. Music started playing, and the lavish carriage pulled by demonic horses departed, accompanied by the sound of horns.



Waving to the people along the road just as he had on the way there, Emperor Konstantin said in high spirits, "The roses of Nova were quite beautiful this year, especially the blue one, wouldn't you agree?"

"My, how unusual. It's not often a young lady catches your eye, Your Imperial Majesty," Empress Magdalena answered. She, too, waved and smiled for the crowd.

"You seemed to like her so much that I couldn't help but pay attention. You two had quite the lively conversation, did you not?"

"Well..." the empress started with a smile before suddenly bursting into laughter. "How could I not? Can you believe it? That girl brought up tariffs and cargo insurance with sparkling eyes! I've never met another young lady quite like her. Just a few words of explanation and she seemed to grasp a deep understanding of the matter! She's truly Alexei's sister."

The cheerful empress surely used to be a peculiar young lady in her youth.

"When she took notice of the pattern on my dress, I thought she was going to question whether such fashion would suit her, but she instead inquired about the provenance of the fabric and the culture and techniques of the people who'd made it. We would do well to invite her to the table if we ever need to put their ambassador in a good mood. She listens with no prejudice and her discernment is remarkable for her young age. Any ambassador who meets her shall be deeply moved."

Had Ekaterina been there to listen to these comments, she surely would have bowed inwardly and thought: *I'm sorry for deceiving you. I'm not young at all.*

"Not even a year has passed since she set foot in society. Her progress is astonishing," the emperor said.

Under normal circumstances, a young lady of Ekaterina's rank should have started visiting the palace from a young age. Her mother, Anastasia, should also have enjoyed a high position in the noble circles of the capital. Instead, she'd passed away after over a decade of confinement even though her husband, Aleksandr, had spent most of his time in the capital after succeeding to his title.

The official story was that Anastasia had been ill and rested in the duchy, but no one had believed a word of it. It was easy to imagine what kind of life the mother and daughter had led, and rumors about their grand stone prison often circled the capital.

Remarkably, the Ekaterina they'd met today was a bright, strong-willed young woman eager to support her brother and her territory. Her resilience ought to have been praised. The emperor and the empress couldn't help but smile when they thought of the way Alexei, who always kept his guard up, softened in her presence.

"With Alexei and Ekaterina to host us, I shall now look forward to our visits to the Nova," the emperor said.

"To tell you the truth, I already looked forward to each of our visits to the Nova," the empress said with a mean-spirited laugh.

Just as Ekaterina had imagined, Alexandra had not been the kind of person to obediently bow to her nephew's wife. Especially not when Magdalena held views that clashed with hers in every way. Alexandra had disliked her unbridled smile and the friendliness she displayed so easily, her rapier skills that equaled a man's, and the way she involved herself in business matters and fostered exchanges or friendships with foreigners. Even Magdalena's height, which was almost the same as her husband's, had annoyed Alexandra. Naturally, with her sharp tongue, she had made her opinions known.

"You do not have an ounce of dignity or grace. Truly, I cannot think of someone as unworthy of joining the imperial family. I'm sure even Pyotr the Great shares my sorrow at having to educate a failure like you," Alexandra had said, sighing behind her fan.

Magdalena, crown princess at the time, had answered, "You'd like to educate me? Have you become a private tutor? I cannot begin to tell you how proud I

am to see you finally realize the importance of labor.”

While Alexandra had already left the imperial family to marry into the House of Yulnova, she was still the emperor’s elder sister. At Magdalena’s words, a commotion had risen among the proud duchess’s followers. Still, in hindsight, most of them had thought that it was a clever response.

Some years later, Emperor Valentin, depressed after losing Sergei, had decided the time had come to abdicate. With Konstantin’s ascension to emperor, Magdalena became empress. From that day onward, her status unmistakably surpassed Alexandra’s. Regardless, Alexandra had made a point to reject anything Magdalena ever produced or endorsed. Watching Alexandra gradually lose her influence and grow sullen and irritated had become one of the empress’s favorite pastimes.

“I’m looking forward to seeing Ekaterina’s future. Elizaveta is also an adorable girl, but...”

Elizaveta was Duke Yulmagna’s daughter—a girl of only ten. Her efforts to catch Mikhail’s attention were praiseworthy, and no one doubted that she’d eventually bloom into a wonderful lady, but she was still too young.

Besides, her father, Georgi, lacked tact. He’d once insulted Ekaterina during one of the ducal meetings held in front of the emperor, saying point-blank that she was “so frail that she hadn’t had a true education, nor had she accepted any requests to socialize.” He hadn’t seemed to understand that mocking an unfortunate young lady wouldn’t have the effect he’d hoped for. Mikhail’s future wife’s family would become the next emperor’s maternal relatives. Making his daughter look good at the cost of his own reputation was not a wise move.

The emperor hummed.

“What does Alexei intend to do with his sister?” he mused.

He’d brought up the fact that Ekaterina was frail in front of the emperor himself. Alexei was no fool. That had been not a slip of the tongue but an intentional remark. He knew full well that the crown princess—and later, the empress—was expected to perform demanding duties. Moreover, her most important mission was to birth a healthy heir to the throne. In other words, a

sickly young lady could not hope to fill that position.

Alexei had been clear: he did not want Ekaterina to become empress.

“Their granduncle, Isaac, never fathered children, and the two of them are the only remaining Yulnova,” the empress replied. “He may be hoping to strengthen their line by marrying Ekaterina into one of their branch families. Perhaps he’s reluctant to let her go because he adores her too much. I do wonder what Ekaterina’s thoughts on the matter are.”

The emperor and empress’s gazes turned to their son.

Mikhail paused. “Ekaterina has no interest in me.”

His smile had not dropped, and he continued to wave at the people through the window, but his tone wasn’t as neutral as he’d hoped to make it sound.

“When I first talked to her, she reacted as though she’d just seen some horrendous insect,” he said. “I almost thought she’d step back in terror.”

Ekaterina’s visceral reaction had been a lot more obvious than she thought.

“That could very well be a ploy to get your attention,” his mother said.

“I’ve met girls who tried to seem distant to arouse my interest in the past,” Mikhail said. “Girls can truly be scary! But Ekaterina isn’t like that. Even after we fought the monster, she stuck to Alexei’s side and seemed to forget I existed.”

That, too, had been more obvious than Ekaterina thought.

“Even though the monster appeared out of the blue, she used strategy without losing her cool for a moment. As expected of a Nova girl, I thought. Then she burst into tears and jumped into Alexei’s arms like a normal young lady, and when I praised her bravery, she almost started crying again! Although, it was a little cute...”



The prince had practically started monologuing about Ekaterina. His parents listened intently, all the while pretending not to be paying attention.

“To be honest,” he continued, “it’s my first time meeting a girl who doesn’t seem to care for me to such an extent. I’m fairly certain that she harbors no hopes of becoming my fiancée, Alexei’s decision or not. If anything, I think Alexei might have said that because *she* abhors the idea. I wish she didn’t hate me so much! Being treated like a pest is quite vexing.”

Emperor Konstantin let out a pensive sigh. “It’s no matter. There is still time until you graduate,” he said.

Mikhail’s position as the heir to the throne would be made official during the Investiture of the Crown Prince, after his graduation. In most cases, the future ruler’s fiancée was officially introduced to the court at the same time and the pair would marry soon after so that she could become the crown princess.

“Situations sometimes change fast, and so do young people’s feelings,” the empress said.

“My dream is to set up my own firm and run a business! I’ll take my ship and travel the world. So, please, do not concern yourself with a woman like me, and find yourself another wife!”

The emperor and the empress both knew that Mikhail took after his father in more than his appearance—he’d inherited his stubbornness. Just like Konstantin, he was the type to chase after those who ran from him.

“Don’t fan the flames,” the emperor whispered.

“I know, I know,” the empress murmured. “That will have the opposite effect.”

The young prince continued to wave, unaware of his parents’ hushed conversation.



“Their Majesties appeared to be in a good mood. It’s all thanks to you,

Ekaterina.”

“Oh, brother, I haven’t done a thing. Your guidance, as well as our servants’ earnest efforts, made this visit a success.”

After watching the imperial carriage disappear past the gate of the Yulnova residence, Alexei and Ekaterina were walking back to the mansion together, making small talk on the way.

While the doors had remained open, the crowd that had gathered to catch a glimpse of the imperial carriage had also cheered for the beautiful siblings, but neither of them noticed a thing. They were both alike in this peculiar way: they rarely noticed praise and applause directed their way.

“Your Grace, your ladyship, please allow yourselves a well-deserved break. Tea is ready.”

“Thank you, Graham,” Alexei said. “You’ve worked hard as well.”

“Indeed!” Ekaterina agreed. “Everything went smoothly with your help!”

The siblings expressed their appreciation to their butler before entering a small lounge next to the entrance to the manor.



When we walked into the lounge, we found Ivan and Mina waiting for us there. They swiftly poured cups of black tea for us as we took our seats.

“Brother, you were right. Their Majesties were very amiable,” I said. “I was worried at first, but I had a most pleasant time.”

“You did enjoy a lively conversation with Her Imperial Majesty.”

“Why, indeed! I learned so much. Her Imperial Majesty is a wonderful person. Perhaps because she’s close in age to mother, I felt comfortable by her side.”

“I see,” Alexei said, smiling fondly at me.

“You seemed to have a most agreeable talk with His Imperial Majesty too.”

“Yes. He’s always been kind to me. When he was still crown prince, he’d often come to see me and Vladimir when we visited His Highness. He helped us with our studies and taught us swordsmanship.”

His Imperial Majesty seemed like a good dad. I understood why the prince was such a sweet boy. Compared to him, our father was a lazy womanizer and Magna the kind of terrible dad who'd abandon his crying kid in the middle of the imperial palace—during his very first visit there!

Seriously, the deadbeat-dad quotient is through the roof.

As a child, my brother must've often wished for His Imperial Majesty—no, at the time he was still crown prince, so he probably would've addressed him differently—anyway, he must've wished for Konstantin to be his father. Vladimir too, surely.

"Prince Mikhail's story about Lord Vladimir surprised me," I said. "I did not find his demeanor to be particularly agreeable when we met."

Alexei's gaze dropped. He hesitated.

"Brother," I added. "We can avoid this topic if you'd like. Please don't feel pressured to tell me more."

"No, it's fine," Alexei said after a second. "When I first met Vladimir, he was indeed a gentle child. He was a little shy, but he quickly became attached to me. In truth, I almost considered him a younger brother. Even back then, Vladimir was brilliant and had an impressive memory. At just seven, he could recite countless pieces of classic literature from the Astra Empire. After grandfather passed, I did not see him for a considerable amount of time due to my duties. When we finally met again, he left without so much as returning my greeting. Time went on, and..."

Alexei paused and his expression soured. "For some reason, he started spending more and more time with father."

Huh?

"With father? You do mean *our* father, right?"

"I do."

There wasn't anyone else Alexei could have called father so that made sense, but, *huh*?!

Hang on, lemme say that again: HUH?!

So our dad had ignored Alexei, his flesh and blood, only to hang out with another kid?! I knew Alexei had seemed mature even as a child, but that didn't mean he had no feelings!

Wait, I just realized something else! Our father had been a notable womanizer. Guys like him mostly hung around at establishments where you could seek the company of ladies: casinos and other seedy places, right? *Did he really take a child there?!*

"I've only heard about it from others," Alexei continued. "But Vladimir often visited places that were quite improper for children. This is probably what gave rise to most of the rumors about him. I will not give any more details, as I do not believe a young lady should hear about this."

"I understand, brother. I trust your judgment and shall not inquire further." *Sorry, but I have a pretty good idea what sort of places we're talking about. Again, so sorry!*

Seriously, what was *wrong* with our father? Had he just used a random kid to have a laugh at the expense of his straitlaced son who disapproved of his salacious ways? How old was Vladimir back then? *Doesn't that count as child abuse?*

"Our grandmother was always close to the previous head of Magna," Alexei said. "Her mother was a Yulmagna before marrying the emperor. From what I know, the father of the previous head of Magna, who was head before him, doted on the last emperor and grandmother, since they were his grandchildren."

In other words, the previous head of Magna, with whom the old hag got along so well, was her uncle. And the old hag's grandfather, who was the previous-*previous* head of Magna, had pampered and spoiled her rotten—which probably explained a lot about her personality. Or perhaps not? The previous emperor had grown up in the same environment, but he sounded like a kind person.

I guess natural disposition accounts for a lot in the end.

"Our father also used to be close with Georgi, the current head of Magna. In the few years that preceded father and grandmother's passing, Georgi visited

them often. Many things changed after grandfather left us. This was one of them.”

Ah. Alexei had lost the only member of our family who truly loved him, the only one he respected, but neither our father nor our grandmother had bothered to mourn him properly. Instead, they’d socialized with other people, ignoring Alexei. I could only imagine the shock he’d received when he’d gotten the silent treatment out of the blue from a supposed friend only to later see that “friend” tagging along with his absentee father.

He must’ve been so lonely. I’m sure he’d felt as though his home wasn’t his own after that.

That’s it. I’m never forgiving any of you.

I was an idiot for thinking there was a BL route there, even for an instant. I’d never expected the bad blood between them to run so deep! Without thinking, I reached for my brother’s hands.

“How lonely you must have felt. To think that even through this, though you were still just a child, you fought to protect the House of Yulnova. I don’t have the words to tell you how admirable I find that. I’m still inexperienced, but I swear to do everything I can to support you, brother!”

Alexei’s eyes opened wide in surprise, and he squeezed my hands. “I’m grateful, Ekaterina, truly. The heavens sent me the most precious gift I could have asked for. You are the loveliest, kindest lady I’ve ever known.”

Nah, I’m really not that great—just some stalker from another world.

“Ekaterina.”

“Yes, brother?”

“Mother...” Alexei paused before continuing. “What kind of person was she?”

I gasped. This was the very first time he’d asked me about our mother. He’d apologized many times for her death, but since the funeral, he’d avoided the topic altogether.

Ivan and Mina exchanged a glance with one another before bowing and leaving us alone.

It always felt strange hearing Alexei say “mother” or “father” the same way I did. Considering the way he usually talked, I would’ve expected him to speak of them as “our mother” and “our father” or to use their names or titles. When he used the terms like they were names, it sounded like he was doing it to match me. Had I used different turns of phrase, he might have copied those instead.

After all, Alexei had never gotten to call our mother “mother” directly. In her last moments, she’d confused him for her husband, and he’d gently called her name, “Anastasia.” That had been their one and only interaction. I assumed that was why he copied me, because he didn’t know how else to refer to her.

I shook off the tears that were threatening to well up at that thought and focused on recalling my childhood.

“Mother was beautiful and incredibly graceful,” I told Alexei. “Her Imperial Majesty called her the perfect young lady, and I very much agree. She always exuded an air of calm gentleness. As I recall... Yes, she loved to embroider. She spent most of her time in the sunroom, engaging in needlework. She also liked to draw and paint, and she was an accomplished piano player. When I was little, I often sang along while she played.”

Only when I was little, though. The piano had eventually disappeared from the mansion. So had the paint and brushes, mother’s needles and thread...even her lovely sewing box. Every last thing she loved had been stolen away from her. In time, our life had grown more and more difficult. Mother had still been endlessly kind to me, but she had fallen into a deep melancholy, until her health was lost to her as well. From that point on, she’d spent most of her days confined to her bed.

“Sometimes, she would tell me about you,” I continued. “She told me that I had an older brother, that he’d surely grown into a wonderful gentleman. Mother’s voice was so elegant and soft.”

None of this was a lie. She’d told me these things time and time again. She’d also said *other* things, though...

“Your father is a splendid person, Ekaterina. He’s handsome and gallant, tall and learned, and a true athlete! Although his best quality is undoubtedly the

goodness of his heart. He has a way with words too! When he speaks, I cannot help but listen with rapt attention. Even at the academy, there was not a single lady who could resist his charms. When I learned that I would become his bride, I thought I was dreaming. We cannot see him for the time being, but if we're good and wait for him, he'll come for us. Oh, and you have a brother, Ekaterina! I'm sure he's grown into a wonderful gentleman, just like your father."

Her son had been taken from her immediately after birth, so she hadn't seemed to have a clear image of him. Her yearning for her husband had taken up far more space inside her heart.

After everything I'd learned about grandfather, I was almost certain he'd suggested that mother come live in the capital instead of remaining in the duchy at least once. In the capital, grandmother and father would've been forced to mind how their treatment of mother would be perceived by outsiders. In the capital, they couldn't have forced her to live in poverty.

If he had suggested it, I knew mother would've refused immediately. Instead, she'd have insisted that a wife ought to be by her husband's side and that Aleksandr would soon return to her. She'd been a young woman in love, as well as a proper lady—she'd believed that a wife's duty was to trust and obey her husband.

In the end, our blasted father had never gone back to her.

When she'd become bedridden, mother had stopped mentioning father altogether. Instead, she'd urged me to become the empress. It was only when she saw Alexei, at the very end, that she brought up Aleksandr's name again.

Her painful life reminded me of "Asagi ga Yado," one of the stories of the *Ugetsu Monogatari*. It told the tale of a wife tirelessly waiting for her husband during troubled times. The husband finally comes home after losing everything and spends a night with his wife. The next morning, he notices that his house is in ruins. As for the wife who'd supposedly welcomed him the previous night, he finds that she's already dead in her grave.

If mother had been not a model noble lady but a strong woman like the empress, perhaps she would have stood up to her mother-in-law. In that world,

we could've all lived together, like a real family. It was easy for me to think such things now, but I knew none of it had been easy for mother.

This place wasn't twenty-first-century Japan. Noblewomen had no right to pick their partners, much less to work or be independent. That was the way of this world. Seeing how the empress behaved, I knew she must've faced heaps of criticism. Even so, she'd refused to give in—but she was the exception, not the rule.

I knew that truth, but...

I wished I had more to tell Alexei. I wished I could say that mother had always thought of him; that, while we hadn't had as much as other nobles, we'd lived just fine and had plenty of fun every day; that mother hadn't passed with her heart crushed by sorrow, so there was no reason for him to feel forlorn. If only I could tell him all that.

Even though those words would be lies, I ached to say them. But I felt as though he'd see right through me, then swallow his emotions and pretend to be glad to hear it.

I couldn't make him do that. I couldn't lie to him. I wasn't sure why, but I knew not to.

"I'm so sorry, Ekaterina," he said to me. "I shouldn't have asked about something so painful. Please don't cry anymore. I shouldn't have; I'm sorry."

I'm not crying, I thought. It was only when Alexei took me in his arms that I noticed my cheeks were wet. *Ekaterina must be crying. Well, she's only fifteen.*

It hadn't happened in a while, but it seemed like our souls had pulled apart again.

"I'm fine, brother. I'm happy, you know, because I have you. How could I be anything but happy?"

"Ekaterina... Thank you. I'm blessed to be by your side, my gentle goddess, my Queen of the Night. Seeing your tears will sadden the stars so much that they'll fall from the night sky. Please, I beg of you, do not cry anymore," Alexei whispered.

I wrapped—rather, *Ekaterina* wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. Alexei must have felt terrible hearing about my past. Although he tried to act mature, he was still a child. A courageous child who'd fought alone ever since he was ten to protect his grandfather's legacy, but a child nonetheless.

They were both so young: a seventeen-year-old and a fifteen-year-old left to carry the burden of an immense territory, colossal wealth, and a noble house with a four-hundred-year-long history.

And me? I was just a woman who'd died at twenty-eight, floating in the void, disconnected from my sense of self in this world. As if from a great distance, I watched the pair of siblings comfort one another.

Interlude: The Narcissus of Yulmagna

Among the three grand ducal families, or rather, among the influential noble families that owned a residence in the royal capital, the House of Yulmagna boasted the grandest estate. There, one could find lodgings for their numerous knights, a training ground, and even a magnificent library that held the most extensive collection of rare books pertaining to the Astra Empire in the entirety of the empire.

In the early days of the Yulgran Empire, the House of Yulmagna had been affluent. The family's territory, located in the east of the empire, was made up of large plains and lakes. Even then, the plains had been home to ample agricultural land.

The founding father of the empire, Pyotr the Great, had left his youngest brother, Pavel, the easiest territory to manage for two reasons. The first was his gratitude to the young military genius for saving him on the battlefield time and again. The second was his concern for his dear brother who, for all his military might, did not have a head for politics.

The gesture had moved Pavel so thoroughly that he had become more loyal than ever before. Thus, he had left two precepts to his descendants, prompting them to follow in his footsteps: *As long as the House of Yulmagna endures, it shall support the emperor through arms and strategy. But do not rely solely on martial arts—deepen your understanding of human nature by learning from the wisdom of old.*

These principles explained the large chivalric order the House of Yulmagna maintained, as well as the Astra Research Institute established by Pavel. While both of these endeavors cost tremendous sums of money, the large plots of farmland in the territory had produced enough resources to compensate.

But four hundred years had passed since those days. Times had changed.



Vladimir of the House of Yulmagna entered his father's office to find him

shouting at the butler.

“You called for me, father?”

“Vladimir!” Georgi barked, turning toward his son. The man was all muscles, his arms several times thicker than Vladimir’s, yet he was shaking.

“That damned brat Alexei dismissed another of her ladyship’s attendants! He was always impudent, even as a child, but I cannot believe how disrespectful he’s gotten! How sorry I feel for her!” The one Georgi referred to as “her ladyship” was none other than Alexei’s grandmother, Alexandra. “Nova and Sein have been looking down on the imperial family recently. Only we have remained perfectly loyal. We must correct their ways!”

“Allow me to guess. The servant he fired came to us looking for employment—again,” Vladimir replied after his father’s rant.

Georgi twitched at the way his son spoke, but he nodded. “Do something about it.”

“And what exactly should I do? Would you like me to hire this person?”

Georgi grimaced, as though his son had just said something ridiculous.

“Don’t be stupid! That woman shouldn’t even be alive! Why did she not follow her master to the grave? What a lack of loyalty! No, I shall never welcome such an individual into our employ!”

“I see. Then I suppose that is the message we shall pass on. You heard him, Zakhar.”

“I understand,” the butler said, bowing.

Georgi clicked his tongue. “If she cannot follow her master in death, tell her to seek revenge! Let her strike that insufferable Alexei with a sword! That is the least she could do when *he* killed her!”

“Father,” Vladimir said sternly.

“Humph. No one else has realized, but I will *not* be fooled. Her ladyship was far too healthy to have passed so suddenly. It’s beyond suspicious. The same goes for Aleksandr’s death. All we heard was that it was an accident. That coldhearted, calculating brat must be behind it. He’s guilty of parricide, the

worst sin of all! I am certain of it!”

“Father,” Vladimir repeated, his tone icy cold. “Why are you still saying these things? I do not believe for one moment that Alexei killed Lady Alexandra. He *personally* asked for her to be buried in the imperial mausoleum.”

While she’d been born to the imperial family, Alexandra had long been part of another house, and her final resting place should’ve been the Yulnova mausoleum. However, Alexei, who knew that his grandmother had prided herself on her status as an imperial princess until the end, had requested that she instead be buried in the imperial mausoleum. Emperor Konstantin had given special permission to allow it, as an honor to her.

Though, in truth, the act had been more about Alexei’s reluctance to put her to rest by his dear grandfather’s side.

“Had he done anything to her, her remains would be the only incriminating evidence against him,” Vladimir continued. “Some trace of his would-be machinations would undoubtedly have remained. Alexei is no fool. Why give anyone a chance to uncover his crime? If he’d killed her, he would’ve hidden the body in the Yulnova mausoleum.”

“Sometimes, no traces are left,” Georgi whispered, his voice deep and heavy with a hint of satisfaction.

Vladimir looked at his father. His eyes were usually green and gray, but in that moment, they’d turned a vivid shade of green and gleamed with a peculiar light.

“What are you talking about?” Vladimir asked.

“It’s... It’s nothing.” Georgi averted his eyes. When he glanced back at his son, he noticed that Vladimir was observing his desk instead.

“You don’t seem to have made much progress in your work,” Vladimir said.

Mountains of paper had accumulated on the expensive ebony desk that dominated Georgi’s office. The imposing piece of furniture had been used by generations of Yulmagna heads. Vladimir’s comment immediately ignited his father’s temper.

“Quiet! What do you even know of life?! The lot of you keep badgering me

about money! There isn't enough for this, we need more for that, the peasants aren't paying their taxes. Enough! The topic is so dull I fear I might die of boredom. *My* proud House of Yulmagna does not care for debts! *You* figure it out!"

"Just sign the documents and everything will be fine," Vladimir said. "I'll deal with Lady Alexandra's attendant. Now, if you'll excuse me. Zakhar."

"Yes, young master," the butler replied. "Pardon me, Your Grace."

He scrambled out of the room to follow Vladimir.

Right after they left, a dull sound reached their ears, as though someone had thrown something at the wall of the office.



Vladimir sighed.

Father is always like that.

Despite the earlier scene, his father wasn't incompetent. His knights approved of him, he was learned and proficient in Astra studies, and he knew how to keep the nagging members of their branch families in check. Only Georgi could unite the current Magna, bloated as it was.

However, Georgi had strong likes and dislikes and was quick to make assumptions. He was self-righteous to a fault and often made promises based on his feelings on a given day. He'd most likely been the one to tell Alexandra's servants that they should turn to him in time of need, softened by his mood at her funeral. By the time they came begging for help, his heart had hardened. Not that he would say that to their faces, out of concern for his image. He let others deal with the aftermath. That was just the type of man he was.

"Are you feeling ill, young master?" Zakhar asked, looking at Vladimir with concern.

The elderly butler had already welcomed his seventieth birthday. His hair and brows had long turned white, and even his height had started regressing. While he delegated most of his work to his successor, his sense of loyalty prompted him to insist on serving Vladimir himself.

“This old man is more than capable of chasing away a single servant,” he continued. “Please go rest in your room, young master. You shouldn’t work all day on the weekend.”

“I can *only* work during the weekend,” Vladimir said. “Perhaps I should set up an office at the academy. Then I could do a little every day...”

Just like Alexei.

Alexei was famous for having set up an office for himself right after enrolling at the academy. Even though his father, Aleksandr, had still been duke at this time, he hadn’t hesitated to do so. He might as well have announced to everyone that he, not his father, carried out the duties of head of the family. Even though his son had made such a public declaration, Aleksandr had continued to live in debauchery and neglect his work without a care in the world.

Georgi wasn’t that sort. While he did neglect the work he didn’t feel like doing and forced his subordinates to turn to Vladimir for direction, he wouldn’t stand for anyone outside of his household finding out. He wanted the world to think of him as the sole enactor of the ducal authority in his family. Nevertheless, he *actually* pushed more and more work onto Vladimir—budgeting concerns in particular, for he abhorred thinking about money.

“I’m not ill,” Vladimir said, “but I’ll leave the servant to you while I head to the library. There is something I must research.”

“Leave it to me, young master. Still, I’m afraid the library must be cold. If you’d like to read a book, I’ll bring it to you, so please remain in the warmth of your room.”

“That won’t do. The documents I want to check are restricted. You can’t bring them out for me.”

“Then please, at least wear a coat. This old man will bring you one at once. You should also have your medicine, young master. You didn’t have lunch either, did you? I’ll bring you something to eat too.”

A wry smile found itself on Vladimir’s lips at the old man’s excessive worries. “I’ll take a coat with me.”

“I shall bring you your tincture.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll wait for you in the hall.”



Vladimir stopped in the corridor that linked the residence to the library and stared into the garden.

The flower of the House of Yulmagna was the narcissus. From the end of the winter and throughout the spring months, their garden bloomed. Many different species of narcissus blossomed in every corner, releasing pure, pleasant aromas. In one of the sections of the garden, the flowers were arranged in such a way that they depicted the crest of Magna. In another, they brought to life the flag of the empire. There were also several rare specimens that could only be observed here.

Right now, however, the garden was simply green. Really, this place served a singular purpose: showcasing the many narcissi in full bloom during the imperial visit. The rest of the year, the only thing worth looking at was the fountain.

The narcissus garden was also eerily quiet. Here, one could not hear the chirping of birds or the fluttering of insects. The aftermath of such creatures visiting the garden to peck or munch on the leaves was also nowhere to be seen.

Why? Well, narcissi were poisonous. The leaves, flowers, and roots—there wasn’t a single part of them free of poison. The bulbs were the most poisonous parts. Eating one meant certain death.

In fact, there was a legend about narcissi and their poison in the empire.

The story went as such: The spirit of the flower was a beautiful woman. One day, her lover, having had a change of heart, broke things off with her. She asked them to grant her one final wish. She presented a golden cup and requested that they drink together one last time. The golden cup was in fact the golden corolla of a narcissus. After they both drank from it, the two of them passed away, side by side.

While the narcissus was a symbol of earnest love, most people avoided gifting them to their lovers. They represented a love so obsessive it could become

deadly.

Vladimir turned his eyes to the north. In this season, the Yulnova garden must've been wonderful.



Vladimir had first met Alexei in the shadow of a staircase in the imperial palace.

He'd been brought to the palace to play with the prince, but after running into an acquaintance, his father had told him to go find Mikhail and left Vladimir on his own.

Vladimir knew that he should just ask someone for directions, but that thought didn't cure his melancholy. His father did not care one bit for him; that much was obvious even to him, a child. He'd known it as long as he could remember, but he blamed no one but himself. He'd been born too feeble to deserve his father's affection, yet he couldn't bear the pain it made him feel to have been discarded so easily. This was why he had hidden under the protective curve of the flight of stairs to cry alone.

"What's wrong?"

Someone had found him! At first, Vladimir cowered in fear, but he soon realized the one who'd spoken was another child.

He looked up at the boy. He looked slightly older than him, with beautiful features, light-blue hair, and bright blue eyes.

Vladimir remembered having been particularly struck by the way his eyes gleamed. He'd never seen such memorable eyes before.

"I'm Alexei Yulnova. What's your name?"

"My name is...Vladimir Yulmagna."

"Vladimir," Alexei repeated. "If you're Magna's son, you must be here to see His Highness too, just like I am. What are you doing?"

Alexei's question was so direct that Vladimir didn't know how to answer. If he said that his father had left him to his own devices, it'd reflect badly on Georgi.

"It's my first time here..." Vladimir replied.

Alexei assumed that he'd lost his way and left it at that.

"His Highness is this way," the light-blue-haired boy said, starting to walk away.

Vladimir's face was still streaked with tears and he didn't want to step out of the dark. As he hesitated, Alexei turned around to watch him.

"Are you scared of me?" Alexei asked.

"Huh?"

"People sometimes say I'm scary, that they can't bear to look at me because of my eyes. If you don't want to come with me, I'll call someone else to show you the way."

Vladimir would later learn who'd said that to him. In that moment, though, as he studied the color of Alexei's eyes, words he'd read before bubbled up from his memory.

"The mountaintop lake that reflects but the blue of the sky;
the temple has sunk inside.

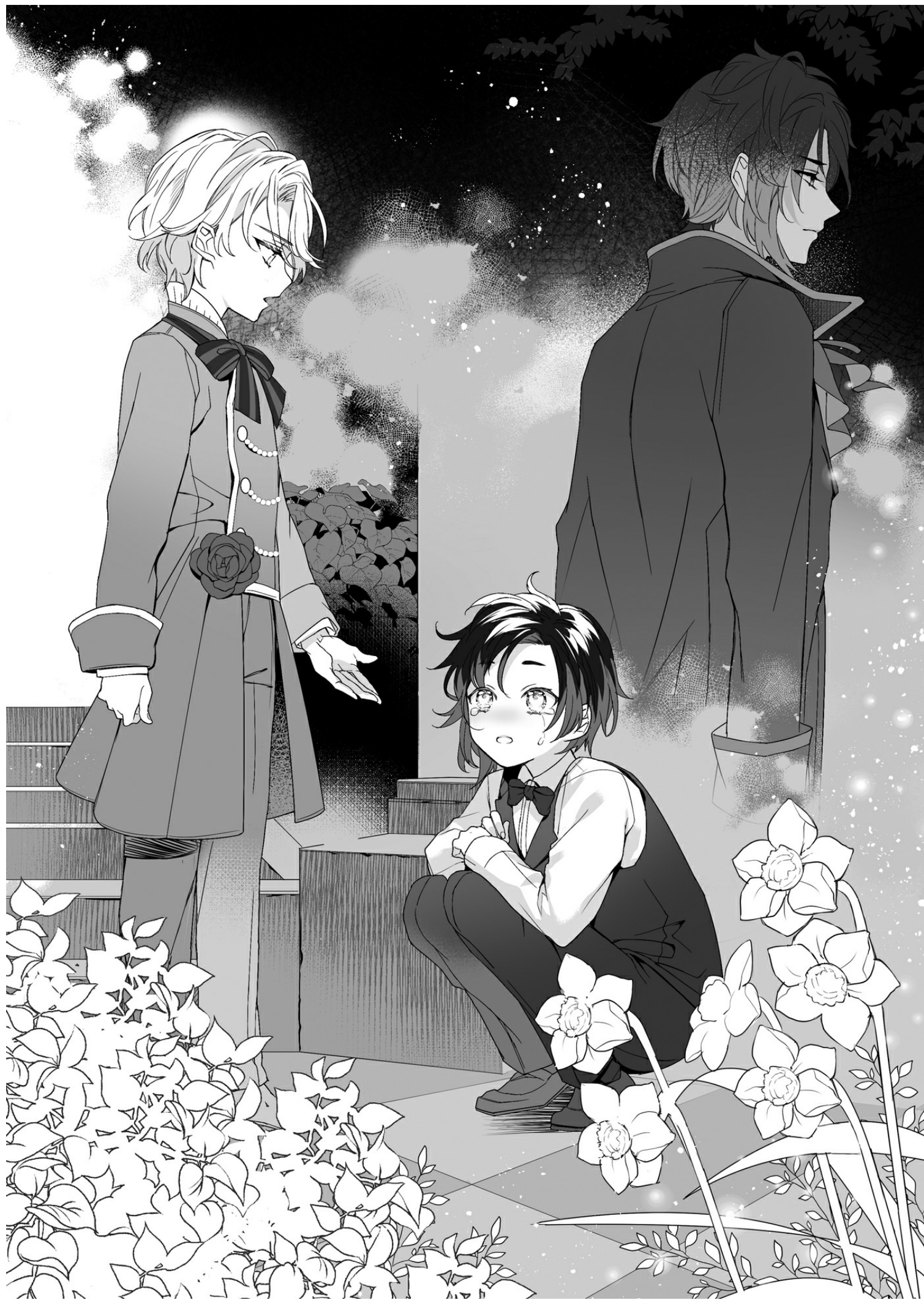
The pale blue of the clear, cool lake
glitters under the sun, like a sword on the surface."

Alexei blinked in confusion. "What is that?" he asked.

"A poem from the time of the Astra Empire," Vladimir replied. "It comes from the journal of the traveling poet, Torres. He composed it after finding an ancient temple at the top of the Summit of the Gods. He thought its reflection on the lake looked like a glimmering sword. You know, I think the color of your eyes is beautiful. Any poet would be inspired to compose verses upon seeing it."

A bashful smile appeared on Alexei's face.

"I don't need poems written about my eyes, but thank you," Alexei said. "It's amazing how you can say such things so easily. If it's really not an issue, I'll take you to His Highness."



He held out his hand and Vladimir took it, staring at him in wonder. It was the first time someone had held his hand, as well as the first time he'd been touched by someone he didn't know. In theory, he knew he should've pushed Alexei away. That was what Vladimir had been taught to do with strangers. Even so, he nervously took the hand of the boy with a soft smile whose eyes reminded him of glimmering swords.

As Vladimir was pulled into the light, his own reaction frightened him and tears welled up in his eyes once more.

"You're a bit of a crybaby," Alexei said.

The words were meant to tease him, but Vladimir could hear the kindness in his voice.

The mountaintop lake that reflects but the blue of the sky...

Even as a child, Alexei exuded an aura of severity and aloofness that made him difficult to approach, to the point that words that compared him to a blade had immediately popped into Vladimir's head. That was also the reason most of his peers stayed away from him.

However, in that moment, Vladimir learned that Alexei was endlessly kind to someone once he became close to them.

When they were young, they had often visited one another's homes. At the time, Alexei would pull him by the hand whenever he showed him around the rose garden to make sure he wouldn't get lost. Vladimir had never actually been lost, not even on the day of their first meeting, but he never told Alexei that. As long as he didn't, Alexei would extend his hand to him and him alone. That thought pleased him.

Whenever he recalled these days, Vladimir's chest ached, and his heart felt as heavy as lead. Back then, he could still cry *and* smile. How far away those days felt.

Seven years ago, when he was nine, he'd walked on the border between life and death. In that place, he'd screamed and screamed, apologized until his voice grew hoarse, cried until his tears ran dry. He hadn't shed another tear since then.

He sometimes thought about how badly he must have hurt Alexei when he'd suddenly started acting like a different person.

He just couldn't smile with Alexei anymore, as though he was still the same.



Vladimir let out a deep sigh and returned his gaze to the garden.

When the House of Yulmagna had still been flush with funds, different flowers were planted once the season of the narcissus ended. They no longer had the money for such extravagance.

Their family being so wealthy from the get-go had backfired on them. The successive heads of the Yulmagna had never put any thought into developing more farmland or finding ways to improve harvests. They had rarely taken interest in politics either, preferring to dedicate their time to the pursuit of martial arts and scholarship. On the other hand, while the Yulnova had plenty of natural resources, they had started out with barely any farmland. There was a stark contrast between the passivity of the Magna and the efforts deployed by the House of Yulnova to create farmland over the years.

The yearly earnings of the House of Yulmagna had not gone down compared to the days of the founding of the nation. However, the earnings of the two other grand ducal houses had risen substantially, dwarfing their own.

Pavel's ideals were noble. Considering the situation of the empire in the early days, leaving behind guidelines urging his descendants to protect the crown through military might made sense. However, the times had changed. Unfortunately, Yulmagna hadn't been able to change with them.

The Order of Yulmagna and the Astra Research Institute had both become bastions of vested interests. Most of the major positions within them were inherited rather than earned through abilities, and cronyism had become rampant, causing these institutions to burn through massive sums of money for little benefit. For all of the internal power struggles these people engaged in, they knew when to band together against adversity, and they'd stood up to and thwarted several attempts at wide-ranging reforms. The main reason Georgi received such overwhelming support from the knights was because he had no intention to reform or scale down the order.

Of course, sensible, motivated individuals sometimes knocked at the doors of the order and the institute. However, the obstacles they had to overcome were impregnable. They all left in the end.

“Yulmagna is a giant. A distorted giant whose head and fists are bloated beyond repair. It has yet to notice it, but it can only drag its warped flesh, almost ready to succumb to its own weight.”

Those had been the words of Anatolie Moldo, a researcher born to one of Magna’s branch families. While he was more than qualified for his work at the Astra Research Institute, he hadn’t been able to turn a blind eye to the widespread corruption. He’d tried to fight it and had been shown the door.

“Lord Vladimir, will the House of Yulmagna finally undergo real reform under your care?”

When Anatolie had asked him that, Vladimir had shaken his head. Anatolie had probably assumed that Vladimir did not wish for reform or that he thought attempts at such reform were doomed from the start.

What he didn’t know was that such a day would never come.

As Vladimir looked at the verdant garden under the sun of May, he contemplated the future.

When would the House of Yulmagna fall?

When would *he*, Vladimir Yulmagna, die?

Chapter 3: Examination Results

“Please hurry, Lady Flora!”

“Yes, Lady Ekaterina! But must we truly go so fast?”

I hastened the pace without running, as much as was proper for ladies. Flora followed behind me, a smile on her face.

“Our first examination results are out! How could I not be curious?” I said.

“I do hope my results are good enough for them to be put up.”

“I have no doubt yours will be stellar, Lady Flora.”

Today was a crucial day and a major event in the game—the day the results of our first exams would be announced at last! If everything was going the way it should, Flora would be first and the prince second. That would lock her on the prince’s route and, after Mikhail meddled with her business a few more times, he’d invite her to be his partner at the ball.

Honestly, the recent imperial visit to the Yulnova residence had taken up so much of my brainpower and been so impactful that I’d almost forgotten about the otome game happenings. I had to get back on track and protect my family from doom!

“Didn’t we find that we answered most of the questions the same way? I assume our results will be similar, Lady Ekaterina,” Flora said.

“I’d be overjoyed if that were the case,” I replied.

The results of the top ten students were set to be put up in the entrance hall after school. Flora and I had compared our answers after the exams and we really *had* answered most of them the same. That probably meant that I, too, had managed to score decently high. I hoped that was the case, as Alexei would no doubt rejoice!

The thought made me ecstatic, and I walked even faster.

When we reached the entrance hall, the results had already been displayed,

and a crowd had formed in front of them. If I ordered them to scram, I'd live up to my name as a villainess, wouldn't I?

Obviously, I did no such thing, and Flora and I approached the crowd like normal students. When the other students noticed us coming, they kindly cleared a path.

"My, how considerate of you," I said. "Thank you."

After thanking them, we approached the boards until we could see the list of the first-year students. The moment of truth had come! Was my little Flora first?

Um, hold up?

"Congratulations, Lady Ekaterina!" Flora exclaimed before hugging me.

No, no, no. Hang on. My eyes are tricking me, aren't they?

As if in a dream, I read the list of names again starting from the bottom. I didn't know the people ranked ten to four. Familiar names started popping up after that.

Third place: Mikhail Yulgran.

Second place: Flora Cherny.

First place: Ekaterina Yulnova.

My mind sat inert for a moment longer, until I pictured a clone of myself punching me in the face to wake me up.

Seriously, self? What am I even imagining?

Now wasn't the time to dwell on such silliness! I had more important things to worry about—like why in the world was I first?!

I'd been super busy with the imperial visit the day before the exams. Afterward, I'd gone back to my dorm at the academy only to crash the moment I arrived because I was too tired. I'd proceeded to sleep right through the night and hadn't studied one bit.

Besides, I hadn't been busy on just the day of the visit. I'd spent so much time preparing and worrying about it that I'd barely gotten any studying done. I was

already impressed with myself for having managed to give answers that were fairly close to Flora's, but here I was.

Oh no, I may know what happened!

"Lady Flora, I'm off to the teacher's room to protest!" I cried.

"Huh? To protest? But protest what exactly?" she asked.

"It makes no sense for me to have scored above you. They must have manipulated the results because of my rank. Such things aren't right. I'll make sure they correct this injustice," I declared, clenching my fists reflexively.

At the sight, Flora laughed. Her smile was as beautiful as a flower in bloom. "Please calm down, Lady Ekaterina. I'm sure no one did such a thing."

"Don't try to stop me! That is the only explanation!"

"In that case, I wouldn't be in second place," Flora said. "After all, the third is..."

Ah. Third place was the prince, someone whose status was undeniably higher than mine.

Oh no. I'm sorry for dragging your good names through the mud, dear teachers. But, then... Wuh? I really earned first place?

ARGH! I MESSED UP FOR REAL!

I buried my face in my hands and almost fell to my knees, but I forced myself to remain upright.

How did this happen?! Noble children usually started their education at around five. I was so sure that I'd be far behind everyone else that I'd poured my everything into studying to catch up!

Come to think of it, the exams *had* only covered the material we'd studied in class since the school year started. It made sense that I had kept up, especially when considering the fact that I had far more advanced knowledge on certain topics thanks to my past life. Plus, while I wasn't one to brag, I wasn't Alexei's sister for nothing. My memory, ability to understand complex topics, and overall potential when it came to studying were top-notch!

I'd never noticed, though. The only other person I'd ever studied with was Flora, and we were at around the same level. Flora was a real genius. She didn't have the advantage of memories from her past life nor had she received a noble's education. The fact that she was supposed to take first truly showed her tremendous talent!

And I goofed that up! What do I do now, like, what can I even do?! At least Flora's still above the prince! That must mean things are okay, right? Right?

"Congratulations, Ekaterina, Flora."

Speak of the devil! I uttered a scream (only deep inside, don't worry) and turned around. There he was, the prince. I almost started trembling in fear. *Prince, please, don't hate me!*

Mikhail smiled warmly at us, without a hint of anger.

"You both did a splendid job," he said. "Especially you, Flora. Many of the topics must have been foreign to you, yet you earned such a high score."

He praised Flora! Yay! We're in the clear!

I felt so relieved that a bright smile spread on my face as I looked at the prince and Flora in turn. The ever-modest Flora shook her head.

"The fact that these topics were foreign to me is the very reason I must endeavor to fill the gaps in my knowledge," she said. "I don't deserve your praise. Besides..."

A mischievous smile curled her lips as she took my arm.

Wow, she's cute.

"Lady Ekaterina invites me to her room every day to study," she continued. "We review and prepare for lessons together. It's all thanks to her that I could score so high."

"So, this academy's top two students have study sessions together? I'm sure they must be incredibly worthwhile," the prince answered with a smile before taking another look at the board and sighing. "How embarrassing..."

Forgive me for cheating you out of the rank you deserved with my unfair advantage. You're great, I promise!

While Mikhail wasn't as busy as Alexei, he still had much to do. He, too, had been part of the imperial visit right before the exams. While he was still in school, he had many princely duties to carry out. Despite all that, he strove for the top here as well. He was a *serious* prince.

Mikhail had been taught by the best teachers there were since he was a toddler, only for two inexperienced girls to swoop in and outperform him. Any fifteen-year-old would feel frustrated in such a situation. In fact, I would've expected him to grumble and find fault with us, but he hadn't. He'd dealt with this like a grown-up. As expected of an imperial prince.

Or perhaps not? Actually, his composed reaction was even more impressive *because* he was a prince. Mikhail had grown up with everyone around him flattering and pampering him. He could've turned into an arrogant idiot. Many noble kids—the ones who'd made fun of Flora, for instance—had done so, despite being of lower birth than him. Mikhail hadn't. From day one, he'd been kind to Flora.

Knowing him, Mikhail would rather work hard. He'd face his shame headfirst, confront the fact that he hadn't been able to take first place despite everything, and come back stronger. To be honest, I didn't expect to win against him next time. He and Alexei were the same in that respect. The notion of noblesse oblige had seeped bone-deep into their beings. It was funny how the two of them were nothing alike yet similar in a few ways because of their circumstances.

"Prince Mikhail, I'm most impressed by your willingness to confront the heavy burden that rests upon your shoulders," I said.

Mikhail gazed at me. He was still smiling, but he seemed conflicted.

You're a good boy, Prince, so I wish you all the happiness in the world with the heroine. Don't be shy and get your girl!

"Ekaterina."

I smiled brightly at the sound of this new voice.

"Brother!" I exclaimed.

The students that had gathered to check the results scurried out of his way,

leaving a clear footpath between me and Alexei. He reminded me of Moses parting the Red Sea. *That's my brother for you!*

Alexei spread his arms and I immediately jumped into them, hugging him.

"You've done so well, Ekaterina, my pride," he said softly, holding me.

Yay! He praised me! I'm so glad I got first! My earlier worries about having committed a huge blunder flew off into the void, replaced by utter joy.

"I'm so happy to receive your praise, brother," I said. "Although I'm still nowhere near your level."

I'd taken a quick look at the board of the third-year students earlier. No surprise there, Alexei had taken first place—the immovable top!

"I was raised to do this," he replied. "Your efforts are far more impressive, Ekaterina."

I wasn't surprised to hear him say that. As I thought, he didn't realize that things like that didn't just happen, regardless of the education you received. He had put in just as much effort as I had over the years, and he was a smart person to begin with!

By the way, Vladimir Yulmagna had ranked first among the second-year students.

He's outstanding himself, as expected.

"You two get along wonderfully, don't you?" Mikhail said.

Flora was still smiling warmly, but I noticed Mikhail's smile had turned awkward. I also realized that Marina Krymov and Olga Florus, two of my classmates that I'd befriended, had approached us. They were watching us with rapt attention, their hands clasped in front of their chests.

"Lady Marina, Lady Olga, is there anything I can do for you?" I asked, letting go of my brother.

Marina laughed.

"We saw the two of you rush out of the classroom and figured you would come here, so we came to take a look. You both study with such ardor that we

knew you'd score well, but we never expected you to take first and second place! That's incredible. We're excited on your behalf!"

"My, thank you!"

They'd come just to check *our* results? *They're such kind girls.*

"What are you doing here?" a pleasant, deep voice interjected. "There's no way you'd ever make the top ten."

"Always nice seeing you, brother," Marina replied, her tone turning icy.

Wait, "brother"?!

I turned to look at the man who'd just spoken and was greeted by a pair of golden eyes. The tall young man had fiery red hair and was built like a jock. Upon meeting my eyes, he stopped in his tracks.

I remember him!

He was one of my brother's classmates, the one who'd pointed me to his office when I'd gone to his classroom to see Alexei. I was finally connecting the dots. He and Marina had the same hair and eye color and shared a sporty look. Funny! The younger sisters were both in the same class and so were the older brothers.

"Hey, Duke! See you got first this time too. That's great. And your sister's here too. It's been a while. Do you remember me? I'm Nikolai Krymov."

"It's been a long time," I replied with a smile. "Of course I remember you. I'm most thankful for your help last time."

Alexei looked at Marina and smiled at her too. "This must be your sister," he said to Nikolai.

"Yeah, that's our monkey," Nikolai replied with a raucous laugh.

Marina groaned, then went on a rant.

"Brother, what did you call me?! If I'm a monkey then you're a *giant* monkey! An enormous *monster* monkey brawny enough to destroy not one but *two* storage sheds! No one believes your human act!"

"Who're you calling a monster?! And for the record, I was *asked* to destroy

them to put new ones in their stead!”

So, wait, he did break them?

Nikolai wasn’t done. “I’ll have you know your lady act is even harder to believe! I can’t even bear to watch!”

“Oho ho ho! Mother taught me how to put on a ladylike look in a matter of seconds! I seem as innocent as a kitten—no, five kittens!”



“And you figured admitting it in front of all these people would help how?” Nikolai said.

Marina froze. “Oh no!”

Now, that was a good comeback, Nikolai. Five whole kittens, you say?

I started imagining five li'l kittens stacked up over her head. That would make for the cutest, fluffiest tower in existence. As a master actor—a corporate drone in villainess's clothing, no less—I felt a sense of kinship with her. This made me want to play along.

“Lady Marina, you keep five kittens?” I asked, pretending not to have heard their entire exchange. “They must be adorable.”

Marina jumped on the opportunity and exclaimed, “Y-Y-Yes! They *are*! We manage a stable and plenty of cats settle there. They hunt down vermin, and even the most temperamental horses soften in the presence of cats.”

“Cats and horses can become friends? How lovely! Speaking of which, I recently had the chance to admire the demonic horses of Krymov with my own two eyes! I was most impressed by how powerful yet graceful and beautiful they were!”

“That's very nice of you to say! Thank you!” Marina seemed genuinely thankful for my praise, but I could tell she was also glad to have dodged the previous topic.

I looked around and other than Nikolai, who seemed fed up with his sister, everyone was smiling. *Sweet, it looks like they're going to let it slide. I did my good deed of the day.*

While the Krymov siblings fought a lot, they seemed very close. I glanced up at Alexei, a mischievous smile on my lips.

“Brother,” I said. “Don't you think the Krymov siblings seem even closer than we are? Would you like to try calling me a monkey so we can bridge the last bit of distance that separates us?”

“Never,” Alexei replied immediately.

“You sure gave up fast, brother,” I said.

“Some things are simply impossible,” he said. “I’ve never seen a monkey. I hear they live in groups in southern forests and climb on trees.”

Apparently, there were no monkeys in the wild in the Yulgran Empire. There were plenty of them in southern countries, though, and some people kept them as pets even in the empire. In my previous world, I thought monkeys mostly lived in tropical forests and hot places. There were practically none in Europe.

That said, there were monkeys even in colder areas in Japan. They were famous for entering hot springs when snow fell and drinking monkey booze (okay, that part was a lie). Although, I supposed the cold-loving Japanese monkeys were kind of an exception.

Alexei ran his fingers through my hair.

“If such beautiful creatures truly live in groups in forests, I shall do well to abandon my duchy and retire to one of these forests. I’ll build a small abode for myself yet spend most of my days outside of it, gazing at the trees in the hope of catching a glimpse of you. That is why I absolutely refuse to even suggest that you could be a monkey, my dear Queen of the Night. Instead of climbing trees, I hope that you’ll stay by my side.”

“Oh, brother!” As always, he saw me through rose-tinted glasses—or, in his case, a rose-tinted monocle. “It’s not often you jest so, brother.”

“I do not jest, Ekaterina. I cannot bring myself to do such things,” he replied, the picture of seriousness.

“Hang on, Duke,” Nikolai practically groaned. “Have you always been the kind of guy who could spout out embarrassing lines like those with a straight face?”

“Did I say something strange?” Alexei asked. “I only intended to state my thoughts. I’m aware I’m not very skilled at picking my words.”

“If anything, you’re *too good* at it, but you’re not even aware that you’re not aware that... Never mind. What am I even saying?” Nikolai brought his hand to his forehead.

“He’s always been like this; he’s just opened up in the most abrupt way, unfortunately. Do I have to copy him?” Mikhail muttered. He looked unusually anxious.

Prince, why would you even want to? Though, you might be good at it! Your dad is just as impressive as Alexei when it comes to spouting flowery words. Though, I kind of hope you'll stay the way you are.

For some reason, Olga was a bit red. Flora, on the other hand, wore the same sunny smile she always did. As for Marina, she was covering her face with her hands.

Hey, I can totally see you staring at me from the gaps between your fingers. Some of your kittens are dozing off. Did I make it too awkward by letting Alexei shock you guys with his excessive attachment to me?

I can't let myself lose to him, though! I love him just as much!



The following day, Forli—the eldest of my brother's advisors and the one in charge of forestry and agriculture—came to his office for the first time in a while.

"The Black Dragon has left," he declared.

I gasped.

These past few months, a gigantic beast called the Black Dragon had been occupying a part of our forest. That very dragon could take on a human appearance and was one of the hidden love interests of the game. His true identity? Vladforen, the Dragon King. And this mighty dragon had finally left our forest.

Since Flora cleared the event, he didn't leave to prepare an offensive on the empire, did he? Did something happen on his hidden route to prompt this change? It's so hard to predict anything when I don't know what the conditions are for unlocking his route!

"Are you certain, Forli?" Alexei asked.

The tan, white-haired man nodded. "I am. I ascertained it with my own two eyes."

As always, he reminded me of a veteran warrior.

I'm kind of curious. How does one ascertain anything about the oldest, most

powerful dragon of all? Were you stalking him the whole time?

He truly had a wild and dangerous hands-on approach to things. Just as I was thinking that, Forli started recounting the story in detail.



Having put together a plan to start replanting trees in the Yulnova Duchy, Forli had started the work in the first area that had been selected. The trees there had been cut and carried away, leaving only stumps behind. The terrain was fairly steep, which made it a terrible location for agricultural prospects, so it had been left as it was.

With the Black Dragon stopping work, many sawyers were out of a job. Forli hired them to plant saplings in exchange for daily wages. This first step helped people realize that afforestation could indeed bring them monetary benefits.

The second step involved making sure that these saplings would grow into strong trees. Unlike lumbering, this did not require harsh physical labor, so those who were usually too feeble to participate in such work found a way to earn their keep. Forli, whose strong legs had not weakened despite his turning sixty-five, made rounds in the entire area, checking on the saplings. His wife, the head of one of the largest tribes of the forest, was quite interested in the afforestation process and had accompanied him to witness the work.

At one point, she looked up at the sky and said, “The Dragon Herald Bird is watching.”

Forli followed her gaze and saw a large black bird flying in circles. It was pitch-black, like a crow, but the shape of its body resembled that of a bird of prey. Forli knew the forest of the Yulnova Duchy like the back of his hand, yet he had never seen such a bird.

His wife explained to him that the Dragon Herald Bird was under the command of the Black Dragon. Some even said that it was its alter ego. It reported everything it saw and heard to its master. According to her, it must have caught a glimpse of humans acting in a peculiar way and was there to investigate.

The Dragon Herald Bird suddenly lowered its altitude, as though it had heard

them. Eventually, it stopped on a large rock near Forli and his wife and fixed its gaze on them. Its eyes shone like two fine rubies.

Forli decided to tell the bird what they were doing. He explained that they'd cut down trees for generations, but they now intended to plant new trees in their stead and repeat the process every time they removed more trees. He also stated that it would take around fifty years until the saplings they'd replanted could be used and that he hoped they'd be allowed to keep lumbering as usual until then. He even said that this was an idea of the lord of this land's younger sister and that the lord was eager to have it enacted.

"Our lord pays his respects to the Black Dragon. He wishes to coexist peacefully with the forest and its inhabitants," he said.

At these words, the Dragon Herald Bird laughed. The uncanny sound was exactly like human laughter. Then, it spread its wings and flew away. The beating sound of flapping feathers filled the air.

After the bird departed, Forli felt somewhat embarrassed. He had no idea whether the bird would truly relay what he'd said to the Black Dragon, and he couldn't help but think he must've looked ridiculous, speaking so seriously to an animal. He was smiling awkwardly at his wife when the clear sky darkened without warning.

The weather was fickle in the mountains; Forli was used to that, but when he looked up at the sky, he saw not the clouds he expected but a gigantic silhouette. High in the air, far above the top of the trees, a large shadow obscured the sun—the head of the Black Dragon.

Even in the backlight, Forli could sense that its burning red eyes were on him. His breath hitched in his throat, but he mustered his courage and stared back.

Somehow, he felt as though the beast smiled.

"Intriguing."

Had the dragon spoken aloud? Forli wasn't sure.

The shadow that obscured the sky above him grew larger. Below the dragon's head stretched its humongous wings. Strong winds arose as it pumped them, and the majestic beast soon flew away.

Forli closed his eyes reflexively to protect them from the cloud of dust that had risen. By the time the powerful winds calmed down and he could open them again, the dragon had disappeared somewhere far, far away.



That story made my chuuni blood boil, not to mention left me wondering where the Dragon King had gone off to!

“Did the Black Dragon really say, ‘Intriguing’?” Alexei asked.

“Indeed,” Forli said with a nod. “While it did fly away, it must be watching from afar, waiting to see whether we hold up our half of the bargain or not.”

“In other words, the Black Dragon approves of afforestation,” Alexei said. “That makes for a rather straightforward reason to forbid the people from clearing new agricultural land. It is time to start working on a hundred-year plan. Henceforth, trees shall be replanted in areas that have been logged, unless it is particularly fit for agriculture. That should help ease the masses’ worries. I want you and Daniil to start writing new regulations at once.”

“Understood.”

Daniil Legall was the duchy’s advisor on law—an expert in the legal matters of the empire and the duchy alike. His job was to work conjointly with Forli, who knew the field best, to come up with clear, explicit policies. He also had to take into consideration every fine detail that came with declaring a new law, as well as consider appropriate punishments for would-be offenders. Being too harsh when it came to this last point was dangerous since it could invite the ire of the people.

The stark contrast between the unreal conversation Forli had held with a *dragon* and the mundane, bureaucratic act of lawmaking made me realize once again that this world was grounded in reality.

As I thought about that, I tried the stuffed deep-fried bread I’d made for lunch. Even though I had meant to act like a refined young lady, I couldn’t help but take hearty bites. It was still warm and *really* tasty!

Flora and I had cooked together today as usual, but she’d left the academy to attend a special lesson to help her learn holy magic. She’d taken her share of

the bread with her.

“In any case, we should now be able to honor the Sun Sanctuary’s order of black dragon cedar,” Alexei stated.

“That’s good to hear,” Halil, our trade advisor, said. “I’d like to maintain positive relations with them.”

Relief filled the office.

“I also happen to have a report for you, your ladyship,” Halil continued. “Her Imperial Majesty the Empress ordered Celestial Blue from us. She seems to want to use it together with imported fabric to create a new trend. We’ve gradually received more orders from others as well.”

“My! That is good news!”

Yay, the queen decided to wear Celestial Blue! Her dress will knock ‘em dead for sure! I wondered if the other orders Halil had mentioned were linked to Camilla. Looks like she truly is promoting it! I did a great job playing sales ambassador, didn’t I? Mission cleared!

“You’ve helped the duchy tremendously, Ekaterina. Thank you very much.”

I shook my head at Alexei’s words, and not just out of modesty. “I’m glad you think so, brother, but I haven’t done much. You and your advisors did the work. In most cases, the ideas of the daughter of the family would hardly be considered, but you took what I had to say seriously. You all heard my proposal without prejudice and endeavored to implement it as swiftly as possible. This could only be done thanks to Lord Forli’s extensive experience and the trust he has earned from everyone who has worked with him. My words were just that: words. You turned them into a reality.”

As a former systems engineer, I knew just how difficult giving shape to ideas could be. In my past world, most people would’ve ignored a newcomer’s ideas, no matter how revolutionary. Alexei’s advisors, on the other hand, knew to listen. Part of it was due to Alexei’s outstanding talent despite his young age—he’d gotten them used to it. However, I believed that wasn’t the only thing. These people were smart and talented enough at what they did that they could identify and pick up ideas worth using, even from the words of a sheltered

young lady.

The people who lead this duchy are beyond impressive, I thought. The one who'd uncovered these gems was our grandfather, so I supposed he got the credit.

The men in the office looked at each other and laughed quietly. Unbeknownst to me at the time, though they mostly agreed, they couldn't help but think that few people would've recognized their worth so readily.

"You *are* clever, Ekaterina," Alexei said. "Your 'words' had far more value than you can imagine. No one else could have thought of them. You also scored at the top of your examinations. I would like to reward you for being so outstanding. Is there anything you'd like?"

Being near you is already the best reward I could ask for!

"You call me outstanding, but you've remained at the top of your grade ever since you entered the academy. You should reward yourself, instead," I said. "As for me, I wish for nothing more than to remain by your side."

"Ekaterina," Alexei said with a smile. "I knew you'd say that. That is exactly why I wish to give you a gift."

Halil and Aaron jumped at the opportunity.

"How about ordering some more dresses, your ladyship? Her Imperial Majesty may call upon you soon."

"Shall I recommend some jewels for you? You will need them eventually for your trousseau!"

Hey! Don't encourage kids to drown in opulence! I needed to do something. At this rate, I was going to end up buried in luxury goods I had no use for. *I don't need any of this! I'm a memories-over-physical-things kind of girl!*

Right then, a thought occurred to me. "Brother, there *is* something I want!"

"Is that so? Do tell."

I smiled sweetly at him and said, "Do you remember, on the day before the entrance ceremony, I asked you to show me around the imperial capital? I'd like for you to take an entire day off work to accompany me."

“Are you sure?” Alexei asked after a pause.

“Spending a day in your company is worth far more than any riches! Please give me this.”

Alexei looked bewildered for a while, but he eventually smiled. “All right. If that is what you want, that is what you shall have.”

“I can hardly wait!”

Hooray! It's a date!



The next weekend, I spent a little more time than usual dolling myself up in the morning before skipping to the carriage.

My dear brother was already waiting for me there, his outfit slightly more formal than his usual uniform. He smiled when he saw me.

“I apologize for making you wait, brother,” I said.

“Waiting for a beautiful lady makes for a most pleasant time. I have you to thank for this discovery, Ekaterina.”

Oh dear! I'm gonna pop! Best of all, I knew that Alexei loved me enough that he meant it! *Thank you so much!*

He held out his right hand for me and I placed my left hand in it, allowing him to escort me to the carriage.

“I hope you do not mind me asking again, but are you sure this is all you want?”

“I'm quite certain. I couldn't be any happier, brother.”

Alexei had indeed asked me over and over again. He'd tried to talk me into accepting jewels, a horse, a private carriage, and even a castle instead.

That had to be weird, right? Who gave their sister a *castle* because they did well on their exams?! Even aristocrats had to have limits! Apparently, this particular castle was a health resort of ours which had “beautiful architecture that was worthy of me.”

Bro, are you kidding? The most shocking part was that none of my brother's

advisors had tried to stop him. *Do something! Tell him off!*

Then again, Novak's quiet "I shall work on her trousseau separately" scared me the most. He was definitely going to pick things at his own discretion. I could already see myself owning a wide array of items that would've belonged in a museum in my past world, just like the trousseaus of the ladies from the three branches of the Tokugawa family who'd married feudal lords! I still remembered how impressed I'd been with the gold lacquer and nacre details.

I also had an inkling that Novak hadn't entirely given up on making me the next empress. He was surprisingly tenacious.

I'm not doing it, though! Flora and the prince were both my friends now. My heart would break if they turned on me and cast me out of the empire. Just imagining it hurt. *Okay, let's not think on that anymore.*

The wheels of the carriage rattled as we moved forward.

The imperial capital had been built outward from the imperial palace. Around it were the residences of the most important noble families and the governmental offices. That area was beautiful and tranquil, and the paved paths that passed through it were large and thoroughly maintained. The atmosphere of this place reminded me of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo and its surroundings. With the beautiful castle rising above the city, I felt as though I were in a fairy tale. That made me wonder if Edo Castle had towered over the city during the Edo period too.

"This is the statue of Duke Sergei you wished to see," Alexei said.

"How tall it is!"

We always passed in front of a statue of Pyotr the Great when we went from our residence in the capital to the academy. We were taking a different path this time, and the first sight on our little trip was Sergei's statue.

"He somewhat resembles grandfather," I said.

"I agree. I once told grandfather the same thing," Alexei replied. "He laughed and said that everyone thought so from the day he was born. That is why he was also named Sergei."

I wondered how old Alexei had been when he'd said that to Sergei. Probably even younger than the ten-year-old I'd seen in the portrait next to our grandfather. Surely, he'd been just as bright at that age. He would have been adorable, using adult vocabulary despite his small body.

Heh heh. I couldn't restrain my smile at the thought.

Confused, Alexei asked, "Was that funny?"

"Sorry, I imagined you as a child and couldn't help but think of how adorable you would've been."

Alexei shook his head. "I was often told I wasn't the least bit cute."

By the old hag, I presumed! His feelings must've been hurt quite often in those days. Absolutely unfair.

"I was never good at interacting with people. I wished to be, but no one seemed to enjoy my company much," Alexei continued, before he fell silent. He might have been remembering the time spent with the one friend he did have. In a rare moment of weakness, his head drooped.

"Besides you, only grandfather truly enjoyed being with me," Alexei confessed. "You often worry about me working too much, but my work is all I have, my only worth. Even if I were to clear my schedule, I wouldn't know what to do. I'm a rather dull person, Ekaterina. Spending a day with me won't be as fun as you imagine."

I looked at him, baring his insecurities to me, and the first thought I had was...

DAMN, HE'S TOO CUTE!

Witnessing the soft side of an incredibly talented guy who could do just about anything was amazing. It hit especially hard for me. As a thirtyish woman, seeing him actually act his young age and share his troubles pulled at my heartstrings.

He's adorable! That was why he'd asked me so many times if I was sure I wanted this day as my gift! He'd been worried all along. *Ah! I can't! He's too precious!*

I took his hands in mine and squeezed them.

“Brother... I do not have the words to share the depth of my feelings with you, but I assure you I enjoy myself whenever I’m with you. I also feel at ease. After mother passed, I was lonely. When I collapsed upon arriving in the capital, you took my hand. The loneliness disappeared there and then. Your hands are big and warm, and your heart is sincere and strong. I know I can rely on you, and you know so much about so many things.” I paused and took a deep breath. “I would much rather spend time with you than with any sophisticated gentleman who knows his way with the ladies.”

Alexei opened his eyes wide.

I could easily picture the old hag comparing her beloved son to Alexei. I bet she’d told him so many times that his dad was a cute child, unlike him. I imagined Alexei wouldn’t have said anything back to her, just stared at her with his cold demeanor while hiding the hurt deep down.

Just the thought made me want to hug him tight.

Children—people, actually—are all different from one another, with their own special qualities! Everyone is great in their own way!

While I did mean that, I still liked my brother the most. Everyone was great, sure, but *he* was the winner.

I know everyone has different things they like, but...indulge me.

In any case, I was pissed at the old hag. Alexei was her grandson. She ought to have loved him unconditionally.

I guess not everyone loves their grandchildren, but you should have! Why couldn’t you have?!

“Thank you, Ekaterina,” Alexei said. He took my hands and brought them to his forehead.

Wow, his bangs are so soft!

“You are a gift from the heavens,” Alexei said. “You’re so kind, so bright, so beautiful... I often find myself reflecting on my own life and wondering what I did to deserve you.”

Now, I’m sorry to say I’m nothing special. Just a girl who loves her brother way

too much.

As we rode past Sergei's statue, a canal came into sight.

"This is a man-made waterway," Alexei explained. "It was dug to draw water from the Serno River into the moat of the imperial palace."

"So, it's used to deliver goods to the palace on boats. I suppose the empress's silk must travel through this waterway."

The Serno River was an important commercial route, not only for the capital but also for the Yulgran Empire as a whole. It flowed through a good part of the empire—including the capital, all the way to the Yulsein Duchy in the south, where it passed into the bay where the main harbor of the duchy was located. Most of the goods imported from beyond the Summit of the Gods journeyed on this river before they reached the capital. This went to show just how important a role the Yulsein Duchy played when it came to the exchange of goods.

We soon made a turn and moved away from the canal. On each side of the road stood shops with large storefronts. This part of the city was inhabited by nobles, but also by wealthy merchants, and many prominent businesses operated here. It was similar to the Ginza-Nihonbashi area in Tokyo, with a high density of luxury stores. The atmosphere on the street was vibrant.

"The storefronts are so harmonious," I said.

"This place represents the Merchants' Guild. They'd never allow a store to open that doesn't match the atmosphere of this place," Alexei said.

Yup, this is Ginza all right.

"We've almost reached our first stop, the Sun Sanctuary," he added. "I'm sorry I had to mix work into our plans."

"Not at all! As a daughter of the House of Yulnova, I'm proud I get to accompany you on a work commitment."

This area wasn't only home to fancy stores. There were also sanctuaries dedicated to the gods with the most believers. While they were religious institutions, the sanctuaries were also tourist attractions, famed for their grand buildings. The sanctuaries of the God of the Sun, the God of Commerce, and the

God of Thunder were particularly popular. They were considered must-see attractions when visiting the imperial capital.

I didn't recall religion ever coming up in the game. Most people in the empire believed in the gods, but they didn't *do* much about it. Some zealous believers ardently worshipped specific gods, but in most cases, people only went to the sanctuaries to pray when they had problems. Regardless of the god any given individual preferred, the temples were often splendid places with interesting histories, so plenty of visitors sought them out for leisure, taking the chance to offer prayers while they were there. In other words, it was a lot like Japan. The main difference was that the gods of this world actually existed—or so I'd heard.

While they were called gods, they were far from omniscient and omnipotent, like the God of most monotheistic religions. The myths described many different gods; some had human emotions, while others were similar to animals, and some tribes even venerated monsters as gods. The line between divinity and monstrosity was thin. From what I'd heard, the gods of conquered tribes were often deemed to be monsters by the winners.

All in all, there were countless gods worshipped in the empire. Since people from across the empire gathered in the capital and erected sanctuaries dedicated to their local gods, if you took into account even the smallest shrines, there were gods enshrined in every corner of the capital, making it the place with the highest density of gods per square meter in the empire.

Apparently, the overcrowding of shrines and sanctuaries was so bad that a god had once appeared in the dreams of one of his worshippers who'd just built him a sanctuary to say: "This isn't gonna work. This place's too crowded. Give it up." (A liberal translation.)

I wasn't sure whether I believed that but—oh well!

The most popular tourist attraction was undoubtedly the Sun Sanctuary. When we arrived, it was crowded. Visitors entered through the main gate on foot, but *our* carriage headed toward another gate. Having seen the crest of our house, the gatekeepers quickly opened it, letting us through.

Alexei took my hand and helped me climb out of the carriage. We'd barely

been there for a moment when a priest—a middle-aged man in a fancy robe—approached to welcome us.

“Allow me to thank you for your visit, Duke Yulnova. The high priest awaits you.”

“Thank you for your welcome, Head Priest.”

The head priest himself had come out to welcome us. I realized once again how influential the House of Yulnova was.

We followed him to the innermost part of the sanctuary, where worshippers weren’t allowed. The architecture and decor were so dazzling that I couldn’t help but be reminded of the Basilica of Saint Peter in the Vatican.

The high priest Alexei was here to meet had long white hair and a long white beard to match. He looked every bit like a stereotypical old sage. His robe was yellow like the sun, with white and gold accents, and even fancier than the head priest’s. It reminded me of the Pope’s outfit.

“I’m terribly sorry for neglecting to contact you for so long,” Alexei said. “I have come to inform you that your order of black dragon cedar will be honored and to apologize for the delay.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Your Grace. Although we could hardly blame you for the delay considering the fact that the Black Dragon appeared in your territory.”

Having a duke personally apologize to him ought to put the high priest in a good mood.

I was once again surprised by Alexei. While the high priest was at least sixty years his senior, Alexei’s presence was just as intense. In fact, whenever his neon blue eyes shone, the high priest seemed to feel a weight upon him.

I’ve asked myself this question about a million times by now, but are you really seventeen?!

Not too long ago, he’d told me that he had no special abilities aside from working, but being *that* good at it was already impressive enough. I had nothing but respect for him. Seeing a competent guy clearing tasks like they were

nothing was captivating. I also loved when he admitted his weak points to me—it was super endearing—but at the end of the day, I was a sucker for the cool Alexei.

After their conversation, the high priest showed us around. We got to see treasures hidden from the general public such as idols and relics from the days of the Astra Empire. I'd expected as much, but the God of the Sun was a real hottie! Every depiction showed him looking like a Greek sculpture. The stories of how these treasures had ended up in the sanctuary were also fascinating. Pyotr the Great's and his brothers' names came up a lot. In my past world, this place would've been a World Heritage site. As a history buff, I was in paradise!

Alexei knew I enjoyed history, and I suspected he'd asked for this tour on my behalf. An original tsundere going all out was something else!

Still, as a former middle-class girl, I didn't know how to feel about this special treatment when the genuinely pious men and women who came to pray had to remain in the outer part of the sanctuary. Perhaps that was just how class-based societies operated, but to me, this world appeared to be the ultimate expression of social stratification.

The high priest was also using this special tour to try to renegotiate the price of wood with Alexei. Listening to them argue vehemently through veiled expressions was most enlightening.

Eventually, we parted with the high priest at my brother's request and the head priest showed us to an area where regular visitors were allowed. This particular area, however, was dedicated not to the main deity of this sanctuary, the God of the Sun, but to a minor deity who had relatively few followers: the Queen of the Night, also known as the Spirit of Twilight.

In the legends, the God of the Sun was a notorious seducer, and there were many stories about his love affairs. He once fell for the Queen of the Night, but the chaste goddess refused to give herself to an adulterer. Henceforth, she only ever appeared before the sun rose or after it had set. Regardless of her rejection, her connection to the God of the Sun was the reason she was enshrined in this sanctuary.

The Queen of the Night would not bestow any particular perks to her

followers, so she had few of them, and the shrine dedicated to her was rather plain. Despite the lack of riches, however, I still found it elegant and strangely enchanting.

“I apologize for making you wait!” a plump, gentle-looking priest said as he rushed to greet us. However, when he saw me, he stopped in his tracks and stared in shock.

Hmm? Something on my face?

“I-I’m terribly sorry... I, well, I thought the goddess had appeared before my eyes!”

My, what skillful praise.

“Oh! I’m not the only one who thinks so,” Alexei said, overjoyed.

I predicted that this place was about to receive a hefty donation. *Good job, Mr. Priest. Ooh, I have an idea.*

“I’m not worthy of being compared to the goddess, but I’m glad you would honor me with this,” I said, before turning to Alexei. “Brother, what would you think about offering Celestial Blue dye to decorate this shrine? I’m sure the Spirit of Twilight would favor the beauty of that dye, as it’s a most fitting color for her.”

If the shrine became more beautiful, the number of worshippers visiting this place would be sure to increase. It could also serve as a good advertisement for Celestial Blue.

Alexei’s donation shall serve as an advertisement fee. Sorry if that’s disrespectful, Miss Goddess!

“What a good idea,” Alexei agreed. “I should like to make an offering to the Goddess of the Night. May I?” he asked the priest.

“Of course, Your Grace!” the priest exclaimed. “I must say, I am surprised to find that this lady is your sister. I assumed she was your bride.”

Oh my! What do I say?! Nothing, I guess. What can I even say to that?

The plump priest seemed to be the one in charge of this shrine. As a special treat, he showed us a statue of the goddess that was usually kept hidden from

the public. It was made of wood and roughly fifty centimeters tall. The carving depicted her turning to look back as she climbed a stairway to the heavens. It was gorgeous. According to the priest, it was the most splendid statue of this goddess in the empire.

“She’s wonderful,” Alexei said. “As I thought, she *does* resemble you.”

Alexei smiled at me, but I felt my chest tighten. To me, she looked like mother. Alexei immediately noticed that something was off with my reaction. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and whispered, “If you so desire, we could bring the goddess home.”

Hang on, brother.

Was he offering to buy me that statue? Even if it wasn’t as precious as the World Heritage-level treasures the high priest had shown us earlier, this was still an important cultural artifact! We couldn’t just monopolize it, could we? I didn’t want it to be wasted like that.

“I believe this statue of the goddess should belong to every worshipper who visits her sanctuary,” I said, shaking my head from left to right.

“You truly are too kind, Ekaterina,” he replied with a smile.

I see someone’s vision is clouded by his love once more.

Since I’d refused to bring the statue home, Alexei promptly asked the priest and the head priest for a reproduction to be made. There were no portraits of our mother, Anastasia, in our residence. Apparently, there used to be one, but the old hag had burned it after our grandfather’s passing. The copy of the statue would become a replacement for the portrait we didn’t get to admire.

As expected of Alexei. Leave it to him to find a realistic middle ground.

“This is a wonderful idea, brother,” I said. “I’m sure this pleases mother.”

We can put it in front of the portrait of father, the man she loved so much. And I’m counting on you, the independent, badass goddess who didn’t even cave to the God of the Sun, to help her dump our wannabe-Hikaru-Genji father with class!

I knew full well that mother had never been that kind of woman, but if her

soul was ever reborn, I hoped she'd be reborn as strong as the goddess.



It was around noon by the time we bid farewell to the priests and left the Sun Sanctuary in our carriage. After a short trip, we entered a classy neighborhood with plenty of high-end restaurants around. The empire boasted a long history, and several restaurants here had stood for over a hundred years. We decided to head to one that our grandfather had favored.

We disembarked the carriage in front of the dignified facade and Alexei escorted me inside. The doorman bowed respectfully as he opened the door for us. Beyond the door was a bar with a chic ambience. These types of bars were common in high-class restaurants. People waited there and enjoyed aperitifs while the waiters readied their tables. I could sense the long-standing tradition behind this place.

A few ladies and gentlemen were already there, glasses in hand. As soon as we approached, a man in a black suit who appeared to be the manager bowed to us.

"It has been far too long, Lord Alexei—no, Your Grace," he said. "It's an honor to welcome you today."

"It has been quite some time indeed, Moore. You seem to be doing well," Alexei answered with a nostalgic tone.

Moore was a man of short stature with naturally silver hair and soft features. He looked up at Alexei with a warm, hospitable gaze.

"Meet my sister, Ekaterina," Alexei continued. "This is her first time here."

Moore bowed to me once more. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Ekaterina. I've heard rumors of your beauty, but I now find that none of them did you justice."

"You're quite the flatterer," I replied. "I heard that our grandfather was fond of this place, so I look forward to our meal."

"I'm glad to hear that. Come, let me show you to your table."

We followed the manager. As we passed by the people waiting at the bar, I

could see the envy and admiration in their eyes.

Our table, which had been our grandfather's regular table back in the day, was in a private room in the back. The decorations and furniture were lavish yet not too extravagant, and the general atmosphere of the room was elegant and poised. The large window allowed plenty of light to enter and offered a pleasant view of a small rose garden. In the distance, I could even see a small path by which people came and went. I had no doubt that this was the best table in the place.

Come to think of it, in my past life I'd heard that prestigious restaurants in the West also assigned tables to their clients based on their ranks and the frequency of their visits. Things seemed to work in the same way here. Though, in the USA, I thought the tables that could be seen from the entrance and were the nearest to it were supposed to be the best.

People have different preferences in different places, huh?

After Alexei and I sat opposite one another, I asked, "Brother, do you come here often?"

"No, I haven't come since grandfather brought me here."

Made sense. He was a student and lived in a dorm; he probably didn't eat out much.

"You were still a child the last time I saw you, Your Grace," Moore pointed out. "You've grown into a fine man. Lord Sergei would be so proud of you."

Alexei smiled awkwardly. "Telling me I'm grown shows you still think of me as a child," he said.

"Treating youngsters like children is one of the perks of aging," Moore replied. "You'll come to enjoy that too in due time, Your Grace." He paused and smiled. "That was something Lord Sergei once said. He was a kind person, but he did have a tendency to tease people. Come to think of it, he was far too young to speak like he was an old man back then..."

Our grandfather had passed at fifty-eight. While the life expectancy was lower in this world, it had still been far too young. I knew that he'd worked demanding jobs such as minister and prime minister, which meant...he'd

definitely died from overwork!

Death from overwork is a thing here too! I must be extra cautious and do everything in my power to protect Alexei. Grandfather, I promise that I won't let my dear brother follow in your footsteps!

I might have been jumping to conclusions, but there was a big chance I was right. I set my jaw and clenched my fist under the table.

While I was lost in thought, the drinks and appetizers were brought to the table. I was astonished by the sight of the glass that was placed in front of me. The bowl was a gorgeous blue color with detailed decorations, while the stem was an intricate twist of two different shades of blue. It reminded me of Venetian glass.

"This is beautiful," I said.

In my past life, I'd owned a handmade glass similar to this one. The design itself wasn't the same, but it definitely reminded me of it. My friend who loved art had bought one for herself, and after I'd seen it, I hadn't been able to stop myself from purchasing one too.

Hey, I may just be able to have that replicated in this world!

"What a discerning eye, my lady," Moore said. "This is one of the works of Master Murano, the best glassblower known to this empire. Sadly, the esteemed master passed two years ago. The value of his works has risen ever since."

The name of the man who'd made this glass that reminded me so much of Venetian glass was Murano, then. Did that have anything to do with the Venetian island of Murano? I remembered hearing a story about a master glassblower shutting himself in his atelier to work on that very island.

"If you like them, I shall acquire them for you to use at home," Alexei offered.

Oh, brother! The glasses we had at home were exquisite and had a long history. We didn't need more.

"Would it not be far more pleasant to encounter such works of art unexpectedly rather than purchasing them all?" I asked.

“As expected of the young lady of the House of Yulnova. You’re most magnanimous,” Moore said, impressed.

Alexei smiled, saying that this was very like me. I was about to pick up my glass when he stopped me.

“Wait a moment,” he said. He put his hand over my glass, and I soon felt his mana surround it. A second later, he said, “Try touching it.”

I did as he told and discovered that the glass had become chilly!

“Wonderful! Your control over your mana is marvelous as always, brother.”

“I once did the same thing for grandfather in this very spot. It pleased him greatly.”

I had no doubt it had. His ten-year-old grandson had shown him mana control of such complexity that most adults wouldn’t be able to imitate it. He must’ve been very proud. Unlike the old hag, our grandfather had been a good grandparent!

I raised my glass for a toast before taking a sip. The corners of my lips curled into a smile at the refreshing taste of the cold berry juice. There were no particular laws prohibiting underage drinking in the empire, but not giving alcohol to children was common sense here too. I’d never been a big drinker in my past life, so I’d decided to wait until I reached twenty to try alcohol in this one.

“It’s deliciously cold. Thank you very much, brother.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Fridges had yet to be invented here, so unless you were a nobleman with ice mana, you could only rely on ice houses to cool your drinks. If you were rich enough, using the precious ice from an ice house and putting it in your drink was also an option. Cold drinks, which in my past life I used to enjoy without thinking much of them, were a luxury here.

While Moore was the manager of this establishment, he waited on our table. Apparently, he used to be a simple waiter, but our grandfather had taken a liking to him and helped him climb through the ranks. This was his way of giving

back to him.

“I’m ashamed to say that in my youth, I could not even read or write properly,” Moore told us. “Your grandfather granted me the opportunity to educate myself. He enjoyed nurturing talents, even when he had no particular intentions to have them work for him. He often said that he simply liked seeing people become the better versions of themselves. I believe he loved people very much.”

So his hobby was training human resources? That’s a helpful pastime.

“Grandfather seems to have been a wonderful person,” I said. “I’m starting to understand why his former subordinates miss him so much.”

“I’m glad you think so, Ekaterina.” Alexei paused. “Grandfather would have loved to meet you. You excel in creative thinking, much like he did. He’d often have novel ideas and endeavored to turn them into reality. I’m sure he would have enjoyed conversing with you and laughed and called you a kindred spirit. I can almost hear him say it.”

I also wish I could’ve seen our dandy of a grandfather laugh.

What Alexei had said reminded me that our grandfather had also helped his friends elope during their school days, so he really had had some *creative* ideas. Though I assumed that Alexei wasn’t referring to such things.

“I’m starting to feel like grandfather must have resembled you a lot too, brother,” I said.

“I concur,” Moore said. “You do take after Lord Sergei, Your Grace. Like him, you stand above others, have a sharp mind, and spare no effort.”

Nice observation skills, Mr. Moore! I can see why you’re the manager of a high-class restaurant!

“Your voices are also quite similar,” he said. “Lord Sergei’s voice was also pleasantly deep.”

“Is that so? I never noticed,” Alexei replied.

I could tell he was happy. As far as appearances went, he resembled our grandmother and father, so he must’ve thought that he was nothing like our

grandfather. His voice had gradually changed over the years, and I expected that none of the people he often worked with had noticed or pointed out the similarity, and it was not like he could hear his own voice properly.

So, he got this killer voice from our grandfather, huh? Good job, genetics!

As our meal went on, we continued to talk about grandfather. Moore told us many stories while serving us, and Alexei and I listened with rapt attention.

One of them was about grandfather and someone else we knew quite well. While we knew that Novak, Alexei's closest retainer, had gained that name by marrying into the viscount House of Novak—a branch family of the House of Yulnova—we now learned that the one who'd pushed for the wedding wasn't our grandfather but the lady of the House of Novak herself! Apparently, she'd been head over heels for him. Moore told us about a time our grandfather, Novak, and that young lady had come to dine together in this restaurant. Novak hadn't noticed the lady's feelings in the slightest and had spent most of the evening arguing with Sergei over some political measure he was considering.

Moore also brought up the period during which the emperor, the crown prince at the time, had been trying everything he could think of to woo the future empress. To help him out, Sergei, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, had used the visits of foreign officials as excuses to invite them both to meals at the same time.

Alexei and I almost face-palmed.

Seriously? Was playing matchmaker another of his hobbies?



Once we were done eating, Alexei brought me to the national theater so we could have a look at the building. Then, we headed to the sanctuary of the God of Time and Fate and climbed the steps of the bell tower. In the flickering light that preceded the sunset, the view of the imperial capital was absolutely magical.

I was somehow reminded of the view of Tokyo from above. I couldn't remember if I'd seen that particular sight from the top of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office or from the observation deck of the Skytree,

only how vast and gray it had been as it stretched in front of me. In comparison, this city was much smaller and so much greener. It was lovely.

With enough time, would this city too turn into an ocean of concrete?

Even if I led a very long life as Ekaterina, I would never live to learn the answer to that question.



“Did you have a pleasant time today?” Alexei asked in the carriage as we traveled back to our residence in the capital.

“Of course!” I answered excitedly. “I had so much fun being by your side! You made arrangements so I could see historical artifacts, *and* I got to hear stories about grandfather. I can tell you put a lot of thought into this day. Nothing could make me happier.”

“I see,” Alexei said with a smile. “If you’re happy, I am too.”

I wondered if Alexei had spent a lot of time worrying about what to do and where to take me. I felt bad for taking up even more of his time when he was so busy, but my heart was still singing with joy.

That said, as far I was concerned, anywhere would’ve been fine! As long as I was by my dear brother’s side, I would have fun!

You know what? I want to do more than thank him. I’ll give something back to him!

My dear brother was my absolute fave, and fans had to devote themselves to their faves, not the other way around! Your fave made *you* happy, and you gave back to *them* through gifts and stuff! Thankfully, I had the perfect idea.

Alexei, just wait and see!

Chapter 4: Presents and Projects

The first thing I did upon returning home was to run to Mina for advice.

“Mina! I’d like to order a handmade glass item. How should I go about it? Oh, and I need this to remain a secret from my brother,” I said.

“You’re keeping secrets from His Grace?”

“It’s a gift! I want to surprise him.”

I’d asked Ivan about Alexei’s birthday, and it turned out to be in a little over a month and a half. If I could reproduce the idea I’d had at the restaurant, it would make for the perfect present! It was funny that Alexei was an icy beauty, cool and composed, and even an ice magic user, yet he had been born at such a warm time. In my past world, he would’ve been a Leo.

Heh heh. That sign actually suits him so well!

Speaking of which, I’d been a Virgo in my past life. In this one, I’d been born in December which meant I was...a Sagittarius? I couldn’t help but wonder if our signs were compatible. I’d never cared about astrological signs in my previous life but, for some reason, I was turning into an astrology girlie out of nowhere.

“You say you wish to have something made out of glass...?” Mina said pensively. “Well, I suppose you just need to place an order at a workshop. Could you explain to me what you want made? I’ll order it for you.”

“That may be a *little* difficult,” I replied. “I’m fairly certain that what I want is something neither you nor the artisans have ever seen before.”

I showed a piece of paper on which I’d drawn the item in question to Mina. For once, a look of confusion took over her features.

“What is this?” she asked. She poured a cup of tea for me while her befuddlement remained apparent on her face. “As you feared, I may not be able to explain what you want to the artisans well enough. We could call the master of a workshop here, but His Grace would learn of it at once. The best

way would be for you to head to a workshop to place the order yourself, but workshops are no place for a lady.”

“I’d like to talk to the artisans myself,” I said. “Would it be so terribly improper for me to visit a workshop?”

“I would not say it’s ‘improper,’ per se, but such places are not worthy of receiving the visit of the lady of a prestigious house such as yours.”

“I see. In that case, I’d still like to go. You’ll be by my side the entire time, so I’ll be perfectly safe, won’t I?”

Mina paused before finally agreeing with a nod. “Understood. If that is what you wish for.” Her expression returned to its usual neutral state.

By the time she came to help me change into my nightgown, she’d already made the necessary preparations.

“After the death of the acclaimed Master Murano, his workshop closed and another glass workshop rose to the top. I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

“Wonderful. I’m glad to hear you could get an appointment so quickly.”

That Time My Beautiful Maid Was Super Efficient!



The next day, I hopped into the carriage with Mina.

Once I’d told Graham about my plan, he’d smiled and agreed to help me leave the residence without Alexei noticing. Come to think of it, I’d only ever ridden a carriage with my brother. Even though Mina was with me, I felt forlorn without him.

Snap out of it! You’re way too old to get down about something like this! Didn’t you used to eat out alone without batting an eye? Remember all the ramen and yakiniku you wolfed down all by your lonesome!

After that little internal screaming session, my bad mood passed.

The carriage advanced toward a district I hadn’t visited with Alexei the previous day. This lively part of town was crowded with commoners, and I could tell many people lived here by the disorderly atmosphere around us. Children were running around in the street that more often saw the passage of wagons

than noble carriages. There also seemed to be many workshops lining the streets, and I could hear loud, regular noises which must've been from workers repeatedly beating metal to forge it.

If I had to compare this place to a part of Tokyo, I would have picked Ota, home to many small-to medium-sized manufacturing companies. When I saw the laundry drying in the back alleys, however, it reminded me more of old Hong Kong or Napoli.

Our carriage finally stopped in front of one workshop. It was relatively large compared to the others I'd seen on the way. The sign, which was rather new and intricate, read "Garen Workshop."

"We've arrived, my lady. This is Master Garen's workshop." Mina opened the door of the carriage and swiftly descended before offering me her hand. I took it and she helped me down.

"Please be careful, my lady," the driver said.

I nodded with a smile and the two of us entered.

The first thing I noted was the heat. There was a kiln in the back of the shop, and I could see glimpses of orange. They must have been in the process of melting glass. I didn't know what they were used for, but there were other kilns in a corner of the room. Several half naked artisans were hard at work. One of them, a young man with soft features, walked up to us.

"Welcome, how may I help you?" he asked.

"Tell Master Garen that the lady of the ducal House of Yulnova has arrived," Mina said.

"The, um, the ducal house," he repeated, intimidated. He glanced at me several times before stuttering, "E-Excuse me. P-Please wait a moment."

Then, he hurried to the back of the workshop. It didn't take long for Garen to come to us. He seemed to be around fifty and, while his belly protruded over his waistband, he had terrifyingly thick arms.

"Hello, m'lady. Did you come to such a filthy place just to see me? I'm honored," he said before letting out a boisterous laugh.

I didn't believe I'd ever heard such a crude sound.

Is this old fart okay? Also, can he please stop staring at me?

Mina looked at the man, her face flat as ever, and silently handed me a folding fan. I accepted it without a word and flicked it open, hiding my lips and chest.

In a corner of the workshop were two sofas, which I assumed were there to welcome guests. Garen sat on one and Mina and I took the opposite one.

"So, I heard you wanted to order special glassware. Don't you worry, m'lady, I'm just the man you need. What d'you need made? A big vase? Imposing ornamental plates? For your sake, I'll make anything you like."

"I wish to have a small object made, not a large one. I apologize for my lack of artistic talent, but if you would please take a look at this sketch," I said, then showed him the drawing I'd shown Mina the previous day.

"Huh? What's this thing supposed to be?" he asked.

"It's a pen. A pen made of glass."

Garen didn't look convinced. "A pen?"

"Indeed, a glass pen."

Yup, that's what I wanted to gift Alexei: a gorgeous writing implement popular among a limited (but nonetheless dedicated) group of aficionados!

Glass pens actually originated in Japan. They were invented during the Meiji Period by a wind-chime craftsman. At the time, their popularity rose dramatically, but they were eventually replaced by ballpoint pens, a much more practical alternative. Even so, there were still people who loved and used glass pens for their pleasing aesthetic and agreeable feel.

In the empire, quill pens were the norm. Quills were also beautiful as far as appearances went, but they were so thin that holding them was a challenge. They absorbed so little ink that you couldn't write an entire line before having to dip them in the ink again, and the nibs often became worn, so you had to spend ages sharpening them with a knife. They weren't practical at all. To someone who'd lived in the twenty-first century such as myself, they were a

pain to use. In fact, I was confident the people of this world found them annoying too. Even the ever-vigilant Ivan had recently lamented about failing to sharpen my brother's quill to the level he preferred.

If I could bring glass pens to this world, I'd be able to make everyone's—and in particular, my dear brother's—lives easier!

However, Garen just laughed in my face. "I don't know where you got that idea, but I've never heard of glass pens. Glass can't suck up ink! You know that, right, young lady? Why would you even think of writing with glass? Ha!"

"You just need to curve grooves on the nib. They'll suck up the ink and act as reservoirs. The logic is the same as for a quill pen," I said. The point was to make use of the capillary phenomenon. At least, that was what that principle had been called in my previous life.

Quills don't suck up ink by magic either!

As I grew increasingly annoyed by this man, I fanned myself as a distraction. That was when I noticed that someone else was looking at my drawing. It was the gentle-faced youth from before, peering over Garen's shoulder. He seemed particularly interested in what I had drawn.

Garen noticed too and he twisted toward him, snapping, "Lev! What the hell are you doing?!"

"I'm sorry!" The young man, Lev, hurried back to the kiln.

"Sorry about that, m'lady. Kids nowadays," he said with a shrug. He once again let out his ribald laughter before pushing my drawing back into my hands.

"Anyway, if you want some glassware, I can provide you with the best quality there is. Let me show you," he said before yelling, "Hey, you! Bring that here!"

Garen seemed to have no intention of doing what I had asked. He just wanted me to order whatever he was good at making.

Two apprentices—or at least that's what I thought they were—picked up a large vase and started walking toward me. It was so big and heavy that they struggled to carry it. I sighed behind my fan.

"No need to bring it all the way here," I said. "I apologize for wasting your

time. Let us go, Mina.”

“Yes, my lady,” she said, standing up.

“Hang on! Wait, m’lady! If you take a good look at it, I’m sure you’ll love it.” Garen was so flustered at the idea of losing a prospective client that he reached to grab me. Before that could happen, Mina’s pale, dainty hand grabbed his thick arm, pulling it back.

“Don’t touch her ladyship with your dirty hands,” she threatened, her voice low.

“What the hell, you bit— Argh!”

Garen tried to shake Mina away but her slender fingers did not so much as twitch. She tightened her grip until her fingers mercilessly bit into his flesh.

CRACK.

The sound of bone breaking was audible.

“AAAAAAH!!!” Garen screamed.

I stood up and retreated behind her, where Garen wouldn’t be able to reach me. “Mina,” I said quickly.

“Yes, my lady,” she replied, letting go of his arm and pushing him back.

“I apologize for taking up so much of your time. Farewell.”

At these words, I smiled at Garen—who was trembling with his face as white as a sheet—and at the workers of his workshop, before turning on my heels and leaving.

“I’m terribly sorry, my lady. I should never have allowed such a man to speak to you,” Mina said.

I’d already boarded the carriage but Mina remained outside, looking up at me with an apologetic expression.

“This wasn’t your fault, Mina. Who could have expected the master of a reputable workshop to be so ill-mannered?” I was surprised that the guy had managed to rise to his position with a personality like his.

“From what I’ve heard, that man could not hold a candle to Master Murano,”

she said. "With Master Murano dead, he became the top artisan in the empire. He must have grown conceited."

"Oh, that makes sense."

When the cat's away, the mice will play, huh?

"Still," I continued, "he did seem talented. I don't believe that many artisans could make a vase like the one we saw. But I suppose he struggles with delicate, intricate work."

As the empire's best glass artisan, his pride must've gotten in the way. Instead of admitting that he couldn't do it, he'd acted like a jerk.

You gotta be clear and polite with customers especially when you're presenting negative information, dude.

I was also pretty sure that he'd acted like that because we were two women. There had been guys like that even in modern-day Japan, and gender disparities were far worse in this world.

"Please look for an artisan who specializes in intricate work next time, Mina."

"You still want someone to make the glass pen?"

"Of course I do! I'm not one to give up so easily." *A working adult doesn't give up after a failure or two!*

"In that case, would you mind waiting here for a little longer, my lady?"

"Here?"

"Yes."

Mina's face did not betray her thoughts, but I assumed she had a reason.

"All right, Mina."

The person she was waiting for soon came to us on his own.

Lev, the young man we'd seen in Garen's workshop, had sneaked out. He walked cautiously, as though he was scared of being spotted by his colleagues. When he saw that my carriage was still there, his eyes widened in surprise.

"Do you have something to say to her ladyship?" Mina, who'd remained

outside of the carriage, asked bluntly.

“Yes! Erm, I mean— Yes, I’d like to speak with her.” Lev seemed intimidated, but he steeled himself. “So, um, could her ladyship give me more details about the item she wants made?”

“Can *you* make it?” Mina asked.

“I can’t say for sure until I’ve heard the details,” he answered, an earnest expression on his face. “But I feel like I may... Rather, I want to try!”

I watched his expression from inside the carriage and smiled.

He has the soul of a true artisan.

The challenge I’d brought him made his blood boil. I totally understood him—that was just how such things felt to me. I remembered forgetting to eat and sleep because I’d been too engrossed in difficult projects. Systems engineers were artisans too, in a way. Weren’t we?

Wait! That’s a death from overwork flag right there!

“Do you have time?” Mina asked him.

“I’m sorry, right now I don’t! I slipped out of work, but I have to get back. I’ll be able to take my lunch break soon!”

Mina glanced my way and I nodded.

“Her ladyship agreed to speak to you,” Mina said.

Lev bowed his head to me. “Thank you very much! I’m Lev Naro!”



After Lev told us, wisely, that right in front of his boss’s workshop wasn’t the best place to have a conversation, he gave Mina an address. With that, she hopped into the carriage and we departed.

The place we ended up at was another workshop. However, there was a padlock on the door. A small sign on the shop, worn by the years, read “Murano Workshop.”

Figures, I thought, connecting the dots. Lev had probably been one of Murano’s employees who’d gone to Garen for employment after his death.

“Lev was taught by a proper master, so he knows how to address nobles,” I noted.

“Wealthy merchants and noblemen often commissioned Master Murano. He would’ve learned then.”

Mina and I waited there chatting for a short while before Lev came running.

“I’m sorry for the wait! I borrowed the key, so we can talk inside if you please.”

While Master Murano’s workshop was similar to Garen’s in some ways—there were kilns and work tools—it seemed to have been planned with efficiency in mind. There was a sort of functional beauty about the way the objects inside were arranged.

I recalled that Master Murano had passed over two years ago. Despite that, there wasn’t much dust and the air inside didn’t feel stale. I wondered if Lev sometimes came by to clean the place. Everything felt tidy. For some reason, I couldn’t help but feel like it had been just as tidy even in the days when it was bustling with activities. Keeping things neat and orderly was important to doing good work. The first step of the proved “just-in-time” (or JIT) manufacturing production model also involved ascertaining the right place for every item and component.

Master Murano must’ve been an exemplary artisan!

In one of the corners of the workshop hung a set of white curtains. Just as Lev drew them, I predicted what would be behind them: sofas and a table for meeting with clients. They were of far better quality than the ones at Garen’s.

Lev invited us to sit before taking a seat across from us. I handed him my drawing, which he studied intently.

“So, the idea is to carve several grooves on the nib into a spiral...”

“Exactly. If you do so, the pen will hold much more ink than a quill.”

“Would you mind if I modified the design of the body?”

“You’re free to do so, as long as it’s easy to hold and looks appealing.”

After a long time, Lev lifted his face.

“For such a long and narrow item, the main issue will be the durability,” he said. “Especially for the nib. If I make it with regular glass, it’ll shatter the second someone presses too forcefully onto the paper.”

As expected of a pro!

Lev was right; the fragility of the nib was the main flaw of glass pens. The one I’d bought in my past life after seeing my friend’s had been made of hard glass, so it hadn’t had this issue.

“Is it impossible, then?” I asked.

“It normally would be,” Lev answered, “but please allow me to show you something.”

He stood up and approached a nearby shelf. From it, he picked up a glass from under a piece of white fabric. It was similar to the intricately detailed ones I’d seen yesterday at the restaurant, but the stem was much shorter. It looked like a brandy glass.

The most notable feature of this glass, however, was its red color. Red glass was expensive because you needed to add melted gold to it to give it this hue.

Lev returned with the glass in hand and held it up over the table. Suddenly, he let it go. I gasped despite myself, but the glass just bounced against the table and rolled before stopping.

“Don’t worry, my lady. It’s not broken,” Lev said with a smile. He picked it up once more and handed it to me.

I took it and inspected it from every angle. There wasn’t a single scratch on it.



“The glassware of the Murano Workshop is not only beautiful,” Lev declared, “but it’s also sturdy enough not to shatter even if it falls to the ground. Master Murano spent a lot of time devising a method to achieve this degree of durability. A slender pen could never be as sturdy as this glass, but if I make it using this method, it has a much better chance of withstanding frequent use than regular glass.”

“Do you know Master Murano’s method?” I asked.

“I learned it from the master himself. In fact, I made the glass you’re holding.”

At those words, I took another close look at the glass. I didn’t know much about glassblowing, but I could see that the shape was perfect, the thickness even, and the color vivid and uniform. Not to mention, if Master Murano had allowed Lev to work with such an expensive material, he must have trusted his skills.

“I’m not too knowledgeable when it comes to glass, but this is beautiful,” I said. “You’re very talented.”

“Thank you, my lady. Master Murano was far more skilled than I could ever be, but he did me the honor of recognizing my work. Enough to sell my creations under the name of the workshop.”

That made sense. The items that came from the Murano Workshop wouldn’t have all been crafted by Master Murano himself; some would’ve been made by the people of his workshop. Now that I thought about it, that was certainly the norm. It reminded me of the famous painter Rembrandt. Many of the artworks thought to be his had in fact been painted by his disciples. After that fact had come to light, museums had had his paintings appraised to check whether they were truly his or not. While many had been disappointed to find they owned works created by his disciples, I personally thought that Rembrandt was impressive for that. He’d managed to raise several disciples talented enough to equal him. It was quite an accomplishment!

“However, there is a problem,” Lev declared, pulling me out of my reverie.

“My, what might that be?”

“I cannot produce glassware this sturdy unless I work here, in the Murano

Workshop. I need to use the kiln that the master modified to fit his method, or it won't work."

What, really?

"This place is currently for sale. The master had debts, after all. He was a wonderful artist but a poor businessman. He was often conned out of his money. As soon as he passed, the workshop was taken away by his debtors." Lev looked at me with a sad, brooding expression. "But I want to work *here*. I want to craft the things that can only be crafted here with my own two hands! Please, my lady—please purchase this workshop!"

Excuse me?!

Lev bowed to me as deeply as he could. "I promise to make whatever my lady needs! Glass pens, wine glasses, anything, and I swear I won't let your investment fail! The Murano name has yet to be forgotten! The items I'll make with the techniques I inherited from the master will fetch a high price. I've never negotiated or sold anything myself, but I'll do my best to learn. I will accept the lowest wage there is in order to save this workshop!"

"Wh-What do you mean by 'save'?" I asked, taken aback.

"If this place is bought by someone who wants to turn it into something other than a glass workshop, the master's kiln will be lost forever. I can't bear to think of that. That kiln has value! There's only one like it in the world! Think of all the artistry that could emerge from its heat. I know full well I'm overstepping and asking too much of you, but it's not often I get to speak to someone with the power to purchase this place. In fact, this may be my only chance! Please, my lady, I beg of you, buy this workshop."

Hmm. I was only looking to buy a birthday present for my brother, not an entire glass workshop. This isn't a present anymore—this is a challenge straight out of that Project Something show!



As soon as I returned home, I went to find Alexei to discuss the workshop situation with him. I had one more corridor to walk through before reaching his office when I stopped in my tracks. I stood frozen in place, wondering for the

umpteenth time how things had turned out so strangely.

I just wanted a pen! One single pen! Yet here I was, buying a workshop! This made no sense. No matter how I turned the matter in my head, it made absolutely no sense.

I'd just told Alexei that I didn't need anything but his company! It hadn't even been a week since then, yet here I was, about to knock on his door to ask him to buy me a *workshop*. Ridiculous. Even his obsessive love for me wouldn't save me. He'd get fed up with me. He might even scold me!

There was an easy fix to that. I could just *not buy it*. I knew that. I'd asked how much the workshop was, and it was the equivalent of *tens of millions* of yen. It made sense considering the kind of building it was, but it simply wasn't an amount I should be spending on a glass pen.

I could go knock on another workshop's door. For all I know, they may just take my order and make it.

At least I hadn't been foolish enough to promise Lev that I'd buy it. I'd simply told him that I'd consult my brother about it. He'd then proceeded to thank me half a million times while bowing. I could tell from his behavior that he knew just how big of an ask his request was. If I ended up refusing, he'd be disappointed, but he wouldn't push.

I knew all of the above. But *still!*

I used to really love that reality TV show I'd remembered from my past life—most work-related shows actually. I also used to watch *Professional: Something Something* and the one about a continent of passion or whatever. I was more into these kinds of nonfiction documentaries than regular TV shows. I liked seeing workers demonstrate their spirit and determination to the world.

"I want to craft the things that can only be crafted here with my own two hands! That kiln has value! There's only one like it in the world! Think of all the artistry that could emerge from its heat."

Lev's words had gone straight to my heart! This entire narrative of saving an artisanal factory from the brink of destruction... Ah! I just loved it! A dramatic theme song sung by one of the superstars of my past life kept playing in my

head!

I get it! I've got to "let the earthly stars rise toward the sky!" As the young lady of a ducal house, I could purchase a workshop or two!

Or...perhaps not. It basically cost tens of millions of yen! Buying a workshop was like buying a small enterprise, wasn't it? A fifteen-year-old girl asking for that kind of present was pushing it. It wasn't a new dress or a shiny jewel. It was a *company*! That was well beyond the realm of a young noble girl's whims.

Besides, if I bought a workshop, I'd have to manage it. These things came with operating costs! What if it stayed in the red the whole time? I'd end up costing the family even more money and putting pressure on our finances!

Could I turn a profit? I had no idea. I'd worked for a company, sure, but I hadn't been involved in management so I couldn't count on my experience from my past life. I felt like a kid begging for a puppy with no idea how to care for it. If you bought a business, you had to remember to feed and water it every day—hold on! This was about a company, not a pet.

What's up with the unfunny babbling, me?

Leaving my terrible sense of humor aside, just like Lev, I did believe the workshop had a fighting chance. At the restaurant, Moore had also mentioned that Master Murano's works had only gone up in value since his death. Even if they weren't made by Master Murano himself, there were bound to be clients eager to buy new glassware from the Murano Workshop.

Besides, Lev was there. I trusted he could produce work of the same quality as that of the days of Master Murano. He was only twenty-two, but Master Murano had taken him as his apprentice when he was ten and recognized him as a full-fledged artisan by the time he turned *eleven*.

From what Mina had told me, it usually took two years at the least for an apprentice to complete their education. Lev had done so in half the time, at the number one workshop of the empire, which I expected had higher standards even for their apprentices. I did not doubt his talent. Apparently, he'd even successfully passed the guild's master certification and could have opened his own workshop years ago if he'd wanted to. Despite this, he'd chosen to hone his skills by his master's side.

That, too, was such a win in my book!

You're ticking all the boxes, Lev. All right, if I'm going to do this, I have to put together a convincing presentation for my brother and his advisors!

Today, I'd just talk to Alexei for a quick overview. You know, just to get a feel for his reaction and see what I was working with. Once I knew what to expect, I could focus on addressing my brother's worries and try my luck again another day with a thoroughly planned presentation!

The first step was to collect information. To do so, I couldn't hesitate.

Come on, Ekaterina! Let's go!

The BGM of my mind had just changed. I could now hear the upbeat theme of that passionate continent I envisioned, played beautifully by a scruffy violinist. With a deep breath, I made that passion my own and stepped forward.



As soon as I entered his office, Alexei smiled at me. "What brings you here, Ekaterina?" he asked.

"Brother... I actually have a request for you."

"Oh?" His neon blue eyes shone. He seemed delighted. "Go on, tell me."

"I, um, may have found something I want," I mumbled, looking at my feet and playing with my fingers.

"How rare. What is it?"

"A glass...workshop."

"A workshop?"

"Brother, do you remember the magnificent glass I took notice of at the restaurant? I couldn't stop thinking about it, so I asked Mina to look into it for me. As it turned out, after Master Murano's passing, his workshop was put up for sale. I met with one of his disciples who says he wants to keep creating glassware there. I thought that if I purchased it, I could allow him to create such masterful works of art again. That's what I want."

Alexei's lips parted and I tensed up awaiting his answer—but in the end, he

just laughed out loud!

“I’m always amazed by your unfettered thoughts,” he said. “While I thought of collecting all the existing pieces created by this artisan, you went to look for his workshop and set your sights on new work.”

He turned toward his subordinates. “Halil, make arrangements. Kimberley, treat the workshop as a new business.” He paused and turned back to me. “Ah, it’s your first time seeing Kimberley, is it not, Ekaterina?”

“Indeed, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said to the stranger.

Kimberley stood up and bowed to me. He was a thin, bald man with a large aquiline nose who appeared to be around sixty. I could sense from the look in his gray—or rather, distinctively silver—eyes that he was strong-minded.

“I’m Yemelyan Kimberley,” he said. “I serve as the financial advisor of the Yulnova Duchy. I’ve heard many rumors about you, my lady, but you’re far more impressive than they say.”

Scary! What kind of rumors are even spreading?!

“Lord Kimberley, I’m terribly sorry for making you listen to such an overbearing request during our first meeting. As our financial advisor, you must abhor such wasteful spending,” I said, feeling remorseful.

Against my expectations, Kimberley looked surprised for a second, then shook his head and smiled. “I would not refer to such an interesting project as ‘wasteful.’ My interest has certainly been piqued.”

He was interested?!

“The Murano Workshop, you say? As always, you have a keen eye, my lady,” Halil said with a smile. “Master Murano’s name has lost nothing of its renown, and his works keep gaining value. If a direct disciple of his creates new, quality pieces and sells them under the workshop’s name, I have no doubt they’ll fly off the shelves.”

Ah! Don’t spoil my presentation! Glassware had no direct connection to the duchy, but Halil still had a clear understanding of the state of the market. As always, the extent of his knowledge impressed me. *Is there any market he*

doesn't know like the back of his hand?

"You need not worry about profit, Ekaterina. While I told Kimberley to treat it as a new business, I only meant to say the accounting should be processed like so. Just have the workshop create whatever you like," Alexei said with a soft smile.

Huh?

"B-Brother, my chest aches at the thought of being so selfish. I cannot ask for it without reserve when the price is quite steep..."

"Oh! You even checked the price?"

Hey, brother, why do you have such a charmed smile on your face? Even after I told him the price, his smile did not budge. *Why?!*

"Well, that does seem appropriate for a workshop in the capital," Alexei said.

"Glassware workshops are quite specialized," Halil added. "If anyone wanted to use it for a different purpose, they'd have to go through the trouble of demolishing the kilns. A tedious process considering they're made to endure high temperatures. It won't sell easily, so we have leeway for negotiations."

Brother?! Halil?!

This conversation was not going the way I'd expected it to. I'd thought I would have to prepare a convincing presentation! I'd even imagined that Alexei might get mad at me!

"Glass sounds like it'll be interesting to work with," Aaron said. "It's made with white sand, is it not? We may be able to collect it in the duchy. I'm sure your Granduncle, Isaac, will know."

Aaron? Don't you have enough work on your plate? Why are you trying to add more? It did seem like a good idea, though! We could save on material costs that way. *Hang on, why am I acting stingy at this point?! Actually, one more thing—my brain just can't keep up anymore! Are we actually buying it?! Like, has it been decided already?!*

"Brother! Please be candid with me as the head of our house. Am I not being too willful? Should we not think this over?"

“As long as I am duke, anything you desire shall be yours. You could never be too willful, for there is nothing I wouldn’t give you.”

He looks...deadly serious!

“Don’t say such things, brother. I’m far too immature for you to grant every one of my whims without a second thought!”

People can change, you know?! What if I become depraved and start asking for the most outrageous luxuries? What would you do then?!

“Don’t worry, Ekaterina. There are limits, naturally. If you wished for me to build you a castle the size of the imperial palace within the walls of the capital, I’m sorry to say that I would fall short of your expectations.”

What in the world is he even talking about?! That’s not a normal boundary by any standards! Someone, anyone, say something to him!

“Her ladyship would never ask for something like that,” Novak said. “No, she’d come forward with something far more unexpected, like wishing to keep the Black Dragon in the garden.”

Novak! I’d never ask for that either! I am asking you to please scold my brother, though! I needed just one person in this room to say something sensible! Why was everyone adding to the madness?!

If you want me to go crazy with the asks so badly, I will! Bring the snarkiest stand-up comic from my past life to this world so he can shame them into oblivion! Right this second! But, actually, I’d be the one who gets cooked!

Something had to be wrong with them. Alexei still made sense considering his excessive love for me (although I wasn’t sure that could excuse everything), but what was up with his advisors?

Is there some sort of epidemic spreading?! Do we just let little sisters do whatever they want now?!

“Keeping the Black Dragon in the garden... Was that one of grandfather’s ideas?” Alexei asked.

“He did have a tendency to bring up unreasonable ideas.”

I finally got it. They all suffered from post-grandpa-exposure syndrome. My

ideas were just as far-fetched as grandfather's, and the nostalgia tugged at their heartstrings. Then there was the old hag, who had just spent endlessly. Compared to that, a workshop had the potential to turn a profit. It probably sounded a lot better.

Okay, let's change gears. The goal is to recreate glass pens! My Project Something experiment is about to start. I thought maybe I wouldn't be able to make it in time for Alexei's birthday, but I think I have a chance! This probably shouldn't be a competition, but I'm not about to lose to him in the obsession contest!

I'd do my best to make my brother happy!



"I'm glad to hear you had a good time."

Back at school for the new week, I was walking with Flora from our dormitory to the classroom. She smiled as I told her about my outing with Alexei.

"I did! My dear brother really escorted me the entire time. It was wonderful!" I said.

The following day had been so eventful that my outing with Alexei had lost some of its impact, but there was no doubt about the fact that I'd had a fantastic time!

"You and your brother get along so well," Flora said with a smile like pure sunshine. "I'm happy for you whenever I see the two of you interact."

You could bottle and sell her smile, it's so therapeutic!

My little Flora was such a good girl. She didn't have a single living relative, so she had every right to be jealous, but that thought never seemed to cross her mind.

Flora had been born and raised in the capital, and she, too, returned to the baron couple that had adopted her every weekend. She often cooked with the baroness and came back with new recipes for us to try.

"I look forward to having you visit me at home this weekend," I said. "The roses are still in bloom and make for a wonderful sight."

“Thank you very much, Lady Ekaterina. It’s an honor to be invited to the Yulnova residence. I can hardly wait,” she replied. The thought seemed to truly thrill her.

I’d only managed to get first place at the examination thanks to Flora studying with me. Since we finally had time for a break, I’d invited her to my house to thank her. Together, we could enjoy the rose season that had not yet ended.

“With everyone there, we’re sure to have a lively time,” Flora said.

Marina and Olga had overheard our discussion and started lamenting about how envious they were, so I’d offered to invite them. Needless to say, two extra invitations had soon turned into a few more as others in the class overheard us too. In the end, I’d concluded by saying that whoever wanted to come was welcome—I expected to see the entire class, perhaps more. After all, the rose garden of the Yulnova was marvelous enough for the emperor to admire it. Everyone would surely jump at the chance to see it for themselves.

The imperial visit had just concluded, so I felt bad for putting a burden on the servants of the residence so soon, but when I asked him about it, Graham told me with a smile that hosting a few people was hardly an issue. They had small parties with more guests than the number of students in my class all the time.

Once again, my house is pretty damn amazing, isn’t it?

The following day, I had a meeting with Lev planned. Yesterday, my brother had agreed to buy me the workshop (some might say *too* readily), so I’d sent Mina to inform him.

As every working adult knows, reporting, informing, and consulting ought to be carried out promptly.

According to Mina, Lev had been more shocked than happy. To be honest, I totally felt that too. I still couldn’t believe what had happened myself.

Halil’s team would make sure to get in touch with the financier who currently held the Murano Workshop this week so they could acquire it as swiftly as possible. Lev would then leave his current position at the Garen Workshop to come back to the Murano Workshop. When I saw him on the weekend, we’d discuss the details of the glass pen once again so he could start on it without

delay.

I'd gotten my brother to spend a fortune on a workshop just so I could get him a birthday present. It was a little outrageous, but glass pens *were* a novelty in this world. After I gifted one to him, we could market them as a product and make sure the workshop turned a profit.

With all that, I was about to be busier than ever—but it was for my brother's sake, so I was ready to knock it out of the park!

The rest of the week went by in the blink of an eye. Before I knew it, it was the weekend.

Forty, maybe even fifty young men and women were strolling through the rose garden of the Yulnova residence, admiring the roses in full bloom.

"Oh, how the zephyr carries the fragrance of the roses!" Marina said grandly, taking in a deep breath. Flora and Olga, who were next to her, imitated her, then breathed out with soft laughs.

"This truly is a wonderful garden. It's my first time seeing so many species of rose at once. The fountain and the gazebo are works of art too. I feel as though I've wandered into a dream!" Flora said.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," I replied, smiling as I held up my parasol.

Speaking of that parasol, Mina was the one who'd brought it out and opened it, shielding me from the sun. Having her pamper me like that in front of everyone was beyond embarrassing, so I'd insisted she hand it to me instead.

"I can't begin to tell you how different this place is from our garden," Nikolai said with a sigh. "Ours is practically a stable! Take a deep breath and you'll be assaulted by the stench of— Oof!"

Before he could finish his sentence, Marina hit him in the pit of the stomach, and he coughed violently.

"Shut it! Don't go running your mouth in a beautiful place like this! I knew I should've found a way to get rid of you before coming here!"

"Shut it'? Have you given up on pretending to be a lady already? What happened to the five kittens act? Mom wouldn't bat an eye in such a situation,

you know?”

“It’s all because *you* say the most vulgar things! You horrible, kitten-skinning ghost!”

In this world where demonic beasts and monsters actually existed, imaginary beings whose existence was dubious were usually called ghosts. Though I wasn’t sure this particular ghost was a thing as far as folklore went. Marina seemed to have invented it on the spot.

Leaving the matter of ghosts aside, Nikolai was here because Alexei had invited him. Since the siblings were close enough to bicker with one another constantly, he must’ve thought that Nikolai would be worried if he couldn’t be with her.

“We do have a stable here too,” I said. “If you would prefer to admire horses over flowers, I’m happy to show you the way, Lord Nikolai. As a military man yourself, you must have an interest in swords and spears too. Please have a look at the weapons passed down in our house from generation to generation before you go.”

I knew that Alexei wasn’t one to entertain people himself when he didn’t need to, so I did my best to show our hospitality to Nikolai in his stead.

“That collection is absolutely worth seeing. I’d love to have another look myself.”

At the sound of this additional voice, the corners of my mouth twitched, but I swiftly schooled my expression.

Why are you even here, Prince?! You saw the entire garden the other day. What were you doing sneaking in via the Krymov carriage?!

I’d started having doubts the second I’d seen the Krymov carriage approach. For some reason, four imperial knights had been surrounding it. Sure enough, the prince had emerged from the carriage right behind the Krymov siblings and hit us with a breezy “Hello.”

It had taken everything I had to stop myself from screaming, “What the hell?!”

I had asked my classmates to ride together as much as possible, but it wasn't so that the prince could waltz in in the *least* sneaky way I'd ever witnessed! I'd made the request because, even among nobles, wealth disparities were sometimes glaring. Not all families had carriages in the capital, so the point was to offer an opportunity to those without a carriage to travel with others without lowering themselves to asking for a ride. Yet, here was the prince, as if he were some sort of hitchhiker!

We couldn't just improvise a royal visit! There were preparations to be made. We needed proper security too!

Despite that, I crammed all of my irritation into a locker inside my heart and asked with a bright smile, "My, have you already seen our weapon collection?"

"In the past, yes. When your grandfather was still with us, I came to visit Alexei and he showed it to me."

As expected, it had been back when grandfather was still alive.

"Ekaterina," Mikhail continued, suddenly dropping his voice until it became a whisper. "I'm sorry for coming without warning. I thought that the security of the Yulnova residence was sufficient. To be honest, I've always wanted to join a fun and carefree stroll like this."

Oh...

Mikhail had been born and raised as the heir to the throne. Even with other noble kids, he couldn't just play together with them however he liked. His short years as a student were the most carefree he'd ever get to be. Since I'd suddenly invited the whole class and more to our house, a well-guarded ducal residence, he'd probably figured that this was his one and only chance to spend time with the group "like everyone else."

Come to think of it, his father—the current emperor—had also spent a lot of his time as a student sneaking into restaurants with my grandfather's help as he tried to romance the woman he loved. If they picked relatively safe places, princes could have a bit of fun sometimes, right?

"Besides," he added, "mother monopolized you the last time we were here. I wanted a chance to talk to you some more."

Huh? Why? I'd mostly just asked questions about diplomacy and foreign trade because I was curious. If he wanted to learn more about these topics, why not ask the empress directly? Mikhail smiled at me, but my eyes were full of confusion.

"Lady Ekaterina, your butler..." Flora's voice brought me back to reality.

Ah! Right!

I had to give out the orders myself! Graham couldn't act without me saying anything. Although, as always, he had shown up at the best time! He was standing not too close yet not too far and bowing at the perfect angle. I smiled at him, my heart full of gratitude.

"Graham, are the refreshments ready?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Perfect. Please serve our guests, and make sure the gentlemen get a larger serving."

"Understood, my lady."

He bowed once again, his silver hair flashing in the sun, before he raised one hand. That signal was enough to spur the maids and servants on standby into action. Tables and chairs were brought in and arranged on the grass. The servants covered each of the tables with a pure white cloth and arranged teacups and plates full of sweets on them as though they were decorating a cake.

As I watched Graham walk away and join them, Olga let out a dreamy sigh.

"As one would expect of the House of Yulnova, even your butler has great panache."

"Indeed, he seems to be the ideal butler. I once heard about a family that produces butlers from generation to generation. Could he be from that family?" Marina asked, looking at me intently.

I shook my head and admitted, "I do not know anything about Graham's family, except that he's always protected our house. I think of him as the guardian spirit of the House of Yulnova; he's just that dependable! Now, now,

everyone. The sun is shining so brightly today, I am sure you must be parched. I have had wild-rose tea prepared, so please have a taste.”

After the tea, I had the domestics bring out lunch—a buffet in the garden! I was going for an “informal garden party” vibe. I’d just recently become the lady of the house, so today was the perfect rehearsal for me, as planning parties was one of my responsibilities.

When I’d told Graham I wanted to invite a large group of friends home, he’d immediately suggested we go about it this way. I wouldn’t have expected anything less of the veteran butler, but I probably should’ve been the one to come up with the idea.

Ugh, I’m so terrible at managing this household.

Unlike studying and business, I had neither knowledge nor experience when it came to this, but that just gave me more reason to work hard!

“This small pie is delicious! Am I mistaken, or is it one of the dishes that you and Flora often bring to His Grace at the academy?” one of my classmates asked.

“You’re correct,” I answered. “This is one of Baroness Cherny’s recipes. Our chef was most impressed with it, so we requested the baroness’s approval and she allowed him to cook it.”

After hearing that the Chernys were old friends and classmates of my grandfather, most of our classmates had started treating Flora differently. Sergei had occupied the position of prime minister as well as headed several prestigious ministries. His reputation was quite something, even among the younger generation. Nowadays, more and more students talked to her. Some were marveling at the taste of the pie while others asked her for the recipe. There wasn’t a hint of bullying anymore.

“The rose-shaped cookies we ate earlier were also beautiful! Needless to say, the taste was lovely. I assume these must be traditionally served by the House of Yulnova at this time of the year,” another student commented.

“I come here every year, but I’ve never had them before,” Mikhail said. “It must be a new recipe. You must be glad to hear how popular the rose cookies

are, Ekaterina.”

“Indeed. I’m happy they suit your taste! Our chef recently came up with that recipe.”

The truth was that I’d taken inspiration from a famous baked good from my past life and asked the chef to try to make something like it. Back there, these were actually made out of brioche—although they’d been called cookies anyway, for some reason. They were also literal calorie bombs. *Delicious* calorie bombs, though! In this world, I’d only asked the chef to replicate the shape so they were true cookies. He had added his own touch to the recipe by adding some rose jam to each of them.

Incidentally, the House of Yulnova *did* have a traditional sweet. It was a small doughnut with rose jam inside. It was an unexpectedly simple dessert, but the recipe had been passed down for generations. They were also yummy, for the record!

I answered the many questions of my classmates one by one and periodically took a few steps back to glance around and see if anyone seemed to be having trouble. It was my first time performing my role as lady of the house, but I was doing my best to keep up and do it properly.

Mikhail did not leave my side for a moment. At first, I was a little peeved, but he helped me out many times. He knew how to handle this sort of party and redirected the conversation whenever several people tried to talk to me at once. In the end, I was thankful for his presence. He was especially helpful whenever other men came to talk to me. He took care of most of the conversations by himself. I couldn’t help but be impressed by how smooth he was.

That’s the prince for you. If he weren’t a walking doom flag, I’d want him here every time I throw a party!

Flora also remained by my side the entire time. Before I knew it, she and the prince had started conversing with one another in a more relaxed manner.

Actually, maybe I should invite him every time, just to help Flora out.

Speaking of people I wanted to see every time, the Krymov siblings were

merrily quarreling today too. Having these two around really summoned a convivial, easygoing atmosphere. Many of the guests were drawn to that, so there were always people around them. Their presence could turn any dull affair into a resounding success.

Somehow, none of the above were the most amazing people at the party. No, those to whom I wanted to scream “Bravo!” the most were the inexhaustible *Right Right Trio!*

With the royal visit and the exams, I’d practically forgotten about them. To be honest, I was a little surprised they’d even decided to come.

You bunch have a lot of nerve!

The three girls were full of energy, to say the least. They ate a lot but complained to every servant they could catch.

If you hate it so much, just stop eating! Actually, if you’re so unhappy about the service here, go to Versailles or something—or better yet, come complain to my face!

They’d magically gotten quieter the second they’d met my gaze.

By the time the young men and women in attendance—the ravenous young men, for the most part—finished eating every last morsel of food, the mood had relaxed. The garden was beautiful, but after raving about it for a few hours, everyone had grown a little bored.

Right as I thought it was about time to move on, tension permeated the garden.

Alexei was here.

Unhurried, he walked toward me, Flora, and Mikhail. No one had announced his arrival, but all eyes were on him, the statuesque duke.

What presence! You’re amazing, brother!

This much was true in every high school, but the gap between freshmen and seniors was almost that between children and adults. In Alexei’s case, though, he seemed even more mature—both from a physical and mental point of view—than his fellow third-year students. Nikolai was more built than the majority

of his classmates, but he, too, looked like a kid next to Alexei.

When he arrived before us, Alexei bowed.

“It’s a pleasure to welcome you today, Your Highness,” he said.

“I’m sorry for intruding without warning. I heard about the party and...” Mikhail paused and glanced at me before redirecting his gaze to Alexei. “It seemed like many of the boys were going to come, so I wanted to be here too. Each rose of Yulnova is beautiful, after all.”

Alexei narrowed his eyes, as though he were about to step on an insect. He seemed to be trying his hardest not to let his irritation surface to avoid overstepping his position as a vassal of the imperial prince. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. Strangely enough, his smile made him look like a ferocious beast.

“I hear you’re interested in our weapon collection,” Alexei said. “I’m sure you’ve grown bored of flowers already. Allow me to guide you there instead.”

“I would hate to impose on you when you’re so busy. I shall ask someone else to take on that role. Don’t forget you have family to help you now, Alexei.”

“For anyone other than the head of the household to attend to Your Highness would be unthinkable.”

Neither of their smiles budged.

“In that case, I shall take you up on your offer. Let us men *all* partake in this tour.”

I really am a terrible host.

I made sure my own smile did not falter, but I let out a deep inward sigh. I could tell that there was another layer to their conversation but couldn’t figure out what it was. What could it have been about? They’d mentioned looking at the weapons several times. Was that code for something else? Conversations between an imperial prince and a duke were deep!



Was it possible that Ekaterina would never notice she had completely missed the mark? That the conversation had gone in a direction that she never

guessed? Well, even in her past life, her friends had agreed that she was terribly dense. It might be a long time until she lost her regrettably obtuse way of thinking.

“See you later, Ekaterina,” the prince said.

“Do enjoy your visit!” she called.

She watched the prince walk away, not understanding for the life of her why he seemed a little reluctant. It wasn’t that she didn’t *want* to know, but she couldn’t hold that thought when Alexei, who was about to follow him, paused and whispered in her ear.

“Graham had nothing but praise for you. He said you were a wonderful host. Though this was your first time acting as the lady of the house, you did a splendid job,” he said.

When he smiled fondly at Ekaterina, it was as though a stray bullet had hit her in the chest. The ladies around them all but squealed, their faces turning red—which she also didn’t notice—while her spirit soared.

Brother praised me! I could die right now, she thought.

More accurately, it was Graham who had praised her, not Alexei, but Ekaterina loved to hear such words from her brother more than anything. She felt satisfied that her foray into the unknown territory of “lady of the house” had paid off. As for Mikhail and her brother’s conversation—she had other things to worry about.



“I’ll leave the ladies to you,” Alexei said. “Feel free to use any part of the residence and anything in it as you see fit.”

“Thank you, brother,” I said.

All right, time to lead the girls to the secret event I planned!

“While the gentlemen are off observing those weapons, what do you say we have a look at a *lady’s* weapons?”

At my invitation, the girls followed me inside. I led them toward a hall I’d visited before, one large enough to hold a small party. As I pushed the door

open, chatter erupted from my classmates.

“My, amazing!”

“Wonderful! How luxurious!”

Just like the time when I’d come here with Nonna, the hall was filled with extravagant dresses. Today, however, the shutters were open and the rays of the sun shone through the windows and into the room. The air wasn’t stuffy anymore either. All in all, the place had entirely lost its eerie energy.

“These were my grandmother’s,” I said.

“Oh!”

Everyone in high society knew of the old hag’s reputation, and they all seemed to come to terms with the number of dresses in an instant. I wasn’t surprised; Camilla had told me how well-known she was.

“Lady Ekaterina, may we look at them up close?” someone asked.

“Why, of course! Actually, if you’d like,” I said, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear me, “you may take home any dress that suits your fancy.”

None of them said a word but I could *feel* the wave of excitement spread through the group.

“My grandmother was born an imperial princess before marrying into our house,” I continued. “Ladies of this standing usually leave their dresses behind as mementos, to be given to close friends and relatives. Naturally, we proceeded in this way after her funeral. However, as you can see, there are still so many dresses of hers left. My grandmother took a great interest in fashion, so I’m sure she’d love for the young ladies that are the future of the empire to wear her dresses and carry on her legacy.”

Sorry, I lied! She’d no doubt scream if she heard her dresses would be worn by anyone like a measly baron’s daughter. In fact, I imagined she was currently throwing a fit in the other world.

That’s exactly my goal, witch! If you try to pull a Sadako on me and crawl back from beyond the grave, I’ll welcome you with open arms, then bury you again with my earth magic.

“I strongly believe that my grandmother’s guidance led you all to accept my invitation today. As you know, a ball will be hosted at the academy during the second semester. I hope your time here helps you decide on the kind of dress you will wear then. I’m sorry to present you with such dated dresses, but you may be able to create interesting pieces by incorporating new trends into them. No matter what fate you choose for them, I’d be glad if they could be of use to you.”

Seriously, go ahead and sell them if you want. I don’t care!

Noble families each had different sets of circumstances to deal with. Some of the ladies here could very well be from families that struggled to make ends meet. Georgi, the head of the Yulmagna and a die-hard fan of the old hag, would nag my brother if we tried to sell these dresses. He’d definitely take the chance to mock Alexei and imply that the House of Yulnova must be struggling financially or lacking loyalty toward the imperial family, inviting needless speculation. On the other hand, if we graciously gave them away to young ladies, the rest wasn’t our problem anymore. No matter what they did with them, we couldn’t be criticized.

It was also customary to bestow keepsakes upon waiting maids. Considering our grandmother’s maids were the type to embezzle money, I would’ve expected them to put their grubby hands on every last one of her things and sell them off, but they hadn’t done that. I had only met Nonna once, but considering the way she’d acted, grandmother’s dresses and parures were the embodiment of her spirit to her and the other maids. As long as they remained within the house, they thought that they could act as though she were still there, backing them up.

Obviously, that wasn’t the case anymore.

“Anyhow, please start by examining everything. Feel free to try things on if you’d like. Our maids are here to help you if needed,” I said, gesturing at the maids who were standing behind them. They all bowed, Mina included.

There was the matter of sizing, so I assumed the dresses wouldn’t fit everyone without alterations, but they could still remove them from the mannequins and hold them in front of their bodies to see if they liked the

general cut and if the colors suited them.

From the dresses in the room, I recognized that the old hag had managed to maintain her weight throughout her entire life. They all seemed to be the exact same size. While I loathed her, I had to give her credit where credit was due. It was impressive.

“But how could we...?”

“What should we do?”

The girls looked around like lost lambs. I could tell they were itching to start picking out dresses but were hesitating.

How do I give them the last push they need? Just as I wondered what to do, three girls rushed into the hall, breathing heavily from excitement. *The three of you really are full of energy.*

“Oh my, would you look at this! I’ve never seen so many real pearls sewn onto one garment!”

“And this prism silk! It shines as if it were all seven colors of the rainbow! It’s my first time seeing such fabric with my own two eyes!”

“Oh dear! Which one is the most expensive?!”

Your thoughts are leaking out, girls, careful. But it was for the best. Thanks to them, the girls’ final traces of self-restraint had disappeared. I smiled and extended my hand toward the entrance of the hall.

“Go ahead, everyone,” I said.

More like... Fight! GONG!!!

The high school girls swarmed into the hall, squealing excitedly. They let their gleaming eyes wander through the large collection of dresses, looking for something that would suit them. Whenever they stumbled upon something they liked, they turned to their friends for advice.

“What do you think of this one?” one would ask.

“It would look stellar on you! You should get it!” her friends would respond.

I totally get that. It was exactly the same in my past world. Whenever you go

shopping with friends, you get the irresistible urge to motivate them to buy something if you see them holding back!

When I'd first seen this dress graveyard, it had disturbed me. I'd felt as though the hag remained here, haunting us. However, now that I saw young girls merrily praising these dresses, they almost felt like treasures.

The dresses must be happier like this too. These young, bright girls were all full of vitality and this bargain sale further fueled their drive. *The old hag's grudge has been defeated in an instant. Let this mighty bargain sale purify this haunted room. Ha ha ha!*

I was watching over everyone from a corner of the hall when Flora came to find me.

"They're having a lot of fun," she said.

"Indeed. I am quite pleased."

I supposed Flora was not getting a dress. To be fair, she didn't seem like the type to partake in these types of activities.

"Lady Flora, did I perhaps make you uncomfortable?"

"What? Why?"

"In a way, I am flaunting the wealth of the Yulnova right now. While the other girls seem to be having fun, they must have their own conflicted feelings about this affair."

Having a new dress made every week was beyond extravagant, right? If this world was similar to medieval Europe or Edo-period Japan, clothing—especially fancy dresses—would be so expensive that the idea of fast fashion was completely unimaginable. For commoners, getting new clothes made was almost a pipe dream. Buying secondhand clothing and wearing it until it turned to rags was more common sense.

After all, synthetic fibers weren't a thing yet. You couldn't use oil to produce polyester or nylon. Instead, everything was made of cotton, silk, wool, or hemp. It took time and effort to grow the plants, and you could only harvest them once a year. You weren't done then. Next, you had to commit even more time

and effort into turning your harvest into fibers, weaving them into fabric, and making clothing—all by hand. One garment could only come at the price of tremendously difficult and time-consuming labor.

Even cotton, which was far cheaper than silk, was probably far more valuable than it had been in my past life. I'd once heard that a developing country that produced most of the world's raw cotton used mind-boggling amounts of agricultural chemicals. Without them, you'd only reap meager harvests of poor quality from your crops. Agriculture had yet to reach that point here, so I expected the production output was still low.

Even though all the girls here were noble ladies who studied at the Magic Academy, their families weren't *all* rich. Nobles had to commit to an expensive way of life and many were forced to take on debt to maintain their prestige. Faced with this hall full of dresses, these ladies must've had conflicted thoughts. Deep down, I expected they felt offended.

"I'm sure everyone understands that you have no such intentions, Lady Ekaterina. No one is uncomfortable, and certainly not me," Flora replied resolutely.

You're such a good girl. Thank you.

"You brought up the ball, Lady Ekaterina," she continued. "The ladies who aren't exactly well-off must already be thinking of what to wear. The thought surely troubles them greatly. You've just provided them with the opportunity to forget about this issue and focus on enjoying their time at school. No one could mistake such kindness for anything else."

Too good, actually.

The thing was, I wasn't nice. I just hated the old hag very, *very* much and wanted her dresses gone. Of course, as a former Japanese citizen, equality was important to me! The thought that only a fraction of rich girls got to enjoy fashion did not sit right with me. That was how the thought had first arisen in my mind. I could be rid of the dresses and let everyone doll themselves up for the ball.

Since then, I hadn't been able to stop worrying that some might take it the wrong way and assume I wanted to flaunt my wealth. Even though Flora had

assured me it was fine, I didn't think everyone was as pure as she was. Everyone had their own way of thinking.

Nevertheless, her words made me happy.

"Thank you very much, Lady Flora. I appreciate you saying this. Speaking of which, do none of these dresses suit your fancy?"

"Oh, no need to worry about me. I have no reason to go out of my way to look good. I'm quite casual when it comes to these things," she replied with a little laugh.

I figured you'd say that. So...I picked one out for you already!

"My, I must have forgotten to remove the cloth covering this dress beforehand!" I pulled on the piece of fabric and revealed the dress hidden underneath.

It was a neat white dress. Its basic shape was simple, but the wide sleeves spread out like lilies, and the skirt and collar were adorned with exquisite lace woven with silver thread. Small aquamarines were sewn into the lace here and there, making it sparkle beautifully.

There were countless dresses far more intricate and lavish than this one in the hall, but for some reason, it looked more memorable than most of them to me. The tailoring in particular was spectacular. The folds of the skirt and the way the sleeves spread out truly *made* this garment.

"Would you look at this? This dress seems to have been left just for you, Lady Flora. We just need to have the aquamarines replaced with stones that suit the pink of your hair and it will be perfect!"

I wasn't exactly being slick, but I smiled at her. However, Flora didn't seem to have heard a word I'd just said. She stared at the dress, flabbergasted.

"That's one of my mother's dresses," she murmured.

"What?!"

"I think this is one of the dresses my mother made. I remember her telling me she had to be careful with the lace because it was so expensive. She worked more slowly and cautiously than usual on this particular dress, so I never forgot

it.”

Unlike me, who had almost forgotten that Flora’s mother was a seamstress.

Wow, your mom made this?! Seriously?!

I grasped her hands without thinking.

“I knew it! This dress truly was made for you! You must have it! I will not have it any other way. Your mother worked on it tirelessly. I’m sure she thought of you for every moment.”

“Lady Ekaterina...”

“I see your mother was a most talented seamstress! This dress is gorgeous!”

“Lady Ekaterina!” Tears swelled up in Flora’s amethyst eyes and she hugged me tight. “Thank you... I’m so happy. Being able to wear a dress my mother made is like a dream come true! His Grace always says so, but you truly must be a goddess. Thank you. I’m beyond grateful.”



That's just Alexei's rose-tinted monocle; don't mind that! The goddess here is the heroine of the story: you! I'm just your villainous sidekick.

For proof, the dress Flora's mom had made looked purer and more dazzling than ever in my eyes now that I knew it was hers, due to Flora's immaculate halo! Which got me wondering...could her holy magic also exorcise evil spirits?

In that case, it's time to vanish for real, you old ghoul!



The girls all seemed more or less done with their shopping, so I invited them back to the garden to take a breather over some tea. At about the same time, the boys came back from their own little expedition, and everyone was together once again.

I was wondering why the boys were so fired up when I heard someone say that Alexei and Mikhail had sparred in the training hall next to the armory after their tour. They were both amazing swordsmen and, according to the boys, it had been an impressive showdown. While they hadn't been fighting for real, obviously, the tension had been high and sparks had flown.

Apparently, they'd purposefully stopped before a clear victor could emerge, but Alexei had dominated the match. It wasn't that surprising. With his height, he had a longer reach and—at their age—two years still made a big difference. Still, Mikhail had managed to put up a good fight.

Apparently, Nikolai had also helped his juniors train...by flinging them to the ground one by one. He seemed to have impressed them, though, and the first-years were now in awe of his strength. Some had apparently begged him to allow them to call him "Big Brother."

The whole Nikolai thing is fine, but I'm not happy with you, Prince. What are you doing making my dear, busy brother spend unnecessary energy?!

I'd never intended for today's event to eat away at Alexei's time. Initially, I'd intended to ask Graham to show the boys around the armory. However, Mikhail's impromptu visit had forced the head of the house to make a direct appearance.

You're a handful, Prince. Alexei had already headed to his office when I

confronted the prince on his behalf, frowning.

“You were being unreasonable, Prince Mikhail. Naturally, your presence honors our house, but you must know that my brother is very busy. He makes every effort to complete his work for the duchy *and* his schoolwork. I’d appreciate it if you could refrain from making him partake in dangerous activities on top of occupying so much of his time.”

Mikhail raised both hands apologetically. “I’m sorry, Ekaterina. For the longest time, Alexei and I were sparring partners. He asked if I’d like to compete again, for old time’s sake.”

Huh?

“My! Did my *brother* request the sparring match?”

“He told me he was feeling rusty since inheriting his title. Although, I found such worries were unfounded, to say the least.”

Oh boy, I messed up.

“I’m terribly sorry. I acted so rudely without ascertaining the circumstances.”

“It’s all right. I can tell you care for him very much, and I like that about you. Alexei must be glad to have you as his sister.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

Do you really mean that? What’s up with you today, Prince? That’s one of the best compliments I’ve ever received! Well, Alexei was my number one fan, so he often told me things along those lines, but hearing from a third party that I’d made him happy made *me* happier!

“Come to think of it, you told my mother you’d like to learn how to wield a rapier, did you not?” Mikhail asked. “If you’d like, I’d be glad to teach you the basics. Alexei won’t get angry if we keep it light and you just learn how to hold one at first.”

Wow, I’d love to try—but I need to hold my horses. Don’t forget: the prince is a herald of doom!

If Flora was doing it with us, it’d be fine, but I definitely couldn’t learn from Mikhail alone! “Lady Flora, do you have any interest in rapiers?” I asked her.

“Me? Rapiers... They’re thin swords, are they not? Well, I couldn’t say I do, no.”

Regrettably, a most common view for a girl.

Sorry, Prince! I’m sure you thought that Flora would tag along if you invited me, but I can’t help you out this time! I had too much to do these days, between my lady-of-the-house lessons with Graham and the glass pen situation.

“I thank you for your consideration, but I must focus on learning how to properly manage my household before anything else.”

“Understood. After all, you’re the lady of this house until Alexei gets married. If there’s anything I can do for you on that front, don’t hesitate to ask, all right?”

“That’s very kind of you, Prince Mikhail.”

For real, thanks! I knew already, but you are such a nice guy. Unfortunately, that tends to make me forget how terrible a threat you could be to me, the villainess.



The party eventually came to an end. I watched my classmates board their carriages to return to the dorm. I had things to do at the residence tomorrow, so I’d stay overnight.

Before parting with the girls, I made sure to hand them each a box decorated with a ribbon that contained the dress they’d picked. One by one, they thanked me profusely as they took the small boxes from my hands. It went that way for everyone but three people.

The culprits? You guessed it: the Right Right Trio.

The other girls had all picked *one* dress. These three, by contrast, had hesitated for ages only to end up grabbing *five dresses each*. Fifteen in total! They’d ridden here together, and there was absolutely no way in hell fifteen boxes could fit in their carriage!

“Do something about it!” one of them admonished the servants. “Lady Ekaterina personally gave us these dresses! It’s your job to figure out how to

send them home with us!”

As their behavior started to get out of hand, I almost let out a nervous laugh. These girls were starting to remind me of Osakan grannies. They had a tendency to be overbearing when they let their pushy side out. Though, there usually was another grandma ready to set her friend straight in such situations.

I started walking toward the trio but stopped in my tracks when I noticed Graham looking at me. Instead, *he* went to them instead and bowed politely. His right angle was so on point it looked like he’d used a ruler.

“Is there a problem, my ladies?”

“There is! These maids are *defying* Lady Ekaterina! They won’t listen to her orders,” one of them said.

Excuse me?!

“Lady Ekaterina gave us that many dresses because we’re *special*! That means you should be paying special attention to us too! Isn’t it common sense for you to prepare another carriage for us?”

“Right right!”

As a very famous kickboxer and MMA champion once said: “What are you saying?!”

Graham smiled. It was refined, as a butler’s smile should be, but with an edge of capriciousness. “Allow me to assure you that we, the servants of the House of Yulnova, endeavor to follow our masters’ orders to perfection.”

“My! That’s excellent! Then, *you* know what to do.”

“Lady Ekaterina wishes for her guests to head home safely. To ensure your trip is safe and comfortable, we shall hold on to your luggage for now and have it sent to your dormitory at the Magic Academy as soon as tomorrow. Please enjoy an agreeable trip.”

“Hey! That’s not what I asked for!” one of them shrieked.

Graham’s smile did not budge. “Do excuse me, but you’re Sofia Saimaa, daughter of Count Saimaa, correct?”

“So what?!”

Oh, so the one with a tendency to raise her chin is called Sofia, huh? That’s funny, since it sounds like “sou ya” which means “right” in Japanese! And her surname’s Saimaa? I’m kind of impressed Graham knows that.

I later learned that all three members of the Right Right Trio were named Sofia! Seriously, what were the odds? Their names didn’t really matter much to me, though.

Lady Saimaa shall henceforth be known as Right-One!

“If you know who I am, then you should—”

Unexpectedly, Graham bent down and whispered something to Right-One. She suddenly shut up and her face paled. Without another word, he bowed once more.

“Have a safe trip, my ladies,” he said.

“S-Sure!”

The Right Right Trio hurried home without another word.

Graham, you’re amazing.

Call this volume *That Time My Butler Was a Wizard!*



I didn’t mind the fuss the Right Right Trio had made. See, clouded by immediate gain, they’d lost sight of something far more important: their value on the dating market. Young noblemen and noblewomen from all over the empire with a sufficient amount of mana gathered at the Magic Academy, which was considered the *heart* of said market.

One’s mana increased the most between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, and the core objective of the Magic Academy was to make sure those who had mana knew how to control it. However, in this world, this was *also* the perfect age for marriage.

Noble kids had to marry for the good of their houses, and many would have arranged marriages. The Magic Academy was a rare chance to snatch a better match than your parents could’ve ever arranged for you. In such cases, noble

families usually accepted the marriages even if they hadn't actively planned for them. Most students dreamed of finding romance at the academy so they could have a love match instead of marrying whomever their parents decided on.

As an outsider, all of that had taken me some time to understand. I couldn't help it, though! I couldn't focus on finding love or enjoying my youth. Love was the worst doom flag of them all for me!

Leaving personal matters aside, I had a feeling this country's educational system was practically built to encourage the students of the academy to look for a partner there. People with large quantities of mana marrying gave the nation better odds of maintaining its number of capable magicians. It would make sense if this was one of the main reasons the Magic Academy had been founded in the first place *and* the reason even commoners with high mana were compulsorily enrolled. That must be why Flora could marry the prince in the game without the emperor shutting down the wedding because of her status.

Now that I'd realized that, the academy just seemed like a huge blind-dating party arranged by the government.

Yup, an actual blind-dating school—or rather, some sort of elaborate trap set up by the authorities!

I supposed the young men and women who attended the academy didn't really care much about the government's intentions. Whether they did or not, the end result was the same: everyone was out there searching for a partner. Some let their hearts flutter when they found someone who was their type, others were hit by lightning and fell in love at first sight, and there were their opposites too: those who focused on objective criteria to secure the perfect match.

More than their families, the students themselves were the ones with high expectations. It was only natural; people tended to want a lover with good looks who also happened to come from a richer, nobler family. Not everyone made it their life goal to marry up, but most hoped it would happen. Dreaming big was a luxury of the young.

So, getting back to the Right Right Trio. The boys had obviously seen the little

stunt they'd pulled at the gate. Letting everyone see your greedy side wasn't a good idea to begin with, but with the way they'd acted, everyone would start doubting their families' financial situations as well. This considerably lowered their chances of finding good partners. To be perfectly honest, I estimated their chances were down to zero—although I wasn't sure they had been much higher to begin with.

I thought they were a bunch of idiots, but I couldn't bring myself to hate them anymore.

Live strong, I guess. Or maybe weaken up a bit! You're strong enough as it is!

Nevertheless, I couldn't help but wonder what Graham had said to make the infamous trio shut up so abruptly.



Once all of our guests had gone home, I went to find Graham to debrief.

"Graham, I'm so sorry my classmates caused trouble for you earlier," I said. "You handled Lady Saimaa perfectly."

"Thank you, my lady."

"May I ask what you said at the end?"

"I simply told her as follows: 'It seems your family owes us money. I'm happy to take these dresses off your hands as part of the reimbursement if you'd like.'"

Wow. Savage!

"Oh my. I now understand her sudden change of heart. I must say, I admire your ability to keep track of these things. You even recognized her! I could never do the same."

"I could not either," he answered. "The House of Yulnova does not usually lend money. However, we sometimes end up receiving proof of debt as part of payments. I do not know how many we currently have nor which house they concern. But it is a fact that most noble families find themselves incurring some level of debt. I also never stated that her family *definitely* owed us money, only that it seemed to be the case. As for her name, I asked Mina about it when I

saw her behavior during the tea party. She knows the name of every lady who lives in the same dormitory as you.”

Wait, it was all a bluff?!

Marina had called him the ideal butler, and she wasn’t kidding. He’d nonchalantly bluffed his way out of a pinch! I started laughing and clapped.

“What great acting skills you have!” I exclaimed. “I’m so impressed. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from an actor grandfather admired so much, but I must say I did not even notice you were acting. You deserve a standing ovation.”

Graham bowed to me. It wasn’t his usual perfect bow; instead, it looked like an actor’s exaggerated flourish. “That is the best compliment a humble actor from the countryside could receive. I’m honored, my lady.”

I let out a little laugh. I’d told my friends that I didn’t know what family Graham was from, and that much was true. However, I did know what kind of life he’d lived before he started serving grandfather.

Graham used to be a traveling actor. His company had once traveled to the Yulnova Duchy for a performance, but they’d been attacked by monsters on the road. The knights of the Order of Yulnova had ridden to defeat the monsters—too late, sadly. The company had been decimated and Graham was the only survivor. While he’d escaped with his life, he’d lost everything he held dear and struggled to carry on with his life in the aftermath.

This had all happened thirty years ago, when Graham had been in his late twenties. I didn’t know if there had been members of his family among the acting troupe; Graham had not said a word about *that*.

The knights had brought him back with them to treat his wounds, but he’d been a shadow of his former self. That was when grandfather had gone to find him. He’d told him that his attendant had just resigned and that he was in a pickle.

“You’re an actor, are you not?” he’d said. “Once your wounds are healed, would you agree to stay by my side and play the role of my attendant for a while?”

That was how it had started.

Graham loved to act and did not want to take on another job. However, he could not bring himself to forget about his former comrades and join another company. Grandfather had had no way of knowing any of that at the time, but he'd somehow told him exactly what he needed to hear, and the words had affected him deeply. Thus, Graham had started playing the role of his attendant.

Apparently, traveling actors did not care much for scripts. Even if they had them, they tended to adapt to the audience and situation and improvise. With that training, a short explanation of the duties and mindset of an attendant had been enough for Graham to adapt to the role. If anything, he'd been far better at dealing with unexpected situations and bothersome people than any other attendant grandfather had previously had. It got to a point where grandfather had often been told by other noblemen they were jealous he had such a capable and faithful attendant. Whenever that happened, grandfather had clapped for Graham when they were alone.

"You're an incredible actor," he'd say. "No one even notices that you are onstage!"

Most people would surely have told Graham that he was better suited to be an attendant than an actor or praised his skills as an attendant. In fact, that'd certainly been true. But grandfather had never done so. He'd always praised Graham's acting.

Grandfather had been the duke of Yulnova, one of the noblest people in the empire after the emperor. Under normal circumstances, an actor from the countryside would never have had the chance to speak to him. Despite that, Sergei had offered him words that had touched his soul. That was why Graham had decided that he'd give his life for him if he had to.

In the empire, it was common for the high-ranked servants of noble ladies to be from noble families themselves. The point was for these women to create connections with important families before their weddings. Men's servants, on the other hand, were usually professionals with a range of skills. While their status was not deemed to be important, a traveling actor serving as a duke's

direct attendant was unheard of. When grandfather had been asked about Graham's origins, he'd always dodged the question. Somewhere along the way, though, he'd started responding that he was the guardian spirit of the House of Yulnova.

With that, Graham's identity was never questioned. He went from attendant to chamberlain until he eventually became the butler of the House of Yulnova—the most important position among the servants.

"Duke Sergei was my only audience for the longest time," Graham told me.

Alexei didn't know of Graham's past. He was such a serious boy that grandfather had avoided telling him. However, Graham had trusted me to hear his story.

"You truly resemble Duke Sergei, my lady. You're a free spirit, just as he was."

Hearing things like that made me feel super-duper sorry for being a fraud.

At least Graham's story had further convinced me that grandfather had been a wonderful person. I was lucky to be compared to such a great man.

Thank you, Graham. I'm sure you're the actor grandfather loved most in the world.

I later learned from Kimberley that our family had bought most of the obligations—in other words, the right to collect a debt—of the Right Right Trio families. He'd also had their parents inform the three girls of that fact, so he doubted they'd act out in front of me ever again.

I would have felt guilty, but we weren't the ones who had forced them to take on debt in the first place, and owing everything to the same debtor meant their debt accrued less interest. It wasn't a bad deal for them.

The House of Yulnova really was amazing, right? Although, to be perfectly honest, I didn't expect the Right Right Trio to learn their lesson anytime soon.



"Welcome, my lady!" Lev greeted me with enthusiasm when I arrived at the workshop on the day that followed the party.

"Hello, Lev," I said, smiling. "I'm terribly sorry for making you deal with this

process so abruptly.”

“Please don’t apologize, my lady. If anything, I should be thanking you for heeding my ridiculous request so swiftly! Just the thought that this workshop isn’t for sale anymore and that I can personally relight the kiln that my master left us fills me with happiness. I can’t believe it!”

That was right; we’d *already* bought the workshop.

It had barely been a week since I’d gone to Alexei, but Halil had gotten everything arranged immediately after our meeting. He’d left the groundwork to one of his subordinates, who’d found the people who previously owned the workshop. The subordinate had spoken with them at the beginning of the week. They’d spent three days negotiating, until they’d agreed to sell for about half of their initial asking price. Halil’s subordinate had then proceeded to pay them right away, and he’d been handed the keys by the previous owner the day before yesterday. Apparently, they had been pleased by the swiftness of the payment too.

The keys had since made their way to me, and I’d had Mina deliver them to Lev yesterday.

It all went fast as lightning!

I knew that Japanese businesses were considered slow to close deals by the rest of the world, so this further convinced me that the empire was more similar to Europe than it was to Japan.

People work fast here! Fast enough to compete on the global stage in my past life!

What had I accomplished in a week as a working adult in my past life? Convincing my superior to let me start writing a proposal to ask for funding—that was probably about it. I wasn’t even sure that could be called progress.

That’s just how big companies are.

While Halil’s subordinate had managed to negotiate to buy the workshop for half its original price, it was still worth more than several times my yearly salary, even with all of my overtime pay included! My company had been exploitative, but they had paid for every hour of work, so I’d taken home a heftier salary

than most other people in my field. Somehow, this building was worth many times that!

Speaking of my huge income, I'd died before having the chance to spend much of it. I supposed my savings had ended up feeding the national treasury instead.

Ah... No, snap out of it! There's no point crying over spilled milk.

My past aside, thanks to my brother and the rest of the duchy's officials doting on me, I now found myself the proud owner of a glass workshop.

They're so soft on me that I really need to pay attention not to indulge their kindness too much!

The equivalent of tens of millions of yen was a life-changing amount in both of my lifetimes, but in this world where wealth disparities were so extreme, I couldn't begin to imagine how many commoners could've had their lives turned around with this kind of money. Since I'd gotten them to spend so much on me, I had to do everything in my power to make sure the glass workshop didn't end up in the red.

"I have high expectations for you, Lev," I said. "I want you to give life to beautiful objects that will touch the hearts of the people."

"Thank you, my lady. I'm prepared to produce such works."

"I'm glad to hear that! I know little of glass, so I'll be counting on you." My expression grew more serious. "However, I do not intend to make you do everything on your own. This workshop is now mine, and on my honor as a Yulnova, I will make sure it benefits from being one of the businesses of the Yulnova Duchy until it can one day fulfill its duty and benefit the duchy in turn."

"Benefits and duty..." Lev repeated, dazed.

"First of all, I have a few questions for you," I said. "You told me that Master Murano was a poor salesman. What about you? Do you also wish to control every last step of the work, from production to sales? Or would you rather focus on your craft?"

Lev's breath caught in his throat and his eyes wandered to the side. "I-I'm

terribly sorry, but I don't know the first thing about money and sales. Master Murano always used to say that I was a worse businessman than even he and that I should never try to open a workshop of my own."

"Goodness! In that case, I'm sure you'll agree we must divide the work," I said graciously. "Those in charge of trade within the duchy have assured me they could sell the workshop's products in your stead. In fact, they tell me new works of art from the Murano Workshop are sure to fly off the shelves. They're eager to start selling them."

"I'm grateful for their kind words," Lev said as relief washed over his face.

"This offer stands for the staples of the Murano Workshop such as glasses, but glass pens are a new product. We'll need to go through trial and error until we can turn them into a viable product. Speaking of which, I've received approval to use the duchy's money to fund the development of new products until the workshop is back on track." I paused. "Mina."

"Yes, my lady." Mina set down a small bag in front of Lev. As it hit the table, the coins inside clinked.

"This is your wage for this week. I've heard from Mina that you were fired right after you came to speak with me."

Lev had been dismissed on the spot, without even being paid for the work he'd already completed. That Garen guy was the worst! He'd certainly been pissed after Mina hurt him when he'd tried to grab my arm, so he must've taken it out on Lev when he'd realized he'd talked to me.

"I cannot have you so troubled over how to pay for your daily expenses that you cannot work on new products, so I'm paying you in advance. For the time being, your wage shall be the same as what you received when you worked for Master Murano. We'll sign a proper contract at a later date. I'll do what I can to pay you appropriately as the new master in charge of the workshop."

"Incredible," Lev murmured, hesitantly reaching for the money. "Distinguished families are something else. Thank you so much, my lady!" He looked as though he were in the middle of a dream.

"And—"

I was about to say something else, but I was interrupted by a beautiful clear sound that resembled the sound of wind chimes. After a second, I realized that it was the doorbell. When someone pulled on the lever next to the door, glass bells sang with high, clear notes.

Lev made to stand but Mina was faster. She returned almost immediately, asking, “Where does the firewood go?”

Behind her was a man holding a large bundle of firewood.

“Oh, in the underground storehouse. I’ll show you the way,” Lev said, getting up.

I wouldn’t have expected any less from the Murano Workshop. They had an underground storehouse you could access directly from outside, making deliveries highly efficient. There was plenty of firewood to be delivered, but it was brought in swiftly.

When Lev returned, he had a dumbfounded look on his face.

“It arrived before I could explain,” I said with a smile. “I’m sorry for surprising you. Deliveries of raw material and fuel will arrive at the same time as for other ventures of the duchy, as buying in large quantities means more advantageous prices. We also have expert negotiators, so the burden on the workshop will be less than if you were to purchase everything you need individually.”

After I’d praised Halil and his subordinate for driving the price of the workshop to half of what it had initially been marked, Halil had suggested we proceed like this: by buying raw materials and fuel for the workshop too, the duchy could make a larger purchase and increase its margin of negotiation; it was a win-win situation. Needless to say, I’d jumped on the occasion as soon as Halil offered!

“I shall also have a professional accountant take care of the ledgers and calculate the workshop’s earnings and costs,” I concluded.

“T-Truly?” Lev asked, bewildered. He didn’t seem to believe everything that was happening.

A little voice inside me screamed: “You said you wanted to avoid making the duchy lose more money, but you sure have no hesitation using its resources and

personnel!”

To which I answered: “No hesitation at all!”

Now wasn’t the time to hold back. Since I was a beginner at this “running a business” thing, I had to accept all the help I could get. If I tried to figure things out alone, I’d do more harm than good.

I’d seen many junior systems engineers try to do just that because their seniors seemed busy and they didn’t want to bother them. The result was always the same: a huge catastrophe that took forever to fix! The worst was when they’d pretended to be just fine for ages to avoid bothering us—or didn’t have the nerve to admit they didn’t know how to handle certain things—until they’d suddenly stopped showing up to work out of nowhere!

Urgh, let’s stop with this infuriating trip down memory lane.

Besides, I’d heard that making a sizable investment in the early stages of a project and withdrawing if it seemed doomed was the best approach. Conversely, injecting funds gradually to make up for bad results or difficulties was the worst possible move. The issue was, would a novice like me even notice if my business was doomed? I had no idea, so I needed assistance now from hardened professionals! I was blessed to have so many I could trust around me.

“So, Lev,” I continued, “I’d like for you to focus on producing pieces. As we discussed prior, I hope you can also craft a glass pen for me. *My* role is to provide you with an appropriate environment to do so. If there’s anything you need, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“My lady...” Lev bowed deeply. “Thank you so much. You’ve shown me such consideration. I can hardly believe I’m so lucky! Thanks to you, the storehouse is full of firewood, so I’m ready to fire up the kiln at any time. Once I do, this workshop will come back to life. To a glass workshop, fire is life itself. I swear I’ll craft the glass pen you desire, my lady.”

Then, Lev put down a stack of papers on the table. “I’ve drawn a few sketches,” he said. “Which design do you prefer for the handle?”

“Oh my! Your drawings are so much more impressive than my amateurish one!” I exclaimed as I reviewed the realistic sketches. His drawings were already

works of art in themselves. They resembled those of Leonardo da Vinci that I'd seen in my past life!

"I'd like to have the very first glass pen made for my brother, the Duke of Yulnova. As such, it should be elegant and fitting for a man to use. His hands are quite big, so the handle should be thick enough for him to pick up comfortably. Oh, and I'd like for the color to..."

My list of requirements was almost unending. Later, I felt a little bad about that.



The following weekend, I received word that Lev had a prototype to show me and that he hoped I could visit him. I was at a loss for words.

That was fast!!!

"Welcome, my lady," he said when I met with him.

"Lev! You've made a prototype already?! Honestly?!" I asked excitedly.

Lev nodded with a smile. "Yes, I have. Please, come take a look."

A piece of black velvet was on the table next to the sofas. As I approached, I saw that several glass pens were lined up neatly on it. They were all as clear as the purest ice.

"I haven't used colored glass yet," Lev told me. "The ingredients necessary to dye glass are expensive, so I wanted to make sure the nibs worked to your liking before moving on to that step."

"You're right! That *is* the most important part."

The pens were already beautiful with twists and spheres decorating their bodies. They'd be even prettier once Lev added color to them, but clear glass had its own subtle charm.

I picked up one of the pens and studied it carefully. Like I had instructed, there were spiral grooves neatly carved on the nib. I dipped it into an inkwell Lev had prepared for me and looked at the ink run up the grooves, painting beautiful black ribbons into the nib.

Yes! That's exactly what I wanted!

Lev had also prepared paper for me to use, so I tried writing on it. I started with my name. The tip of my pen ran smoothly over the paper. It was far from the tedium of using a quill. Next, under my name, I drew the crest of the House of Yulnova. No matter which way I moved the pen, it didn't catch on the paper like quills did. That was one of the strong points of glass pens. Even better, I didn't run out of ink until I was almost done with my drawing.

In my past world, the box of the glass pen I'd bought promised that I could fill up an entire postcard with text before having to dip my pen in ink a second time. I'd tried it immediately after purchasing it, and sure enough, that had proved to be true. In fact, the ink had held for longer still! I'd explained the mechanism to Lev, and he'd done a wonderful job of making it a reality.

The glass pen I'd just used was the perfect size for me. I tried to pick up a second one. It was a little too big for me and felt heavy in my hand. It would probably be perfect for Alexei. I tried dipping it in the inkwell. Once again, beautiful swirls decorated the nib.

"Hmm. What do you think?" Lev hesitantly asked. "Should I try to lengthen the grooves so that they can hold more ink? It's possible, but I'm afraid it'll throw off the balance between practicality and aesthetics."

"No, this level is perfect," I answered, setting down the pen. I took both of Lev's hands in mine and squeezed them. "You're a genius, Lev! You managed to make my terrible drawing a reality in such a short time. I'm astonished!"

"Ah! Hmm... I... That's too much praise!" Lev exclaimed, shaking his head as his face turned bright red.

"No! One could never have pulled off such a feat without a natural gift! You have remarkable flair and insight, and you understand customers' requests well. You also have the curiosity and adventurous spirit to embark on such an endeavor. You've made something no one else knows of yet. How blessed I am to have met you!"

"Th-Thank you, my lady. I-I don't know what to do or say." Lev looked like he was about to cry.

Right at that moment, Mina approached us. She pulled my hands away from Lev's before retreating just as quickly.

I came back to my senses. That wasn't good! As a proper young lady, I shouldn't be holding a man's hands like that. I'd also sung Lev's praises a little *too* much. The poor guy didn't know what to do with himself.

To be honest, I still had much more to say, though. I was truly impressed! He had to be a genius to have made something of that quality that fast. In fact, he was so good that if we'd been filming an actual episode of that reality TV show I liked so much, the crew would've been at a loss. He'd made it so fast there would have been nothing to show.

Well, his very first prototype had most likely been a failure, but he'd used his knowledge and talent to overcome that trial in the blink of an eye. Lev was still twenty-two, wasn't he? I had a feeling he might very well surpass his master and become known as the best glass artisan in history.

You're a true earthly star, Lev! The swallows foretold your arrival!

I looked forward to seeing how Lev's future would turn out. Likewise, I was glad my brother had bought me the Murano Workshop. Being part of a duke's household was great. I'd become a patron that supported talented artists!

The House of Yulnova will be the Medicis of this world!

"My lady, does one of these designs fit what you had in mind for your gift?" Lev asked.

Right! I still had to get Lev to remake this with colored glass before Alexei's birthday. I was stunned that he'd made things work considering the timing, but there was no time to waste if I wanted to have the final product done before the deadline.

Lev wanted to talk business, so it was time to stop gushing and do it! I switched gears quickly.

"This first design, with the twisted handle, makes it easy to hold—I like that. This one, with the larger handle, also has some good points. The patterns you carved onto it are beautiful, and I approve of the thought of shaping it so that it wouldn't slip when held. As for this one..."

As we talked, I realized Lev had successfully implemented all of the requirements I'd brought up when he'd shown me his sketches. Each of his three designs was sophisticated, but the last one reminded me of the beautiful scabbard I'd seen in the armory.

"As I thought, glass pens will suit my brother perfectly," I said. "Can you remake them with colored glass?"

"Of course, my lady."

"All right. In that case, I'd like you to make one of each. Keep in mind that they're a gift for the Duke of Yulnova. Oh, and I haven't changed my mind about the colors, so please proceed with what I asked for last time."

Lev's eyes sparkled. I suspected he was envisioning the finished products flashing before his eyes. In his mind, he could already summon them up flawlessly.

"Leave it to me, my lady. I shall give this my all."

"Thank you! I'm counting on you," I said. I gave him one more smile before switching to a serious look. "Lev, there's one thing I need you to promise me."

"Anything, my lady. Just say the word."

"You need to eat and sleep properly every day. Promise you'll take care of your whole self. That's all," I said. "Geniuses like you tend to feel happiness when they use their talent. They get so engrossed in their craft that they end up forgetting to sleep or eat. While this may bring you temporary satisfaction, you mustn't neglect your health. Eating and sleeping are *necessary*. I don't want you harming your body just so I can give my brother a gift on time for his birthday. If it takes longer, so be it. I'm sure my brother will appreciate my gift even if it is late. You only have one life, Lev, so treasure it—treasure *yourself*."

I wished I could tell the past me exactly that. While I was working, I'd just thought of pushing through so I could finish my load for the day. But had any of that been worth losing years of my life over?

It was *my* life. *I* should have been the one treasuring it...

Since I'd somehow kept my memories, I had to make the most of it and do my

best so that no one around me followed in my footsteps!

Lev was at a loss for words, and a few moments passed before he finally said, in a feeble voice, “A-As you command, my lady.”

“Good. It’s a promise, then,” I said.

Lev averted his eyes and whispered, “To be honest, this makes me want to work as hard as I can, even if it kills me.”

Wait, what?! You’ve got to be kidding me!



It was morning, and I was already feeling restless. Flora looked warmly at me before declaring she’d take care of lunch on her own today.

“But, Lady Flora, I couldn’t inconvenience you like that!”

“It’s no trouble,” she replied. “Your and His Grace’s happiness is my happiness too. Besides, I wouldn’t want you anywhere near knives and fire in your current state. You’re far too distracted.”

She giggled. As always, she reminded me of a flower in bloom.

Sorry! And thank you, Flora.

Today was Alexei’s birthday. I’d done so much to prepare for today that I couldn’t help feeling stressed. What if he didn’t like his gift? Ever since last night, the thought had kept turning and churning inside me.

I was pretty sure he’d be happy. He would, right? He was so obsessed with me, there was no way he wouldn’t like receiving a gift from me, was there? But, at the same time, I didn’t want him to rejoice just because I was the one giving something to him. I wanted him to have something *useful* he could really enjoy. That was why I’d been so fussy about my gift. Alexei liking anything I got for him didn’t mean I could just randomly give him anything. I’d put a lot of thought into this! After all, I was just as obsessed with him as he was with me!

For the umpteenth time, it isn’t a competition, self!

Despite telling myself that, as soon as my morning classes ended, I rushed to my brother’s office. When I got there, Alexei seemed to have just arrived and Novak and the others were surprised to see me.

“You’re awfully early today. Is something wrong?” Alexei asked.

“I wanted to see you as quickly as possible, so I hurried,” I replied with a shining smile. “Happy birthday, brother.”

Alexei’s neon blue eyes widened in confusion.

Ah. I understand this face. Brother, you totally forgot about your own birthday, didn’t you?!

As always, Alexei never spared a thought for himself. Actually, what if he hadn’t forgotten about it but didn’t think of it as an important occasion worth celebrating?

Wait! What if he’s got traumas linked to his birthday?! I didn’t think of that!!!

Alexei uttered a soft laugh and extended his hand, pulling me in for a hug. “Thank you. I’ve always thought of my birthday as a day like any other, but with you celebrating it, it feels like a wonderful day.”

I squealed inwardly.

Yessss! I’m so happy! The original tsundere is dere-ing today too! Love it! I hadn’t even gotten to the present yet. I’d just wished him a happy birthday! That’s Alexei for you!

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” I said as I hugged him back. “I’ve brought a modest present for you. I’m not sure you’ll like it, but please have a look.”

Alexei smiled and caressed my cheek with his hand. “How could I not like the present a goddess bestows upon me? Truth be told, the fact that you thought of me makes me happiest.”

Yup, that’s Alexei for you.

In any case, I handed him the box. It was a dark blue velvet box decorated with a light-blue ribbon. I’d had it made urgently, especially for the glass pens. The inside had silk lining and little cavities of the perfect size to fit each of the pens so that they wouldn’t be damaged when transported. Glass was fragile, so it needed special care.

Alexei undid the ribbon and opened the box, revealing the three glass pens.

In my opinion, Lev's talent was even more obvious with colored glass.

The first pen was the one with a twisted handle. One of the filaments forming the pen's barrel was a vivid light blue that almost sparkled in the light, while the second was indigo blue. I'd picked that color scheme based on Alexei's hair color and my own.

The second pen had a thick handle that gradually tapered to a thin tip. Most of it was made of clear glass, but there were two blue roses, one light blue and the other indigo blue, drawn inside the thickest part. Green leaves connected the roses in the center and the outer part of the pen.

Finally, the third one was modeled after the scabbard of the sword Alexei had shown me. The outer part was clear but the center was light blue. With its shape and details, it was as though a light-blue blade was trapped within a glass scabbard. The finial, the part that corresponded to the grip of the sword, was indigo blue. On the surface of the clear glass, words had been drawn with gold paint in the language of the Astra Empire. Though I couldn't read or write in that language, I'd told Lev that words were written on the scabbard of the sword and I wanted to have some on the pen too. He'd picked a phrase commonly used for ornaments.

Alexei inspected the gift with a puzzled expression that I completely understood. There were only quills here, so he had no clue what he was looking at.

"These are pens, brother," I said.

"Pens?"

"Indeed, glass pens. They can hold more ink than quills, so you'll be able to write more in one go. Allow me to show you how they work."

I took out my own glass pen—one of the prototypes Lev had made. It was the right size for my hand, so I'd taken it with me. I used a long, narrow wooden box filled with cotton that Mina had prepared for me to carry it around.

With the pen in my hand, I borrowed Alexei's inkwell and a piece of paper. My brother urged me down, so I sat in his fine leather chair. I was a little self-conscious, since I felt like a random employee sitting at the boss's desk. My

corporate-drone instincts were still alive and kicking, I realized.

I dipped the tip of the glass pen into the inkwell. Ink steadily saturated the grooves.

What should I write?

I wasn't skilled enough at drawing our crest to attempt it in front of my brother. At the same time, I wanted to display the fact that you could write a lot in one go.

Oh, whatever, I'll just go with that.

I started writing.

In the end, I decided to go with the lyrics of the theme song of *Project Something*. That song had been stuck on repeat in my brain for the past few weeks, so I'd translated it into the language of the empire hoping it would get it out of my mind. It was no easy feat translating lyrics to still fit in the rhythm, but I felt like I'd done a decent job out of it.

I wrote the entire first verse before running out of ink and sighed in relief. "You can write all this after dipping it in ink only once," I declared proudly.

"That is groundbreaking," Novak said.

His comment made me notice that everyone in my brother's office had also approached to see what I was doing. They were all marveling at the glass pens, their curiosity piqued.

Ah.

"Please have a try, brother."

I sat up from his leather chair and encouraged Alexei to take his rightful place. He did so and stared at the glass pens for a moment before picking one up: the one designed to mimic a short sword.

"Fate, fortune, talent," he murmured.

I tilted my head in confusion. "What is this about, brother?"

"That is what's written here in Astran. This last word, 'talent,' can also be translated as virtue, valor, ability, or even fighting spirit depending on the

context. These three words often appear together. The formula means that to change their fate, one needs good fortune and talent.”

“Is that right? How embarrassing that I cannot read Astran in the slightest, so I had no idea.”

Sadly, my lack of a proper education showed at times like this. In the past, learning the language of the Astra Empire had been required of all nobles. While that wasn’t the case anymore, being able to read common words was the norm. If I didn’t do anything about this, it might become an issue at school at some point!

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Ekaterina,” Alexei said. “People who understand Astran are a dime a dozen. But you, my dear sister, are a sage like no other.”

Thank you, brother! I see your rose-tinted filter is doing a great job of coloring the world once again!

“Speaking of which, that poem of yours has a peculiar form. Did you write it yourself?” he asked.

Ah! I didn’t think he’d point it out!

“N-No, I read it somewhere.”

“I see. I read poetry from time to time, but I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

He reads poetry? That was a little unexpected. I wondered if that was Vladimir’s influence. Alexei had said that he used to recite old poems from memory. *Wait, that checks out. That’s where his flowery language skills stem from!*

Alexei dipped his pen into the ink. The first thing he wrote was his name.

“Oh,” he murmured. “What a smooth sensation. It doesn’t catch on the paper.”

“Exactly! That’s what’s nice about these,” I said.

Alexei started writing something else on a different piece of paper. I couldn’t read any of it since it was written in Astran, but each letter was beyond

beautiful.

That's ornamental penmanship!

I'd seen letters written by noble men and women from the Heian period at a museum in my past life. I'd never imagined I'd get to see someone writing in this fashion in front of my eyes. It was incredible—the refinement of nobility!

"I can write regardless of the way I orient the nib," Alexei noted. "It's so different from a quill."

Alexei hummed in admiration, but I was the one who wanted to do some humming! It was his first time holding a glass pen, and while he was struggling a little at times, every last one of his letters was gorgeous!

"What did you write, brother?" I asked.

"I translated the poem you wrote into Astran. Although it needs some polishing."

Seriously?! It had taken me quite some time to translate the song from Japanese to our language, but he'd done it just like that.

"Ekaterina, these...glass pens, was it? Did you have them made at your workshop?"

"Yes, brother. The artisan I hired is most talented."

"When you asked me for the workshop, you said you wanted to allow him to create masterful works of art. You must've been talking about this." Alexei put down the pen gently. Then he stood up and kissed my temple, hugging me close.



AAAAH!

“Thank you, Ekaterina, my goddess. I cannot believe how marvelous you are.”

AAAAH! AAAAH! AAAAH!

AAA— *All right, let's calm down.*

“Brother... I'm so glad you like it! Nothing could make me happier. Not anything.”

I was ten different kinds of *delighted* he liked my gift, though I wasn't sure I could really call it “my” gift considering Alexei had been the one to buy the workshop for me. Oh, well. I was glad I'd *thought* of giving him a glass pen.

“You're happy, huh?” Alexei said with a soft laugh. “To think you went to such lengths to give me such a grand thing. All that for my birthday? Ah, Ekaterina...”

“You're the most important thing to me, brother. Naturally, your birthday is the most important day of the year in my eyes.”

Hearing Alexei call it a “grand thing” convinced me glass pens could be sold. That was good news, but I didn't *really* care about the financial aspect of things as much as I did Alexei's happiness. He was my absolute fave and my beloved brother after all; his joy was my joy. There was nothing else as important as that in my book.

“I see... Thank you,” Alexei whispered.

Right at this moment, someone knocked on the door of his office. Ivan swiftly opened it to reveal Flora, carrying a larger basket than usual—lunch!

“Thank you, Lady Flora! I'm sorry for making you cook alone.”

“Actually, I had help,” she replied with a big smile. From behind her back, Marina and Olga appeared and waved at us.

“Happy birthday, Your Grace. We helped out in your stead, Lady Ekaterina.”

“The kitchen's workers gave us a few more dishes to bring along. They wish you a happy birthday as well, Your Grace.”

I'd long ago gotten friendly with the staff, as I visited the kitchen with Flora every day. Apparently, they'd wanted to help us celebrate Alexei's birthday. The

thought warmed my heart.

Alexei brought his hand to his chest and bowed. "I, Alexei, Duke of Yulnova, should like to express my gratitude, ladies."

Marina and Olga squealed at the beautiful picture he made before bidding us farewell, saying they'd eat at the cafeteria as they usually did. Only the usual gang remained in the office after that. Together, we enjoyed a slightly more elaborate meal than usual.

When we'd finished, Flora took out a pound cake decorated with dried fruit.

"This isn't much, but here," she said softly.

As we enjoyed the not-too-sweet cake, I couldn't help but think this was a wonderfully heartwarming birthday party.

Alexei's Worries (and Another Gift)

"Thank you for your work, Kimberley," Alexei said, looking up from his pile of documents. While he'd just praised his financial advisor, he sounded somewhat tense. "The situation is more alarming than I imagined. I know you've just gotten back on track after returning to your position as financial advisor, but I need you to focus on this matter for the time being."

"Understood, Your Grace."

The bald man with a large, aquiline nose and silver eyes bowed. There was an air of severity in the way he carried himself.

"If my guess is correct, the House of Yulnova was on the brink of a precipice. We faced imminent danger," Kimberley said.

"You were grandfather's financial advisor," Alexei said. "You know more about the finances of the House of Yulnova than any other, so if that is your sentiment, you must be right. Dismissing you and appointing a stranger to fill your role was what drove us to this crisis in the first place. I thought grandmother simply did not understand these matters, but I'm not sure anymore. What in the world was she thinking? And we may very well need to correct the wrongdoing of her maids too. Dammit!"

After loosing a foul word, Alexei threw the documents at his desk. The strong motion made his pen roll dangerously close to the edge of his desk.

"Oh no!"

Alexei rushed to pick it up in a hurried way that was quite out of character. He'd received this precious glass pen alongside two others with different designs from his sister for his birthday. The one he was currently using mirrored a blue blade sheathed inside a glass scabbard.

Alexei looked at it for a moment. Beautiful ornamental letters in the language of the ancient Astra Empire decorated its front. It read "Fate, fortune, talent." Only through good fortune and talent could one overturn their fate.

Alexei's expression softened. A few days had passed since he'd received this pen from Ekaterina, but the sight of it still filled his heart with love.

"It was a wonderful gift," Novak said. His expression was stern, as always, but Alexei could tell he was happy for him.

"Indeed. I would've thought so regardless of who gifted it to me. Just like I would've been happy with anything she chose for me. But she gifted me this..."

At Alexei's emotional words, his subordinate smiled. The birthday celebrations of Alexei's father, Aleksandr, had always been grand yet lacked dignity. Alexei had been forced to witness ladies fighting tooth and nail over Aleksandr so many times that he'd started hating birthdays. The second his beloved sister had wished him a happy birthday from the bottom of her heart, though, his state of mind had changed. Birthdays were supposed to be celebrations! Thanks to her, he could finally see that.

"Her ladyship is a strange one," Aaron said with a smile. "She's such a free spirit. Ever since she brought up afforestation, her ideas haven't stopped surprising me."

Had Ekaterina been in the room, she would have apologized in silence. "Sorry! None of these ideas are mine! I'm so sorry!" she would've screamed (internally).

"She takes after her grandfather," Novak replied. "Though, I think even he might have been surprised."

Halil laughed. "You should start thinking about what to get her ladyship for her birthday, Your Grace. Giving back after receiving such a gift won't be an easy feat."

Alexei's eyes widened. "You're right, Halil. Her birthday is in December... I wonder what I should gift her."

Not too long ago, he'd tried to give her a gift to congratulate her for her good grade. When he'd asked her what she wanted, she'd insisted the only thing she wished for was an outing with him. Ekaterina always surprised him—and that surprise had a way of turning into contentment. It was surely because of the compassion he felt for her.

“She doesn’t seem to care much for dresses or jewels. What else did I suggest, again? A horse, a private carriage, and a castle. None of these seemed to strike her fancy either.”

For Ekaterina, who retained the memories—and common sense—of her past life, a castle just seemed completely unreasonable. But Alexei had no way to know *that* was the issue.

“To begin with,” Alexei continued, “dresses and jewels cannot compare to what I’ve received from her. They’re too common to make fitting gifts.” He buried his face in his hands and groaned, at a loss. “Ah, I despair at my lack of inventiveness. How I wish I could ask grandfather for advice. I wonder what he would’ve done in my shoes.”

Alexei thought of his grandfather and memories came flooding back to him. His grandfather’s eyes had been as blue as the clear sky—a vivid light blue. He remembered that the painter who’d done their portrait together had pointed out that both of their eye colors were difficult to render.

Ekaterina seemed to like that portrait. She sometimes visited the room where all the portraits were hung and spent time looking at it. In the past, Alexei had kept that painting in his own room, but he’d had it moved so that Ekaterina could look at it. The fact that she actually did pleased him.

How nice would it have been if she had been there when their grandfather was still alive?

Alexei suddenly lifted his head.

“Get in touch with Lord—no, Master Hardin.”

“Master Hardin? He painted Your Grace’s portrait. Are you commissioning a painting?” Novak asked, puzzled.

Alexei nodded. “Have him come here as fast as possible— No, I shall go to him. He must have a long list of orders. I must get him to prioritize my request. Then, I’ll have him meet Ekaterina without her noticing.”

Would Ekaterina like his idea? Thinking about her reaction worried him, but he was equally excited to find out.

“Thinking of what to give someone dear is quite pleasant,” he said.

Ekaterina’s birthday was in December. It was still far, but Alexei would fill his chest with the fluttering wings of anticipation until then. That emotion, too, felt like another gift she’d given him. Alexei smiled.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book. I'm Chidori Hama. Thanks to your support, I was able to publish this second volume. Thank you so much! I'm overjoyed!

The first volume took place almost exclusively at the Magic Academy, but the scope widened in this second volume with the entire capital becoming the focus. From knight orders and oaths of allegiance to imperial visits and *Project Something*, I was able to write about things I love from start to finish.

Some characters whose names were mentioned but didn't show up in volume 1 finally appeared, while others who'd only made a brief appearance were fleshed out. Naturally, our regulars also made their comeback!

As always, Ekaterina has a huge brother complex while Alexei has an unwavering sister complex! If anything, I feel like they've both gotten worse compared to the first volume. As the author, I probably shouldn't be the one asking that question, but...are these two okay?!

What am I even worrying about?

One of my biggest motivations when working on the second volume was the thought that I'd get to see more of Wan Hachipisu-sama's beautiful illustrations! Just as I'd hoped, the cover of the second volume is absolutely breathtaking! Thank you so much! It made me so happy! I left the choice of which scenes to illustrate to my editor. I'm so glad I get to work with an editor who understands and loves my work so much! Truly, I feel blessed. I'm still so glad I gave Alexei a monocle, lol!

This story is available on the internet too, and I'm very thankful that so many people read and comment on it. I couldn't begin to tell you how much courage and energy every comment gives me. I'm also very thankful to everyone who wrote reviews about the first volume. There were even people who sent me New Year's cards through my publishing house. My editor and I were both incredibly moved. Such cards are so rare and precious nowadays!

I have a lot of fun writing this story, and my greatest wish is for you to have as much fun reading it.

Chidori Hama



Author Chidori Hama
Illustrator Wan Hachipisu

Goodbye, Overtime!

This Reincarnated
Villainess Is Living
for Her New
Big Brother

2



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Goodbye, Overtime! This Reincarnated Villainess Is Living for Her New Big Brother Volume 2

by Chidori Hama

Translated by Rymane Tsouria Edited by Nikita Greene

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AKUYAKUREIJO, BURAKON NI JOB CHANGE SHIMASU Vol. 2

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